

Conclusion

This book has proposed new ways of thinking philosophically about gardens and urban gardening in the Anthropocene. More generally, it has been a reflection on the situation of individuals in the face of the global forces and planetary changes and challenges of this new epoch in which no earthly place, entity, form, process, or system escape the influence of human activity.

Gardens have always hosted culture-infused nature, always been “built” environments, always needed stewardship. I have thus suggested that reflection on gardens can provide guidance in thinking about the humanized environments of the Anthropocene, and that reflections on gardening can provide guidance in thinking about how we should behave in and for these environments. Working in urban gardens, for its part, can be a way to realize promising forms of moral, ethical, and political progress.

Assigning conceptual dignity to gardens, and more generally exploring the rich contradictions of built environments, is one element of discontinuity that the circumstances of the Anthropocene demand from environmental philosophy as an academic discipline. Assigning a practical (moral, ethical, political) role to gardening is one element of discontinuity that the circumstances of the Anthropocene demand from individuals, particularly city dwellers.

I have suggested that it is possible, and for many ecological, social, moral, ethical and political reasons also advisable, to disseminate our cities with reticular networks of urban gardens – city-level garden systems, in turn part of a city’s larger “green infrastructure”. As many real-life examples show, this can be done through a combination of garden-oriented urban planning, engineering, education, public policy, and economic incentives. Nonetheless, to be pursued to the fullest, a garden-based turn in urban living would require some radical re-thinking about matters as basic as how we dwell and what we eat.

It would also require some reconsideration of our individual responsibilities in the Anthropocene. In the new epoch, immense amounts of values are already being lost and more yet are at risk of being lost in the future. This works to the detriment of both present and future humans, as well as non-human nature. I have suggested

that individuals have a moral obligation to self-offset, erasing their ecological footprint primarily through anti-systemic practices that can be turned into forms of collective action capable of prompting systemic reform. Individuals ought to self-offset in politically incisive ways. This ensures that individuals not only protect but also promote the state and prospects of humanity in the Anthropocene. I have proposed urban gardening as one of these practices, and concluded that garden-based stewardship can be described as a moral obligation in the new epoch.

I have then discussed selected virtues for the Anthropocene whose development and exercise is enabled and required by urban gardening. I tried to highlight the importance of each of these virtues with respect to some defining challenges of the new epoch; and I also highlighted that developing and exercising these virtues by gardening our cities can disclose important sources of value and meaning in and for our lives. Among the garden virtues for the Anthropocene are classics like wonder and humility, and relative newcomers like ingenuity, perseverance, mindfulness, and cheerfulness. Cheerfulness, in particular, is a behavioral and attitudinal response to the fact that the problems of the Anthropocene must be alleviated by the very agents that are bringing them about. In other words we must, much like gardeners digging weeds, protect ourselves from ourselves. This makes our stewardship inherently self-contradictory. And because there is no end-point to reach, when one manages systemic problematic circumstances that are brought about and reinforced by her, our stewardship in the Anthropocene is also inevitably unresolved. Cheerfulness is the virtue of those who do not give up even in the face of self-contradictory tasks whose end is not in sight. It is, in a sense, the very pink and joy of agency.

Finally, I sketched a garden-based politics for the Anthropocene that I called “operative democracy”. Operative democracy has an environmentally pragmatist, agrarian, civic republican pedigree. It is calibrated at the scale of cities, and takes the form of participatory stewardship of a specific public good, namely the garden system. It attempts to respond to a number of challenges that the circumstances of the Anthropocene pose to liberal democratic political theory and practice. Among these are challenges related to effectiveness, justice, waning participation, and a new public/private blur.

One theme running throughout the book has been that the circumstances of the Anthropocene generate the ethical problems of agency loss and responsibility dissolution. In response I have proposed a strategy of agency retrieval through responsibility assumption. Gardens, or more generally the “rurban” landscapes of the Anthropocene, are the context in which individuals can take on responsibilities and thus retrieve agency. These responsibilities are compensatory and participatory (i.e. to self-offset in politically incisive ways).

Another theme has been the emphasis on practices. Gardening is a practice; stewardship is a practical task; it is primarily through practices that individuals should self-offset; practices are the homes of virtue development and exercise; and collective action against some defining problems of the Anthropocene should take the form of an operative democracy based on material practices.

Insofar as it aspires to contribute to improvements in the real world, environmental philosophy needs to enlarge its focus beyond environmental values to include the

study of human practices: their analysis, evaluation, critique, configuration, and the interdisciplinary exploration of the conditions necessary to their implementation. Practices give shape to our cities much like they give shape to our characters. Politics itself, in the Anthropocene, becomes the practice of shaping a planet:

It will not do to raise pious calls for democracy just because democracy is abstractly a good thing. The Anthropocene question – what kind of world to make together – should be taken as a challenge to democracy. The test is whether citizens can form the kind of democracy that can address the Anthropocene question, the question of what kind of world to make. A democracy that cannot do this will have marked itself as inadequate to its most basic problems (Purdy 2015: 267)

Environmental philosophy in the Anthropocene ought to focus on human practices at least as much as on environmental values. In fact, it should be acknowledged that there is no way of discussing the ones without also discussing the others. Natural and human systems are entangled in new forms of “oneness”.

For this reason the notion of “stewardship of humanity” is only seemingly self-referential. In fact, it points to the goodness of an interaction: to the quality of the co-working between human and natural systems that are now co-dependent. It also underlines that stewardship in the Anthropocene is primarily about managing our own behaviors, not nature itself. And it makes clear that the nature that is thus indirectly stewarded is really humanly-congenial nature, not all the nature that there could be: a certain climate, a certain resource-base, a certain set of systems, processes and entities. Yet this is not the triumph of unacceptable anthropocentrism: it is rather the humble acknowledgement that the planet can and will do without humanly congenial nature – and without us – unless we do something about it. Stewardship is a practical task, not an axiology.

A philosophy of gardens for the Anthropocene begins here. It immediately invokes a practical response to the risk of losing humanly congenial entities, processes, and systems. The response it invokes is personal: it invites individuals to take direct action in their own cities. If our everyday behaviors contribute to the problems of the new epoch, the alleviation of these problems cannot take place without changes in our everyday behaviors. These changes need not be legislated to occur. Individuals can and should engage in anti-systemic practices that contest and circumvent political, economic, and cultural infrastructures that disrupt basic earth systems and thus engender spatiotemporally and genetically unbound harms and damages. Urban gardening is one such practice. There might be others: all experiments in living for the Anthropocene.