

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2021.0014

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Reclaiming Time Aesthetically: Hadot, Spiritual Exercises and Gardening

Abstract:

Pierre Hadot's legacy is a vision of ancient philosophy not only as a system of abstract concepts and logical procedures but as a practical philosophical methodology. A key element of this interpretation is consideration of ancient philosophical practice as a series of spiritual exercises to improve one's own life. The present paper aims to show, more humbly, that by highlighting the aesthetic dimension of the practice of gardening we can consider it part of the set of philosophically charged spiritual exercises. Gardening supports the improvement of one's own experience of the world through the meeting of different temporal experiences. The appropriation of such different temporal nuances in stark contrast to the accelerated pace of modern life, or periods of tiresome repetition, makes it possible to question one's own rhythm in the world. In other words, I defend the thesis that horticulture can be considered therapeutic also from a philosophical perspective.

Keywords:

Pierre Hadot, spiritual exercise, nature, experience of time, aesthetic experience

Introduction: What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?

This essay approaches philosophy as a practice to improve one's own life. Pierre Hadot expresses this position in two of his most well-known texts: *What is Ancient Philosophy?* and *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Hadot's legacy is a vision of ancient philosophy not only as a system of abstract concepts and logical procedures but as a practical philosophical methodology. How Hadot describes Socrates, by paraphrasing Plutarch, represents

well this idea of philosophy and of the philosopher: “If Socrates was a philosopher, it was in walking with his friends, in eating with them, in discussing with them, in going like them to war, and finally in drinking the hemlock, and not by teaching from the height of a podium. Thus he showed that everyday life makes it possible to do philosophy.”¹

Hadot spent much of his career studying the philosophical methodology of the various Hellenistic schools, such as Zeno’s Stoa or Epicurus’ Garden, among others. In so doing, he called attention to their teaching methods, emphasizing the fact that these schools guided the students along a path of wisdom through the practice of *spiritual exercises*. Their main aim was not to instill the notions of the various sciences but to train individuals, perfect them, transform their character and actions, to achieve inner well-being and a good life. Philosophy then, Hadot argued, was a way of life:² “This practice has its roots, first of all, in the simple fact that in all schools, the beginning of philosophy means becoming aware of the state of alienation, dispersion, and unhappiness in which we find ourselves before we convert to philosophy.”³

The philosophical desire to find peace of soul through self-transformation had a clear therapeutic value supported by exercises. It is in these terms that we can speak of philosophy as a life project driven by attempts to practically answer Socrates’ question, “How should one live?”

Hadot’s analysis of ancient philosophy reveals an important lesson: not only that originally philosophy, rather than being a rigorous academic discipline, was considered the gateway to inner well-being, but that everyday practices could also be carriers of reflexive stimuli to achieve such well-being. Moreover, thus understood philosophy was an inclusive practice, available as well to non-scholars, which required an initial existential commitment enforced through exercises which could be “physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation.”⁴ Hadot describes these spiritual exercises as “voluntary, personal practices intended to cause a transformation of the self;”⁵ a transformation that always corresponds “to the movement by which the ‘I’ concentrates itself upon itself and discovers that it is not what it had thought.”⁶ Clearly, the capacity for self-reflection was fundamental in these exercises. They were based on the idea that self-knowledge allows for constant self-mastery, making the ego rise “from a partial and particular vision to a universal perspective, be it that of Nature or that of the Spirit.”⁷ However, such self-scrutiny did not necessarily have to occur in solitude, like in meditation, memorization, repetition, and so forth; even discussions with a fellow student or guidance from a mentor create moments of self-reflection.

From this brief excursion into Hadot’s writings, we can address the main points that define philosophy as a way of life. We can start by saying that the practical component to be qualified as a spiritual (philosophical)

1) Hadot, “From Socrates to Foucault,” 121.

2) Philosophy as *a way of life* must not be confused with philosophy as a *life-style*, despite the use of this term in the translation. The term “life-style” is full of socio-economic nuances better addressed by cultural studies, and are not addressed by Pierre Hadot’s project. The fact remains that to adopt Hadot’s idea of philosophy as a way of life and spiritual exercises, which were developed to acquire a better grasp of the ancient philosophical culture, and translate them into a contemporary phenomenon, one needs to think carefully about this translation in order not to trivialize it into “self-help, New Age, and every imaginable variety of esoteric quackery.” See Chase, “Observations on Pierre Hadot,” 279. Furthermore, we must not forget that, although the emphasis falls on spiritual exercises as the lived part of this philosophy, it still envisages a sophisticated theoretical aspect.

3) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 198.

4) *Ibid.*, 6.

5) *Ibid.*, 179–80.

6) *Ibid.*, 190.

7) *Ibid.*

exercise must be sustained, first and foremost, by *rational reflection*. This rationality also guided each school to formulate the dogmas and rules that constitute their *idea of well-being* and the good life. The *spiritual exercises*, on their part, were the practical aid for achieving this ideal. Moreover, by referring to these practices as “exercises” (Gr. *askesis*, Lat. *exercitium*), Hadot wants to underline at least two things. First, albeit rational reflection is a crucial aspect of philosophy as a way of life, the spectrum of practices also involves practical and physical engagement. Second, these exercises not only reinforce one’s idea of the good life but incline the subject to repeat and improve them.

To clarify this function of the spiritual exercises, we can consider a concrete exercise treated by Pierre Hadot: writing. In his book *The Inner Citadel*, Hadot examines, from a stylistic perspective, the *Meditations* of the emperor and prominent Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. Hadot concludes that we must consider this collection of twelve books as a personal diary that the Roman emperor wrote for himself. According to this interpretation, Marcus Aurelius exercised daily writing as the main tool for training his philosophical thinking, rather than writing a philosophy manual for posterity. For example, the repetition in writing the Stoic dogmas aimed at changing Marcus Aurelius’ spiritual state and to, in the long term, keep it consistent and coherent. Hadot stresses that

As he wrote the *Meditations* ... he was using writing as a technique or procedure in order to influence himself, and to transform his inner discourse by meditating on the Stoic dogmas and rules of life. This was an exercise of writing day by day, ever-renewed, always taken up again and always needing to be taken up again, since the true philosopher is he who is conscious of not yet having attained wisdom.⁸

Hadot suggests that “Marcus was thus ... trying to do what, in the last analysis, we are all trying to do: to live in complete consciousness and lucidity, to give to each of our instants its full intensity, and to give meaning to our entire life.”⁹ However, we must be careful not to confuse “the enjoyment of the present moment” with living in a total and abstract instantaneity. The former attitude toward time was one of the fundamental aspects of performing spiritual exercises. Marcus Aurelius called this attitude “delimiting the present,” which indicates a concentration of attention “upon what one is in the process of doing,”¹⁰ implying human consciousness and actions as markers of this present rather than the abstract notion of “an instant.” Furthermore, the crucial aspect of focusing on the present moment was attaining “cosmic consciousness,” that is, recognizing that “we are a part of the cosmos, and the consequent dilation of the self throughout the infinity of universal nature.”¹¹ This conscious harmony with the cosmos, which we see in Stoicism and in Epicureanism, implies, first of all, going beyond the limits of individuality, that is, letting go of all things and worries that do not depend on us, like unpleasant past events or concerns for the future, in order to focus on the things that truly matter and depend on us.¹²

This introduction condenses Hadot’s analysis of ancient philosophy, leaving out many fundamental aspects and focusing on the idea that philosophy was originally studded with practical activities that functioned as a corollary to the dogmas of the various schools. In this article, I am asking if it is possible to discuss

8) Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 313.

9) *Ibid.*, 51.

10) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 227.

11) *Ibid.*, 266.

12) *Ibid.*, 86.

and practice spiritual exercises today, given the cultural and theoretical distance from the ancient philosophical schools. In other words, what are the theoretical conditions that would allow us to speak of and practice spiritual exercises today? In order to answer this question, I must first introduce the changes and shifts the theoretical apparatus has undergone since ancient times, taking the concept of “cosmos” as exemplification. This observation will open a series of questions on the aesthetic dimension of spiritual exercises, which will be dealt with in section 2. In section 3 I will develop the main claim: everyday gardening is a spiritual exercise for modern times.

1. Remarks on Spiritual Exercises: The Theoretical Apparatus

It cannot be denied that, without disputing a line of continuity of the late-modern practice of philosophy with the ancient one, Hadot’s vocabulary brings up tensions regarding more contemporary and secular theories.¹³ Terms like “spiritual,” “soul,” “*askesis*,” or even “cosmos” resonate with an outmoded philosophical tradition and evoke a mystical dimension of philosophical reflection and self-reflection. A modern version of spiritual exercises would imply, first of all, reviewing the weight of these terms which are tied to a grand theoretical apparatus of the past.

We can start by reviewing the cosmic dimension the spiritual exercises entail and the unified order that it implies. Specifically, the grand notion of “cosmos” implies an idea of the absolute unity of Nature and universal reason. Conversely, confidence in such an ordered or harmonic system seems unsustainable in the increasingly fragmented contemporary reality. This fragmentation is evident in the empirical sciences and the humanities, which register an interest in specific and narrow problems relating to many and diverse phenomena. Moreover, the proliferation of different fields of study on the natural world reflects a fragmentation that the grand notion of “Nature” cannot capture. Above all, the modern techno-scientific split between what is human and nature¹⁴ relegates ancient categories like “cosmos” to “an abstract metaphysics that is [now] inoperative.”¹⁵ More technical and scientific categories outdo the heuristic potential of the ancient categories.¹⁶ On this line of thought, the German philosopher Joachim Ritter claimed that the notion of “landscape” might be the “substitute of the cosmos of ancient metaphysics.”¹⁷

Hadot was well aware of this situation of late-modernity, so much so that he addressed the question in these terms: “the quantitative universe of modern science is totally unrepresentable, and within it the individual feels isolated and lost. Today, nature is nothing more for us than man’s ‘environment;’ she has become a purely human problem, a problem of industrial hygiene. The idea of universal reason no longer makes much sense.”¹⁸

13) For example, the passages quoted do not reflect contemporary philosophical debates on the self and subjectivity. Just think of Lyotard’s “transcendentalism without a subject.” See Kowalska, *Dialektyka poza dialektyką*, 123. Nevertheless, it is still possible to discuss spiritual exercises. In this case, they would be generative of new personal dispositions, rather than allowing a return to an authentic self.

14) The philosophical treatment of the notion of “nature” is very complex, and even Hadot himself dealt with it in his book *The Veil of Isis* by tracing the genealogy of the notion of “nature as hidden” from Heraclitus to Heidegger. See footnote 22 of this article.

15) Veríssimo Serrão and Reker, *Philosophy of Landscape: Think, Walk, Act*, 11. This observation refers to the rapid increase in number of very specific empirical fields of study. This fragmentation of nature into different fields of study dismisses the heuristic potential of ancient categories which instead tend to express a unity.

16) In contrast, Michael Chase argues that “recent scientific findings seem to reinforce the ancient idea that we are not totally unrelated to the cosmos.” See Chase, “Pierre Hadot on Ancient Philosophy,” 24.

17) Veríssimo Serrão, “Landscape as a World Conception,” 32.

18) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 252.

Nonetheless, he did not renounce submitting a proposal for attaining a cosmic consciousness in modern times. He noted that the celebrated paintings of Paul Cézanne, but above all, their phenomenological analysis proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, take as model the ancient exercise of contemplating nature. In this contemplation the artist and the philosopher showed how “in order to *perceive* the world, we must, as it were, perceive our *unity with* the world.”¹⁹ Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty investigating the emergence of the essence of things, one through painting and the other through philosophy, re-learned the world “*within* our very perception of the world.”²⁰ This modern artistic (and philosophical) approach, which abandoned the convention of *mimesis* – imitation of the visible – shared nature’s creative process of making things visible. Hadot endorses this idea that art can bring us closer to a cosmological conscience, not only in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* but also in *The Veil of Isis*. In the latter book, Hadot argues for the capacity of art to make us profoundly aware, not simply that we are surrounded by nature but that we are part of it. At the end of the book, the French philosopher presents:

An idea: nature is art and art is nature, human art being only a special case of the art of nature, an idea that, I believe, enables us better to understand both what art can be and what nature can be. An experience – that of Rousseau, Goethe, Holderlin, van Gogh, and many others – an experience that consists in becoming intensely aware of the fact that we are a part of nature, and that in this sense we ourselves are this infinite, ineffable nature that completely surrounds us.²¹

In other words, an aesthetic experience is an awareness of our participation in Nature.

The introduction of aesthetic experience into the discussion requires further clarification since Hadot criticized other aesthetic interpretations of the spiritual exercises. In the next section I will introduce the discussion between Hadot and Michel Foucault²² on the possibility and consequences of focusing on the aesthetic dimension of spiritual exercises.

2. Remarks on Spiritual Exercises: The Aesthetic Dimension

An admirer of Hadot’s work, Foucault suggested a different interpretation of the ancient philosophical practices, an alternative *aesthetic* path through what he called “techniques of the self.” Foucault understood these ancient techniques in terms of the creative modes human beings turn themselves into subjects; a conception of exercises that minimizes the cosmological aspects of Stoic ethics²³ to, in Hadot’s word, “offer contemporary mankind a model of life.”²⁴ In other words, Hadot criticized Foucault for approaching ancient times with a twenty-first-century mindset.

19) Ibid., 261.

20) Ibid., 281.

21) Hadot. *The Veil of Isis*, 319.

22) Michel Foucault took inspiration from Pierre Hadot’s research for his studies on the history of sexuality and favored his appointment as professor of ancient philosophy at the Collège de France.

23) For an analysis of the difference between Hadot’s account of “spiritual exercise” and Foucault’s “techniques of the self,” see Sellars, “Self or Cosmos: Foucault *versus* Hadot,” 1–18.

24) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 208.

An alternative reading is given by Andrew Thacker²⁵ who points out that the concept of “the aesthetic” is generally problematic in Foucault’s theory as he sometimes adopts the related sense of aesthetics and ethics from Greek discourse, at other times the typically modern idea of the autonomy of the aesthetic from the moral sphere that, the latter idea, Hadot strongly criticized:

What I am afraid of is that, by focusing his interpretation too exclusively on the culture of the self, the care of the self, and conversion toward the self – more generally, by defining his ethical model as an aesthetics of existence – M. Foucault is propounding a culture of the self which is too aesthetic. In other words, this may be a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.²⁶

However, it would be reductive to interpret “the aesthetics of existence” as *formally* making one’s own life as a work of art or to stylize one’s actions aesthetically. “The aesthetic” advocated by Foucault acquires greater vigor when interpreted as “the *primary resource* for the subversion and displacement of normalization with practices of freedom,”²⁷ and does not necessarily derive from a purely formal aesthetic principle. Indeed, Foucault’s blurred concept of “the aesthetic” that derives from the revision of the Greek notion could be interpreted as a historical cue to rethink the modern separation between the spheres of morality and aesthetics advocated by proponents of “modernist” art criticism.²⁸

In my opinion, what Foucault suggests is that, if in the Greek theory of the aesthetic there is no clear separation between art, or at least what we now consider art,²⁹ and what is life, the aesthetic relates to the (ethical) realm of *praxis*. According to my interpretation, in the attempt to rethink the modern aesthetic debate, Foucault’s proposal does not localize the aesthetic beyond *praxis*.³⁰ The strength of such an approach is that it prioritizes the means to well-being rather than the end, assigning the primary *locus* of the aesthetic to the appreciation of one’s own actions rather than to life intended as a work of art. In this sense, the notion of “the aesthetic” is unburdened from the nuances of the modern notion of “the artistic,” with its rules and canons, giving space to the aesthetic force of the confrontation with the mundane, a position held by many contemporary scholars, for example, by exponents of Everyday Aesthetics³¹ and Environmental Aesthetics.³²

However, before explaining the connection between these remarks and my proposal to consider everyday gardening as a spiritual exercise for modern times, in section 3, I will outline a series of diagnoses related to our modern perception of time.

25) For an in-depth analysis of the discrepancies in the use of the term “aesthetic” in Foucault see Thacker, “Foucault’s Aesthetics of Existence.”

26) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211.

27) Wimberly, “The Joy of Difference,” 19. Emphasis mine.

28) Tacker suggests understanding Foucault’s techniques of the self as relevant to the ongoing aesthetic debate during his life. See Thacker, “Foucault’s Aesthetics of Existence.”

29) The notion of institutionalized and autonomous art are a recent concepts. For a definition of the institutional theory of art see Arthur Danto and George Dickie respectively in Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, and Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*.

30) Giorgio Agamben points out the use of the term “etho-poetic” by Foucault in the *History of Sexuality*. See Agamben *The Use of Bodies*, 98–99.

31) For a general overview of Everyday Aesthetics, see, for example, Light and Smith *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Di Stefano *Che cos’è l’estetica quotidiana*, Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*.

32) For a general overview of Environmental Aesthetics, see for example Carlson and Lintott eds., *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*, Toadvine, “Ecological Aesthetics.”

3. Gardening as a Contemporary Therapy

We can recall that the ancient philosophers practiced philosophy as a method of healing the soul. One of the concrete aspects of this practice was to assimilate a series of precepts for living a good and flourishing life. This way of life, strengthened by spiritual exercises, operated as a “remedy for human worries, anguish, and misery brought about, for the Cynics, by social constraints and conventions; for the Epicureans, by the quest for false pleasures; for the Stoics, by the pursuit of pleasure and egoistic self-interest; and for the Sceptics, by false opinions.”³³ All of these seem like legitimate concerns; however, today, a fundamental dimension of our experience of the world seems to collide with a general conception of a good life: the temporal dimension. Although it is not a novel diagnosis, the recent outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic made it evident. The sudden stop of activities has overturned all of our rhythms.

As Covid-19 lockdowns have taught many,³⁴ the confinement of interactions and the lack of social life have generated a repetitive and monotonous lineup of actions resulting, in the long run, in a disruption of our sense of being and of time. A recent study, aimed at establishing how the passage of time was experienced during the Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, showed that “over 80% of participants experienced distortion to the passage of time during lockdown in comparison with normal [pre-quarantine].”³⁵ Such distortion has impaired many people’s ability to find meaning in their everyday. Another study³⁶ on mental health in China during its lockdown, one of the first on the issue, provides data suggesting that panic disorder, anxiety and depression all increased during this time.

For many, the Covid-19 experience was a sudden slowdown in the daily race against time. This unveiled the dependence and addiction on the frenzy schedules that characterizes late-modernity. Globalization, capitalism, development of communication technologies, ecological crisis are all factors that have led to the theorization of a crisis of the perception of time as it is inhumanely accelerated. Several philosophical studies have highlighted the implications of technological progress in human activities, depicted by the French cultural theorist Paul Virilio as a deadly struggle between time and space. As the philosopher himself emphasizes:

Globalization and virtualization are introducing a world time which anticipates a new type of tyranny. If history is rich, it is because it is local, because there were local times which took precedence over something which existed only in astronomy – universal time. But in the future our history will be played out in the universal time of instantaneity.³⁷

In addition to Virilio, the English sociologist Anthony Giddens, in his book *The Consequences of Modernity*, suggests that time is not only a measure of change but, above all, a part of the very facts changing. It is common knowledge that late modernity’s transformations appear more profound and sudden than in changes that happened in previous centuries. I need only mention the succession of technological innovations and how they have driven

33) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 102.

34) One prominent exception has been *key workers* who provide vital service to the community. Nevertheless, in this article, I will not consider working conditions, social and economic inequalities during the Covid-19 related lockdown, but I will focus on the lockdown experience on the part of those who lived it, aware of the fact that the rhetoric of seclusion has mainly reflected the condition of *homo urbanus*.

35) Ogden, “The Passage of Time During the UK Covid-19 Lockdown,” 1.

36) See Qiu, Shen, Zhao, Wang, Xie, and Xu, “A Nationwide Survey of Psychological Distress Among Chinese People in the Covid-19 Epidemic.”

37) Virilio, “Red Alert in Cyberspace!,” 3.

a frenetic change of pace, if not their increased scope. This transformation is also reflected in everyday speech where phrases like “time to be gained,” “time is money,” “time that is never enough” embody a temporal ideology that is commonplace. In our late-modernity, to put the matter in another way, as we rush through our days, in what the art critic Jonathan Crary described as “a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7,”³⁸ we get lost in the process of modernization. This claim implies that being involved and concerned in the myriad of activities for which “time is always lacking,” a shared temporal texture that we have set for ourselves, the related feeling of pressure leads us to neglect time for reflection, and therefore to lose sight of the meaning and direction of life.

Comparing the diagnosis of Crary, Giddens, and Virilio with the findings reporting the impact of the Covid-related lockdown on our perception of time serves to illustrate how imposed temporal norms affect us, shaping our experience, often beyond our conscious inspection.

In our daily lives, each of us employs different strategies to cope with this situation. In the specific case of Covid-related lockdown, the media (both institutional to social networks) was rife with practical advice on how to deal with the psychological implications of the quarantine and lockdowns. Gardening was part of the list,³⁹ together with other forms of contact with nature, such as hiking or walking in the forest. A recent study has identified gardening activities “as a plausible tool to buffer the mental health consequences of forced home confinement”⁴⁰ during the first wave of Covid-19. This study confirms in the specific case of Covid-related stress that horticulture and contact with nature are therapeutic for humans, a claim that more general (pre-Covid-19) empirical studies⁴¹ support.

In other words, horticultural therapy is a viable strategy to cope with, to paraphrase Hadot, human worries, anguish, and misery brought about by the feeling that time is beyond our control. This fact also explains the spread of popularity of horticultural practice and the increased number of amateur and spontaneous gardeners.⁴²

These observations support the possibility of establishing a parallel between gardening and spiritual exercises, considering their inclusivity and that their goal is to resolve internal conflicts, and, more generally, pave the way toward a state of well-being.

Consequently, in the next section, I will explain how this therapeutic practice operates from an aesthetic point of view, reconnecting to the discussion of section 2. I will argue for gardening as a practice that exposes us to reflect on the temporal texture of everyday life, reconnecting to the discussion of modern conceptions of “cosmos” of section 1.

4. Gardening as a Spiritual Exercise

The above two diagnoses, even if they are on the two opposite poles, foreground the close relationship between the sense ascribed to one’s existence, our conception of a good life and time perception. We can see how two modes of imposed normalization of time (accelerated time and monotonous time) can be problematic factors for

38) Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, e-book.

39) As reported by Jane Perrone of the Financial Times “Gardening was listed as the second most popular lockdown activity people planned to do after watching TV, according to a survey by GlobalData market research in May, ahead of cooking, reading and exercising.” See Perrone, *How Coronavirus Changed Gardening Forever*.

40) Theodorou et. al., “Stay Home,” 1.

41) The most recent results of these studies can be found in Soga et. al., “Gardening is Beneficial for Health: A Meta-analysis,” 92–99; and Spano et. al., “Are Community Gardening and Horticultural Interventions Beneficial for Psychosocial Well-being? A Meta-analysis.”

42) See Perrone, *How Coronavirus Changed Gardening Forever*.

our well-being. On the one hand, time perceived as inexorably fugitive becomes an adverse factor for reflection and self-reflection; making sense of life becomes elusive. On the other hand, the monotonous time of seclusion, affected by the lack of sociality and involvement in the world, is filled with mindless routines that do not allow the generation of meaning either. Both, as forms of normalized time, that is, forms of time perception assimilated through constant exposure to them, persistently imposed by our social and cultural environment, might become sources of malaise. The impossibility of reflecting on ourselves and pondering on the present, as discussed earlier, are all characteristics that render our actions devoid of spiritual and, therefore, philosophical depth. In this case, we cannot speak of philosophy as a way of life as the main element is missing: rational reflection.

At this point we can ask ourselves how can gardening be a reflective practice, that is, a spiritual exercise. How can this exercise challenge the temporal discourse that narrates our actions? In other words, what are the philosophical conditions of gardening that allow us to reflect on time and temporality?

The answer I will defend is that gardening is an active engagement with nature. As such, it has the potential to challenge the distressing temporal norm we have appropriated by making them collide with nature's temporal dimensions. In its complexity, this statement tries to prove something intuitively simple and strongly linked to the common idea of the garden as a place that positively affects humans' well-being.

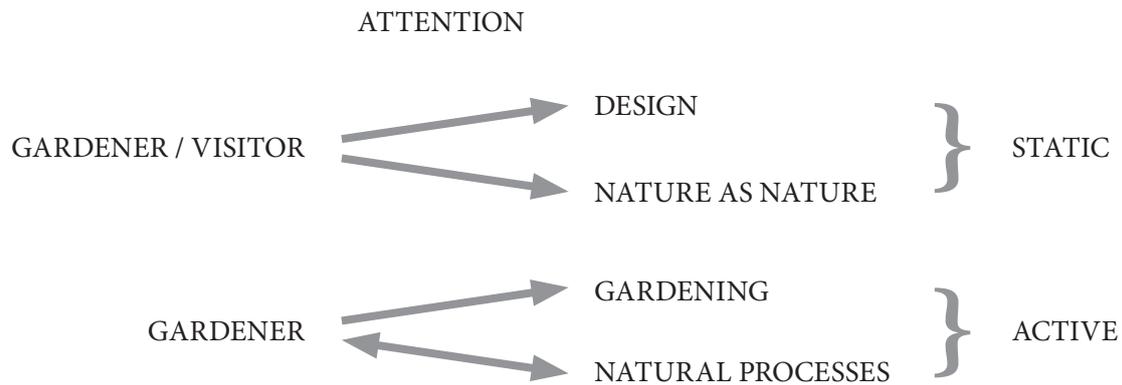
In order to elucidate this answer, we must first see (1) the philosophical relevance of gardening and (2) why our involvement with nature is more rewarding throughout an active engagement rather than a static one. Then, we must see (3) how gardening opens up the possibility of reflection on time, such that it is unique for gardening compared to the mere observation of a garden. I will expand on these aspects in a more or less orderly manner.

To begin with, I follow contemporary takes on the aesthetics of gardens and environmental aesthetics⁴³ that define the garden as aesthetically mediated nature. In other words, the garden is a physical manifestation of the idea of nature that every gardener possesses, whether professional or amateur; they are "places which are made of real nature in order to present *in vivo* ideal nature."⁴⁴ This account of the garden, which belongs to the Italian philosopher Rosario Assunto, regards nature as intentionally cultivated and arranged to be the object of aesthetic experience for the gardener and visitors alike. Then, the philosophical relevance of the notion of "garden" is linked to the experiential domain, as was art for Hadot. However, it captures a glimpse of cosmic unity in quite a different way: the gardener and nature co-participate in creating the garden. I will develop this aspect further in this section.

Having acknowledgment that the garden is a place for aesthetic contemplation is one fundamental issue; another of equal importance is that a garden is also a place for aesthetic practice – gardening. As gardeners, in fact, we have access to the aesthetic contemplation of the garden *and* the aesthetic practice of creating it. We can point out then that gardens' appreciation is a complex matter. Contemplative attention, which I call *static*, is bipartite, as well as the appreciation of the practice, which I call *active*. On the one hand, the static situation comprises a constellation of judgments on the work done by the gardener; on the other, our appreciation is directed to real nature, in its non-artifactual form, therefore not entirely open to artistic judgments. In other words, a relevant aspect of the appreciation of gardens, for visitors and gardeners alike, is not only nature as matter shaped by the gardener, but the aesthetic appreciation of nature *qua* nature, that is, not as a work of art. Consequently, attending a garden means having a complex aesthetic experience, where our attention is directed (1) to the skillfully designed, maintained, or decorated space, and (2) to nature, because the garden gathers together animated and inanimate natural entities such as plants, insects, rocks, earth but also meteorological elements, like rain and wind, that we perceive as natural.

43) An exhaustive discussion of these perspectives can be found in Salwa, "Everyday Green Aesthetics."

44) Salwa, "Everyday Green Aesthetics," 173.



Also of importance is the active engagement with nature – gardening – which reflects a complex aesthetic dimension as well, where the attention can capture the aesthetic qualities of two activities. On the one hand, as gardeners, we appreciate the improvement of our gestures in handling the soil and the tools to work it. On the other hand, since nature is involved in the practice, we appreciate the level at which we enter into dialogue⁴⁵ with the natural world and its processes.

When nature is involved *as nature* in our appreciation of the activities we carry out in the garden, we can call the form of temporal experience afforded *dialogic*, that is, a form of dialogue between the gardener and the natural processes, versus the *monologic* form of observation. In other words, being involved with a dialogic temporality means that we are directed by what nature demands every time we have to do something in the garden. This type of temporal recognition is a declaration of commitment to change, as Mara Miller, who extensively wrote on the aesthetics of gardens, points out:

Gardeners expect changes in the organisms they arrange and intend these changes to be among the features of gardens to which attention is directed and in which pleasure is taken. In particular, relations in and between the sequences of events that constitute the lives of plants, and between these sequences and those that are changes in inorganic objects that are also parts of gardens, are features that supply reasons for the aesthetic judgments involved in appreciation of gardens.⁴⁶

In fact, at the core of gardening, there is a sort of pact with the garden, a sort of futural promise, what Derrida calls the unforeseeable “to come” (*a venir*), that only the arrival of spring⁴⁷ will be able to maintain.

Considering the garden as the *locus* of a dialogic form of time, dissolves the idea of the aesthetic appreciation of nature only as art-like scenes (picturesque), which require the experience of time defined only as a snapshot of the present (abstract instant). Mara Miller notes that experiencing gardens as a composition of pictorial elements excludes a more profound mode of experience. She writes:

45) As Mateusz Salwa points out “the idea of dialogue may be seen as a foundation for a new sort of culture, one that hopefully will be less exploitative toward nature as well as toward humans.” Salwa, “Dialogue with Nature and the Ecological Imperative,” 133.

46) Miller, *Gardening*, e-book.

47) Of course, every season has its beauty, and not all plants bloom during spring. The red berries of the holly or the delicate flowers of the snowdrop surprise us during the winter greyness.

When we experience gardens as paintings we experience them as [entities] that do not represent events or tell stories. We attend to them as static arrangements and ignore *their* temporal aspect altogether. However, when we experience them as presenting the passing of time we experience them as objects whose temporal qualities are as important as their pictorial qualities. Our experience of them is analogous to our experience of musical performances.⁴⁸

Although the analogy of the aesthetic experience of nature to that of music is debatable, Miller captures a crucial temporal aspect of the garden, which cannot be reduced to the temporal dimension of artistic appreciation.⁴⁹

A practical example of this temporal intuition is when we sow, but seeds take a long time to sprout or do not sprout at all. Did we get the sowing time wrong? Did the seeds get enough sun throughout the day or too much? Maybe this type of soil dries too fast? Over time and with practice we will end up learning about the temporal dimension of the garden, the blooming period of all the plants, the time to trim the hedge avoiding breeding season for nesting birds, the right time to rake the leaves, all this because we learn to listen to the garden.

So far, I have managed to show how gardening is an aesthetically charged practice that involves two experiential temporalities: the monologic one if we pause to admire the gardener's work, and the dialogic one, which involves nature as a co-creator of the garden. These observations allow me to divert the reader's attention to the practical aspects of everyday gardening as a spiritual exercise, following an understanding of garden as nature involved in human practice and gardening as active interactions with nature *qua* nature.

Nevertheless, to consider it non-trivially, but as a philosophically charged spiritual exercise, I still have to show how gardening relates and might resolve the "worries of life" as they have been delineated in section 3 and explain how the aesthetic function of gardening, that is, affording the aesthetic experience of nature *as* nature, activates a reflection on the concept of time. In other words, I have to answer the following question: What is the critical potential of gardening?

The clearing for the ameliorative transformation is created within the "playing field" of aesthetic appreciation of each individual committed to overturn their existential situation. Through gardening, an active and prolonged engagement with nature, we develop the capacity to grasp the contingency of the normalized time, that is, the conception of time we have created as a norm for ourselves. The contingent conceptual structure of normalized time that we have constructed is slowly dismantled by being exposed to the variety of temporal experiences afforded by nature when we are engaged in gardening.

To go back to the example of unsuccessful sowing, we may come to discover that we sowed too early and in the urge to do everything immediately, ASAP, we failed to respect the natural germination times for this seed. On this point, nature does not forgive; there is a right time for everything within a year, and if we miss the opportunity, we have to wait for the following year.

In other words, analyzing gardening in its aesthetic dimension allows us to talk about the temporal ways in which we organize the sensory world. The aesthetic experience procured by gardening triggers the clash between the natural temporalities presented by the imagination and the normalized time held by the intellect, assuming they are not attuned. This aesthetic disruption⁵⁰ has the ability to question the subject's existing assumptions

48) Miller, *Gardening*, Emphasis by the author.

49) This claim supports the analysis of "the aesthetic" provided in section 2.

50) Jacques Rancière terms this dissent "the politics of aesthetics," that is the political dimension of the aesthetic. Rancière derives this understanding from reading Schiller's political interpretation of the aesthetic experience as "a perturbation of the normal relation between sense and sense," that is, between sensation and conceptual apparatus. Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 3.

on time and reconfigures them. Therefore, a consequence of this play is the awareness of our temporal rhythm, and the intrusion of a suspicion regarding the temporal rhythm assumed so far. Thus, the aesthetic experience becomes the sensor of the state of alienation and leads to an internal examination.

Gardening thus can be seen as an active engagement with nature, by co-actively participating in nature performance, that can intervene in our conception of time. It is undoubtedly naive to believe that spending a single day in a garden allows such profound reflection. On the contrary, like Marcus Aurelius' own writing exercises, this transformation occurs in time through a constellation of micro-disruptions that happen every time we pick up a hoe. Thus understood, gardening is a learning process over time, combining unpleasant episodes (the death of a plant, the invasion of aphids) as well as positive ones (a good harvest of apples, the mild smell of pine needles) to produce something akin to a wisdom that can be shared and enjoyed with others (humans, animals, and the plants as well) moment after moment, season after season, and year after year.

I will end the section with two short comments. First, I am not claiming that only gardening has a transformative potential with respect to the temporal ways in which we organize the sensory world. Meditation, sports, and hobbies, in general, are all good candidates. Gardening, however, reformulates the conditions for considering spiritual exercises in a modern key without appealing to a metaphysical system that is now inoperative. However, the aesthetically mediated dialogue with nature, so rare, especially for *homo urbanus*, preserves a sense of unity and cosmic consciousness, albeit faded.

The second point concerns the privileged access that gardening allows to a reflection on time. The intention was to put in the foreground gardens temporal dimension, since gardens are usually thought of in terms of space. Michel Foucault probably put forward the most well-known idea that the garden is a heterotopic space.⁵¹ However, this idea of heterogeneity is not possible to catch outside the garden's perimeter. Instead, we can assimilate the garden's "heterochronia" as a form of prevention to use beyond the garden's walls.

Conclusion

Pierre Hadot's historical journey had the fundamental objective to analyze the role of philosophy in antiquity and what it meant to do philosophy in the major Hellenistic schools. In these schools, to do philosophy was a genuine conversion of the person who practiced it. This conversion implied a transformation from an inauthentic life, obscured by worries and insensible to one's own nature, to an authentic existence. Following Hadot's general line, according to which philosophy as a way of life begins with the commitment of each individual and progresses as a reflective practice involving forms of everyday experience, I have argued that gardening can be included among the set of spiritual exercises. However, I have argued that the idea of spiritual exercises is not sufficiently appealing to the modern context, especially if discussed in terms of ancient metaphysics. Even though we can still understand this idea of philosophy as a way of life, the paths of the modern self are paved with more concrete experiences, often devoid of the metaphysical consciousness that permeated the original schools.

Taking advantage of certain aspects of the idea of philosophy as a way of life, like for example, the inclusivity beyond academia, its mundane quality, but above all the concreteness of the spiritual exercises, I wondered if gardening comes close to the idea of spiritual exercise, and perhaps even of philosophy as a way of

51) The third principle of *Des Espace Autres* maintains that "the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden... The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm." Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 6.

life. A series of recent studies gave rise to this question, together with ongoing promotion during Covid-related lockdowns of contact with nature with particular attention to gardening. Having experienced the therapy and aware that it is not a question of idyllic contact with nature, much less of its mere beauty, I wondered how one could describe this therapy in terms of spiritual exercises.

I have argued for the aesthetic presupposition for their effectiveness which, with the same critical force that Foucault wanted to express, must not necessarily fall into a solipsistic cosmetics of the self or mere aesthetization. Starting from a definition of garden that highlights the aesthetic experience of real nature – nature *as* nature – but also the practical dimension of this experience I have argued that an active engagement with natural processes confronts us with natural temporalities. Moreover, in the aesthetic space created when we appreciate our dialogical relationship with nature, reflection and self-reflection, so fundamental in spiritual exercises, have their origin.

In conclusion, I can venture to say that Hadot might agree with this proposal, as he himself has identified an essential link between aesthetic experience and nature as a means to tune ourselves into the universe's natural order, which ultimately is the purpose of the spiritual exercises. Still, I have managed to avoid the orthodox Stoic position concerning metaphysics that guaranteed the success of their exercises. Having in mind my interpretation of spiritual exercises and the transformative power of the aesthetic experience of nature, we might re-read Hadot's guidance without the much-criticized ancient patina: "This is a new way of being-in-the-world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature, and a portion of universal reason. At this point, one no longer lives in the usual, conventional human world, but in the world of nature."⁵²

Furthermore, gardening is an activity accessible to anyone and does not require the possession of a plot of land. The basil plant that keeps us company on the windowsill is also a powerful, albeit small, catalyst for philosophy as a way of life.

52) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211.

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