

The garden is the new café: Vegetal metaphysics and community philosophy

László Nemes¹

Abstract: In this paper I introduce my new project in philosophical practice and community philosophy called *garden philosophy* or *philosophy in the garden*. In many senses, this is very similar to the usual philosophical café, but organized in a community garden, in this case at downtown Budapest. The garden, and especially an urban community garden, as a complex multispecies community, provides not only a good environment for philosophical conversations, but a strong philosophical foundation, a metaphysics of community philosophy practices, a model and a metaphor, based on the interconnectedness of minds. The garden philosophy, a modern version of Epicurus' philosophical practice, thus connects new insights on the world of plants, the entanglements of various life forms, community philosophy and the long tradition of philosophy as a way of life.

Key-words: garden philosophy; community gardening; community philosophy; multispecies community; philosophical café; Epicurus, philosophy as a way of life;

“You will find me if you want me in the garden”

Einstürzende Neubauten

¹Semmelweis University, Institute of Behavioral Sciences, Budapest, Hungary, Email: nemeslal@hotmail.com

In this paper I introduce my new project in philosophical practice and community philosophy, which can be called as *garden philosophy* or *philosophy in the garden*. In a sense, it is virtually nothing but the usual *philosophical café*, the public group philosophy discussion as we mainly know it, in a rather unusual environment. For sure, it is not just about the place. I organize public philosophy events, like philosophical cafés, death cafés, bioethics cafés, philosophy book club and philosophy with children events for more than a decade. This means several hundreds of philosophical events, hundreds of wonderful people with whom I was lucky to meet and talk. The garden philosophy is a natural extension of my work in philosophical practice. These philosophical activities are not just entertaining meetings and conversations with certain „therapeutic” effects, but alternative ways of doing philosophy, based on different theoretical foundations or *metaphysics*. They are my *metaphilosophical experimentations* with philosophy, as I often say.

As it happened, my philosophical café group, with a massive core of regular participants (perpetually completed with new members), received an invitation from a *community garden* in downtown Budapest, last year, to collaborate on philosophy. Back then it was planned to be a one-time occasion. However, it has turned out to be not only a regular event, on a monthly basis, but inspired me to think further on the metaphysics of community philosophy. As a philosopher, with a scholarly interest in philosophy of biology and bioethics, and more recently, in fields like environmental humanities, multispecies and plant studies, my attention has got focused on the general nature of organism, and the special characteristics of plants in this regard, that is the role of individuality and community in nature. I started to rethink my philosophical practice from these directions.

The common feature of any kind of philosophical practice is that they are always based on interpersonal relations, both in the case of the *dialogical* way of philosophical counseling, and the *group* philosophy discussions, like the philosophical café or philosophy with children (Nemes, 2016). The interconnectedness of minds is the essence of philosophical practice, it is not about acquiring certain knowledge about philosophy, but the very process of doing philosophy together (Nemes, 2018).

In this sense, one of the primary goals of dialogical and group philosophy is dissolving personal autonomy, to overcome it, in order to create a higher order agency of thinking together, the so-called *community of inquiry*, the *inter-subject* (Kennedy, 2004) or a *group-mind* with *emergent* properties. In short, in most cases of philosophical practice, we do not think independently, we suspend our individuality to connect our minds to other people, we know them or not, to achieve a unique quality of philosophizing.

As far as the philosophical café is concerned, the question is the role of the café in it. *Philosophical* café or philosophical *café* would be the more appropriate understanding? I often have the impression that when people refer to a philosophical café, they don't take the *café* in the name really seriously. They seem to think that it is philosophy *something*, the philosophy is only important, not its particular environment. I disagree. The performativity of the philosophical café is coming from the culture of the European café, which became not just the center of urban community life in big cities like London, Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna or Budapest from the 17th century, but the social *symbol* of free discussion. Jürgen Habermas' early work *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1962) (and its English translation in 1989) has opened up an intense discourse on the history and role of cafés and coffeehouses in culture, politics, art, science and philosophy (Nemes, 2011, 2012). The café as a social institution was playing a pivotal role in the development of the public sphere where people could meet and discuss ideas, largely regardless of their social positions, educational and other backgrounds. So the café *itself* is the agent of this kind of public philosophy. The public cafés had serious impact on thinking and communication, similar to that of literacy, the printing press or later the internet.

The cafés in Europe were typically situated at city centers, so they could dominate the cultural life of the city (Nemes, 2019). A rarely recognized feature of modern European philosophy that it is basically an *urban* phenomenon: the most important philosophers live in cities, the typical places of philosophizing are the urban café and the university. As James Conlon (1999) writes: "Being urban and being philosophical are significantly intertwined and the city is the surest place for philosophy to happen. [...] Philosophy has acquired the reputation of being ethereal and

abstract, but if its paradigm is the Socratic dialogue, it was born amidst the bustle of the agora, born on the busiest corner of a great city.”

The café facilitates easy connections between different people, creating an entangled web of their minds, making the thinking process more dynamic. The coffeehouse was not just a place favored by philosophers, from Voltaire to Simone de Beauvoir, but a place which had created a new kind of philosophical practice. One may say that not the pure *content* of particular views is the main point, but the complex performative organization of minds. When we bring philosophy (back) to the café, or at least name the practice as a “café”, we keep this venerable tradition in mind. The coffeehouse is a meeting point of people with different backgrounds, social positions, interests, views, experiences and motivations. This diversity creates a unique atmosphere, necessary for modern philosophy.

So far, so good; but what about plants and the garden? Recently it's got recognized that plants were seriously underrepresented in education, biology, philosophy of biology, and our entire culture in general. This is the so-called “*plant blindness*” (Wandersee and Schussler, 1999). Plants are different from us, animals and humans. Even metaphysically different. In philosophy of biology, metaphysics refers to basic questions about identity, individuality, time/space limitation, transformation, topology, mereology (part-whole relations), process, connections, etc. As it has turned out, in the vegetal world, just like in fungi, these metaphysical categories are much harder to clarify. Surprisingly enough, plants (and fungi) question many of our metaphysical convictions. This led to a *vegetal turn* or a kind of *phyto-centrism* (Marder, 2014) in recent philosophy of nature.

As Robert Macfarlane (2019) quotes his interview with Merlin Sheldrake in relation to fungi: “All taxonomies crumble, but fungi leave many of our fundamental categories in ruin. Fungi thwart our usual senses of what is whole and singular, of what defines an organism, and of what descent or inheritance means. They do strange things to time, because it is not easy to say where a fungus ends or begins, when it is born or when it dies.” (102) and so do the plants. According to the *vegetal metaphysics* or *anti-metaphysics*, to use the philosopher Michael Marder's phrase (Marder, 2011, 2013), plants are challenging our conceptions of individuality and individual autonomy. Plants are much less individualistic than animals and

human beings. They are much more interconnected than we could imagine before (Marder, 2022).

Furthermore, the new scientific study of plant cognition, communication, behavior (even consciousness) has opened up a whole new world to discover and understand. The most curious insights about the life of plants and fungi are those explaining how they are relying on within and between species connections, cooperation and communication (e. g. via the *mycorrhizae* in forests). The striking characteristic of plant cognition and behavior is that they are *decentralized* agents, plants do not have anything like a central nervous system (Mancuso, 2018). To use an important analogy, plants are living in a world very similar to a biological internet, which is sometimes called as the *Wood Wide Web* (Simard, 2021; Bridle, 2022). Like the traditional café, which can be understood as a social predecessor of the internet, or for that matter, the current philosophical café, the complex ecology of plants (and fungi) can serve as a useful model or metaphor for community philosophy.

Obviously, we are not plants, neither fungi. We are human beings, human persons, with important differences. Nevertheless, the new discoveries about plant biology can throw some light on nature and our place in it, the more and more entangled modern world, and so the basic metaphysics of community philosophy practices. *What can we learn from plants, anyway?* One lesson is that evolution is more about cooperation than competition, as Peter Kropotkin once asserted. This insight fairly coincides with the elementary experience of modern people and has profound implications for the future, that Glenn Albrecht described as the age of the *Symbiocene*: “The core message of the concept of the Symbiocene is that life is inter-connected and that the idea of autonomous individuals is mistaken. Life is a collective enterprise requiring collective and non-hierarchical forms of governance.” (Albrecht, 2020, 26)

Socrates, our role model in philosophical practice, notoriously was not a great fan of the natural landscape. „I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.” (Plato *Phaidros*, 230d). Socrates then keenly follows us to the coffeehouse, but not to the forest or the garden. However, this strict opposition between the town and the nature (the forest or the garden) can be challenged now. As Anna Tsing (2010), a leading figure of multispecies studies claims: „Next time you walk through a forest, look down. A city lies under your feet.”

(191) The vegetal world, instead of being an antithesis of the city, is an even more extreme (multispecies) instance of the web of beings, the embodied, living symbol of connections, typical of urban living.

Our next step will be to investigate the role of the *garden* in this story. The garden is not just a particular segment of a natural landscape. The garden is controlled, partially, by human agents, human intentions, plans, management, work. The garden is an ecosystem which includes human person(s). The garden is a dynamic ecosystem, always changing, hard to predict. "As soon as we enter a garden, we become a part of it, so we experience it as an audience that has come to participate in a performance. Obviously, participation may assume multiple forms: we may only contemplate visual aspects, ignoring other dimensions, we may stroll around or play games, but, equally, we may mow the grass or prune trees. One way or another, given the event-like character of gardens, we cannot visit the same garden twice" (Salwa, 55.). Certainly, you can be alone in the garden; gardening is ideal for a retreat and meditative seclusion. Yet the garden is still an entangled, organized ecosystem of a number of species, which you are a part of.

Gardening, as the greatest moral teachers recognized long before, is a rich source of virtues, both moral and intellectual (Cooper, 2006; Brooks, 2010; Kidd, 2022). Among them are patience, temperance, prudence, simplicity, the attitude to time, life and finitude, caring and responsibility, curiosity and wondering, the joy of work. As a gardener, you should accept the unpredictable, which is a form of humility and respect. Gardening is a spiritual exercise. It is a bodily experience, an embodied way of creativity. Beyond the psychological effects of the garden and gardening, they are prime sources for cultivating character and wisdom. The moral significance of the garden and gardening, especially in community gardens, is present in improving the social sensitivity, cooperation with other people, other beings and the nature as such. Respecting others. "The art of listening to plants implies the cultivation of not only a more receptive and respecting relationship to plants, but also more hospitable human-to-human communication." – says Vanessa Lemm (2022, 849). With David Cooper's words: the garden is "embodying a unity between human beings and the natural world, an intimate co-dependence" (Cooper, 2006, 136). This is part of the *phenomenology* of gardening (O'Brien, 2013), like the

touch of soil and the plants, appreciating the aesthetic landscape, the sense of harmony and natural beauty.

As I understand, the community garden (Lawson, 2005; Nettle, 2014) is a unique, highly complex, multilevel ecosystem. First, actually a vacant lot in the downtown area, consists of dozens of miniature gardens, small plots which are themselves contain complex ecosystems of different plants (e. g. tomato, cucumber, paprika, flowers, rosemary and other spice plants), usually in a well-designed and controlled way. Second, these small parcels compose a higher-level ecosystem, which can seem somewhat chaotic, but certainly based on a designed construction. Third, this *garden of gardens*, the colorful patchwork of them, gets completed with other beings, certain animals like snails, bees, bugs, butterflies, birds or cats. Forth, the humans. The individual citizen gardeners who do not necessarily meet, but still feel the presence or impact of each other. Fifth, these people organize community events, to meet, talk, cook together, or just to manage their actual issues. Even small festivals are organized. Or philosophical discussion groups. Sixth, the community garden is located at the heart of the big city, while providing an idyllic island, the promise of getting out of its daily bustle. As Nettle and Crouch (2018) claim: „These landscapes are neither urban nor rural, but both: a hybrid with horticultural production shaped by the particular fabric of the city.” (462)

For me, this strange order or apparent disorder of the dynamic multispecies ecosystems serves as a model for community philosophy. A group discussion always has a particular direction, follows certain epistemic and moral rules, within certain settings, while it still remains unpredictable how the conversation will develop, who will join it, what kind of topics will arise. In these philosophical meetings, the duality of orderliness and disorderliness, the openness of the process, the *adventure* as I like to call it, are always present. The individual minds are melting into a complex ecosystem of thoughts of the actual community.

There is a long tradition in practical philosophy organized around the garden. This is Epicurus' philosophical practice, badly overshadowed today by the more fashionable Socratic and Stoic practices. I am not referring to Epicurus' famous statements about death, gods, the meaning of life, hedonism, atomism, soul, etc., but his very practice of living a philosophical life. This was definitely a community living, together with other people, based on shared activities, like conversations, dance, singing,

eating, gardening. “Epicurus taught in his Garden, purposely avoiding the markets and law courts of the city. Business and politics, he knew, were not conducive to philosophical tranquility. In the Garden, greed and love of power and domination were absent, and knowledge-seeking, friendship between equals and moderate enjoyment gave daily life its shape.” – writes Catherine Wilson in her book *The pleasure principle* (2019, 245).

The ambiguity between the town and the garden led to a perennial tension for Epicurean philosophical practice. As Gordon Campbell writes: “The paradox of a philosopher moving to Athens, founding a school, attracting students, giving lectures and writing and publishing books, but also advising his followers to live unnoticed attracted critical comment in antiquity.” (Campbell, 2010, 221) The reason of this complicated attitude to the city lies in Epicurus’ philosophical practice: „Epicurus’ school was not simply a school of philosophy in the sense of a regular gathering of like-minded thinkers; it was also a community of friends that lived within the walls of the garden and worked there together, studying under Epicurus, writing philosophical works, and also working in the garden and growing their own food.” (221)

Epicurus’ *city garden* can be understood as an ancient predecessor of modern urban community gardens. These gardens are not escape routes to solitude, outside of the human society, but prime opportunities to create new forms of communities, based on shared philosophical interests: “Cities, then, for the Epicureans, are not the pinnacle of human achievement; they are, rather, a decadent decline from a previously existing near-paradise of friendship, simplicity, and harmony in the first village societies. We can therefore begin to understand the decision to live secluded from the city in Epicurus’ garden: ideally, the Epicurean community would establish itself in the countryside far away from the evils and disturbances of the city but, given the modern state of things with city states and empires warring against one another, *it is prudent to take advantage of the protection offered by the city while still enjoying the secluded peace of the garden.*” (226 – my italics)

The location of my garden philosophy events is the *Kisdiófa Közöségi Kert* (*Kisdiófa Community Garden* – where Kisdiófa refers to the street where the garden is located), a well-known community garden in Budapest, functioning as such since 2016, this time having approximately 100-120 citizen gardeners, taking care for the garden plots (6-7 m²), while

the actual community is much larger. The conversations are going in a separate, roofed area of the garden, with tables, benches and seats. We drink and eat whatever we bring with us. Before and after the discussions, we take short walks around the garden plots, which is an organic part of the overall philosophical experience.

At the garden philosophy events, like in my philosophical cafés, we follow the original model of the philosophical café. We choose a topic before the discussion, everyone can suggest a topic, which is usually one single concept, and then we talk about it in one and a half hours, trying to define it and assess its importance in life. No need to reach a consensus, find ultimate answers, solutions. We don't use texts. Occasionally I invite a guest, who introduces her/his interest and work, and may bring a topic to discuss. It is still not a public lecture or a "meet the author" event, but the usual conversation with a special participant. In the group discussions, I function as a *facilitator*, a kind of moderator with the plus responsibility to keep the conversation focused and philosophical. In the group, everyone is accepted as equal, and encouraged to participate actively.

The garden philosophy events are on Tuesday afternoon/evening, when this central area of the capital city is usually full of life, many tourists and locals are gathering at nearby restaurants, pubs and bars. The garden is a relatively silent, undisturbed island in the middle of this urban hustle. A separate small green world of plants and people, quite ideal for philosophical discussions indeed. To announce the actual events and recruit, invite participants, I use a Hungarian facebook group called *Filozófiai Kávéház* [Philosophical Café], which recently has some three thousand members. In the age of social media, it is important to note that we don't record and stream the meetings, to emphasize that it is always an actual activity in real time and real place, with real people who are present. Even though at a garden philosophy we can choose virtually any, philosophically relevant topic (again, usually one general concept), I asked the participants, at least in this initial period, to connect the performativity and the environment of the event with the topics we discuss. So among the first topics, I can mention such concepts as "community", "garden", "veganism", "property", "root" (as opposed to nomadism), "weed" (weedy plants).

Garden philosophy offers a good opportunity to compare the two philosophical practices, the philosophical café and its garden-based

counterpart, garden philosophy. One of the differences is that the garden philosophy is more unpredictable, partly due to the weather. A philosophical café is unpredictable too, you cannot calculate in advance how many people and who will come, what will be the topic, how will the conversation develop, what the general atmosphere and mood will be like. Instead of being this uncertainty a kind of failing, the essential openness makes it a real intellectual adventure, that is an active and creative way of exploring new paths of thinking. Philosophizing in the garden is a new and inspiring experience for me and other participants. The garden philosophy, especially in the summer period, attracts more participants (25-30 people) than the usual philosophical café. I am fully aware that it can change quickly, as the weather turns cold and rainy, or after the initial enthusiasm begins to fade.

In sum, philosophy in the garden is not a new idea, but in current philosophical practice, as we know it, it doesn't play a considerable role. Epicurus' community philosophy is waiting to its revival. The garden philosophy, which I have introduced in this paper, could be a first step in this direction. Like with the café, the garden is not only a good environment for a philosophical conversation, but provides a subtle historical, cultural, and philosophical context for community philosophy, a strong metaphor and symbol for the entanglement of minds, which itself is the goal of philosophical practice. "The Epicurean school was a community based on friendship and in which friendship was considered the most important thing of all." (Campbell, 2010, 221) By helping you to give up your rigid individuality, the garden offers a version of *philosophy as a way of life*.

Follow the famous Epicurean maxim "to live unnoticed", not in the sense that you are sentenced to helpless passivity, but that you will get empowered to actively participate in the community of your friends, even in a *more-than-human* world. What we begin to learn about the life and world of plants, and a renewed interest in the philosophy of gardening, we start to reimagine the nature of philosophy and its relation to the community, its diverse history, the many ways people tried to do philosophy in different times and different cultures. The café is still very close to me, so the philosophical café. But my experimentations with philosophy, philosophical practice and a philosophical life, can be extended toward this new natural and social environment: the garden.



Fig. 1. Garden philosophy, Budapest, July 2023

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