
ON SOIL AND SOUL:
THE PHILOSOPHICAL
QUESTION OF THE GARDEN

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In what follows I want to suggest that, although the garden is generally quite absent from philosophical discussions, the idea of the garden is nonetheless philosophically significant. There are three sets of reasons for this significance and that argue for a closer look at the nature of the garden. First, the garden is a quite distinctive site; it cannot be thought simply as a place of nature – the presence of human intention defeats that attempt – but neither can it be thought simply as the product of human intention – the vitality and unruliness of nature defeats that attempt. In other words, the notion of the garden escapes the categories – of nature and of art – that have long structured the discussion of the human relation to the natural world. Second, as such a distinctive site where the human and natural worlds intersect in a manner not able to be defined by either the human or nature alone, the garden opens up a space that helps us think the relation of the human being to the natural world in a rather novel manner. Third, the garden is a place of cultivation, not just of the earth but of the self as well. One does well to recognize that the ancient sense of the garden as a place of education – a rather unique kind of education in light of the unique relation between nature and the human in the garden—needs our attention today. In other words, the absence of the garden from philosophical reflection is an oversight that needs to be addressed. The question of the garden is a far-reaching one that touches upon basic questions of how we are in the world.

Locating the garden, getting a grip on its elements and on the ways in which we might approach it, is no easy matter. The word “garden,” like the word “paradise” to which it is related, derives from words that

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refer to a “walled enclosure.”¹ The word speaks of something set apart and protected from the outside. However, like the word “paradise,” this meaning of “garden” as something set apart and enclosed is more a dream, an idealization, than a name that is appropriate to the reality of the garden which is both constantly dependent upon and threatened by the “outside.” Weather and insects are not alone in reminding us that the “wall” defining a garden is thoroughly *porous*. The garden needs what is not in the garden; it can never be self-contained, but needs to be understood as part of a larger whole. So, while it is true that gardens are set apart and delimited from within – they are defined spaces – it is equally true that the starting point for any reflection upon gardens must be that they are *intersections*: of the human and the natural realms, of animal and plant, of earth and heaven. Though full of human purpose and intention, every gardener knows all too well that intention does not account for much in the life of a garden. Though a place of growth and the arrival of the new that is mostly the result of human design, the garden is equally a marker of the limits of what we can know, define, and control. In the end then, though it may be well defined and walled off, the garden needs to be approached as a place of mixtures. Gardening naturally invites hybrids; they are liminal phenomena not by virtue of their edges, but by virtue of their own character. To understand the garden, one needs to recognize that it is not, in the first instance, a walled enclosure defined by a set of geographical coordinates; rather, it is set apart by virtue of the peculiar place that it defines. It is, one might say, set apart only conceptually. Despite the meaning of its name, it can never be fully enclosed.

As such a place of interaction and mixtures, the garden is by nature a metaphorical place: that is, it is a sort of doubling of the human and the natural world, of the heavens and the earth. It is the site of connections made between what is otherwise distinct: gardens are naturally metaphorical.² It is no accident then that gardens have long been meta-

¹ The word “paradise” comes from the ancient Persian word “*pairidaēza*” which means walled-in park or garden. On this, and on the way one finds this echoed in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, see: Casey, E., (1993), *Getting Back into Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 154–155.

² See my (1999) “Stereoscopic Thinking: Aristotle on Metaphor and the Law of Resemblance,” in: *American Continental Philosophy* (ed. Brogan and Risser). Bloomington: Indiana University

phors in which we see and understand something of ourselves and of our world. Consequently, when one speaks of the garden, one needs to remember that they have a double meaning: as simultaneously real – as plots of earth – and as representations – as ways in which we work out our relation to the natural world. Gardens engage our senses – the feel of the soil, the smells that range from putrid to perfumed, the splashes of color, the sound of life abuzz, and tastes galore – they also engage our imagination and enact our understanding of the human place in the world. To speak of the garden, one needs to bear in mind its double life: it grows just as well in our imagination as in our backyard. As Michael Pollan put it: “a tree in a garden is also a trope.”

Ready made for multiple meanings, gardens figure prominently and frequently in literature (just think of Voltaire, Boccaccio, Dante, and even the oldest literary work – *The Epic Gilgamesh*) as well as in religions (from the Garden of Eden to the Zen rock gardens). But the garden is just as easily made an image of an ideal (the gardens of Elysium). There is a tendency for things to grow in the garden – ideas as well as plants – and so it will always need to be defined as a place of cultivation. It is not by chance that institutions of learning have a long history of setting themselves up in gardens. From Plato’s Academy in Athens and Epicurus’ Garden School in the ancient world to the British “college garden” and the American campus in the present, places of learning, reflection, and conversation have long gravitated to the garden.³ Gardens, both real and imagined, cultivate common grounds for communities.

In light of all of these possibilities of the garden, the difficulty in defining the garden, in getting some purchase upon its specific character, is easy to understand. Much more could be said about the various distinctions and meanings of the garden, it is a rich site, but the point that is as yet only tacitly present, but that I want to highlight, is that the garden is intimately bound to the human even while it remains a place in the natural world. The garden is what it is because nature remains itself while the garden is defined by virtue of the trace of the human that is

Press, pp. 66–94.

³ See: Harrison, R.P. (2008), *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This book is very much at the heart of what I will argue in this essay.

always present: “*vestigium hominis video.*”⁴ That is why we learn something about the nature of human being from reflections upon the garden. This deep kinship between human beings and gardens is expressed as well by the Latin word for human, *homo*, which is closely related to the word for soil, “*humus*”⁵ (likewise, the name “Adam,” the original biblical human being who emerged in the Garden of Eden, is a form of the word “earth” [“*adama*”]). In other words, the link between the soil and the soul, between the earth and the human, is very much at stake when one speaks of gardens. As a plot of land, the garden may be modest, but as an idea it can seem so sweeping that one eventually comes to see the legitimacy of the claim that “life is a subset of gardening.”⁶

The importance of the garden, its rather unique and doubled place within the world, can be seen by even a superficial glance. And yet, despite this obvious significance of the garden as an idea, philosophical reflection upon gardens remains remarkably rare.⁷ This absence of any serious consideration of gardens is however indicative of a more generalized problem with philosophy today, namely, that we are not able to take up the question of nature outside of the orbit defined by science and technology. In the age of technology, our being in nature has shown itself to be profoundly destructive, our relation to nature is overwhelmingly a matter of aggression. Heidegger, rightly I believe, char-

⁴ On this remark by Vitruvius in *De Architectura*, see: Kant, I. (2001), *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, Ak., 370.

⁵ Heidegger discusses this in the fable of “Cura” in *Sein und Zeit*, see: § 42. There Heidegger emphasizes not only the relation of the human being to the earth, but also the significance of care for the maintenance of that relation.

⁶ Klinkenborg, V., “Introduction,” in: *The Gardener’s Year*, by Karel Čapek. New York: The Modern Library, p. xii. Čapek, for whom technology was a central concern (he also coined the word “robot” in his 1921 play *R.U.R.*), wrote his book as the story of a year (1938) in the life of a garden which he tells as the story of his obsession with the soil and his relation to the various possibilities of soil.

⁷ So, for instance, see: Cooper, D.E. (2006), *A Philosophy of Gardens*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, which opens with the remark that “The volume of philosophical writings about gardens in recent years is modest – so modest that their authors typically begin, as I am now doing, by remarking on the relative neglect of the garden by modern philosophy” (p. 1). The most significant exception to this tendency is found in Romanticism. On this see especially Schiller’s “Über den Gartenkalender auf das Jahr 1795.” Schlegel and Novalis are also important in this regard. Likewise, see: Hirschfeld, C. C. L. (1779–1785) *Theorie der Gartenkunst*, 5 Bd., Leipzig. I will discuss this exception and its significance in what follows.

acterizes this relation as a matter of a “Herausfordern” [an “insistence” or “demand”].⁸ On the other hand, the garden models a different sort of relation to nature, one that is much more collaborative and one in which there is clearly the need for a sort of reciprocity in that relation – one needs to adapt and adjust oneself to the garden as much as one needs to design and define it. In the garden, we find a different sort of ethic,⁹ a different way in which we can understand our place in nature: one tends nature, one does not attempt to tame it, one cultivates rather than challenges. One might say that one learns an ethics of care. To say, as does Voltaire, that “Il faut cultiver notre jardin” is not to propose some sort of retreat from the world or a withdrawal from responsibility. Quite the contrary, it is to point to the need to change oneself. Voltaire’s comment needs to be heard as centered on the meaning of the cultivation required in the garden.¹⁰

In the following, my intention is twofold: to provide what I believe is a productive context for opening up the garden in its philosophical significance, and to provide some indications of what might develop out of a serious philosophical consideration of the garden.

In the ancient world the garden was – when it was taken up as a matter for thinking at all – typically regarded as having some relation to “the good life.” One sees this, for instance, in Pliny for whom a life spent in the garden was a “good and genuine life.”¹¹ Similarly, the “pleasure garden” (that is, the garden that is made without practical intent such as growing food or medicinal herbs) of the Medieval world was often conceived as a copy of the Garden of Eden and its cultivation was re-

⁸ Heidegger, M. (1962), *Die Technik und die Kehre*. Tübingen: Neske Verlag, p. 14.

⁹ Here, I am taking the word “ethic” in the sense one finds in Homer where “*ethos*” is the name for an abode or dwelling place of an animal; that is, it is the name for a place where one properly belongs and is at home.

¹⁰ Here the German word, “*Bildung*,” which needs to be translated as “formation,” “cultivation,” and “education,” captures the sense of cultivation that is at work in the garden.

¹¹ Quoted in Cooper, op.cit. p. 10.

garded as a way of reenacting something of divine creation.¹² Indeed, until modern times discussions of gardens tended to regard them as matters of spiritual practice and the formation of character. In line with this, religion, more than philosophy, concerned itself with the nature of the garden.

This changes with Kant. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant exposes the limits of the capacity of determinate reflection – in the forms of science and mechanism – to give an account of nature that is able to understand the place of human being in nature.¹³ More precisely, guided by the concern to understand the relation of freedom and nature, Kant demonstrates how conceptual reason is unable to grasp this relation of nature and human being in its fullest extent. At the same time that he marks the limits of the concept, Kant argues that aesthetic judgment provides an opening for thinking this relation. The aesthetic opens up the question of nature in such a way that the place of purposes in nature can become intelligible. Once this happens, once nature comes to be recognized as a realm of purposes and not simply of mechanisms that are calculable, the ethical significance – the place of purpose and meaning – of how we are to understand the relation of nature and human being can be addressed. Kant is clear that aesthetic experience is not fully sufficient to this end, but, he argues, it is the proper beginning to this question.¹⁴ The third Critique made many new beginnings, but among the still underappreciated of these is that it opens up the question of the relation of human being and nature in a way that is not found elsewhere; it opens up this question from out of a concern with aesthetic experience, but equally as a question of ethical life. With this new beginning, the question of

¹² Glacken, C.J. (1967), *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 347–348.

¹³ Here, of course, the project of establishing the limits of *cognition* that is laid out in the *Critique of Pure Reason* has a different intention. There the problem of the limits of our knowledge of nature is not specifically centered on the problem of *judgment* and *practice*. While the 3rd Antinomy does point to this problem, the problematic of the first Critique does not extend to its full treatment. The third Critique on the other hand opens with precisely this problem that judgment faces in light of the limits of our knowledge. This is a problem of reflection, not of cognition.

¹⁴ See my (2000), “On the Significance of Nature for the Question of Ethics,” in: *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. XXI (2000), pp. 62–77; and (2005), *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects*. Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 7–18.

the relation of art and nature wins a new found significance that frees it from the realm of science and that recognizes that in this relation we face a profoundly ethical matter.

This is not the place to begin taking up the great insights of Kant's third Critique, but what does need to be noted for my concern with the question of the garden is that by virtue of his opening of the question of nature through aesthetic experience, and by virtue of his insistence upon the importance of thinking through the relation of art and nature, Kant makes a concern with the idea of the garden inevitable. And yet, though Kant's turn to the garden signals a sort of revolution, Kant himself only discusses the garden briefly and, when he does so, he subordinates the garden to the problematic of painting. In other words, the garden, though recognized as a philosophical topic, still remains only a pendant of some other concern.¹⁵

One consequence of this way of calling attention to the problematic of aesthetics is that, by and large, the garden is treated as a work of art¹⁶ (and then it is further located as an instance of a more basic art form so that the question of the garden is removed at the same time that it appears). This means that, in Hegel's words, "In the garden, as in the building, *the human being is the main issue.*"¹⁷ The notion that the garden is an intersection, a mediate realm that is defined as *between* the human and natural realms, is lost. To be sure, the work of art is defined by Kant as an intersection of art and nature; however, in the case of art, human freedom and purpose, spirit, are ultimately the determining features. In other words, in the work of art – even as a composite of the human and nature – it is the presence of the human that is the dominant feature. Awareness that the garden is not defined solely – or even basically – by human purpose or art and that it challenges the efficacy of such purposes, falls away. What is lost is what is essential to understanding the nature of the garden, namely, that gardens are "built, or perhaps we should

¹⁵ Kant, op. cit., § 51 (Ak 323). Hegel too will treat the garden as a pendant an art form, but in his case it is a pendant of architecture. See: Hegel, G.W.F. (1970), *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Bd. I. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 321.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Miller, M. (1993), *The Garden as an Art*. Albany: SUNY Press, and Ross, S. (1998), *What Gardens Mean*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷ Hegel, op. cit., p. 321 [emphasis added].

say contrived, places and yet are largely if not entirely composed of natural things. Even if I am not yet in wilderness, in a garden I am in the presence of things that live and grow, often on their own schedule.”¹⁸ In short, the garden does not let itself be sufficiently domesticated to be thought of as a work of art, that is, as a product of human freedom and intention. No garden is ever able to be “finished” or “completed,” rather one must struggle to “keep up with it” – it will always overgrow human intention. It will always live on its own schedule. So, to take up the garden as a work of art fails to recognize that element of the garden that cannot be understood as art, but that must be understood as the unruly element that resists human art. The inappropriateness of taking up the garden as a form of painting is not the only problem with Kant’s comments about the garden. Even if it does not let itself be thought as a form of nature, neither does it let itself be thought as a form of art.

But it is not only the case that we take up the garden inappropriately when we treat it as a work of art. We do the same when we regard it through the optic of aesthetic experience. Our relation to the garden can never qualify for the basic condition of aesthetic experience as Kant lays it out: we can never fully be “disinterested” in the garden. We can never take up a distance from it. We walk through the garden, smell it, taste and eat it, touch it. For many of the same reasons that food can never be properly regarded as an art work, so too the garden breaks down a distance that might be necessary for a purely contemplative relation to the work.¹⁹ So, while Kant speaks of the garden and thus breaks the philosophical silence about gardens, his way of doing this, that is his way of opening up the idea of the garden as an aesthetic phenomenon and as a work of art, never fully opens up the real questions posed by the peculiar intersection that is the garden. The garden simply does not fit the categories that guide Kant. Consequently, the garden, though

¹⁸ Casey, op. cit., p. 154. One Japanese word for garden, “*teien*,” recognizes that the garden is a hybrid of nature and human intention: it is composed of two words which mean “wildness” and “control.” See: Keane, M. (1996), *Japanese Landscape Design*. Boston: Tuttle, p. 14–15.

¹⁹ This does not imply that food cannot be philosophically interesting, just that, like the garden, the approach to the philosophical question of food should not be defined within the horizon of aesthetics. On this, see: Hamilton, R. and Todolí, V. (eds.) (2008), *Food for Thought, Thought for Food*. New York: Actar.

dignified as a question, is fenced in and severely limited. Its challenge to us never fully emerges.

The one exception to this failure to fully appreciate the significance of the garden is Romanticism, especially the German Romanticism that followed immediately in Kant's wake and took the claims of the *Critique of Judgment* as its starting point. Here the notion of the garden gets taken up in a much more extensive manner than the limited contexts articulated by Kant and Hegel. The garden is so elemental a notion in Romanticism that "in one of its aspects ... Romanticism may not inaccurately be described as a conviction that the world is an *englischer Garten* on a grand scale."²⁰ In Romanticism, the world is thought in terms of the garden. While the garden is still thought through the optic of an aesthetics, the aesthetics in this case is one that is altered to account for the peculiar character of the garden; it is not the case, as one finds in Kant and Hegel, that the garden is simply pulled into an aesthetic framework that is designed according to what Dewey called "the museum conception of art"²¹ so that gardens are treated as subsets of painting or of architecture. It is rather the natural and unruly aspect of the garden, not its regularity and conformity to human intention, that is what attracts Romantic thinkers to the idea of the garden. In Romanticism, the effort to think the meaning of the garden is not guided by the signature of the human, but by that which resists being captured by that signature.

However, even insofar as German Romanticism has a living legacy – one finds elements of it in Benjamin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger for instance – that legacy has dropped the notion of the garden as a central concern. One does find references to gardens in Nietzsche²² and one could quite legitimately link Heidegger's notion of *bauen* [building] to the problematic of the garden.²³ Nonetheless, as a central notion and

²⁰ Lovejoy, A.O. (2009), *The Great Chain of Being*. New York: Transaction Publishers, p. 16. See also: Immerwahr, R. (1960), "The First Romantic Aesthetics," *Modern Language Quarterly* Vol. 23 (1960), No. 1, pp. 3–26. One sees the expanded role of the garden even in the titles of works such as Novalis' *Blüthenstaub* [Pollen].

²¹ Dewey, J. (2005), *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Trade, p. 6.

²² See, for instance, the many references in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*.

²³ Heidegger, M., (1978), *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen: Neske Verlag, pp. 139–156.

as a notion that opens the question of the human relation to nature, the garden has fallen away from philosophy once again, or, if it has any place at all, it has by and large been relegated to the realm of aesthetics.²⁴ This, as I have already suggested, is a great loss since the idea presented by the garden offers promising avenues for addressing the urgent question of the relation of the human to nature in the technological age. In the following section my intention is to give some indications of where this promise leads.

Two assumptions guide the remarks that follow. First, that the garden is a liminal place – a hybrid, an intersection – and, consequently, that it is not well served by any approach that treats the garden as a work of art, that is, as a fundamentally human production. A key feature of the garden is that some aspect of it always exists independently of human intention and purpose; our efforts to give some manner of form to the garden will never come under our control. Second, that the garden needs attention and care; indeed, it is these human elements that set the garden apart from wilderness and render it an intersection of the human and the natural worlds. Even if the garden cannot properly be treated as a human production, neither can it be regarded solely as the place of nature. It is fair to say that “nature abhors a garden”²⁵ and without our care and attention, without the human contribution, nature would overrun the garden. Care and attention are constant elements of the garden – they are the elements that balance the peculiar mixture of nature and the human that one finds in the garden. It is precisely these elements that I believe most merit discussion when speaking of the idea of the garden since care not only cultivates the garden, rather care itself is cultivated by being set in the garden. Pressing this point, one eventually

²⁴ There are exceptions to this neglect. Among the most interesting of these is Borchardt, R. (1968), *Der Leidenschaftliche Gärtner*. Stuttgart: Klett Verlag, who writes that his intention is “zwischen dem menschlichen Garten und dem menschlichen Geiste eine Verbindung zu schaffen” (p. 267). But these exceptions tend to be marginal figures in the philosophical tradition.

²⁵ Pollan, M., (1991), *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. New York, Grove Press, p. 37.

come to understand that the promise of the garden is a promise of cultivation, a cultivation of a form of care that defines the human relation to nature at its best. What one comes to understand is that “gardens *do not*, as one hears so often, bring order to nature; rather, they give order to our relation to nature.”²⁶

In focusing upon the meaning of cultivation one sees how this promise of the garden works: one learns that “cultivation of soil and cultivation of spirit are connatural, and not merely analogical, activities. What holds true for the soil – that you must give it more than you take away – also holds true for nations, institutions, marriage, friendship, education, in short for human culture as a whole, which comes into being and maintains itself in time only as long as its cultivators overgive of themselves.”²⁷ It is this connaturality of the soil and the soul – once remembered in creation myths that were placed in gardens, in language that bound these notions (*homo/humus*; *Adam/adama*), or in allegories such as the Fable of *Cura* that Heidegger recounts – that needs to be addressed philosophically. From this starting point, it makes no real difference what kind of garden is in question. Whether it be a pleasure garden, a garden of flowers, medicinal herbs, for food, or Versailles, the significance of the garden will always emerge out of this linking notion of cultivation that binds the soil and the soul. From this starting point then, one sees that the garden – that common ground between the human and natural worlds – instructs the gardener about being responsible and caring for what one cannot define, control, or fully understand. One sees that one learns even more: one learns patience and the limits of the human will, one learns how to be responsive to the earth and the sky, one learns attentiveness.

The garden is thus the place of a peculiar education.²⁸ Foucault makes a distinction between the philosophical tradition that is derived

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ This is why it is right to suggest that “genuine teaching ... is more like planting than ... inscribing,” *Ibid.*, p. 62. The rather commonplace characterization of teaching as sowing seeds is thus quite appropriate; thus, the soul is not just like the soil, it is a sort of soil with its own nature and requirements for cultivation. On this, see Plato’s *Phaedrus*, 276c, especially the remarks about the Gardens of Adonis. See also: Detienne, M., (1972), *Les Jardins d’Adonis*. Paris: Gallimard.

from the imperative to “know oneself” [*gnothi seauton*] and that derived from the notion of the “care for the self” [*epimeleia heautou*].²⁹ It is this care for the self, which permeates the approach of “The Garden School” of Epicurus and that describes the character of the education one receives in the garden: “[Epicurus’ garden] was a form of education in the ways of nature: its cycles of growth and decay, its general equanimity, its balanced interplay of earth, water, air, and sunlight... Here... the cosmos manifested its greater harmonies; here the human soul rediscovered its essential connection to matter... Yet the most important pedagogical lesson... was that life – in all its forms – is intrinsically mortal and that the human soul shares the fate of whatever grows and perishes on and in the earth.”³⁰ The first lesson of this education is thus that the self is always in a relation to a world that exceeds its own reach and comprehension. The care of the self can only take place by attending to this larger world; it can never succeed if it understands itself as walled off from the world that is outside its own boundaries. This is the first lesson one learns from Epicurus’ Garden School.

One can formulate a number of principles that emerge from reflections upon the character of the garden and the nature of gardening. Michael Pollan does this and arrives at ten theses regarding “the kinds of answers the garden is apt to give... [to] questions having to do with man *in* nature.”³¹ Pollan’s list of “answers the garden is apt to give” is a fine starting point for pressing forward with the philosophical consideration of the garden. So are the texts we have from Epicurus’ “Garden School.” No doubt other traditions and texts will offer other promising

²⁹ See, for instance, Foucault, M., (2005), *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (translated by G. Burchell). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p .8.

³⁰ Harrison, op. cit., p. 74.

³¹ Pollan, op. cit., p. 190. His ten theses are found on pages 190–196. One might summarize these theses as follows: 1). “an ethic based on the garden would give local answers,” 2). the gardener “accepts his own and nature’s contingency,” 3). “a garden ethic is anthropocentric,” 4). the gardener’s “conception of his self-interest is broad and enlightened,” 5). the gardener “tends not to be romantic about nature,” 6). the gardener “feels it is legitimate to quarrel with nature,” 7). the gardener “doesn’t take it for granted that man’s impact on nature will always be negative,” 8). the gardener “firmly believes it is possible to make distinctions between kinds and degrees of human intervention in nature,” 9). the gardener “commonly borrows his methods, if not his goals, from nature herself,” 10). “if nature is one necessary source of instruction for a garden, culture is the other.”

starts as well. The philosophical tradition has been impoverished with respect to serious considerations upon the character of the garden, but that does not mean that it is completely without resources to address that character so long as the habits we have developed of misplacing the garden, of not recognizing its quite distinctive character do not obstruct such considerations.

But, before moving forward to make such a start, I believe that it is important to flag a fundamental difficulty, a real impediment, to any such beginning. It is the same difficulty that renders problematic every effort to address questions regarding nature and the human relation to nature: the difficulty namely of asking such questions in the age of technology. One might like to believe that the question of technology could simply be bracketed, its framework sufficiently set aside, so that one could speak directly of gardens and of the education one receives in them. Such, however, is not the case. In the age of technology with its imperatives of control and calculation, and its emphasis upon production and producibility, the extraordinarily different requirements and character of the garden are difficult to see – if not completely obscured. That is why it is fair to say that “we live in a gardenless age, despite the fact that there are plenty of gardens in our midst.”³² Such a comment is directed not at plots of land, but at the human capacity to grasp the meaning of the garden in the present historical juncture. This incapacity is more tenacious than it might appear at first blush.

It is thus not by chance, by simple oversight, that gardens do not seem to merit serious philosophical attention today. Even the attempt to consider gardens from the perspective of aesthetics which has been the chief form of such attention over the past two hundred years, though a step in the right direction, remains tethered to a notion of production that mistakes the character of the garden and that domesticates the idea of the garden. At bottom, the gardener is not dedicated to any form of production – be it of food or of beauty – nor is the gardener guided by the goal of consumption or even pleasure. Even when the garden is planted out of need for food, the gardener needs to be rooted in an attitude of care and attentiveness; the gardener is one who cultivates and

³² Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

tends. In the age guided by the aims of consumption and production, such cultivation and care are difficult to preserve, one could even argue that they are foreclosed. By turning the world into what Heidegger has described as a “standing stockpile of resources” [*Bestand*]³³ destined for our consumption, we have lost sight of the truth that “human happiness is a cultivated rather than a consumer good, that it is a question of fulfillment more than of gratification...[and that] neither consumption nor productivity fulfills. Only caretaking does.”³⁴

Technology is a way of extracting or making something that is not simply given in nature. It is – or at least we tend to believe that it is – a way of bending the natural world to human needs. As such, it readily falls into an antagonistic relation to nature. The garden, on the other hand, requires a different relation between human needs and nature, one that is more collaborative than confrontational. It requires a tempering of the will. And yet, the garden is not an easy collaboration: care is certainly more difficult than consumption, but it is also much more satisfying. No matter how intimate our collaboration with nature is, the garden will always mark our separation from nature at the same time that it marks one way in which we are in nature, for the garden is also a reminder that we need something – be it order, beauty, or food – that nature does not supply quite as well without our help. The garden, even if not defined by the human, remains apart from nature by virtue of human care. It is, in the end, an intersection, a between, the common ground of the human and natural worlds. To think with reference to the garden is to think from out of this between.

One can argue, rightly I believe, that ethical matters – ethical problems and the source of good ethical judgment alike – begin at the limits of the human.³⁵ Ethical matters begin where cognition and knowledge end, where one cannot determinatively decide a question and where

³³ Heidegger, op. cit., p. 26

³⁴ Ibid., p. 166.

³⁵ See my (2008), “Hermeneutics and Original Ethics,” in: *The Difficulties of Ethical Life* (ed. Sullivan and Schmidt). New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 35–47; 214–216, and (2004)

one can no longer calculate or control; as such, ethical life always takes root and grows in a liminal situation. One such situation is the garden where one finds the encounter of the human and nature as well as the liminal situation, the between, that delimits that encounter. I said at the outset that the garden is by nature a metaphorical place – a between in which there is sort of a double truth presented – but one also needs to understand that the garden is by nature a place of a sort of ethical education. Literature has long recognized and played with the metaphorical character of the garden. Likewise, religion has long played with another meaning of the garden as the place where life takes root. Philosophy, on the other hand, has tended to neglect the way in which gardens are the place of a sort of ethical education and yet, this cultivation that takes place in the garden, this care of the self required by it, might well be the greatest significance of the garden for us since it is in this way that we are changed by working in the garden. One is right to say that “garden-
ing is... a plunge into the depths of natural history, an immersion in the element where life first heroically established itself on earth. To garden is to understand the efforts by which life forced a foothold for itself in a hostile and resistant clay.”³⁶ What is ultimately at stake in the question of the garden is nothing less than our relation to the earth and to a world that we neither define nor control.

Voltaire wrote that “we must cultivate our garden.” This means that we must practice the care for the earth required of the gardener, we must learn to cultivate that which exists independently of our will, we must learn to draw closer to the sources of life and to understand how death belongs to those sources as well. Gardens require much effort, endure seasons, are fragile and can fail – and for all that, for precisely those reasons, gardens help us to grow and be better. They educate us about ourselves.

“Über Sprache und Freiheit aus Hermeneutischer Sichtpunkt,” in: *Heidegger Jahrbuch*. Frankfurt: Klostermann Verlag, pp. 59–73.

³⁶ Harrison, op. cit., p. 32.