



Genealogies of Philosophy > Unfinished Garden: Desislava Parashkevova

[Genealogies of Philosophy](#) | [Research](#)

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September 24, 2021

2



"I want us to be doing things, prolonging life's duties as much as we can. I want death to find me planting my cabbages, neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening." – Montaigne

D esislava is a philosopher, poet, and gardener who lives with her family in Dundee, Scotland.

I met Desislava at a library in Bremen, Germany, where we were both students. We became close friends on account of our shared love for philosophy, poetry, and film. Our paths separated when I moved to Amsterdam and she to Galway with both of us continuing to pursue philosophy. For a time, we were out of touch.

For many philosophers with academic jobs, life outside academia seems almost inconceivable. For this last post of Genealogies of Philosophy, I turned to Desislava, because I wanted to understand why she, after writing a formidable dissertation in metaphysics, turned to gardening and left behind an academic life. What led her away from metaphysics and towards gardening? Like me, Desislava is a migrant philosopher, moving from Bulgaria, to Ireland, The Netherlands, and finally Scotland. What did this movement mean for her philosophically? Where does motherhood belong in all of this?

This piece came out of a written correspondence with Desislava over the summer. My questions have been redacted and the piece has been reworked for unity and coherence. The voice below is Desislava's.

– With thanks to my co-editors, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer and Katherine Cassese, whose valuable feedback helped us shape this piece. Sidra Shahid



Ciara contemplates a snail.

I. An Epicurean Garden

I started gardening in 2020, while the pandemic was unfolding. But the *idea*, to become a gardener, came to me much earlier, while I was living in The Netherlands with my husband, Archie, and writing a pretty abstract dissertation in the history of traditional metaphysics for the department of philosophy at NUI Galway.

An “Epicurean garden” was then my fantasy about a fuller and more meaningful life, where body and mind could come together, and philosophy would no longer feel like a tedious game, manipulating abstractions.

Sadly, the dislocated and unintegrated life I lived then — moving countries, cities and flats every few months, while ambivalently engaging in abstract metaphysical inquiry — made it physically and mentally impossible for me to live in, have, or even begin a garden. I had a few stimulating exchanges with philosophical friends, dreamt up

countless wild ideas, browsed through David E. Cooper's wonderful book *A Philosophy of Gardens*, then put it all to one side.

In summer 2016, Archie and I had an infant in Dundee (Scotland) where we'd only recently moved. I was now a PhD graduate who had intentionally dropped out of philosophy as a professional pursuit, had no idea what to do for a living, and was beginning anew. Of course, gardening came to mind, together with other possible pursuits, and I foolishly began to grasp at the idea of becoming a gardener in the *professional* sense, just as I'd been grasping at the idea of becoming a professional philosopher previously.

But for two years, I mothered, washed and cooked, read, conversed and pondered spontaneously and often aimlessly, then got a regular job as a content writer at a British retail company in 2018.



Ciara posing with sweetcorn, potatoes, chard, lettuce and cabbages in July 2021. (All images, unless otherwise indicated, courtesy of Desislava Parashkevova)

In 2020, I quit my regular job due to intense unhappiness and a mounting sense of inauthenticity. The pandemic was just beginning. I spent the spring reading, walking, and identifying wild plants.

Through a sequence of strange contingencies, I soon found myself doing in-situ composting in cardboard boxes on my lawn and, together with Ciara, throwing seeds into the compost. By the end of the summer, via a long process of improvisation, trial and error, interspersed with reading and Internet research, we ended up with a hot

compost heap and three sheet mulch beds overgrown with dry flowers, cucumbers, pumpkins, gourds, potatoes, lettuce, beetroot, parsley, chard, mustard greens, mint, strawberries...

It seemed as though a new world was creating itself, of its own accord – that gardening was a growing friendship between the gardener and her plants. I was in love with my vegetal friends, proud when they did well, sad when they suffered, eager to help them flourish, ends in themselves. I found a creative human power growing humbly together with its nonhuman friends – an open-ended play.

Yes, it was a lot of work, you might say, but it didn't feel like work at all.

Now in late summer 2021, the sweetcorn has grown tall, lush and beautiful, with tillers on each side – the pumpkin, butternut squash and ornamental gourd vines next to it are exuberant. The leaves of Brussels sprouts, cabbages and cauliflowers have become lacy after snails and slugs have had their feasts. *Yet I don't worry – there's enough for all.*



In winter I walked around the neighbourhood with Ciara, gathering cardboard and brown leaves which we lay directly onto our lawn, cover thickly with grass clippings, hedge cuttings and kitchen scraps, then leaves again – brown, green, brown again, green again, etc. – then spread compost, sawdust and woodchips on top. In spring, I sowed seeds directly in the organic matter. As the plants grew, I'd mulch them with more organic matter. I'd cut down the weeds and leave them to compost down on the spot. I wouldn't remove anything.

I let dandelions, daisies, groundsel, yellow dock, annual honesty, fringed willow herb, broad-leaved plantain, thistles and stinging nettles shoot up in between the vegetables,

and I let volunteer tomatoes grow in accidental places from forgotten seeds in the vegetable scraps I used as mulch.

Everything finds its place, and I give it room with minimum interference and control. It's hard to tell sometimes where the garden ends and urban wilderness begins....

II. Finding Philosophy



Three years old on the beach in Varna, Bulgaria. I was irritated with my mum for insisting I should have my picture taken; so it shows me moody and unsmiling.

My metaphysical journey was tortuous, not unlike my coming to the practice of gardening. In my teenage years, I was intuitively drawn to the problem of individuation in an aesthetic and metaphysical sense — to what it means to be an individual who lives out of her own spontaneous creativity instead of merely adapting to the external world.

In high school, my then closest friend, Vihren, and I would go to operas together in the Varna opera house and browse the little bookshop adjoining it. I'd buy books about mysticism, Sufism, religious experience, individual psychology, myth, comparative

religion, philosophy and anthropology — books by Jung, Nietzsche, James Frazer, Mircea Eliade, Claude Levi-Strauss, Oswald Spengler. I read just part of each book, not understanding very much. But the reading had, I think, an effect on my unconscious.

At age fifteen, having fallen in love with a boy who loved astronomy and cosmonautics and whom I met every year at Biology Olympiads, I began to write poetry, suffused with my reading and lived experience. All this — the biological world, the stellar world, philosophy and myth, *Eros* — came together in what felt like a cosmology, a personal metaphysical system.



Nineteen years old, only weeks before I flew to Germany. I lived most of my adolescence reading, writing and daydreaming in this room.

The Orthodox Church was still repressed by atheist Communism in the 1980s, and, as a small child, I was raised with basic biblical knowledge, televisual mystery (seeing David Lynch, I first experienced “the uncanny”), and superficial religious rites performed mainly on holidays, but with no authentically religious experience.

Perhaps it is this I was trying to recover in my adolescence between 2001 and 2005: a religious sense of ascent, mystery and ecstasy. My early poems were also animistic and took their inspiration from the natural world, from urban weeds and my grandmother’s garden. Trees, insects, crustaceans and molluscs, birds, stars and planets — even domestic items like wardrobes or clothing items like turbans or necklaces! — had spirit and personality. This way of looking at the world stayed with me.

In 2005, I migrated out of Bulgaria to study art history and literary theory at what was then International University Bremen (IUB) in Germany. The richness of the place, full of people from every corner of the world, coming from a dizzying multitude of life histories, contexts and circumstances – the all-too-common hedonistic aspects of early college life – the somewhat chaotic interdisciplinarity of my coursework – these shattered my fantastical way of looking at the world.



My neighborhood in Varna

In a flash, I seemed to become “earthier”, far less concerned with spiritual matters. It was only during my graduate studies between 2008 and 2010 that a horizon of poetic meaning showed up again.

During those years, I lived with Archie (who is now my husband), and co-created a brilliant and beautiful friendship with a classmate (you, Sidra) who introduced me to “pure philosophy.” In conversations, walks, bike rides, cooking evenings, and sleepless nights reading and watching films, I (re)discovered metaphysics through Leibniz’s, Spinoza’s and Deleuze’s work.

There was beauty to this – and a personal context – which I lost when I moved to Galway for my PhD, leaving a home of love and friendship behind. However, I did eventually produce a dissertation through a meandering personal and theoretical process on the conceptual history of what had, in a sense, interested me all along, the self-caused individual in Western metaphysics, from Plato and Aristotle through medieval Scholasticism and early modern metaphysics, ending with Kant and Hegel.

III. Being Individual



I studied A.N. Whitehead's *process philosophy* and F. H. Bradley's *idealism* extensively along the way too, though they didn't make it into the dissertation. I also averted various personal crises, travelled to Zimbabwe, married Archie via a meandering bureaucratic process and met his family for the very first time. Chiweshe, Zimbabwe, August 2012.

In my writing I showed that, in the Western metaphysical tradition, self-causation has been understood in two ways: as the internal reason why an individual exists or as the internal reason why an individual is *this* one and no other. I argued that only the second way of understanding self-causation makes sense: while *an individual cannot make itself what it is*, it can be *identical with an essence unique to it and different from that of all others*.

This understanding I found to be most evident in Hegel's idea of the concrete universal. For Hegel, truth is in the relationship, *in the fit*, between the abstract universal – *what any particular thing ought to be* – and its particularization – *what the particular actually is*. The 'ought' and the actual existence make sense, and are fully real and determinate, only in relation to each other. The 'concrete universal' is their unification. For example, when I garden, I imagine that my plants ought to reach lush beauty and exuberance, that I ought to look after and enjoy them in particular ways; my ideas become real, though, only through the garden's concrete changes and my practices.

In Kant's critical philosophy, sensuous actuality is known according to transcendental conditions given in abstract universality – but only insofar as a correspondence is found, via the schematism, in sensuous intuition in space and time. What is not found in

sensuous experience is relegated to a supersensuous rational realm. A rift is opened up between “pure thought” and experiential knowledge.



Knoops Park, Bremen, Germany, 2009.

Hegel shows, on the other hand, that it is reason in its dialectical form – through the conceptual attunement occurring in a sequence of judgements, each of which transcends its predecessor – that demonstrates the relationship between how things are and how they ought to be. The logical articulation of the concrete universal is complete, for Hegel, in judgements such as “this garden, as so and so constituted, is good” or “this action, as so and so performed, is right.” In these, the universal (how the garden(ing) ought to be) and the actuality of the garden(ing) come together. The spontaneity with which my many plants grow together, fed by mulch of various origins – and my active or appreciative responsiveness to their growth – provide a relation of “rightness.” The garden and I, the gardener, are doing well.

I can't help thinking of my process of coming into my current personal life and into gardening in its practical form as anything but an imperfect articulation of the concrete universal, with no pretensions to completeness or rest.

The Universe, like a garden, is open-ended, ever-different, unresting, ever opening towards variety, novelty and relation.

A garden is a place where growth is found. It has its own source of change. One does not bring

change to a garden, but comes to a garden prepared for change, and therefore prepared to change. It is possible to deal with growth only out of growth. True parents do not see to it that their children grow in a particular way, according to a preferred pattern of scripted stages, but they see to it that they grow with their children. The character of one's parenting, if it is genuinely dramatic, must be constantly altered from within as the children change from within. So, too, with teaching, or working with, or loving each other. It is in the garden that we discover what travel truly is. We do not journey to a garden but by way of it.

— JAMES P. CARSE, **FINITE AND INFINITE GAMES: A VISION OF LIFE AS PLAY AND POSSIBILITY**

In spite of all these ruminations, I felt (and do feel still) traditional metaphysics to be overly abstract, and in being split apart from the lived spontaneity of my adolescent poetic phase, it never felt fully authentic. More than this, the practice of academic life never felt “garden-like” or like a “restless articulation of Hegel’s concrete universal.” My philosophical work depressed me, and I dropped out of academia after defending the thesis. I did write poetry – that, unbeknownst to me, often contained the old spiritual and animistic motifs – in spurts between 2005 and 2012, but I still felt unintegrated in a deep sense. This is how I came to gardening, first as an idea in 2013 and 2016, and then in practice in 2020.



Ciara doesn't help much in the garden, although she does spend lots of time conversing with the neighbour who gardens in the backyard. The neighbour and we lived side by side for a year without ever exchanging more than hellos. By sheer coincidence, our newly awakened and common love of gardening took us outdoors in spring 2020. Now we have so much more to say to each other.

IV. Philosophy and Everyday Life



The Burren, County Clare, Ireland

My experience as a PhD student was lonely and disorienting due a confluence of internal and external factors. I'd worked myself up into doing a doctorate through an idealistic understanding of what a life of ideas and philosophical creativity was going to be. I expected that I would be able to create a world around myself, through luck and spontaneity, just the way that it had happened in Bremen.

The reality was dispiriting.

I found myself part of a program that didn't seem to me to be set up in the spirit of community, and I often felt isolated. Despite moments of connection with the other PhD students, I didn't find much that held us together. Everyone seemed buried by their own concerns and work. To be fair, there were all-departmental seminars where we presented our work, conversational exchanges, some casual reading groups, and a Heidegger seminar amidst the moon-like landscape of the Burren. But I experienced fragmentation, and creeping senselessness set in, what I took to be a lack of deep being-together and true philosophical care for one another and oneself (*epimeleia* and *epimeleia heautou*). I hope that my experience reflected only a moment and was not shared by others, although I do not doubt what I felt.



Inishmore, Galway Bay, 2015

I became used to an informal discourse whereby the common aim that my fellows held, it seemed to me, was to finish the PhD and look for professional opportunities – to focus on one's own scholarly path, to ignore the messiness of life in favour of theoretical neatness and academic pragmatism, to make sure one doesn't get “pulled into too many directions.” My personal struggles and practical difficulties were understandably burdensome to others. They were even a “distraction from what I should be doing.” I am sympathetic to the challenges of entering professional life, and I do not know what others were really feeling, but I personally needed a different kind of environment in order to flourish.

As it happened, I was, in fact, pulled into various, intellectual and practical, directions. Thank goodness for that!

Rather than starting with a plan and following it out, I followed the multiple paths where they led, without being afraid to change direction and scrap things. My supervisors were

both critical and encouraging. Although this met my abstract mental needs, it hardly met the bodily ones – for integration and for community. I was becoming different from, and differently than, a “professional” philosopher.



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Archie and I in 2005.

Whenever
the clever and lofty Mind storms
to hide it unto Itself
and ship it into an impossible world,
the body grows moss
and curls itself
into a knowing worm.

An excerpt from a poem I wrote sitting next to you, Sidra, in my sunroom in Bremen, in spring 2010.

My personal life, my garden and my friendships met my needs holistically in a dramatic and spontaneous manner, and I eventually found it unnecessary to follow “the” professional script.

At first the transition away from “the” script manifested in feelings of shame, wrongness, and societal rejection. But with time, these faded, and I relaxed into my life. Now I’m looking into low-status possibilities of making a living, such as gardening for others for part of the year, and being at true non-utilitarian leisure during non-gardening months (see Josef Pieper’s *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*), reading, writing, and traveling with friends.

While I don’t know whether this will work, I’m thankful that I feel alright to consider and plan for it.

V. Motherhood



*It is telling that my first serious intellectual engagement with motherhood took place in 2020 (the same year I started gardening), as I read Morris Berman's *Wandering God: A Study in Nomadic Spirituality*, and, a little later, Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. Reading these lent intelligibility and contextual historical awareness to my lived experience. But it worries me that this came so late!*

I became a mother four years before I became a gardener, and while, at its best, mothering is indeed like gardening, it is emotionally and intellectually challenging in a way that my philosophical learning hardly prepared me for. In actual fact, throughout

my academic training in philosophy, I didn't witness a single philosophical discussion of motherhood!

I find it remarkable that mundane and earthly, "great and lowly," experiences like motherhood are often seen as beneath serious philosophical consideration. This has everything to do with the body-mind split in much of professional philosophy – the intuitive reason why I left the academy.



Archie and Ciara

... the world has a body –
a big body of mothers and fathers,
of burnt fishes, shapeless mushrooms
and bushy broccoli,
busy potatoes stocked in hostels
where my body never was –
where the world's body was –
where what I call "I" was
like a cell –
Unexpected

After a torturous labor and an emergency Caesarean section, for weeks all I did was respond to my baby's need for milk, physical closeness and comfort, and nurse my own pain. Being pregnant, giving birth, and breastfeeding an infant shaped my reality in a radical way as intense bodily experiences.

Though it's the nearest I've ever come to a state of choiceless awareness and bodily presence, I initially experienced mothering a newborn child as an altered state of mind. For the first few weeks – I perceived, to my horror and amusement, all people's faces as infant-like, shaped in my baby's image. My consciousness seemed to be adapting itself to the reality of my infant's all-consuming need.

As the baby grew and turned into a toddler, then a little girl – as the intensity of her needs decreased gradually and her independence increased – our relationship shifted but remained an ongoing and difficult play with boundaries. The lack of a consistently caring community and the consequent over-reliance on me, the mother, to achieve the fine balance between my own individuality and desires and hers in most practical aspects of life have often been overwhelming, and, on bad days, disheartening.

I now think that, like gardens, families need to be polycultural and open to varied novelty. We need to be in rich relationships with many significant others – friends capable of *epimeleia*, who can share a practical life with us in all its glory and mundanity. The fragmentation of (Western) life, the strangeness of migrating repeatedly, and the weirdness of living in pandemic conditions, makes this a challenge for many of us. I wonder if we can, as [James P. Carse](#) suggests, see culture as an “infinite game of gardening” and ourselves as gardeners growing together with what we help grow.

A fragrant collection I found at the bottom of my bag after emptying it. Ciara had been secretly collecting things all along our forest walk.

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This is an installment of [Into Philosophy](#).

Sidra Shahid

Sidra Shahid teaches at Amsterdam University College. Sidra's doctoral thesis in philosophy offered a critique of transcendental arguments in epistemology using Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein. She is currently working on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the *a priori*, transcendental interpretations of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, and topics at the intersections of phenomenology and politics.