ABSTRACT

Iris Murdoch's Genealogy of the Modern Self:
Retrieving Consciousness Beyond the Linguistic Turn

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In this dissertation I argue that Murdoch's philosophical-ethical project is best understood as an anti-Enlightenment genealogical narrative. I maintain that her work consistently displays four fundamental features that typify genealogical accounts: 1) liberation (i.e., subversion) from a dominant philosophical picture; 2) restoration of a previous philosophical picture wrongly dismissed; 3) restoration of practices no longer intelligible on the dominant view; and 4) recovery of an alternative grammar at odds with the dominant philosophical discourse. The dominant philosophical picture Murdoch subverts is the eclipse of consciousness wrought by both the Anglo-analytic and Continental-existentialist traditions. Whether effaced by totalizing linguistic structures or identified with an empty choosing will, Murdoch argues that the forces present within her philosophical context are fundamentally hostile to an adequate conception of consciousness. Her genealogical project attempts to reassert the primacy of consciousness within this antagonistic climate by restoring a Platonic, erotic conception of consciousness. Additionally, Murdoch insists that consciousness is the fundamental

form of moral being and that moral transformation, including the practices for that transformation, cannot be understood without a thick conception of consciousness. Murdoch's account, therefore, refocuses our attention on important practices or techniques of moral purification rendered unintelligible on the dominant view. Finally, Murdoch recovers the Platonic metaphor of the Good, including the conceptual array in which the Good receives its meaning, in an attempt to develop an alternative grammar fit for the task of picturing the complexities and nuances of our ethical situation. I conclude by commenting on both the promising and problematic aspects of Murdoch's legacy.

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Retrieving Consciousness Beyond the Linguistic Turn

by

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Non est Mortale quod opto.

I have immortal longings in me.

"Take wing my soul, and mount up higher,
For Earth fulfils not my desire."

Emblem and citation from R. B. ('Author of the History of the Wars of England'). *Delights for the Ingenius,* (London: Printed for Nathaniel Crouch, 1684), 174-175.

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PREFACE

This project had its genesis in my attempt to understand the so-called collapse of the Enlightenment project through three very different, yet overlapping anti-Enlightenment narratives. These grand narratives attempt to understand the deeply influential, widely pervasive, and uniquely problematic intellectual, spiritual, and moral shift that occurred in the modern period through a coordination of historical, social, and conceptual analysis. The analyses of greatest significance to me have attempted to characterize the failure of the Enlightenment project in the particular context of moral and political philosophy. Thus, the three narratives toward which I have been repeatedly drawn are those written by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Iris Murdoch. Each of these narratives is unique. They use different casts of characters, diagnose different problems, and suggest different solutions. Put simply, Gadamer focuses on the ill-advised reduction of practical rationality to the procedural model of scientific rationality; MacIntyre highlights the tragic consequences of the loss of a teleological framework; and Murdoch emphasizes the dangers inherent in the eclipse of consciousness and the vanishing of the philosophical self. Whereas MacIntyre posits a neo-Aristotelian account as the solution to our moral woes and Murdoch offers a neo-Platonic account, Gadamer proffers Plato-Aristotle, as well as the relegitimization of prejudice so well exemplified in Roman jurisprudence and legal hermeneutics. Yet, even with the many differences between these accounts, their projects are not entirely incompatible. There is a family resemblance, for instance, between MacIntyre's

"tradition constituted inquiry" and Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice as the horizon in which finite human understanding operates. One also finds overlap between Murdoch's emphasis on the particularity, inexhaustibility, and obscurity of the practical situation and Gadamer's rejection of moral-techne models.

My project represents the effort to explore just one of these anti-Enlightenment narratives, Iris Murdoch's, and to consider the unique insights to be gleaned from her particular way of telling the story. I have three basic reasons for choosing Murdoch over MacIntyre and Gadamer. First, Murdoch's anti-Enlightenment narrative has not received the same amount of sustained scholarly attention that both MacIntyre's and Gadamer's have. I attempt to rectify this neglect by focusing on what I call Murdoch's genealogy of the modern self. Second, my casting of Murdoch's project as an anti-Enlightenment narrative or genealogy is itself a novel way of understanding her philosophical work. No one has yet explored Murdoch's philosophy in this light, and if I am correct, this oversight greatly inhibits our ability to appreciate the scope and character of her project. Finally, I am not merely interested in letting Murdoch's voice be heard for the sake of filling a scholarly void, however important that may be. Murdoch's account possesses unique and timely insights that continue to be of relevance as we continue to wrestle with the meaning and nature of the Enlightenment, and as we attempt to make sense of our lives in a post-Enlightenment era. These insights will surface in my treatment of her narrative; however, of particular significance are her comments on the nature of moral language, the role of literature in moral philosophy, the central place of love in any adequate ethics, the importance of various techniques of moral purification, and the role of the unconditioned in our moral considerations.

A project of this nature eventually must confront a whole host of methodological questions wrapped up in trying to understand the philosophical status of, and role for, genealogies as philosophical arguments. I originally intended to address explicitly these questions as a part of my exploration of Murdoch's narrative; however, that enquiry became too ambitious for the scope of this project and would have distracted me from the prolonged attention the narrative itself required. Inadequate as it may be, it must suffice merely to mention that I reject projects that do not take adequate account of our historically-effected consciousness, but likewise, I reject accounts that think this acceptance necessarily degenerates into a historical relativism where historical narratives turn out to be thinly-disguised modes of rhetorical manipulation that we invent for the sake of advancing our own agenda. My understanding of the methodological issues involved in these large-scale narratives has been deeply influenced by R.G. Collingwood and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

For better or for worse, I have opted to classify Murdoch's project as genealogical. My initial reasons for doing so were twofold. First, I originally understood a genealogy as a historical narrative designed to subvert a dominant philosophical consensus, thereby liberating one to consider an alternative philosophical picture. Second, I also originally understood a genealogy to be subtly arguing for an alternative philosophical picture in the process of subverting the dominant one. These two features of genealogies are inextricably connected in complex ways, and because Murdoch's project exemplifies both of them, I initially considered it a genealogy. However, once classified, I've also allowed Murdoch's account to shape and deepen my original conception of a genealogy, and therefore, have permitted her account to play a role in

defining certain salient features of genealogies. I have done this in part to offer Murdoch's genealogy as an alternative to the Nietzschean/Foucauldian understanding that often dominates conceptions of genealogy. Murdoch's genealogy is attentive rather than agonistic: she desires a narrative which has the capacity to reveal something true apart from the will. She remains committed to a fundamental ideal of a truthfulness which is not a product of a will to power.

By allowing Murdoch's project to deepen my original understanding of genealogies, I have added two additional features that are characteristic of genealogical endeavors. In all, then, there are a total of four fundamental features typical of genealogical accounts that will surface in my exploration of Murdoch's anti-Enlightenment narrative: 1) *liberation* from a dominant philosophical picture; 2) *restoration* of a previous picture misguidedly dismissed; 3) restoration of *practices* that a previous picture was meant to inform; and 4) *development* of an alternative grammar. Each of these features is conspicuously on display in Murdoch's narrative; and thus, Murdoch's project rightly can be classified as genealogical.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first debt of gratitude is owed to those individuals who generously dedicated their time as members of my dissertation committee: Scott H. Moore (chairperson), Anne-Marie Bowery, Robert Miner, Margaret Tate, and Barry Harvey. Each, in his or her own unique way, has been a model of intellectual excellence and has contributed greatly to my understanding of the philosophical issues and themes addressed in my dissertation. Whether through a well-conducted seminar, a timely conversation, an illuminating question, or a needed critique, I have benefited from the insights and expertise of every member. Scott, in particular, has spent many hours editing multiple drafts and offering helpful suggestions along the way. A second debt of gratitude is owed to Baylor's philosophy department in which I received a thorough grounding in the history of philosophy and flourished as a part of an intellectual community characterized by charity. Whether experienced from fellow students or professors, there is a special sense of collegiality and care present within Baylor's philosophy department without which our collective intellectual projects would be impoverished and certainly less enjoyable. Two central philosophical friendships have been particularly important and formative. The conversations I have had with Paul Carron and Cameron Jorgenson (ostensibly a student in Baylor's religion department) are deeply interwoven into the fabric and structure of my thought.

Thanks of a more personal nature are due to my parents, Ted and Carol, who have been a continual source of support no matter the endeavor, and whose concrete display of

love is never far from my theoretical musings. Additionally, I am deeply grateful to the community of Christians who comprise Dayspring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, who are a living testimony to the possibility of a people governed by principles of an alternative city. I am especially thankful to have had an experiential, communal context in which to practice and reflect upon the characteristically Christian spiritual disciplines and exercises, which take on meaning and have their home in the context of the Christian habit of being and moral psychology.

Finally, there are two individuals in particular for whom I feel a deep sense of gratitude and who ultimately transcend professional, personal, familial, and ecclesial categorization: the late A.J. "Chip" Conyers and my wife, Jamie Gianoutsos Jordan. Chip was a mentor and a friend and one in whom real intellectual excellence was seamlessly combined with moral purity and spiritual joy. Chip's theological and philosophical work illuminates with uncommon clarity the deleterious effects of the Enlightenment shift on our common life together. When reading Chip, one remembers what is at stake and witnesses what it is to love God with all of one's mind. As for Jamie, she wears many hats: editor, dialogue partner, confidant, encourager, friend, lover, and much, much more; but this debt of gratitude is of the sort that I must pass over in silence.

For my pappa and mom,
Ted and Carol

CHAPTER ONE

Iris Murdoch's Genealogical Drama: Consciousness as The Hermeneutical Key

One of the most unjustly neglected aspects of Iris Murdoch's thought— essential for understanding her ethical-philosophical project—is her genealogical re-narration of the history of modern moral philosophy. Murdoch approaches her telling of this history from a specific question which she explains in a telling passage from *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*:

> Is there *a* philosophical problem of consciousness; rather than, say, a lot of peripheral problems so arranged as to remove any allegedly central problem which could be so called? Problems are set up in philosophy with ulterior motives. I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being.[1]

The proper place to begin with any history is with the historian's guiding question(s), or in the words of Murdoch, "ulterior motives."[2] She is quite frank that the question of consciousness shapes her telling of the history of moral philosophy, and that it is the "ulterior motive" that gives her narrative its distinctive mark. Murdoch's "ulterior motives" should not be understood as manipulative motives, which tempt the historical knower to distort her historical account based upon what she would like to be true rather

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[1]Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 171.

[2]This is similar to R.G. Collingwood, who maintains, "Whether a given proposition is true or false, significant or meaningless, depends on what question it was meant to answer; and any one who wishes to know whether a given proposition is true or false, significant or meaningless, must find out what question it was meant to answer." *Autobiography*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 39.

than truthfully narrating her account by what she *sees* the historical "facts" to be. For Murdoch, ulterior motives are the necessary prejudgments one brings to a given inquiry without which the inquiring mind would not have access to that inquiry.

I begin with Murdoch's motives not to deconstruct, but instead to understand her genealogical account of the modern self. Murdoch's history initially makes sense in light of her desire to create a context in which the problem of consciousness can be discussed.[3] By consciousness Murdoch means the first person awareness or activity of the "inner life" and the "continuous fabric of being,"[4] which is constantly at work mediating the world to us. She wants to create a context for discussion because she believes that the intellectual context in which she finds herself, namely the early analytic moral philosophy of Oxbridge, has made the problem of consciousness invisible due to the loss

[3]Maria Antonaccio agrees in focusing on consciousness as central to the philosophical project of Murdoch. In *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, Antonaccio claims, "It is precisely here [in consciousness] that Murdoch offers a compelling alternative to current thought. Against the displacement of the notion of consciousness in favor of the authority and primacy of language, Murdoch retrieves consciousness as the fundamental mode of human moral being." (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-4. Antonaccio also indicates that consciousness is an "essential conviction" that links Murdoch's early and late work. She maintains, "Although Murdoch's explicit claim that 'consciousness or self-being [is] the fundamental mode or form of moral being' is specific to *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* [1992], the same essential conviction lies behind her critique of the existentialist-behaviorist view that dominates *The Sovereignty of Good* [1967]," Ibid., 86. Antonaccio also demonstrates that consciousness is central to Murdoch's thought in her analysis of the structure of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. She suggests, "The first third of the book is devoted to the theme of art (chapters 1-5), the second third to the idea of the self or consciousness (chapters 6-12), and the final third is devoted to religion and the idea of the good (chapters 13-18). Not surprisingly, the chapters on consciousness occupy the center of the book, testifying to the essential role this concept plays in Murdoch's ethics," Ibid., 157.

[4]Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 316.

of the philosophical self.[5] Murdoch's suggestion is that this loss is one of the most significant and widely influential legacies of the Enlightenment. As she laments this legacy, her genealogy should be considered an anti-Enlightenment narrative through which she intends to provide an intellectual and historical explanation as to how and why this important context for moral reflection was lost. Since Murdoch's fundamental question can be understood to be, "What led philosophically to the disappearance of consciousness?," the hermeneutical key to understanding her re-narration is consciousness.

Murdoch attempts an answer to this question first by sketching the picture of the human person she rejects, and then by creating the conceptual space for an alternative picture of the human person. She accomplishes these sketches by providing a similar narrative that recurs throughout her work. Most of these genealogical narratives unfold in a common pattern, which might best be understood as a three-act drama.[6] Although

[5]See *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 158, where Murdoch claims, "So, certain philosophical dichotomies make the 'self', or 'consciousness', problem invisible." Although Murdoch argues for the primacy of consciousness within a philosophical context emphasizing the paradigm of language, she should not be interpreted in an overly Cartesian manner. Murdoch recovers consciousness *beyond* the linguistic turn. See my discussion on 26-32.

[6]This pattern is particularly obvious in three important essays Murdoch writes in the 1960s: "The Idea of Perfection," "On 'God' and 'Good,'" and "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999). The large majority of Murdoch's work can be nicely categorized according to these three acts. The works that do not display the three-act structure themselves can helpfully be understood as moments in this larger structure. In fact, Murdoch's philosophical career as a whole can be understood as a display of this three-act structure. In her early career, Murdoch is immersed in the existentialist understanding of the human person. Her first book is on Sartre. In the middle of her career, she grows increasingly unsatisfied with modern *pictures* of the self and turns more and more toward a Platonic picture. Near the end of her career, Murdoch

Murdoch never describes her own project in these terms, I argue that the three-act structure captures both her narratival way of understanding philosophy and the three distinct structural moves she makes in her narration.

Overview of the Drama

In act one of her genealogical drama, Murdoch tells the story of modern moral philosophy as a fundamentally flawed project. She habitually returns to a particular cast of characters to narrate this story. Her problem is with the way in which modern moral philosophy conceives of, or in Murdoch's words, *pictures* the human (particularly the human as moral agent). She argues that the view of the moral agent developed is one in which moral choice is conceived in an essentially existentialist manner, and one in which the agent's will is the creator of value. Murdoch uses the term "existentialist" not only to refer to the customary cast such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre, but also provocatively to refer to philosophers in the Anglo-analytic tradition such as Richard Hare and Stuart Hampshire.[7] Murdoch certainly realizes that referring to Anglo-analytic philosophy as existentialist is not only counter-intuitive, but also an unwelcome classification to the British philosophers so dubbed. She links these traditions of thought, so often contrasted (and rightly so), in order to draw attention to what she thinks is a more important, and often overlooked, commonality. The commonality is that both

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directs more and more energy and attention toward Plato, writing an extended meditation on Plato and art, "The Fire and the Sun," and some original Platonic dialogues.

[7]See "On 'God' and 'Good'" where she talks about Existentialism "in its French and Anglo-Saxon varieties," 343.

traditions ignore the continuous background of attachment and activity *between* moments of choice when picturing the moral choice of an agent:

> The existentialist picture of choice, whether it be surrealist or rational . . . ignores what appears at least to be a sort of continuous background with a life of its own. . . . Here neither the inspiring ideas of freedom, sincerity and fiats of will, nor the plain wholesome concept of rational discernment of duty, seem complex enough to do justice to what we really are. What we really are seems much more like an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between moments of choice.[8]

Murdoch's concern here is that these philosophers tend to think of the will as an isolated choosing faculty, one not embedded in the complex psychology of the historical individual, and one not subject to structures of value transcending the will.

In act two, Murdoch argues that the picture of the human self developed by modern moral philosophy is not only deeply flawed but also has grave consequences for ethics. She wants to replace this unencumbered self with a thick, erotic picture of human consciousness that allows room for the historical individual and the progressive purification of desire. To accomplish this goal, Murdoch attempts to replace existentialist metaphors of movement (i.e., choice) with Platonic metaphors of vision. She is concerned with picturing human personality in such a way that states of consciousness act as the genetic background for action.[9] She creates this conceptual space through a creative recovery of the Platonic notion of Eros.

Finally, in act three, Murdoch focuses on the image of the Platonic Good as a reality that transcends the will and continually resists the ego's attempt to define it in its

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[8]Ibid., 343-344.

[9]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 368 and 375.

own terms. The Good, as the central ordering metaphor in Murdoch's moral philosophy, allows her to develop an ethical system in which moral value is based on something that transcends human choice. Murdoch's chief enemy is the non-cognitivist tradition, in which moral value is invented or projected onto the world, rather than in some sense discovered. Murdoch asserts, "*Good, not will, is transcendent*."[10] She describes transcendence as a "non-metaphysical,"[11] not to be confused with an otherworldly transcendence. William Schweiker has chosen to describe this as a "lateral transcendence," the transcendence of this world in its ability to interrupt or call into question one's current vision of the world distorted by the ego.[12] To illustrate this non-metaphysical transcendence, Murdoch habitually returns to our sense of scales of value ubiquitously embedded within concrete human activities and practices. She understands the Good in terms of perfection as an ideal toward which we continually aspire and yet never quite grasp. Perfection is an ever-receding ideal that resists the egoism of the human self and calls one to an "unresting spiritual aspiration."[13] I will now turn to a more detailed description of the three acts and discuss the overall structure of my dissertation.

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[10]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 356.

[11]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 376.

[12]William Schweiker outlined this distinction in a paper he gave at the Third International Iris Murdoch Conference titled, "The Moral Fate of Fictive Persons: On Iris Murdoch's Humanism," Kingston University, Kingston-upon-Thames, United Kingdom, September 15, 2006.

[13]Iris Murdoch, "The Fire and the Sun," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 403.

Overview of the Dissertation

Act I – Liberation: Challenging the Dominant Philosophical Picture of the Self

In chapter two, I explore Murdoch's narration of what she considers the flawed and dominant "current view" of the self.[14] Her narrative sheds light on four related aspects of the current view that comprise what Murdoch believes to be the unfortunate picture of the self given to us by modern moral philosophy: 1) the behavioristic treatment of the "inner life"; 2) the view of moral concepts as "factual specifications plus recommendations"; 3) the "universalizability" of the moral judgment; and 4) the accompanying picture of moral freedom.[15] These points occupy Murdoch's thinking in some form or another throughout her entire career.

For the purpose of illuminating the four related points comprising the modern picture of the self, I will focus on four thinkers who play a significant role in Murdoch's story: Immanuel Kant, Jean-Paul Sartre, R.M. Hare, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Murdoch never draws a simple correlation between these four thinkers and her four points. In fact, it is closer to Murdoch's intentions to see these four points as elements in an overall picture of the self and, as such, a strict correlation of one figure with one point certainly breaks down. However, Murdoch does correlate all four points with each of these thinkers individually, and at times she appeals to only one to paint the overall picture of the self.[16]

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[14]Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 77.

[15]Ibid., 78.

[16]Perhaps the best example of this point is Murdoch's critique of Stuart

The arch-villain of Murdoch's genealogy, and the source to which she often traces the ills of the Enlightenment, is Kant.[17] She provocatively considers Kant the founder of the existentialist view of the self. She argues that in Kant one gets a clear picture of the isolation of the will from the psyche and an over-identification of the self with the unfettered will. According to Murdoch, Kant's emphasis on the autonomy of the moral will and his identification of the true self with practical reason (not inclination nor any other feature of the empirical psyche) prefigures the Sartrean-existentialist picture of the self. Since Kant has a special status in her narrative, I treat the Kantian ancestry of the current view in some detail. I also conclude the chapter discussing the role of the naturalistic fallacy in Murdoch's narrative.

Act 2.1 – Restoration (Part 1): Reclaiming the Thick Self

In chapter three, I examine Murdoch's alternative interlocking picture of the self. Murdoch's analysis of the "current view" foreshadows the way in which she develops her alternative as a correction of these four aspects. To temper the behavioristic concept of the "inner life," she emphasizes consciousness as the background to action; to defeat the view of moral concepts as "factual specifications plus recommendations," she insists on the primacy of thick ethical concepts and the entanglement of fact and value; to disrupt the "universalizability of the moral judgment" she underscores the primacy of the particular; and to dismantle the accompanying picture of moral freedom, she argues that

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Hampshire in "The Idea of Perfection," 299-336.

[17]Murdoch's treatment of Kant undergoes significant modification throughout her career. Her last philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, shows a great deal of admiration and respect for him, and her late work displays an ambivalence toward Kant that was absent earlier. However, even among her early essays of the 1950s, Murdoch relies on the Kantian notion of the regulative ideal.

one must link freedom with deep conceptual attitudes. Murdoch's alternative, interlocking picture of the self, merely foreshadowed in act one, comes to full articulation in act two, a self that, I will argue, is largely derived from her creative re-appropriation of Plato.

Act 2.2 – Restoration (Part 2): A Platonic Vocabulary of Eros and the Retrieval of Purification Practices

In chapter four, I discuss the Platonic roots of Murdoch's alternative picture of the self, demonstrating how Murdoch's thick self is a creative recovery of a Platonic, erotic conception of the soul. This chapter represents a crucial transition, where Murdoch ceases speaking primarily in the language of the dominant philosophical discourse and switches to the language of Platonic Eros and the Good which is better suited to her project. She takes this turn because she is fundamentally interested in developing an adequate vocabulary of consciousness. Murdoch's deeply erotic conception of consciousness and its implications on our conception of the moral life as pilgrimage will also be clarified.

One of the chief reasons Murdoch is concerned with the recovery of consciousness is in order to render techniques of moral purification again intelligible. Murdoch argues that moral philosophy should attempt to instruct the moral pilgrim how to improve morally—a task she criticizes modern moral philosophy for shirking. As a result, she often turns her attention to various strategies for moral transformation. However, Murdoch realizes that in order to speak meaningfully about purification exercises, there needs to be a substantial enough conception of the self to be the bearer of moral alteration. Thus, her restoration of purification exercises is intimately related to

her recovery of a thick notion of consciousness. My chapter covers several of these particular techniques Murdoch recommends for moral purification.[18]

Act 3 – An Alternative Grammar: Recovering a Vocabulary of the Good

In chapter five, I argue that a proper understanding of the Good in Murdoch must begin with the constructive aim of her ethical project: to provide a rich moral grammar fit for the task of picturing the complexities of the moral life and adequate for helping us reflect on the ambiguities of moral pilgrimage. Murdoch's recovery of the Platonic Good, including the conceptual field of which it is a part, then, is her attempt to provide an adequate ethical vocabulary. I also argue that Murdoch's Good must be understood as embedded within its own particular conceptual array in which it takes on meaning. Thus, I identify and explore four key contexts in which the grammar of Murdoch's Good comes to presentation: 1) the Good as explanatory metaphor; 2) the Good as perfection; 3) the Good's relation to Eros; and 4) the Good in contrast to God.

[18]When she explores techniques of purification, Murdoch often turns to the category of the religious. By religion she does not mean any particular body of dogma, but constant attention to the inner life and states of mind. Her category of the religious should be read against the category of the moral, where moral refers to outward behavior or discrete external actions. One of Murdoch's general philosophical aims is to extend moral philosophy beyond its focus on public behavior to the religious with its focus on inner states and attention toward the background work of moral attention that goes on in between outward actions. The distinction between the religious and the moral is important for Murdoch; however, she rejects any ultimate separation between either category because of their mutual dependence. Therefore, there can be no profitable and ultimate bracketing of the religious from the moral. The moral philosopher must pay attention to the inner life.

Murdoch's Genealogy of the Modern Self

Murdoch offers her three-act, anti-Enlightenment narrative in order to create the conceptual space for a "discussable problem of consciousness" in philosophical contexts. The significance of Murdoch's re-narration is that it provides a genealogy of the modern self which subverts that self, thereby creating the space for an alternative account. Murdoch is motivated by her conviction that the modern picture of the self minimizes ethically significant "inner work" and renders the notion of moral progress or purification unintelligible. To re-legitimize these activities and to recover a conception of moral life as erotic pilgrimage, Murdoch has to defend philosophically an ethics of the individual consciousness and provide an alternative grammar through which to speak of these issues. Herein lies the meaning and significance of Murdoch's return to Plato and his dual notions of Eros and the Good.

Since Murdoch's overall project is best understood as a genealogy of the modern concept of the self, it is important for us to consider briefly the kind of genealogy Murdoch provides. Because of their habitual association with Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, genealogies and rival histories have come to be associated with certain radical post-modern perspectives. Some have concluded that with the downfall of the notion of "objective" history—defined in terms of the methodological purification from all prejudice—we are left with power politics and various strategies for the victory of certain interest groups.[19] Murdoch's genealogy stands as an alternative to the inventive

[19]I have in mind thinkers like Richard Rorty and his oft quoted remark that the notions of "objectivity" and "truth" must be reinterpreted as "what our peers will . . . let us get away with saying," in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 176. Along similar lines see Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* where knowledge cannot be separated from power as domination.

willfulness of these genealogists, for she remains guided by a fundamental ideal of truthfulness.[20] She never abandons the notion of discovery for invention; rather her genealogy aspires to a timeless truth, even while recognizing the historical nature of human understanding.[21] In this aspirational sense, Murdoch is a metaphysical realist, as she maintains that there is a reality independent of the mind, and the historian's mind must become adequate to its object. For Murdoch, there is a meaningful distinction between the real and the apparent; and therefore, her genealogical account is no mere temporary stance or mask assumed for the sake of addressing and subverting a particular perspective.[22]

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[20]The understanding of genealogy is often dominated by Nietzchean and Foucauldian conceptions, which glory in subversive stories for the sake of subversion as a display of power. The subversive stories themselves enact this venting of power and serve as the site for the display of these forces. I want to suggest that Murdoch provides us with an alternative picture of genealogy. For a similar suggestion in relation to Giambattista Vico see, Robert Miner, *Vico: Genealogist of Modernity*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

[21]In his conception of the "rationality of a craft-tradition," Alasdair MacIntyre similarly holds that "despite its recognition of the historical situatedness of all reason-giving and reason-offering, it understands the truth to which it aspires as timeless." *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, (London: Duckworth, 1990), 66.

[22]Describing Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, MacIntrye argues that "it represents no more than a temporary stance, a mask worn only for the purposes of certain particular addressings of certain particular audiences. . . . The problem then for the genealogist is how to combine the fixity of particular stances, exhibited in the use of standard genres of speech and writing, with the mobility of transition from stance to stance, how to assume the contours of a given mask and then to discard it for another, without ever assenting to the metaphysical fiction of a face which has its own finally true and undiscardable representation," Ibid., 47. Murdoch's genealogy is radically different, as she assents to a continuity of self that Nietzsche and Foucault reject.

Murdoch offers what could be called an *attentive genealogy* in distinction to Nietzschean/Foucauldian *agonistic genealogies*.[23] Put simply, an agonistic genealogy transforms "the hierarchical order of power associated with science" into "a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse."[24] Characterizing Foucault's genealogical project, MacIntyre maintains, "Truth and power are thus inseparable. And what appear as projects aimed at the possession of truth are always willful in their exercise of power."[25] Here as elsewhere Murdoch rejects the centrality of the will. Her attentive genealogy, on the other hand, begins *en media res*, enmeshed in her entire horizon of prejudices, but continually foregrounds and tests (or risks) her "pre-judgments" against the phenomena that appear to her from within those initial prejudices. Discovery of that which precedes a will to power is central to her account. In Murdochian terms, we must understand her genealogical enterprise as a continual and disciplined effort of selfless attention directed toward the discovery and revelation of what is true. However else Murdoch's genealogy is

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[23]In using the term "agonistic" to describe these genealogies, I am following Seyla Benhabib where she maintains, "the agonistic approach conflates all validity claims with 'power effects.'" *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 232. Benhabib in turn borrows the conception of "agonistics of language" from Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Ibid., 209.

[24]Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 85.

[25]MacIntrye, *Three Rival Versions*, 52-53. MacIntrye is here describing Foucault's account which claims to unmask conventional standards of rationality as "distributions of power have been at work, in such a way that what appear at the surface level as forms of rationality both are and result from the implementation of a variety of aggressive and defensive strategies."

construed, it must be interpreted in light of her repeated comments to the effect that the "intellectual ability to perceive what is true . . . is automatically at the same time a suppression of self."[26] This commitment alone renders her genealogical project radically distinct from a Nietzchean or Foucauldian project as she understood it.

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[26]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 353.

CHAPTER TWO

Act I – Liberation: Challenging the Dominant Philosophical Picture of the Self

From the mid 1950s to the late 1960s, Iris Murdoch wrote a series of essays that ought to be read, to a great or lesser degree, as *genealogical essays*.[1] These essays consistently exhibit a pattern that may be understood as a "three-act drama"[2] in which Murdoch first sketches the "current view" of the self in moral philosophy, then sketches her own alternative view of the self, and finally develops a Platonic grammar of the Good

[1]As Gary Gutting notes, one of the chief objectives of genealogical analysis is to demonstrate that the apparently necessary is actually contingent. He says, "The point of a genealogical analysis is to show that a given system of thought . . . was the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends." "Michel Foucault," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2003, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/, accessed May 20, 2008. Murdoch employs the genealogical method in order to liberate us from the "current view" conception of the self, which had become an "intellectual necessity" in certain philosophical circles.

[2]My heuristic method should be read as a "cracked" or "porous" object, in much the same way as Murdoch suggests a good novel functions. This cracked or porous quality refers to the novel's ability to push life into recognizable forms, "large and varied enough to seem to illuminate the whole," while at the same time maintaining an openness to the contingent. In other words, heuristics or forms are helpful in coming to a discursive understanding of our world; however, we must always resist their totalizing, reductive tendencies. Murdoch says, "The novel is a discursive art. . . . The novel, in the great nineteenth-century sense, attempts to envisage if not the whole of life, at any rate a piece of it large and varied enough to seem to illuminate the whole, and has most obviously an open texture, the porous or cracked quality. . . . The object is as it were full of holes through which it communicates with life, and life flows in and out of it. This openness is compatible with elaborate form. The thing is open in the sense that it looks toward life and life looks back." *Metapysics as a Guide to Morals*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 96. My hope is that the three act structure I am suggesting will be able to illuminate a large and varied enough chunk of Murdoch's work to illuminate the whole, while at the same time allowing her work to look back at us. Maria Antonaccio has some particularly insightful remarks on form and contingency in her essay, "Form and Contingency in Ethics," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 110-137.

to legitimate philosophically her conception of the self.[3] This series begins in 1956 with "Vision and Choice in Morality" in which she untangles four interlocking and mutually supporting positions she labels the "current view." The second and perhaps most detailed genealogical essay, "Metaphysics and Ethics," Murdoch writes in 1957 in which she shows that the supposed scientific neutrality claimed by the linguistic analyst of ethical terms is already embedded in a highly particular framework with a distinct history. The third, "The Idea of Perfection," written in 1964, uses Stuart Hampshire as her paradigm case for the "current view," arguing that the genetic view of mental concepts has led to highly suspect conclusions about the picture of the self. The fourth, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," written in 1967, is an attempt to show how the supposed neutrality of behaviouristic philosophy has surreptitiously taken sides with the view that the will is the creator of value. Finally, in 1969 with the publication of "On 'God' and 'Good,'" Murdoch explains why current moral philosophy has ignored human psychology and suggests a different model.

In this chapter, I will explore Murdoch's first act in two distinct, yet related, ways. First, I will focus on her 1957 essay, "Metaphysics and Ethics," as it is one of her most detailed historical treatments of the stages leading to the current view. This essay provides a particularly good display of the movement involved in Murdoch's first act. It also indicates that, contrary to its own claims about neutrality and generality, the "current view" is not a model of any morality whatsoever, but a model of a very particular

[3]Murdoch thinks the *zeitgeist* has brought contemporary philosophy back to Plato in that it is anti-Cartesian, but also concerned not to lose the priority of the individual in a totalizing system. In *Metaphysics as a Guide*, she says, "This is the end of the Cartesian era, and may be the end of the Aristotelian era, but in the strange cosmic astronomy of the wandering *Zeitgeist* we are closer to Plato now than in many previous centuries." 175.

morality with a distinct history.[4] Second, I will turn to her 1956 essay, "Vision and Choice in Morality," in which Murdoch identifies four interlocking or related aspects of the self that fit together to comprise the current picture. This essay provides a telling description of the type of view Murdoch rejects and also supplies familiar philosophical figures in whom this view is concretized. Additionally, it shows how we might untangle various strands in the current view that may seem necessarily inseparable.[5] Finally, I will explore Murdoch's reflections on the naturalistic fallacy as articulated in "Vision and Choice" and "Metaphysics and Ethics." Murdoch maintains that the anti-naturalistic argument is "almost the whole of modern moral philosophy;"[6] hence, this argument plays a fundamental role in the liberation from the current view.

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[4]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 67. It should be noted here that, in this essay, Murdoch is fulfilling at least two of the fundamental functions of any genealogy, as outlined by Gutting. First, she uses a historical narrative to indicate that what has been considered a necessary feature of a particular inquiry can be traced to contingent features of the inquirer's context. Second, she uses a historical narrative to show that a claim about what is universally true is often merely the expression of the ethical or political commitments of a particular society (in this case a modern liberal society).

[5]Untangling conceptual strands is an important genealogical function. Maudemarie Clark says, "Concepts influenced by history are like ropes held together by the intertwining of strands, rather than by a single strand running through the whole thing." Genealogy helps us untangle "the various strands that may have become so tightly woven together by the process of historical development that they seem inseparable." "Nietzsche's Immoralism and the Concept of Morality," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1994), 22.

[6]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 64.

"Metaphysics and Ethics": The Abbreviated History

In Murdoch's essays, she offers an abbreviated history and a long history of how moral philosophy has evolved into the "current view." The abbreviated history begins with G.E. Moore, and the long history reaches back to Kant and, at times, beyond. In "Metaphysics and Ethics," Murdoch narrates her abbreviated history of ethics in order to understand the contemporary scene in moral philosophy. She begins her story by arguing that Moore (1873-1958) marks a decisive shift in moral philosophy from all that came before and alters its trajectory for those who come after. According to Murdoch, Moore was significant for two reasons: 1) he shifts the fundamental question of ethics and 2) he establishes a new methodological approach. In *Principia Ethica*, Moore famously distinguished between two questions: 1) What does Good mean? and 2) What things are Good? He maintains that the former is the "most fundamental question in all Ethics," however, he argues it cannot be answered because the Good is indefinable.[7] He arrives at this position by way of his famous open question argument, which allegedly demonstrates that the Good cannot be identified with any natural property. Moore maintains that when defining the Good through reference to some natural property such as pleasure or happiness, it always makes sense to ask if that natural property is good. From this observation, he concludes that the Good must be a non-natural, indefinable property, which is the object of immediate intuition. This position renders Moore's first question unanswerable and reveals the so-called "Naturalistic Fallacy."

Moore's second question, however, supposedly does admit of an answer. We can point to those natural things that can be counted as good, even though they are not the

[7]G.E. Moore, "The Subject-Matter of Ethics," in Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber (eds.), *20th Century Ethical Theory*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 14.

Good itself. Murdoch maintains that "the notion of 'good' could significantly be attached to or withdrawn from anything whatever, and the things to which it happened to be attached did not form part of its meaning."[8] The significance of this move, according to Murdoch, is that it focuses attention on the human activity of valuing which is centered in the will, rather than a Good transcending the will and in some way reflecting the eternal structure of things. She believes that this is a decisive shift in the history of ethics and claims that Moore's argument "transformed the central question of ethics from the question, 'What is goodness?'—where an answer was expected in terms of the revelation of some real and eternally present structure of the universe—into the question—'What is the activity of "valuing" (or "commending")?"[9] Murdoch calls this "the definitive breach with metaphysical ethics."[10]

Moore's linguistic approach is another important influence on the history of ethics. Murdoch argues that Moore not only shifts the fundamental question of ethics, but also establishes a new departure in terms of method. The *meaning* of Good was now a central concern for the moral philosopher. Murdoch identifies the next major stage in ethical history as the intrusion of the natural science's verificationist view of meaning into ethical thought. The verificationist view states that a proposition has meaning only if it can be indexed to some empirical state of affairs. The only propositions that can properly be said to be "truth apt" are natural statements reducible to scientific observation. Therefore, as Moore had already demonstrated, ethical propositions were

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[8]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 59.

[9]Ibid., 59-60.

[10]Ibid.

not natural, and as A.J. Ayer (1910-1989) argues in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, because ethical propositions are non-natural, they are not truth apt. Ethical propositions did not make true or false statements about some state of affairs but rather expressed the emotions of the individual making it. Murdoch's explanation of the conception of ethical propositions held by Ayer and the verificationists is helpful: "They were not, it was claimed, true or false, they did not state facts: they did not state *natural* facts, for the reason that Moore had given, and they did not state *metaphysical* facts, for the same reason, and also because there were none to state."[11]

The third stage in Murdoch's abbreviated history is the collapse of emotivism in the face of two other developments in philosophy. The first philosophical development was that the meaning of a word was to be found in its usage, not its method of verification. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was the most brilliant defender of this position, which was applied specifically to the field of ethics by Charles L. Stevenson (1908-1979). Ethical statements were no longer said to be the expression of the speaker's emotions, but now functioned as persuasions.[12] The second philosophical development leading to the collapse of emotivism was what Murdoch calls the "disappearance of the mind" or the "inner life" wrought in particular by Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) in *The Concept of Mind*. According to Ryle and other behaviorists, there are no hidden inner mental events distinct from observable behavior. Murdoch summarizes this view saying, "When we speak of 'the mind,' it was now maintained, we are not speaking of a set of

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[11]Ibid., 60-61.

[12]In relation to these theories of meaning, it is important to note that Murdoch maintains that the verificationist account arose outside of the field of ethics, whereas the meaning as use account arose from within ethics as the refinement of emotivism. Ibid., 61.

inner entities such as faculties and feelings, which are open to introspection, we are speaking of observable actions and patters of behaviour."[13] Emotivism is damaged by the behaviorism of Ryle because an ethical proposition can no longer be the expression of an inner state, but is rather to be analyzed in terms of the speaker's *conduct*.[14] The movement of Murdoch's third stage (i.e., the collapse of emotivism) goes from exclamations, to persuasions, to rules. In sum, Murdoch claims, "Moral statements had been treated first as exclamations and then as persuasions—now they were called imperatives or prescriptions or rules."[15]

The fourth stage of Murdoch's ethical history describes an ethical world that has dispensed with both *metaphysical* and *psychological* entities. This stage is a response to the unsatisfactory account of the *rationality* of ethical judgments bequeathed by Moore's brand of intuitionism. In order to meet the rationality desideratum, Murdoch claims that the distinction between descriptive meaning and evaluative meaning was "pressed into the structure of individual moral words."[16] Moral terms could now be analyzed into two elements, the descriptive and the evaluative. The descriptive element refers to the factual criteria by which a moral agent takes something to be valuable. The evaluative element is the prescriptive part equivalent to the statement "Choose this!" For example, take the thick moral term *brutality*.[17] On the prescriptivist account, this term allegedly can be

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[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., 62.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Harvard University

analyzed and divided into its descriptive elements and its evaluative element without something left over after analysis. The descriptive (factual) elements of brutality, when applied to an agent's action, would be something like: hard action that is inflicted on some agent. The evaluative element would be something like: "I don't approve of this class of activity." By analyzing moral terms in this fashion, moral philosophers were able to say more about the reasons behind an ethical judgment. Even though one cannot argue about fundamental evaluative disagreements in this view, one can still make clear reference to the facts in virtue of which we call something valuable. Murdoch notes the benefits of this view over Moore's intuitionism: "In this way the analysis could allow that a moral judgment might be discussed and defended by stating of facts—without itself becoming a factual statement."[18]

These four stages beginning with Moore, moving through Ayer to Wittgenstein and Ryle, culminate in what Murdoch calls the "current position." Murdoch maintains that this final stage is expressed succinctly by R.M. Hare (1919-2002) in *The Language of Morals*. She summarizes Hare's book and the present position as follows:

> A man's morality is seen in his conduct and a moral statement is a prescription or rule uttered to guide a choice, and the descriptive meaning of the moral word which it contains is made specific by reference to factual criteria of application. That is, in a moral statement we quasi-command that a particular thing be done, and are ready to say in virtue of what facts it ought to be done. We are also ready, if our moral statement is sincere, to do it ourselves in the appropriate circumstances.[19]

Press: Cambridge and Massachusetts, 1985), 140.

[18]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 62.

[19]Ibid., 63.

With this description Murdoch completes her abbreviated history of ethics. It is noteworthy that Murdoch conceives of this abbreviated history as the history of "the elimination of metaphysics from ethics."[20] By metaphysics Murdoch means a general structure or larger conceptual framework which both includes and, more importantly, transcends the individual. She calls these systems Natural Law moralities, including the systems of Thomists, Hegelians, and Marxists. Murdoch argues that these systems see the individual as "held in a framework which transcends him, where what is important and valuable is the framework, and the individual only has importance or even reality, in so far as he belongs to the framework."[21] Therefore, when Murdoch claims that she is giving a history of the elimination of metaphysics from ethics, we ought to read her as providing an account of how "Natural Law theories" (on her construal) were eliminated from the present position.[22] The full extent and nature of this account will become evident as we see Murdoch's account unfold.

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[20]Ibid., 63.

[21]Ibid., 70.

[22]Murdoch's primary purpose in the remainder of this essay is to draw a distinction between liberal morality and Natural Law morality. Liberal morality, the most systematic exposition of which is existentialism, exhibits one's morality by one's choices and concentrates "attention on the *point of discontinuity* between the chosen framework and the choosing agent," 71. Natural Law morality, on the other hand, is not focused on the choice of the individual, but on discovering a morally good reality that transcends the choosing agent, and to which he must conform his choice. Rather than emphasizing the point of discontinuity, as the liberal does, the Natural Law moralist thinks morality is much less about the individual's choice and much more about the appreciation of a larger framework in which he finds himself. Through her analysis, Murdoch shows that although the liberal conception passes itself off as a description of morality as such, it is merely a model of a particular kind of morality, a morality most at home in a liberal political context. It should also be noted here that Murdoch is aware that her description of these two different frameworks already begs the question; by calling these two moralities different models, she already privileges her conclusion that

"Vision and Choice in Morality": Four Interlocking Aspects of the Current View

In her 1956 essay "Vision and Choice in Morality," Murdoch confronts the then dominant picture of morality and the self. She outlines four interlocking aspects that, taken together, provide the powerfully persuasive and mutually supporting assumptions of what she deems the current view. Murdoch notes that the current view is an "internally connected edifice,"[23] and thus her strategy in "Vision" is to separate the various supports of this edifice in order to weaken them one by one. As she employs this divide and conquer strategy, Murdoch aims to demonstrate that the current view is not so much the necessary conclusion to an indisputable and neutral philosophical argument but one contested view among others. The current view is taken as a self-evident, Murdoch argues, because it safeguards a liberal *evaluation*, which appeals "to us" because it represents "our" moral attitude.[24] The four interlocking aspects of this internally connected edifice which comprise the modern conception of morality and the self are: 1) the behavioristic treatment of the inner life; 2) the view of moral concepts as "factual

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moral differences are not merely differences of choice but that "it is possible for differences to exist also as total differences of moral vision and perspective." For Murdoch, the liberal view is one large conceptual framework or model among others. The liberal existentialist would disagree with the terms within which Murdoch conducts her inquiry because she calls their view a model, which brings it dangerously close to a "metaphysical" view itself. This privileging, however, is not a weakness of Murdoch's account but is a necessary feature of inquiry as a value-laden endeavor. To Murdoch there is no objective or neutral way to enter a debate.

[23]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 85.

[24]Ibid., 95. It is important to note that the philosophical move Murdoch makes here—by trying to draw our attention to the fact that the force of the current view stems more from certain liberal prejudices than from the inevitable conclusion of purely rational argument—is a particularly transparent example of genealogy.

specifications plus recommendations"; 3) the "universalizability" of the moral judgment; and 4) the accompanying picture of moral freedom.[25]

Philosophical Behaviorism and the Inner Life: A Philosophy of Mind Gone Awry

One of the results of early analytic philosophy was the elimination of the soul or the philosophical self. With the elimination of metaphysical entities at the hands of British empiricism, reinforced by A.J. Ayer's verificationist view of meaning, the substantial self was discarded as unnecessary metaphysical baggage. But, in order to dispense, finally and persuasively, with the substantial self, an alternative philosophy of mind was needed to demonstrate how we could get along without the 'ghost in the machine.' Into this vacancy stepped the philosophical behaviorism of thinkers such as Gilbert Ryle, R.M. Hare, and Stuart Hampshire. Simply stated, this Oxonian philosophical behaviorism maintains that human action need not be explained by reference to mental events, dispositions, or the inner psychological life of the person, but rather can be understood through external behavior or action. This implies that we should eliminate all reference to mental events and that they should be re-described in behavioral terms for the sake of a more scientific and philosophical understanding of the mind. Nether the shadowy inner world of "introspectibilia," nor the personal history of an individual language user are necessary. Rather, armed with the behaviorist technique of genetic analysis, the moral scientist can explain human action entirely by reference to

[25] Ibid., 78.

public behavior. As Murdoch puts it, the current view is "behaviorist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable.[26]"

Delimiting the ethical. In this behaviorist philosophy of mind, one of the implications for ethics appears when initially delimiting the scope of the ethical: what should count as the initial data to be considered as moral?[27] Following the behaviorist philosophy of mind, the answer to this question is that one's morality must be located in choices and actions, not in "the 'inner life' in the sense of personal attitudes and visions."[28] The moral philosopher limits her subject matter to public moral choices.

One potential area for ethical reflection that the behaviorist philosophy of mind obscures is what Murdoch calls the "more complex regions which lie outside 'actions' and choices."[29] For example, she discusses a person's whole vision of life. Murdoch uses varied and rich phrases to speak of this region, such as "personal attitudes and visions," "total vision of life," "texture of a man's being," "nature of his personal vision," "moral nature or moral being," "complex attitudes to life," "total difference of *Gestalt*," "deep conceptual attitudes," and "day-to-day being."[30] Murdoch uses these metaphors to

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[26]Ibid., 305.

[27]I am aware of the important distinction between the "ethical" and the "moral" in contemporary philosophy, and this distinction is helpful at times. However, at this point, I do not want merely to adopt the contemporary way of delimitation, as one of Murdoch's express aims is to draw our attention to the ways in which moral assumptions are already made in our categorizations.

[28]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 80.

[29]Ibid., 82.

[30]Ibid., 80-85. These rich metaphors should also be applied to Murdoch's multilayered concept of consciousness.

show that differences in the moral life cannot be reduced to mere difference of choice, but that they also reveal deep differences in the way we *see* or *understand* the world. Since the behaviorist sees so little moral terrain, it's not surprising that he views all moral differences as differences of choice. The behaviorist view does not allow that our moral differences may be conceptual, that is, based on a "far-reaching and coherent vision."[31]

At this point, it is important to notice that Murdoch does not explicitly reject the work of early analytic philosophy of mind. In fact, Murdoch claims, "The concepts which we use to comprehend and describe the mind depend almost entirely on overt criteria."[32] To a large degree, Murdoch accepts the private language argument and its dismissal of the Cartesian picture of the self.[33] What Murdoch rejects is the "crude" extension of this philosophy of mind into the field of ethics in the first half of the twentieth century by which the 'inner life' was systematically banished as a proper object for the philosophical study of morality.[34]

The genetic analysis of moral concepts: the keystone of the existentialist-behaviorist view. In "The Idea of Perfection," Murdoch attacks the genetic analysis of moral concepts, which she argues is the foundation upon which the existentialist-behaviorist view of moral psychology rests. She explains what she considers to be the "most radical argument, the keystone, of this existentialist-behaviourist type of moral

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[31]Ibid., 82.

[32]Ibid., 81.

[33]See next section.

[34]Ibid., 79.

psychology: the argument to the effect that mental concepts must be analyzed genetically and so the inner must be thought of as parasitic upon the outer."[35] Murdoch's discussion of the genetic analysis of concepts refers to views which maintain that a concept receives its entire meaning via its public structure. Hence, analyzing the meaning of a concept through this model entails examining the "genesis in the rulings of an impersonal public language."[36] On this view, learning what a word means is connected with the fairly straightforward, impersonal network of ordinary language.

Wittgenstein famously dispensed with the Cartesian notion of the self, the Cogito, which had maintained that humans have unmediated access to their inner states and that they have privileged access to mental events. On the Cartesian account, the inner life is that of which humans can have certain knowledge. Murdoch helpfully refers to this picture of the self as the "image of the infallible inner eye."[37] Wittgenstein ruthlessly dismantled this picture through his critique of private language by demonstrating that mental concepts are inextricably linked to public structures and contexts. With this assumption that the meaning of a mental concept was no longer a private mental event, but rather an utterance tied to public structures and contexts, metal concepts were left only to be analyzed genetically. Thus, Wittgensteinian logic focuses on the grammar of concepts (i.e., the public rules for the application of concepts). For example, a person's report about her feelings does not originate from some private core. Instead it is

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[35]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 306.

[36]Ibid., 322.

[37]Ibid., 311.

understood from the outer context by virtue of which she can determine whether or not she has felt a particular and identifiable emotion. As Murdoch explains, "Whether I am *really* thinking about so-and-so or deciding such-and-such or feeling angry or jealous or pleased will be properly determined, and can only be determined, by the overt context."[38] There is no mysterious or impenetrable inner, just the outer behavior to analyze in conjunction with public concepts. All that is needed, then, is information about external behavior and a grasp on public grammar displayed in ordinary language.

Murdoch further clarifies what she means by the genetic analysis of mental concepts by turning to a concrete example of how humans *learn* a concept such as "decide." She asks, "How do I *learn* the concept of decision?" and then answers, "By watching someone who says 'I have decided' and who then acts."[39] The behaviorist account holds that individuals can fully explicate the essence of a concept by watching the *actions* of someone who has decided and indexing that concept according to this behavioral context. Murdoch explains, "A decision does not turn out to be, when more carefully considered, an introspectible movement. The concept has no further inner structure; it *is* its outer structure."[40] Turning to an even clearer example of the genetic analysis of mental concepts, Murdoch discusses how humans learn to distinguish between emotions (private mental events) such as "anger" and "jealousy." She maintains, "What identifies the emotion is the presence not of a particular private object, but of some

[38]Ibid., 310.

[39]Ibid., 309.

[40]Ibid.

typical outward behaviour pattern."[41] On this view, then, humans are able to identify consistently the differences between private emotions only because of the stability of public structures and concepts that are linked to behavior, not some hidden mental event.

Murdoch thinks that Wittgenstein's critique of the Cartesian self, via the argument against private language, and the corresponding adoption of a genetic analysis of mental concepts, is helpful and valid within specific philosophical contexts. However, Murdoch believes that whereas Wittgenstein has remained properly "sphinx-like"[42] and circumspect in the conclusions he draws from the genetic analysis, others such as Hampshire have overextended their reach, drawing "dubious moral and psychological conclusions."[43] Murdoch rejects two particular conclusions as overextensions of the genetic analysis, one moral and the other a corresponding psychological conclusion. She describes the moral conclusion as: "Morality must be action since mental concepts can only be analyzed genetically."[44] This dubious conclusion strikes at the heart of what counts as the "moral" in the first place, and for Murdoch, it ignores the private inner world as a proper object, thus necessarily restricting moral philosophers to focus entirely on impersonal rules of logic and behavioral data. The moment of choice manifested in overt action is foregrounded while the psychological machinery in the background is ignored. This overemphasis on the moment of choice brings us to the corresponding psychological conclusion that Murdoch also wants to reject: that human personality is

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., 311.

[44]Ibid.

best conceived along existentialist lines, namely that we are fundamentally willing things untethered from a thick psychological background. Murdoch succinctly summarizes, "Personality dwindles to a point of pure will."[45]

Murdoch's most provocative and probing challenge to the genetic analysis comes from her insistence that we must distinguish between "two senses of 'knowing what a word means:'" 1) the first sense is connected with the impersonal logic of ordinary language and 2) the second is connected with the notion of an ideal limit, where a concept must be understood in its "depth."[46] The genetic analyst focuses on the first sense to the neglect of the second. Murdoch, on the other hand, maintains that, especially in the case of moral concepts, a "deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process, takes place."[47] For example, she insists, "Words may mislead us here since words are often stable while concepts alter; we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty."[48] The implication is that a simple and sole reliance on the genetic approach is insufficient because it cannot do justice to the way in which an individual, with a particular history, progressively learns what a value concept like courage means, nor can it do justice to how this individual makes the concept her own, so to speak. An individual moves toward an ideal, not an actually achieved or easily definable, end-point of understanding courage in its fullness.

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[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid., 322.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid.

Therefore, Murdoch maintains that the "entry into a mental concept of the notion of an ideal limit destroys the genetic analysis of its meaning."[49]

If this explanation of the progressive understanding of value concepts in their depth is correct, then the genetic analysis is insufficient for rightly apprehending the linguistic dynamics displayed in the concept acquisition of a historical individual. For, this dynamic implies an ideal-limit. As Murdoch concludes, "since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit, and not back towards a genesis in the rulings of an impersonal public language."[50] Notice that Murdoch does not explicitly reject the insights of genetic analysis. Her position affirms the initial derivation of concepts from the ordinary language world; however, she is concerned to refocus attention on the individual language user, who makes "specialised personal *use* of a concept" and "takes it away into his privacy."[51] Maria Antonaccio helpfully explains Murdoch's view: "an individual's use of language is uniquely personal, creative, and irreducible to publicly shared meanings or linguistic codes. . . . Murdoch therefore defends the possibility that language may become in part the 'property' of individual speakers, rather than remaining irreducibly bound to its communal context."[52] By arguing that language may become

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., 319.

[52]*Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173, 183.

one's own, Murdoch ultimately challenges the linguistic behaviorism suggested by the genetic analysis of mental concepts.

In the next chapter, I will sketch the alternative picture of human personality implied by Murdoch's understanding of the limits of genetic analysis. I will also comment on the way in which Murdoch takes her alternative picture of personality to be superior. For now, I restrict my discussion to an accurate depiction of the view Murdoch rejects. Like any good diagnostician, Murdoch first offers a rich description of the ailment—in this case, the modern conception of the self. She is at pains to explain how this existentialist picture of the self became the dominant image in the intellectual culture.[53] Part of her answer involves tracing those insights gained in the philosophy of mind which have been overextended to certain moral and psychological conclusions.

Moral Concepts as "Factual Specifications Plus Recommendations:" Shallow Linguistics

The hasty overextension of insights gained in the philosophy of mind had disastrous consequences for what was then considered the appropriate technique to be employed by the moral scientist/philosopher. If the initial data of the moral is limited to publicly observable behavior (i.e., action or choices), then that has implications for the corresponding technique for analysis. Murdoch rightly points out, "The question is, what technique is suitable to the analysis of such material."[54] The answer, according to linguistic analysis, is that moral concepts are understood as "factual specifications plus recommendations." Murdoch sometimes calls this the "choice and argument model,"[55]

[53]This question is a genealogical one.

[54]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 81.

which rests on the assumption that there is a clean and sharp dichotomy between fact and value. This model analyzes a certain moral concept or claim by separating out the descriptive (fact) from the evaluative (value). For example, if we again take a thick and evocative moral concept like "brutality," we should be able to analyze it in terms of the descriptive or factual elements on the one hand and the evaluative elements on the other.[56] After reading early accounts of Christian martyrs, suppose my mother exclaims, "Nero was brutal." To analyze this moral statement according to the "choice and argument model," we would start by isolating the descriptive content. My mother's factual claim would be something to the effect that Nero's actions were hard and inflicted on some agent. The evaluative aspect of my mother's moral statement is her disapproval of the *fact* that Nero did in fact carry out hard actions against some agent. So, my mother's moral claim, "Nero was brutal," amounts to two claims: the descriptive "Nero is a man who inflicted hard actions against some agent" and the evaluative "Avoid this behavior." Factual criteria are specified and then a recommendation is added. On this view, all moral concepts admit of division into descriptive and evaluative elements with no mixture of the two or remainder left over after analysis.

The basic idea here is that we can gather all the facts pertinent to a moral situation in a fairly straightforward manner: we specify the reasons by virtue of which we act,

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[55]See for example, Ibid.

[56]In his chapter, "The Linguistic Turn," speaking of these same linguistic analysts, Bernard Williams helpfully indicates, "What has happened is that the theorists have brought the fact-value distinction to language rather than finding it revealed there." *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 129. Murdoch's strategy is the same as Williams, only taken thirty years earlier. Like Williams, Murdoch will argue that attention to thick ethical concepts reveals an inextricable union of fact and value in our ordinary language use. I will return to this point in the next chapter where I discuss Murdoch's alternative account of moral concepts.

while the underlying values guiding our action are chosen by an act of the will. Returning to the example of my imaginary mother, her action would be the denunciation of Nero; her reason would be because Nero inflicted hard actions against Christians; and the underlying value guiding her action would be her *choice* to disapprove of such people. On this account, we *choose* to value certain things, whereas we *reason* only about facts. Our values are no longer seen as embedded within an entire metaphysical framework or conception of the way the world truly is. Our values are attached to the brute factual world—literally after the *fact*—by what we *choose* to value. Our will becomes the creator of value in a world of facts otherwise devoid of value. On this view, the moral agent is pictured as selecting value, rather than feeling bound to a prior and, following Charles Taylor, "inescapable framework" or "inescapable horizon" which makes a claim on her will.[57]

[57]See the opening chapter of Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3-24. I adopt two senses in which Taylor uses the term "inescapable framework." First, an inescapable framework functions as a standard of evaluation that is independent of mere personal tastes or desires. The framework makes a claim on me for acknowledgment far prior to choice. Second, against those who claim to eschew all metaphysical entities in their moral theorizing, every view is working within some framework, whether tacit and unacknowledged or explicit and articulated. Much of the importance of Murdoch's work lies in exposing the inability of her interlocutors not to assume an entire picture of the human person in their supposed "framework free" musings. See also the fourth chapter of Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard Universtiy Press, 1991), 31-41. Taylor's point here is that choice is intelligible only against the background of some prior significance that is *given*. Horizons are something that are "discovered, not decided." We are already embedded within a world (i.e., horizon of significance) where some choices have significance and others do not. In other words, we do not create our values *ex nihilo* in a vacuum, but in *dialogue* with preexisting structures of significance.

Murdoch summarizes this linguistic view saying, "morality is choice, and moral language guides choice through factual specification."[58] The connection between this linguistic technique and the behaviorist treatment of the "inner life" now becomes apparent. Behaviorism eliminated everything but behavior and action as the available data for analysis. As a technique, the "choice and argument model" only takes account of the moment of choice along with the specification of the external facts by virtue of which we make a choice. Behaviorism and the "choice and argument model" work together to produce a view of the moral life, the essence of which is a set "of external choices backed up by arguments which appeal to facts."[59] No reference need, nor can, be made to what may be chalked up as elements of the shadowy inner life, such as inner monologues, personal attitudes, personal visions, or one's total vision of life. All of this data is irrelevant—in fact invisible—to the moral life as it is conceived along behaviorist and "choice and argument model" lines. The background, the texture, and the density of personality along with one's comprehensive view of the world behind one's choice is, in principle, excluded by behaviorism and rendered invisible by this linguistic technique.

On this account, moral differences are differences of choice, not differences of understanding or vision. One's "morality is exhibited in his choice."[60] In contrast to this view, Murdoch contends, "Moral differences can be differences of concept as well as differences of choice."[61] But the behaviorist "choice and argument model" method of

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[58]Murdoch, *Vision and Choice*, 79.

[59]Ibid, 80.

[60]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 71.

[61]Ibid, 73.

analysis has excluded this possibility from the outset. Murdoch maintains that this view of moral language is quite simple and naïve. It attempts the reduction of ethics to logic by viewing moral concepts as if they were a combination of the impersonal public world of facts with recommendations. However, if moral concepts turn out to be thick—not at all thin and transparent to all competent users of ordinary language—they may have to be studied historically and in depth. We simply need to consider Murdoch's seemingly obvious truism to see the truth of this: "we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty."[62] She claims, "Knowledge of a value concept is something to be understood, as it were, in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal network."[63] In her disagreement with her early analytic colleagues, Murdoch is not claiming that we should abandon linguistic philosophy; rather, she is suggesting that taking language seriously should cause us to realize that our usage of moral concepts is irreducibly historical and must be analyzed in relation to "human historical individuals."[64] After commenting on the impossibility of reducing ethics to

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[62]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 322.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid. The tendency of philosophy in the British Analytic context traditionally has been ahistorical. The elimination of contingency and history from all possible areas of inquiry has continued to be a desideratum for the English mind, primarily in hope that these areas of inquiry could be reduced to the clean precision of logical analysis. Even when turning to the history of morality (genealogy), the British Analytic tendency has been characteristically ahistorical. Nietzsche, in his typically abusive and polemical manner, notes this tendency: "To say it once more—or haven't I said it at all yet? —they [English genealogists] aren't good for anything. Their own five-span-long, merely "modern" experience; no knowledge, no will to knowledge of the past; still less an instinct for history, a "second sight" necessary precisely here—and nonetheless doing history of morality: this must in all fairness end with results that stand in a relation to truth that is not even flirtatious." *On the Genealogy of Morality*, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 39. Murdoch's work is one of the

logic, she says, "This does not of course imply abandoning the linguistic method, it rather implies taking it seriously."[65] In the next chapter, I will discuss Murdoch's alternative linguistic method in further detail.

The Universalizability of Moral Judgment: A Nearsighted Meta-Ethic

The third aspect of the "internally connected edifice" Murdoch is sketching is *the universalizability of moral judgment*. The universalizability model she describes has two primary characteristics: 1) a properly moral judgment must be universal in the sense that *any* person placed in an analogous practical situation would have to make the same moral decision; and 2) the universal moral rule the agent uses to justify her action must be articulated in terms publicly available to all rational persons. Murdoch says that this model's "fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct."[66] The most obvious figure in whom this view is concretized is R.M. Hare. In his 1963 *Freedom and Reason*, Hare clearly and succinctly articulates the view Murdoch is describing. He maintains the meta-ethical position that a moral statement (an "ought") has two elements that make up its logical framework: prescriptivity and universalizability. Hare defines prescriptivity as "an action to which

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earliest and most significant exceptions to this cast of mind in the British Analytic context. Currently, particularly in the work of Bernard Williams, this ahistorical trajectory of moral thought is beginning to change. The historicizing spirit has also entered the British Analytic context from certain developments in the philosophy of science (Thomas Kuhn) and logic (W.V. Quine and Ludwig Wittgenstein).

[65]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 84.

[66]Ibid., 88.

we can commit ourselves;" universalizability, according to Hare, is found in actions "exemplifying a principle of action to be prescribed for others in like circumstances."[67]

As a meta-ethical claim about the logic of moral statements, Hare intends to proffer this moral model as a neutral description of our moral language. Murdoch's genius in describing and subverting this view is shown in two ways. First, she demonstrates that Hare's description is already embedded in a normative framework with normative assumptions at work—contrary to Hare's self-description and understanding of his own meta-ethical claims as merely logical. She maintains that ethics "can attain only a precarious neutrality, like that of history, and not the pure neutrality of logic."[68] Second, Murdoch highlights certain seemingly important moral data (at the level of common sense) that are necessarily left out of the account on this view, namely personal fables[69] and moral models that "emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world, the

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[67]R.M. Hare, "A Moral Argument," in Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber (eds.), *20th Century Ethical Theory*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 388.

[68]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 98.

[69]Murdoch nicely summarizes what she means by "personal fable." She calls it "a man's meditation upon the conception of his own life, with its selective and dramatic emphases and implications of direction." Ibid., 85. She also works a sense of unique destiny into her notion of "personal fable." If there are legitimate moral systems that allow a place for individuals who have a unique vocation or destiny, then a moral model only recognizing universalizable duties is missing some crucial data of the moral landscape. One of the clearest examples of the kind of view Murdoch has in mind here is the knight of faith in Søren Kierkegaard's (Johannes de Silentio) *Fear and Trembling*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). In the context of universalizability, it is of particular significance that a key characteristic of the knight of faith is his inability to justify his action in any way that another could understand, precisely because his action is not in the sphere of the universal. Kierkegaard (de Silentio) says, "Abraham remains silent—but he *cannot* speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking." Perhaps Murdoch's position, while clarified by this

endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations 'taped', the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique."[70]

I will discuss more fully Murdoch's demonstration of these two points in my next chapter where I address her alternative view; however, a few words are in order at this point. Murdoch describes how Hare's view is embedded in and wedded to a distinctly liberal evaluation of things. Among the values of our contemporary liberal society are freedom, tolerance, disinterested factual argumentation, non-dogmatism, and reasoning that is open to everyone's inspection. Insofar as these values "have become practically unconscious and are taken for granted,"[71] any alternative view must first make them explicit as a particular way of valuing among others. A liberal morality also puts a high premium on the assumption that we can always understand another's moral concepts, or at least in principle there is a universal translatability of moral concepts. If individuals are to consider moral concepts as legitimate, these concepts must always be publicly accessible. Or at the very least, if moral concepts are to be considered legitimate, they must be public and our reasoning ought to be open to all people with a will to understand. Commenting on liberal morality, Murdoch says, "Doubtless 'everyday morality', in our society at any rate, is of the kind currently described, where rules are universal, fairly general without being too general, and where clear and above-board factual reasoning is

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allusion, is not quite as extreme. She merely says, "[I]t is surely true that we cannot always *understand* other people's moral concepts," 82.

[70]Ibid., 87.

[71]Ibid., 89.

required to justify choices."[72] There are certainly times when this liberal moral ideal is desirable; however, there are also times when this moral model is neither possible nor desirable, and in fact may obscure important moral data—like the fact that morality may be a "ramification of concepts,"[73] not just a survey of the facts along with a simple value tag of the will. Murdoch insists, "Reasons are not necessarily, and *qua* reasons, public."[74]

Hare's moral model along with its notion of universalizability is embedded within the values of a liberal society, and they should be seen as such, *values*.[75] If Murdoch's description is correct, then, this liberal morality is one moral model among others—not the general, logical, and neutral description of morality as such—and it is saturated in value to its core. Murdoch's treatment of universalizabilty, in connection with the entire "internally connected edifice," is a clear example of how Murdoch re-describes the "current view" so as to demonstrate that it is another moral model among others, rather than the obviously neutral and "single philosophical definition of morality."[76] Hare's account is supposed to be providing a neutral description of the logic of morality as such, which is completely removed from normative concerns. However, Murdoch argues that Hare has already smuggled in his normative commitments into his notion of what the

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[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 326.

[75]See footnote four where I point out that a typical genealogical strategy is to demonstrate that what passes as universally true is often merely the expression of the ethical or political commitments of a particular society.

[76]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 97.

moral *must* be. Hare *values* universalizability and he values it for reasons that are compelling within a liberal social context. Murdoch maintains that Hare's definition of the moral is persuasive and appears neutral because these values are unconsciously taken for granted.

The choice of which model or theory to use in a particular moral situation is itself a *moral* choice (although as Murdoch would rightly protest, this is too existentialist a way of putting the matter). There is no getting behind the *moral* decision involved in the "selection" of which moral model is best. We cannot reach some single, general, objective, and neutral moral theory because every moral model is itself inextricably moral (i.e., normative) all the way down. As Murdoch concludes, following a Wittgensteinian insight, "For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form."[77] Hare's account, according to Murdoch, contains a flawed understanding of the relation between meta-ethics and normative ethics. The early analytic meta-ethical attempt at reducing moral philosophy to one fundamental form or model turns out to have been a nearsighted dream, rather than an accurate description of all moral models.[78]

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[77]Ibid.

[78]At this point, Murdoch should be considered as an early example of a philosopher articulating a unique and interesting version of anti-theory; if "anti-theory" is meant as the impossibility (even undesirability) of reducing all moral phenomena to one overarching theory. Murdoch's version of anti-theory is one that certainly is not against theorizing or moral models, but rather one that affirms the proliferation of multiple and rich moral schemes that help us understand the complexity of our moral existence in deeper ways. In "The Idea of Perfection," she maintains, "I would put what I think is much the same task in terms of the provision of rich and fertile conceptual schemes

The second way Murdoch attempts to subvert Hare's so-called neutral description of moral language is by focusing on morally important fables that emphasize the unique destiny of individuals. Murdoch insists that if we find moral models that appear to resist reduction to the universalizability model, we should not continue to insist that this description uncovers the logic of moral language as such. That is, we should not continue insisting from the outset on a general definition of the *moral* that already excludes data that seems to be morally significant. The particular moral data Murdoch elicits as her example is a moral view in which the individual is considered unique with a particular destiny to fulfill, out of which duties or responsibilities can be generated. On this view, one does not generate universally binding rules for *any* person placed in an analogous situation, precisely because one's destiny is unique and the situation is always particular. The difference between the two moral models, then, as Murdoch is at pains to show, is the difference between a moral model that takes personal background seriously in moral deliberation and a moral model that does not.[79] Murdoch, therefore, tries to show how insisting on a particular definition of what is moral (i.e., the logic of moral language as such) can distort important *moral* differences. She wisely maintains,

> We should, I think, resist the temptation to unify the picture by trying to establish, guided by our own conception of the ethical in general, what these concepts *must be*. All that is made clear by this method is: our own conception of the ethical in general—and in the process important differences of moral concept may be blurred or neglected.[80]

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which help us to reflect upon and understand the nature of moral progress and moral failure and the reasons for the divergence of one moral temperament from another," 336.

[79]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 86.

[80]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 75.

The universal rule model is a particularly clear example of our liberal values and attitudes, but it should not be considered as the neutral and single definition of morality.

The Accompanying Picture of Moral Freedom: An Existentialist Philosophy of Will

The final element of this interlocking soul-picture is *the accompanying picture of moral freedom*, which conceives of the will along fundamentally existentialist lines (bearing in mind, of course, Murdoch's idiosyncratic use of the term). By calling the current view existentialist, Murdoch intends to suggest that modern moral philosophy in general ignores the continuous background of activity—both in terms of personality and one's total vision of life—*between* moments of choice. The dense psychology and comprehensive life-view of the historical individual are cast aside in favor of a conception of the will that is unfettered and naked.

In her first philosophical manuscript, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Murdoch demonstrates her deep and penetrating apprehension of the existential project, particularly with respect to its conception of the will. It is difficult to overestimate the life-long influence this early research on Sartre had on Murdoch, especially in terms of her uncanny ability thereafter to recognize the existentialist conception of the will in the most unlikely places, including the early Anglo-analytic moral philosophy adopted by many of her colleagues. In essay after essay, Murdoch continually makes reference to Sartre's conception of freedom and the similarities it has with Anglo-analytic conceptions of the self.

At this point, I must stress that Murdoch does see a fundamental difference between Anglo-analytic philosophy and the continental style of Sartre's French existentialism. There is one crucial difference in particular. Murdoch maintains, "What

may be called the Kantian wing [Anglo-analytic philosophy] and the Surrealist wing [Sartrean philosophy] of existentialism may be *distinguished* by the degree of their interest in *reasons* for action, which diminishes to nothing at the Surrealist end."[81] A substantial difference exists between a philosophy requiring reasons for action and one that does not. However, this important difference should not distract us from a crucial similarity. The *choice* of those reasons, in Anglo-analytic philosophy, is still pictured as arising from the unfettered sovereign will of existentialism. One can stipulate clearly the reasons for one's actions, but the *selection* of those reasons is an activity of the will that freely chooses those reasons. Murdoch describes this selection of reasons as follows:

> Our British philosophers are of course very interested in reasons, emphasizing, as I have said, the accessibility, the non-esoteric nature of moral reasoning. But the production of such reasons, it is argued, . . . does not in any way connect or tie the agent to the world or to special personal contexts within the world. He freely chooses his reasons in terms of, and after surveying, the ordinary facts which lie open to everyone: and he acts. This operation, it is argued, *is* the exercise of freedom.[82]

The Kantian wing of existentialism creates a moral context in which we can discuss openly and easily the facts of a given situation and in which we can make explicit our reasons for acting. But, we cannot argue about the choice of certain reasons because, even in this context, our sovereign will is still the creator of value. We gather the facts through scientific methods and then our unfettered will selects what reasons hold value for us.[83]

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[81]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 327. Italics for the word "distinguished" are mine.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Like Murdoch, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that for all their apparent differences, analytic moral philosophy and the continental philosophy of Nietzsche and Sartre share a

As indicated above, Murdoch maintains that the existentialist conception of freedom ignores the background features of choice. It does so in two fundamental ways: 1) it ignores the dense nature of human personality and 2) it ignores the role that entire visions of life play in moral decisions. In other words, the elimination of the background to choice in the existentialist account of freedom has implications for both moral psychology and the role of moral frameworks.

Existentialist moral psychology: the naked will. For Murdoch, the existentialist conception of human personality represents "far too shallow and flimsy an idea."[84] Her dissatisfaction with this moral psychology can be traced to the utter isolation of the psyche from the will. This account pictures the moral agent "as an isolated principle of will, or burrowing pinpoint of consciousness, inside, or beside, a lump of being which has been handed over to other disciplines, such as psychology or sociology."[85] The moral philosopher, after all, only analyzes the isolated choices of the moral agent and the factual conditions in light of which she makes her choice. If one's morality is exhibited in her choices, and if the substantial philosophical self behind her choices has been lost (i.e., the behaviorist treatment of the inner life), then we truly are left with the naked will isolated from the psyche.

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deeper, and more important, commonality. MacIntyre analyzes this commonality in terms of emotivism, whereas Murdoch seeks to cast it in terms of Existentialism. But it is clear that both Murdoch and MacIntrye are united in their efforts to provide an alternative moral philosophy to one where the will is the creator of value. *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1992), 21-22.

[84]Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 287.

[85]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,' in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 338.

In the case of Sartre, this picture of the self is fairly easy to see. In order to escape the specter of determinism—which for Sartre amounts to *mauvaise foi*—he posits a view of total freedom. There are no degrees of freedom. We are either dominated by forces outside our will, and therefore unfree (heteronomous in Kantian terminology), or we are completely and totally free in the autonomy of our will. Murdoch helpfully points out, "An unexamined sense of the strength of the machine is combined with an illusion of leaping out of it."[86] Sartre's conception of human freedom creates a strict separation between "the mass of psychological desires and social habits and prejudices" on the one hand, and the will on the other.[87] His essentially romantic attempt to save the human person from scientific determinism issues forth in a view of the human will as totally free and unencumbered. Sartre not only maintains his version of total freedom in the face of Freud-esque psychological determinism, but he also extends it to social structures and traditional values. Anyone comporting oneself to previously existing structures and values would be suspected of *mauvaise foi*. Such allegiance would be seen as an evasion of the fact that our world is essentially devoid of value, and therefore it is our responsibility to create value *ex nihilo*. We must find the strength and courage for the awful, yet ennobling—in the Romantic sense—fact that our will is the creator of value.

In the case of her British contemporaries, perhaps now it is easy to recognize the validity of Murdoch's provocative claim that they too have an essentially existentialist moral psychology. As with Sartre, Anglo-analytic philosophy is infected with a conception of human will stripped of its psychological background. She maintains,

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[86]Ibid.

[87]Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 289.

"Characteristic of both is the identification of the true person with the empty choosing will, and the corresponding emphasis upon the idea of movement rather than vision."[88] This view of freedom is both supported by and provides support for the three aspects of the "current view" already treated. First, the *behaviorist treatment of the inner life* eliminated any thick conception of the psychological background to choice by focusing solely on action and the moment of choice. Included are the impersonal logic of ordinary language in public contexts and the momentary choice of the empty will. Second, the *view of moral concepts as factual specification plus recommendations* separates the easily known factual world—which is known by science—from the valuing activity of the human will (seen in recommendation). Yet again, we have a picture of the sovereign unfettered will adding its stamp of approval or disapproval after the facts are in. There is no analysis of the background to this choice, thus making it seem as if the action of valuing is merely the arbitrary preference of an all powerful will. Finally*, the universalizability of moral judgment* is connected with an existentialist moral psychology insofar as universalizability neglects personal background. On the universalizability model, there is no concern with the complexities of personal history, and thus, no corresponding attention to particular senses of destiny, or vocation, in which moral choices might find their ultimate meaning. When this psychological background is stripped away from choice, universalizabilty models seem more plausible and desirable.

One additional context in which this existentialist moral psychology quite clearly manifests itself is in our alleged ability to "step back"[89] and, in the Anglo-analytic

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[88]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 327.

[89]Murdoch reads Moore's "open question" argument as a case in which the

context, rationally (i.e., autonomously) and objectively to survey the "facts" and choose again. In fact, our freedom[90] just is the ability to step back from the pressures of our empirical psyche and choose. Thus, Murdoch points out, "The agent, thin as a needle, appears in the quick flash of the choosing will."[91] Again, on this view, there are no degrees of freedom. There is either the heteronomous will determined by the psyche or the morally autonomous will capable of stepping completely out of empirical limitations to choose freely. This will is naked. Since there are no degrees of freedom on this view, freedom itself loses its ability to be seen as an achievement. Freedom cannot be the state attained at the end of a long process of moral purification. And with this point, we come near the heart of what is at stake for Murdoch. She says, "Without some more positive conception of the soul as a substantial and continually developing mechanism of attachments, the purification and reorientation of which must be the task of morals, 'freedom' is readily corrupted into self-assertion."[92] For Murdoch, this kind of existentialist psychology can no longer make sense of morally important categories like purification and transformation, and it is not sufficiently armed against the specter of self-assertion.

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assumption that we can continually step back has already been made. She says, "Good was indefinable (naturalism was a fallacy) because any offered good could be scrutinized by any individual by a 'stepping back' movement." "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 339.

[90]In this context freedom becomes almost synonymous with our rationality.

[91]Ibid., 343.

[92]Ibid., 357.

Existentialism and moral frameworks: vision or choice? In addition to a flimsy moral psychology, *the accompanying picture of moral freedom* overlooks the background involved in choice, for this picture ignores or misconstrues the role that entire visions of life or moral frameworks play in moral contexts. Since existentialists conceive of human freedom as the will untethered from any textured background, the moral agent is able to step out of her moral framework both 1) to examine the facts of a situation without any corruption from personal values or visions of the world and 2) to make a fully conscious and free (in this context these are synonomous) *selection* of the moral framework itself. In this way, the conception of freedom becomes "absolute in the 'withdraw and reflect' sense."[93] For Murdoch, there are two different but related questions here. First, can we separate factual or descriptive analysis from deep moral configurations of the world? In other words, is the "factual world" that is given to us not already filtered in the sense that it is already a moral interpretation of the situation where "the moral concept in question determines what the situation is?"[94] Further, do we see different worlds depending on our (inescapable?) moral concepts or frameworks? Second, is it a correct description, or even a desirable normative account, to conceive of the moral agent as choosing her moral framework? And further, should we focus exclusively on the "*point of discontinuity* between the chosen framework and the choosing agent . . . [which] the modern philosopher has tried to catch in a formula?"[95]

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[93]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 84.

[94]Ibid., 95.

[95]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 71.

The current view's idea of freedom, which maintains that we are free to step out of our morally saturated vision of the world, is one divorced from knowledge. On the one hand we know facts, and we know them through the empirical and impersonal reasons of science. On the other hand we attach value to this *common world of facts*, not in light of our knowledge, but as a separate activity of the will.[96] The will is the creator of value, doing so against the backdrop of a common world of facts easily accessible through scientific rationality. Murdoch characterizes this view of freedom: "We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world."[97] This view maintains that we can examine the facts of a situation, objectively or impersonally, without any corruption from personal values or visions of the world. Our knowledge of a situation, properly speaking, neither impinges upon our conclusions about what we should do, nor do our deep moral configurations of the world determine what world we see. Knowledge and will are isolated. The free moral agent can "step back" and examine the public world of facts and then—after the activity of reason[98] has

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[96]Indeed, to do so would be to commit the dreaded naturalistic fallacy by deriving an "ought" from an "is." See the next section where I treat the role of the naturalistic fallacy in the current view.

[97]Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 290.

[98]On this view, reason is synonymous with scientific rationality. The presupposition is that all rationality is of the same sort and that its unity is to be understood according to the model of impersonal scientific rationality. There are at least two other options. First, there may be different modes of rationality (scientific, ethical, aesthetic). Second, the picture of impersonal scientific rationality developed in early analytic philosophy may be an inadequate image of scientific rationality. For example, Thomas Kuhn has presented us with an image of scientific rationality that is embedded in and affected by historical and sociological contexts, and therefore cannot attain to the purity of logic. *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: The University of

gathered the impersonal facts—choose to value some area or another. Murdoch explains, "On the current view the moral agent is free to withdraw, survey the facts, and choose again."[99] This conception of human freedom, then, is detached from any deep conceptual vision of the world and can leap about at will. The corresponding view of rationality is one that remains pure and untouched by deep conceptual attitudes, or impingement from the will. It is impossible on this view to represent any belief as an achievement, or to conceptualize the possibility that in order to see the world rightly, we may first have to undergo a process of purification. There is the easily comprehended world of facts on one side and the unfettered will on the other. Murdoch says, "There is only the ordinary world which is seen with ordinary vision, and there is the will that moves within it."[100]

The notion that one can, or should, step out of our moral frameworks in order to be impartial, non-dogmatic, and universally communicative is deeply part of liberal *values* and habits of mind. The liberal ideal seeks to free morality from deep conceptual attitudes, thereby attempting to separate privately held metaphysical beliefs (which cannot be argued) from publicly accessible facts. Murdoch helpfully expounds, "It may be argued that we *ought* always to assume that perfect communication and *disinterested* reflection about facts can precede moral judgement, and it is true that such an attitude may often be desirable. But this is itself a Liberal ideal."[101] Murdoch is concerned at this

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Chicago Press, 1996). Particularly illuminating is the exploration of the non-rationality of theory change or paradigm shifts.

[99]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 83.

[100]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 327.

[101]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 84.

point to draw attention to the inseparable connection of this existentialist picture of the self and morality with liberal *values*—values so deeply held as to go virtually unquestioned. Insofar as she is successful at showing that connection, Murdoch unmasks the pretensions of her British contemporaries, who claim to provide a neutral account of morality as such. As she poignantly declares against this liberal ideal with its corresponding view of moral freedom, "Here it may be said that those who think that freedom is absolute in the 'withdraw and reflect' sense confuse the wish with the fact—and that in any case there is no need to equate the freedom needed to ensure morality with a complete independence of deep conceptual attitudes."[102]

The existentialist view of freedom also strips the conceptual background to choice by picturing the will as capable of being totally independent, and therefore able to step out of deep moral configurations or visions of the world. This picture of human freedom, which divorces the will from knowledge, leads to the conclusion that the moral frameworks we use have been *chosen*. This conception of the will—stripped of its embeddedness within a prior and given horizon of significance, transcending the individual will—makes it appear as if we freely *select* our frameworks.

As seen above in the section on Murdoch's "abbreviated history," one of the key moments in contemporary ethics was the break with metaphysical ethics. With Moore's shifting of the question from "What is good?" to "What is the activity of valuing?", ethics was transformed from thinking about the Good as something transcending the individual will to being a value tag of the will. The focus is on the moment of choice. In addition, with the cutting away of metaphysical entities at the hands of British empiricism, where

[102]Ibid.

the verificationist principle is the animating ideal, we have been left with an ethical context void of general frameworks, or, if these frameworks are allowed to play a role at all, they are understood as first being chosen by the existentialist self always capable of withdrawing, reflecting, and choosing again.[103] At this point, we can see how British empiricism, linguistic philosophy, and the existentialist view of the self are mutually supporting aspects of a larger edifice. The break with metaphysical ethics means that we find ourselves in a moral context lacking metaphysical entities such as the old philosophical self and large metaphysical structures. These philosophical positions are wrapped up with a very particular view of the self, one existentialist and liberal in its fundamental features. Insofar as Murdoch finds any of these particular points unconvincing, she also finds each corresponding aspect of the overall picture problematic. Thus, as Murdoch thinks that moral differences can be at the level of "total differences of moral vision and perspective," not just choice, she thinks that the liberal concentration "on the *point of discontinuity* between the chosen framework and the choosing agent" is already to presuppose this entire view.[104] We do not chose our moral framework by some omnipotent operation of the sovereign will, but rather we make small choices embedded within the world we see, and that world is itself a work of moral effort.

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[103]Murdoch often highlights the general British prejudice against metaphysical systems and theory. See in particular "A House of Theory," where she claims, "The British were never ones for theory in any case. We have always been empiricist, anti-metaphysical in philosophy, mistrustful of theoretical systems." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 173. And again, "Developments in mathematical logic, the influence of scientific method, the techniques of linguistic analysis, have combined to produce a new philosophy even more anti-theoretical than its skeptical predecessor," 174.

[104]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 71.

The "Current View" and Its Kantian Ancestry: The Longer History

This first act—the one in which Murdoch narrates the drama of the current flawed view of the self—gains in clarity and persuasiveness as her narrative and cast of characters sheds light on our philosophical context. A great deal of this explanatory power is evident when turning toward one of her characters in particular, Immanuel Kant. Kant is arguably Murdoch's most important character, at least in terms of whom Murdoch provocatively considers the founder of the existentialist conception of the self. In Kant, we have the true grandfather of existentialism; and therefore, we gain significant insight into the traits of existentialism by looking back to him. In order for us to understand Kant's conception of the will and the role it plays in Murdoch's narrative, it will be necessary first to pause and consider Kant's interrelated notions of duty, practical reason, and autonomy, especially as they manifest themselves when considered in relation to eudaemonistic ethical accounts.

Kant maintains that our common notions of duty and the laws of morality help us realize that for a law to be valid as a ground of obligation it must be categorical. By categorical, Kant means the kind of imperative that must be universally and necessarily binding on any rational creature. Kant contrasts categorical imperatives with imperatives that are merely hypothetical. A hypothetical imperative is only binding in certain circumstances for certain kinds of creatures with certain motives, which are in turn dependent on particular aspects of that creature's empirical nature. Kant contends that our common idea of what a duty is leads us to the conclusion that a duty cannot merely be hypothetical but must be categorical.

One ethical position in particular at which Kant aims his comments about the categorical nature of duty is Eudaemonism. Put simply, Kant maintains that the Eudaemonist believes we ought to pursue actions that tend toward human happiness or flourishing.[105] This way of framing why we ought to pursue certain actions is dependent upon the particular inclinations or type of creature for which we are prescribing a certain set of actions. For Kant, this approach to morality does not square with our intuitions about duty's categorical nature. The Eudaemonist can only make hypothetical statements about what obligates us because our happiness is dependent on contingent aspects of our empirical self. The form that moral reasoning takes for the Eudaemonist is as follows: "If you want to be happy, then you will do X." But what if I do not want to be happy? The problem for Kant is that this form of reasoning is merely hypothetical; it rests on the desires of the empirical self, not in *a priori* necessary and universal duties. Kant maintains, "[T]he ground of obligation must be looked for, not in the nature of man nor in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but solely *a priori* in the concepts of pure reason."[106] Even if the Eudaemonist were to make a distinction between *apparent* and *true* happiness and insist that the true happiness of all human creatures is universally the same, then this construal would still be based on empirical grounds (i.e., inclinations)

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[105]This explanation of Eudaimonism is Kant's caricature. Aristotle does maintain that one should cultivate the virtues and that the virtues tend toward flourishing. However he does not necessarily assert that one should pursue an action *because* it contributes to flourishing. The *motive* a virtuous person acts from needs to be distinguished from the rational justification of the virtues. A virtuous person is not motivated by a self-centered regard for her own happiness, but by the concerns typical of a virtuous person.

[106]Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 57.

and could still only be considered *prudential* and not properly *moral*. T.H. Irwin gives a succinct account of Kant's fundamental problem with any Eudaemonist project. He says,

> [I]ts crucial unfitness to provide an account of morality results primarily from its appeal to an inclination that is taken to be prior to rational judgments about what ought to be done. Kant assumes that prescriptions about how to achieve happiness give me sufficient reason to act on them only if I care enough about happiness and about this particular element of it.[107]

The ability to say the words "only if" in any account of morality renders it invalid in Kant's eyes. A valid account of morality must "carry with it absolute necessity if it is to be valid."[108]

Irwin's comment highlights another aspect of Kant's rejection of eudaimonism: his juxtaposition of inclination and practical reason. Kant thinks about inclinations or impulses of nature as obstacles to what practical reason sets as ends for human action.[109] Pure practical reason is both the lawgiving aspect of the rational free will and a law unto itself. The practical will enables us to set ends for ourselves that are in accordance with the law, rather than set ends for ourselves merely out of our inclinations. Our practical lawgiving will issues commands to us *a priori*, and thus independently of inclinations. Through its issuing of *a priori* commands, practical reason creates the conditions that make it possible to have freedom, to be determined by something other than our

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[107]T.H. Irwin, "Kant's Criticisms of Eudaemonism," in Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (eds), *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 70.

[108]Kant, *Groundwork*, 56.

[109]Even though Kant allows that inclinations are not necessarily obstacles to the ends of practical reason (since reason may occasionally harmonize with one's inclinations, and because, as Kant maintains, one should attempt to inculcate inclinations in harmony with reason), ultimately inclinations are not properly part of the "moral" sphere.

inclinations. Kant has a particularly lucid explanation of the relationship of practical reason and inclination in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

> For since the sensible inclinations of human beings tempt them to ends (the matter of choice) that can be contrary to duty, lawgiving reason can in turn check their influence only by a moral end set up against the ends of inclination, an end that must therefore be given *a priori*, independently of inclinations.[110]

Kant pictures the human person as having to overcome the empirical aspects of our character, our inclinations, so that we may choose freely according to the dictates of lawgiving reason. To be moral is to act according to practical reason and the ends it freely sets for the self. For Kant, the very concept of duty must be an end set up against mere natural impulses. If we act according to the ends of practical reason, then we are acting autonomously and freely; however, if we act out of the natural inclinations of our empirical self, then we are acting heteronomously. Hence, to act according to the ends that our natural impulses set for us is to act according to the phenomenal self and not to be free in terms of self-legislating autonomy. Instead, we must act according to the dictates of the noumenal will dictating self-evidently what morality requires of us apart from our empirical inclinations. So, Kant's fundamental problem with any eudemonistic account of morality is that it is essentially heteronomous in its structure.

In her account, Murdoch is at pains to demonstrate that Kant makes a hard separation between our practical will and our empirical character, leaving the will denuded, isolated, and spontaneous. Her major objection to Kant's view has to do with the *picture* of the human self that emerges from his account of morality. This is the now familiar existentialist one. The individual will is conceived as the solitary spontaneous

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[110]Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146.

and totally free will that leaps out of the determined universe of the phenomenal world of empirical psychology. As Murdoch depicts it, "On the one hand there is the mass of psychological desires and social habits and prejudices, on the other hand there is the will."[111] Elsewhere she claims of Kant, "He wants to segregate the messy warm empirical psyche from the clean operations of the reason."[112] Murdoch reads Kant as creating a fundamental dualism between the empirically continuous self, which is constituted by habits, instincts, and social conventions, and the morally responsible self-governing self of pure practical reason. The will of pure practical reason is separate from the historical self with its habits and instincts.

The overall self-picture developed by Kant is one where the rational will can "step back" from the empirical flow of the historical self. The historical human psyche is detached from the will, so that the truly free, moral action is one produced by the spontaneous, isolated choosing faculty. On this view, human choice allows no room for degrees of freedom. On the one hand there is the human will completely determined by the empirical psyche. On the other hand there is the radically free choosing faculty unencumbered by empirical limitations, completely pure and *a priori*. Murdoch suggests, "An unexamined sense of the strength of the machine is combined with an illusion of leaping out of it."[113] This division of the self is a reflection of Kant's noumenally free self and his phenomenally determined psyche. The moral will, that is to say the noumenally free practical will that acts against inclination, is conceived in terms of the

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[111]Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 289.

[112]Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 366.

[113]Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 338.

pure movement of the will, which is supposed to motivate the moral agent to action at a discrete point in time. The moral will is not understood against the backdrop of habitual objects of attention that shape the underlying character of the moral agent.

At this point, the connection with the Sartrean-existentialist conception of willing becomes apparent, and Murdoch herself continually draws our attention to its Kantian ancestry. She explains, "Sartre's man is described as an isolated non-historical consciousness, like Kant's man."[114] Elsewhere she maintains, "The younger Sartre, and many British moral philosophers, represent this last dry distilment of Kant's views of the world."[115] And finally, in an extended comment on Sartre's relation to Kant, Murdoch claims,

> It is interesting how extremely Kantian this picture is, for all Sartre's indebtedness to Hegelian sources. Again, the individual is pictured as solitary and totally free. There is no transcendent reality, there are no degrees of freedom. On the one hand there is the mass of psychological desires and social habits and prejudices, on the other hand there is the will . . . the ordinary traditional picture of personality and the virtues lies under suspicion of *mauvaise foi*.[116]

The similarities between the Kantian conception of the will and its existential offspring that we examined above—in both its Continental and Anglo-analytic versions—is truly striking, and it displays the far-reaching explanatory power of Murdoch's narrative.

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[114]Iris Murdoch, "The Existentialist Political Myth," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 134.

[115]Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 338.

[116]Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 289.

The Naturalistic Fallacy

One final issue remains before we turn, in the next chapter, to Murdoch's alternative picture of the self: the naturalistic fallacy. There are various ways to construe the naturalistic fallacy. One way is in the terms Moore articulated when he first called it a fallacy. As Moore saw it, the exposure of the naturalistic fallacy was an exposure of a problem in any *definition* of the Good. As his open question argument was supposed to demonstrate, the Good was not susceptible of definition in terms of any natural quality, such as happiness or pleasure, because it always made sense to ask whether the quality in question was in fact Good. Any identification of the Good with a natural quality was thus shown to be a fallacy. As a consequence, Moore conceived of the Good as an indefinable, simple, and non-natural entity. Moore set the trajectory for those that followed him by calling naturalism a fallacy, for using the word "fallacy" gave it a particularly logical air.

In the wake of Moore, another way of understanding the naturalistic fallacy is in distinctly logical terms to the effect that it is impossible to derive an "ought" from an "is." The focus here is on the practical syllogism, where if there is no ought in the premises, it is a logical error to end up with an ought in the conclusion. If we are given only factual statements about the world, then it is logically impermissible to move to an evaluative conclusion. On this view, the separation of fact from value is necessary because of the logic of practical arguments. Finally, along distinctly Murdochian lines, the naturalist fallacy can be stated as the prohibition against attaching morality to the substance of the world. Speaking of the generally anti-naturalistic cast of mind, and its place in modern moral philosophy, she summarizes, "[Y]ou cannot attach morality to the

substance of the world. And this dictum, which expresses the whole spirit of modern ethics, has been accorded a sort of logical dignity."[117]

As the summary and culmination of modern moral philosophy, the naturalistic fallacy plays a vital role in Murdoch's account. In fact, she calls it "the most important argument in modern moral philosophy—indeed it is almost the whole of modern moral philosophy."[118] Murdoch's strategy with respect to the naturalistic fallacy is to show that the joining of fact and value is not, as it had been depicted by the current view, a logical or philosophical error. Rather, the separation of fact and value is itself one moral attitude among others—an attitude that fits particularly well with liberal values and habits of mind—and not a neutral description of the logic of moral discourse as such.[119] Murdoch says, "My point is that if we regard the current view, not as a final truth about the separability of fact and value, but as itself representing a type of moral attitude, then we shall not think that there is a *philosophical* error which consists in merging fact and value."[120] In other words, the merging of fact and value is not necessarily an offense against logic or "imposed on us by philosophical considerations;"[121] rather, the anti-naturalistic position has been "accorded a sort of logical dignity"[122] because it is a simple

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[117]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 65.

[118]Ibid., 64.

[119]Murdoch summarizes these liberal values like this: "[D]on't be dogmatic, always reflect and argue, respect the attitudes of others." "Vision and Choice," 93.

[120]Ibid., 95.

[121]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 65.

[122]Ibid.

and elegant summary of what our liberal morality, or way of *evaluating*, is like. Murdoch maintains, "It is therefore the case that the logical formula presented by the modern moral philosopher is on the whole a satisfactory representation of the morality most commonly held in England."[123] If Murdoch is in fact successful in unmasking the logical pretensions of the anti-naturalists and shows them to be embedded within their own broader evaluative framework, then the so-called logical neutrality of the naturalistic fallacy is undermined. How does Murdoch go about accomplishing this task?

Murdoch attempts to dismantle the "logical" force of the anti-naturalist argument by recognizing several important distinctions that are often overlooked. She maintains that there are four pertinent components to the argument against naturalism; all must be kept separate in order to gain a proper appreciation of how truly knockdown and logical the argument is. The four components are: 1) an argument against metaphysical entities; 2) the view that empirical terms have meaning *via* fixed specification of empirical criteria, and moral terms have meaning *via* movable specification of empirical criteria, plus recommendation; 3) the insight that the move *directly* from fact to value contains a concealed evaluative major premise; and 4) a *moral* argument or recommendation of a liberal type: do not be dogmatic, always reflect and argue, respect the attitudes of others.[124] Only the third component has anything distinctly logical about it. The first and second components assume British empiricism, particularly the verificationist principle

[123]Ibid., 67.

[124]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice, 93.

and the behaviorist view of moral language. The fourth component assumes "the moral attitudes of Protestantism and Liberalism."[125]

Murdoch makes two additional important distinctions. The first is between a weak form and a strong form of the argument against metaphysical entities. The strong form maintains that all metaphysical entities are meaningless and can have no place in a philosophical position whatsoever. The weak form maintains that metaphysical entities cannot be philosophically established, but that they may, for example, play a role in a system of morality. Murdoch accepts the weak argument against metaphysical entities, but rejects the strong form. This move allows her to carve out a place for the belief in transcendent entities or the view that morality forms just a part of a total metaphysical picture of the universe. As Murdoch wants to argue, it is important for us to be able to "think of morality as part of a general way of conceiving the universe, as part of a larger conceptual framework."[126]

The second additional distinction Murdoch makes is in relation to the insight that the move *directly* from fact to value contains a concealed evaluative major premise. As Murdoch points out, one of the simplest examples in which we can see the revealing of a concealed evaluative premise is in the case of a statistical argument. A statistical argument often takes the form: "Statistics show that people constantly do this, so it must be all right."[127] The concealed evaluative premise in this case is, "What is customary is

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[125]Ibid., 93.

[126]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 66.

[127]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 93.

right."[128] At this point, Murdoch insists on the importance of distinguishing between the *psychological* cause for the curtailing of the argument and the actual curtailing of the argument. It may be that by uncovering the concealed premise, the argument loses much of its persuasive power, because "the exposure of the premiss destroys the appeal of the argument, which may depend (as in the example above) upon the hearer's imagining that he has got to accept the conclusion or deny the plain facts."[129] But, as Murdoch points out, the arguer may make her evaluative premise known and still insist on defining right as the customary (a natural quality). Insofar as the logic of the practical syllogism suggests that a *direct* move from factual premises to an evaluative conclusion indicates a concealed evaluative major premise, Murdoch certainly wants to endorse this type of exposure. However, this argument is separate from the additional argument that moral terms cannot be defined in non-moral terms (i.e., "right" as the customary), which is the essence of the anti-naturalist argument. This argument moves us back to a consideration of component two and the meaning of moral terms as conceived by the current view. Naturalistic arguments are not strictly an offense against the logic of the practical syllogism at all. The exposure of the concealed premise, which is a result of the logic of the practical syllogism, may then lead to the *psychological* curtailment of the argument because, for example, the definition of the right as customary may be unpersuasive for some other *non-logical* reason.

Returning to the four components of the argument against naturalism, we have seen that Murdoch accepts the weak form of the first, accepts the strictly logical form of

[128]Ibid.

[129]Ibid., 94.

the third, and points out in the fourth that these points fit nicely within a liberal evaluative framework. What we are left with, then, is the second component, the view of moral concepts as factual specification plus recommendation, which I treated above as one of the four interlocking aspects of the current view. As we will see in the next chapter, Murdoch develops an alternative account of how we ought to think of moral concepts, not as "commendations of neutral areas,"[130] but as "deep moral configurations of the world."[131] Murdoch, in her analysis and dismemberment of the arguments against naturalism, has opened up a philosophically legitimate way to begin thinking about how facts and values might merge to give us something that might be called a "moral fact." However, in Act I, Murdoch merely creates the conceptual space for this possibility. We will have to wait until Act II, to see how Murdoch capitalizes on this opening, paying particular attention to how Murdoch's rejection of the strong form of the argument against metaphysical entities and her development of an alternative conception of moral language enable her to re-legitimize naturalism as a valid ethical project.

Conclusion

As an exercise in historical retrieval, genealogies have at least two functions: 1) *liberation* from a dominant philosophical picture and, in some cases, 2) *restoration* of a previous picture misguidedly dismissed. These two functions of genealogical accounts have been captured succinctly by Charles Taylor. He maintains,

> But historical retrieval is not only important where you want to free yourself from some picture. It is very important to my thesis that even in this negative

[130]Ibid.

[131]Ibid., 95.

> case, where you want to break loose, you need to understand the past in order to liberate yourself. But liberation is not the only possible motive. We may also find ourselves driven to earlier formulations in order to *restore* a picture, or the practices it is meant to inform.[132]

To get free of the magnetic force of the current view, Murdoch provides us with a compelling genealogical account that both uncovers strange bed-fellows (i.e., existentialism and British philosophy) and illumines unexamined habits of mind. She exposes some distinct weaknesses and failures through her genealogical account which her alternative view of the self is designed to remedy. As we have seen, Murdoch's first act attempted the important work of *liberation*. However, we must turn to act two to witness her work of *restoration*, where she will develop her alternative view largely as an act of retrieval, particularly of a Platonic conception of the self.

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[132] Charles Taylor, "Philosophy and its History," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, Eds. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 22.

CHAPTER THREE

Act 2.1 – Restoration (Part 1): Reclaiming the Thick Self

Murdoch understood the modern conception of the self to be thin, unsatisfying, and inadequate. In the last chapter, I narrated her genealogical subversion of this modern view, arguing that Act I of Murdoch's three-act drama is properly understood as an attempt to liberate us from that dominant picture of the self, which is comprised of four interlocking aspects. Part of Murdoch's genealogical strategy in response to the dominant picture is to isolate each aspect of this self, challenging the adequacy of each element in order to weaken the overall influence of this dominant philosophical picture. Having weakened this conception, Murdoch can then turn, in Act II, to her alternative conception of the self.

For each of the four aspects of the thin self identified in Act I, Murdoch offers an alternative account in Act II that, taken as a whole, provides a powerful rival soul-picture. In response to the behaviorist treatment of the "inner life," Murdoch insists that "consciousness" is the background to action. In order to counter the prescriptivist treatment of moral concepts, what Murdoch calls "factual specification plus recommendation," she points to the role of thick ethical concepts in which the union of fact and value is displayed. To challenge the universalizability of the moral judgment, she highlights the primacy of the particular and develops an insight-prudential approach to moral judgment. Finally, to free us from an existentialist picture of moral freedom, she argues that we must link freedom with deep conceptual attitudes where "moral freedom

looks more like a mode of reflection."[1] Each of these four aspects can be read as Murdoch's thickening of the thin self. In this chapter, I describe Murdoch's four alternative aspects that comprise the thick self, and then, in the next chapter, I argue that Murdoch develops her alternative interlocking picture of the self through a creative recovery of Plato's richly textured conception of Eros.

Murdoch's Alternative Picture of the Self: Four Aspects

Consciousness (or a Thick Psychology) as the Background to Action

One particularly insightful way to understand Murdoch is to situate her in the context of the psychologizing of ethics. Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958) was a watershed work, shaping ethical discourse from the latter half of the twentieth century until today.[2] Anscombe famously declared, "[I]t is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we

[1]Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 95.

[2]See Nafsika Athanassoulis, "Virtue Ethics," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006, http://www.iep.utm.edu/v/virtue.htm, accessed May 18, 2008; Marcia Homiak, "Moral Character," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2007, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-character/, accessed May 18, 2008; Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2007, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/, accessed May 18, 2008; Duncan Richter, *Ethics After Anscombe—Post 'Modern Moral Philosophy,'* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000); Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 7; and "Narrative Ethics," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 473.

have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking."[3] Her call for sustained attention to moral psychology has been heeded, and thus, has transformed the nature of philosophical discourse about morals from a rigid preoccupation with action, to a rich and penetrating exploration of character (virtues and vices).[4]

Murdoch likewise should be recognized as a major contributor to the expansion of ethics "to the more complex regions which lie outside 'actions' and 'choices.'"[5] Two years before Anscombe, Murdoch was already calling for attention to the psychological background to action in Vision and Choice in Morality" (1956). She not only articulated a need for a rapprochement between psychology and moral philosophy, but she also narrated the historical cause of their separation and attempted to provide a moral psychology where the will and the psyche were no longer divorced.

As we saw in the last chapter, the philosophical behaviorist banishment of the inner life led to a stripped down moral scene, where the only proper object for the moral

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[3]G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe—Vol. 3: Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 26.

[4]The transformed nature of philosophical discourse about morals is perhaps most conspicuously evident in the renewal of virtue by Alasdair MacIntyre. Indeed, *After Virtue* is thought of by some as having its source in Anscombe's essay. For example, see Charles Pigden, "Anscombe on 'Ought,'" *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 38 No. 150, 20. Even Richter, who argues that Anscombe's essay "failed in its task," maintains that moral philosophy operates "in a somewhat changed way." He contends, "These days virtue theory, which focuses primarily not on acts or rules but on questions of character, is very often added to this list [deontology and consequentialism] of available theories. This development can be traced directly to Anscombe's paper." *Ethics After Anscombe*, 1.

[5]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 82.

analyst was behavioral data (i.e., discrete actions and the moment of choice). Murdoch's major protest against this view is that it leads us to ignore important moral data, moral data which is rendered invisible by the blunt analytic techniques of the behaviorist. Murdoch argues that, with the abandonment of the background to action, all moral differences appear to be differences of choice. When we pay attention to the background features of action, however, "moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision."[6] In other words, moral differences often express themselves as differences of gestalt (what we "see things as"). To see these differences, we must attend closely to individual narratives and personal histories, which allow us to observe the way complex attitudes and total visions of life constrain, guide, and even determine choices.

Murdoch argues that, contra behaviorism, there is morally significant activity continuously happening "inside" (as it were) the moral pilgrim which cannot be separated into discrete time slices; this activity does not admit of division into isolated occasions within a person's life. Since there exists significant moral data that, following Robert C. Roberts, we might designate as "temporally extended qualities,"[7] then we must expand our techniques of analysis to encompass this sort of data. Once we allow this data to complicate our conceptions of the moral life, the view that moral differences are merely differences in what we *choose* to value seems much less convincing. Murdoch insists that, if we pay attention to the background of choice, we will see that moral differences can be conceptual and not merely behaviorist.

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[6]Ibid.

[7]Roberts, "Narrative Ethics," 473.

What sorts of complex moral data count as "temporally extended qualities," and therefore, are neglected (i.e., invisible) on the behaviorist account? Answering this question on Murdoch's account is somewhat difficult, because her thoughts here are suggestive and scattered rather than systematic and thematic. In pointing to those "complex regions which lie outside 'actions' and choices,'" Murdoch uses a host of different metaphors.[8] She speaks of "states of mind," "personal attitudes and visions," "total vision of life," "texture of a man's being," "nature of his personal vision," "moral visions and modes of understanding," "moral nature," "moral being," etc.[9] Without being overly reductive or exhausting the full richness of Murdoch's polyvalent metaphors, it seems that these metaphors (which indicate "temporally extended qualities") can helpfully be separated into two categories: the moral (those that relate to character) and the intellectual (those that relate to vision). These two categories capture a large part of what Murdoch means when she employs the term "consciousness." In other words, Murdoch's notion of consciousness should be understood as containing both a moral and an intellectual component, both of which are "temporally extended qualities."

Roberts's definition of a "trait of character" captures succinctly what Murdoch means when she employs her character metaphors. Roberts explains, "Traits of character

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[8]Her use of various metaphors may be suggestive of the fact that there are dangers in becoming overly systematic and reductive when trying to describe these complex regions. Murdoch warns, "However, it seems to me impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without resort to metaphor, since the concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance." "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 363.

[9]These metaphors are particularly common in Murdoch's two essays, "Vision and Choice" and "The Sovereignty of Good."

are not, like actions, datable occurrences in a person's history, but dispositions: temporally extended qualities that are *exhibited* occurrently in action, intention, thought, and emotion."[10] Like Roberts' definition of a trait of character, Murdoch understands character as something "shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation."[11] When Murdoch thinks about character as a temporally extended quality, she means (resorting to another metaphor) the overall texture of a person's being.

When Murdoch employs her vision metaphors, on the other hand, she portrays the way in which our conceptual structures mediate the world to us potentially as total differences of Gestalt. She understands far-reaching moral conceptual structures as moral interpretations of the world. Moral concepts can only be understood in light of their relationship to the entire moral system of which they are a part, and they determine what we "see the world as." Therefore, in Murdoch's view, a person's ramified system of moral concepts must be taken into account if we are to understand his or her moral being, and a ramified system of moral concepts (i.e., one's moral vision) must be understood and explored as a temporally extended quality.

In sum, Murdoch argues that if we are to understand our moral being and moral differences properly, then we must pay attention to those background psychological areas that lie behind action. She rightly indicates two of these significant areas of inquiry,

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[10]Roberts, "Narrative Ethics," 473.

[11]Murdoch, "Visions and Choice," 80-81.

character and vision, and her return to consciousness as the background to action should be understood principally as an attempt to make these areas viable for ethical reflection.

Although Murdoch makes a distinction between character and vision in her discussion of temporally extended qualities, one would misunderstand her moral psychology if one followed Aristotle's sharp separation between the moral (character) and intellectual (vision) virtues.[12] Aristotle famously departs from Plato in arguing that virtue is of two kinds, rather than constituting of a unity. Importantly, Aristotle's distinction arises out of his psychology. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle maintains that there are two parts of the soul, one irrational and the other rational.[13] He then makes a further distinction within the irrational part of the soul between the vegetative and the appetitive. Although Aristotle initially classifies the appetitive as irrational, however, he adds an important qualification. He says that the appetitive is irrational, "yet in a manner participates in rational principle."[14] Again, "One division of [the irrational], the vegetative, does not share in rational principle at all; the other, the seat of the appetites and of desire in general, does in a sense participate in principle, as

[12]Although Aristotle's view of the unity of the virtues in Book VI complicates this so-called sharp separation between the moral and intellectual virtues, his conception of human moral psychology is flushed out while working with a very pronounced division between the two. At the very least, this division is seen at work in his discussion of the difference in how moral and intellectual virtue are produced. I discuss this point in greater detail below. The significance is that there is a pronounced difference in the type of moral therapy that will be emphasized depending on the underlying conception of the relation between the moral and intellectual.

[13]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), I. xiii., 63, ($1102^{a}26$). Hereafter all citations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* will be from this edition.

[14]Ibid., I. xiii., 65, ($1102^{b}13$).

being amenable and obedient to it (in the sense in fact in which we speak of 'paying heed' to one's father and friends . . .)."[15] Out of this psychology, or construal of the soul, Aristotle derives his distinction between intellectual and moral virtues. He says, "Now virtue also is differentiated in correspondence with this division of the soul. Some forms of virtue are called intellectual virtues, others moral virtues."[16]

Once Aristotle makes the distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, he explains the way in which each excellence (virtue) is produced. Intellectual virtue is produced by instruction, "whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit (ethos)."[17] And, as Aristotle goes on to point out, we acquire habits by repeated action. He summarizes, "In a word, our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities. Hence it is incumbent on us to control the character of our activities, since on the quality of these depends the quality of our dispositions."[18] Therefore, for Aristotle, moral improvement is not merely a matter of showing us where we may have some deficiency in our knowledge of the Good, but rather, of re-educating the passions through habitual action.

Plato's Socrates, on the other hand, holds to the view that virtue is knowledge, and correspondingly, that vice is mere ignorance.[19] This view is known as Socrates'

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[15]Ibid., I. xiii., 67, ($1102^{b}29$).

[16]Ibid., ($1103^{a}4$).

[17]Ibid., II. i., 71, ($1103^{a}16$).

[18]Ibid., II. i., 75, ($1103^{b}20$).

[19]At the very least, a good case can be made that this view is held by the "Socrates" of the early dialogues—Gregory Vlastos speaks of this as the historical Socrates, whereas Charles Kahn wants to rid philosophy of the search for the historical

intellectualist moral psychology.[20] Charles Kahn defines Socratic intellectualism as consisting of

> two closely related themes: (1) a conception of virtue in terms of knowledge; knowledge is necessary and sufficient for correct action, so anyone who knows what is good will do what is good; and (2) the Socratic paradox that no one does evil voluntarily. These two views are logically connected by (3) the assumption

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Socrates altogether—before the appearance of the richer moral psychology in the *Republic*. The issue of Socrates' intellectualism is a widely contested issue in recent scholarship. Among some of the more problematic questions are: 1) What is the relationship between the historical Socrates and the dramatic Socrates?; 2) What is the relationship between Plato's view(s) and the various depictions of Socrates?; 3) Is there development in either Plato's or Socrates' moral psychology, and is the best interpretive strategy of the dialogues developmental or unitarian (Kahn, for example, reads all the dialogues as being compatible with the philosophical positions articulated in the *Phaedo* and *Republic)*?; 4) And for developmental accounts, what is the proper chronological scheme of the dialogues, and what is the status of stylometric studies in Platonic scholarship? The contemporary options are mapped out in some detail in a debate between Charles Kahn and Christopher Rowe appearing in the *Journal of the International Plato Society*, Issue 2, August 2002. Christopher Rowe, "Just how Socratic Are Plato's 'Socratic' Dialogues?" http://www.nd.edu/~plato/plato2issue/rowe2.htm, accessed May 18, 2008; and Charles Kahn, "Response to Christopher Rowe," http://www.nd.edu/~plato/plato2issue/kahn.htm, accessed May 18, 2008. See also, Charles H. Kahn, "Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?" *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1981, 305-320; Richard Kraut, "Virtue as a Means: Socrates in *Plato's Ethics* by T. Irwin," *Classical Philology*, Vol. 91, No. 3, 1996, 261-273; Alexander Nehamas, "Socratic Intellectualism," in *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 27-58; and Gregory Vlastos, "Socratic Knowledge and Platonic 'Pessimism,'" *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2, 1957, 226-238. Murdoch often and perhaps too simplistically identifies Socrates the character's views with those of Plato in order to sidestep some of these thorny issues.

[20]Vlastos distinguishes between an early-dialogue Socrates and a middle and late dialogue Socrates. He labels these Socrates I and Socrates II. Vlastos identifies Socrates I as the historical Socrates. Socrates II (i.e., *Republic* Socrates) offers a more complex moral psychology that accounts for emotional factors in human motivation. Plato is behind the more nuanced Socratic account. "Socrates *contra* Socrates in Plato," *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 45-80.

> that everyone wants what is good; if anyone does what is bad, that can only be by mistake. Hence virtue consists in a correct recognition of what is good.[21]

Moral improvement, then, is a matter of showing us where we are mistaken (intellectually) about our Good. Once we have that knowledge, we will automatically pursue that Good because we *see* it as our Good. After all, according to Socrates, once we have been shown that something is our Good, it would be a nonsensical absurdity for us not to pursue it. We pursue that which we *believe* to be our Good. In this way, our beliefs compel our will. The moral psychology corresponding with this view is one that construes the human as a desiring or erotic being, who follows what reason, mistakenly or not, holds out as the Good. There is no gap, so to speak, between knowing the Good and willing the Good. Whereas Aristotle claimed that intellectual virtue was produced by instruction and moral virtue by habitual action, Socrates would deny the distinction and maintain that intellectual and moral virtue is produced by instruction.[22] We might say

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[21]Charles Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of Literary Form*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 225.

[22]Aristotle greatly complicates his view in his discussion of continence and incontinence in Book VII. In fact, he explicitly mentions the Socratic view I have been expounding and after positing an initial disagreement, comes around in his discussion to articulate his fundamental, if qualified, agreement with his masters. Note the following comments and the surrounding discussion: "In fact Socrates used to combat the view altogether, implying that there is no such thing as Unrestraint (*akrasia*), since no one, he held, acts contrary to what is best, believing what he does to be bad, but only through ignorance. Now this theory is manifestly at variance with plain facts; and we ought to investigate the state of mind in question more closely;" and, "we do seem to be led to the conclusion which Socrates sought to establish. For the knowledge which is present when failure of self-restraint occurs is not what is held to be Knowledge in the true sense;" see respectively, VII., ii., 379, ($1145^{b}25$) and VII. iii., 393, ($1147^{b}12$). I have neglected this complication for the sake of simplicity and clarity, wishing to highlight one important distinction between Aristotle and Plato that some interpretations emphasize. The textual reception is complicated; however, it is certainly anachronistic to saddle Aristotle with a strict separation of the passions from the intellect. For an insightful discussion of the

that the picture of the self that Socrates draws is one where we are desiring beings who are slaves to our passions, but beings whose passions always pursue what we *see* as (i.e., believe to be) our Good.[23]

Although Murdoch is rightly considered a Platonist and has sympathies with what might be called a qualified view of Socratic intellectualism, she certainly does not want to deny the psychological advances of Aristotle over Socrates at this point. One particular strength of Aristotle's psychology is that he provides a better account of the passionate elements that seem to resist rationality. Murdoch also does not want to deny what one might call the Augustinian advance over both Greeks, which can be found in Augustine's psychological exploration of cases in which the will, knowingly and freely, chooses to love its own empty and arbitrary freedom over any good.[24] With this

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passions' influence on belief in the moment of passion see ibid., VII. iii., 393-395, ($1147^{b}6$-20).

[23]Compare this statement with Murdoch's claim that, "Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision," "The Idea of Perfection," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 332.

[24]Augustine's description of the pear-stealing incident is a striking example of this point. He insists that, as a sixteen-year-old boy, he stole pears not in order to gain a good/beautiful object, but merely for the sake of stealing (the evil action) itself. Augustine says, "But it was not the pears that my unhappy soul desired. I had plenty of my own, better than those, and I only picked them so that I might steal. . . . I loved evil even if it served no purpose." *Confessions* (England: Penguin, 1961), 49 and 51. Also see Augustine, "That we should not seek an efficient cause of an evil will," *The City of God Against the Pagans*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XII, vii, 507-508 and the surrounding discussion as to the origin of the evil will. Augustine represents a significant moment in the history of the development of moral psychology in that, for the first time, there is posited a will with no intelligible cause; it is thus radically free. There is an analogous treatment of the will in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* where he explains the psychological conditions for the possibility of a fall like Adam's.

Augustinian moral psychology, we get the first robust emergence of what may be called the independence or autonomy of the will.[25] However, for Augustine, this autonomy is a sinful autonomy from God as one's greatest Good and is therefore to be lamented. This love of one's own freedom for its own sake is in fact the definition of pride, which is the root of all sin for Augustine. He explains, "Nor is pride the fault of him who gives power, or of power itself, but of the soul which perversely loves its own power, and despises a more righteous higher Power."[26]

The choice to rebel against God must be qualitatively distinct from the empirical psychology of the particular sinner. If the choice is not free of the determining influences of personal psychology and historical context, then we do not repeat the sin of Adam in the same manner, and the choice cannot be counted against *us*. In other words, if we are to be blamed for our rebellion against God, our actions (at least to sin) must be fully attributable to us in the complete freedom of our will and not "blamed" on forces "outside" of us that determine our choice. In particular see "Anxiety as the Presupposition of Hereditary Sin and as Explaining hereditary Sin Retrogressively in Terms of Its Origin" and "Anxiety as Explaining Hereditary Sin Progressively," in *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 25-80. Therefore, in Kierkegaard, as in Augustine, the philosophical psychology behind the autonomy (relative?) of the will arises in a dogmatic context, namely trying to make sense of the evil or sinful will.

[25]The only exception I am aware of occurs in Plato's *Symposium* where Alcibiades seems fully to recognize the Good (in this case concretized in Socrates and the philosophical life), but then turns away and rejects it. In his speech praising Socrates, Alcibiades says, "And yet that is exactly how this Marsyas here at my side makes me feel all the time: he makes it seem that my life isn't worth living! You can't say that isn't true, Socrates. I know very well that you could make me feel that way this very moment if I gave you half a chance. He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him, for like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die," 216a-b. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Plato come from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

[26]Augustine, "Of the perverse love by which the will fell away from the immutable to the mutable good," *The City of God*, XII, viii, 509.

Murdoch can and does accept each of these moments in the development of moral psychology, but she wants to return to Socrates and Plato in light of this history and ask what may have been obscured as a result of an overemphasis on the psychological autonomy of the will.[27] In particular, Murdoch thinks we have lost the ability (within the context of a moral scene where the psyche and the will have been isolated) to conceptualize how the will is qualified by both one's character and vision, including the complex and multi-directional ways that each of these elements within the soul influences the others. That is to say, one must be able to make sense of a psychological situation in which one's *character* can determine the quality of one's vision and the exercise of one's will, in which one's *vision* shapes one's character and guides one's will, and in which one's *will* can make small strides in the shaping of one's character and the directing of one's vision (attention). That said, at the end of the day, Murdoch is deeply Platonic in giving systematic priority to vision, or modes of understanding, which is why we will misunderstand her if we think of her conception of character as overly Aristotelian. Murdoch is concerned with complicating the way we think about the mutual interpenetration of the intellectual and moral virtues.[28] Aristotle's distinction between intellect and character is too clean for the moral psychology Murdoch wants to advance.

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[27]There is a more complex story of the development of moral psychology to be told, one that takes us, particularly in Murdoch's case, up through Freud; however, for my purposes here, this quick account will suffice. I will comment on Freud's influence on Murdoch in section two.

[28]Toward this end, Murdoch often makes statements that focus on the person as a unified being. For example, she says, "What moves us—our motives, our desires, our reasoning—emerges from a constantly changing complex; moral change is the change of that complex, for better or worse," *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 300.

I will return to Murdoch's notion of the will in my section on "Moral Freedom as a Mode of Reflection" and her notion of character; however, I first must note that Murdoch's Platonism is perhaps most evident in her contention that a morality is a ramification of concepts (a way of seeing, a vision), where moral concepts are moral interpretations of situations and significantly determine what that situation is.[29] This insight leads Murdoch to develop an alternative account of moral concepts to the prescriptivism of linguistic analysts such as Hare. I will explicate Murdoch's account of moral language in the next section.

I now return to Murdoch's notion of character, which refers to dispositions or the overall texture of a person's being. However, as noted above, if we understand this notion in an overly Aristotelian fashion, we will be in danger of missing a crucial dimension of Murdoch's account: namely how Murdoch makes character dependent on vision (or the habitual objects of our attention, i.e. our *thought* life), not necessarily on habitual or repeated action. Making character dependent on vision implies that morality is fundamentally concerned with looking rather than acting.[30]

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[29]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 89, 95.

[30]To be entirely fair to Aristotle, there is nothing in his account that prevents it from being developed in a way that could encompass everything Murdoch is concerned with in prioritizing vision. In fact, Aristotle's contention that a passion, although irrational, participates in rationality, is one way of emphasizing the cognitive aspects inextricably connected with our moral being. If a passion is both cognitive and appetitive, then Murdoch could accept that sort of account. However, it is noteworthy that as Aristotle develops his own account, his emphasis is on how our passions are shaped by repeated actions, rather than some sort of cognitive activity. Murdoch focuses on the importance of vision as a crucial place of moral transformation, because she believes it has been neglected in the tradition. However, a better strategy for shaping the passions would be a coordination of cognitive work and habitual action.

Three statements from Murdoch, taken together, illustrate well her prioritization of vision over character in the moral life. First she claims, "Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness."[31] This statement is significant in that it is both a nod to Aristotle and an insistence that his psychology is insufficient because it does not take account of how both action and character are largely dependent on a mode of vision. Our beliefs, including how we construe situations, are vitally important indicators and shapers of moral virtue. In other words, knowledge and goodness are connected. This is what Murdoch means by calling vision the background condition.

Second, Murdoch affirms, "One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see."[32] This is an important and fairly straightforward psychological observation that, in most cases, the way we construe situations exerts a powerful, if not irresistible, force on our will. We do not gather facts in a straightforward fashion and then choose what to value; we have immediate construals of situations (always morally saturated) and these construals compel the will.

The third statement contains penetratingly subtle moral and psychological insight: "It is obviously, in practice, a delicate moral problem to decide how far the will can coerce the formed personality (*move* in a world it cannot *see*) without merely occasioning disaster . . . . Will cannot run very far ahead of knowledge, and attention is our daily

[31]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 375.

[32]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 329.

bread."[33] First, for all her insistence on how our vision compels our will, Murdoch does not make the will entirely dependent upon our vision, as Socrates may appear to do. Murdoch leaves a space, albeit quite small, for the notion of a will that is more than just a desire in accordance with what we believe to be our Good. However, the will is not the sovereign will of existentialism (in either its Continental or Anglo-analytic form) but, as Murdoch says, "has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision."[34] This will is neither psychologically determined by the empirical psyche (Kant's fear), nor entirely separate or autonomous from the psyche. Murdoch appropriately asks, "Do we really have to choose between an image of total freedom and an image of total determinism?"[35]

In this statement Murdoch also warns of the psychological and moral dangers that go along with an inflated conception of the will as willpower, pictured in isolation from the rest of the psyche. She maintains that we can make small acts of the will that run in opposition to our formed personality in an attempt to shape our character; however, we cannot take very large steps in this region without provoking moral disaster. We are in great moral danger if we aim for a standard out of our reach.

Take, for example, the story of the man who wants to become a more loving, selfless person, so he decides to practice denying himself by interrupting his own projects to serve others. In particular, he decides he will even begin quite small by taking the time to wash his roommates' dishes every time the sink is full. As the days go on he notices

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[33]Ibid., 331.

[34]Ibid., 332.

[35]Ibid., 328.

that his roommates use far more dishes than are necessary, and he also observes that they do not comment on the fact that the dishes are being cleaned. From this he begins to wonder why they are not noticing and if they think that the dishes are washing themselves. Now *every morning* as he washes dishes he becomes obsessed with thoughts about how messy, thoughtless, and ungrateful his roommates are. Before long he realizes that instead of becoming more loving and selfless, he is becoming spiteful and dominated by the need for recognition. The man has actually been habituating resentment, and this resentment has been accumulating a great deal of psychic energy which needs release. Inevitably, this energy may find release in all sorts of passive-aggressive, resentful behavior around the house.

Instead of the sheer willpower involved in this attempt at moral change, Murdoch would suggest that what this man requires is a new way of *seeing* his roommates.[36] His vision of his roommates is a vitally important aspect of the moral equation (in fact, significantly more important that the small acts of will). If moral psychology is not properly attentive to the force that "seeing as" exerts on the will, then we will not only end up with a faulty moral psychology, but with moral disaster. Even if the will can and should, at times, run ahead of knowledge, our vision must quickly follow. Therefore, Murdoch prioritizes vision not only because of the moral importance of the force exerted

[36]An illuminating example of the moral importance of our construals of others occurs in Murdoch's discussion of "M" and "D" in the "Idea of Perfection." She nicely illustrates the central role that vision plays in the moral life, and shows that altering one's vision is a fundamental place of moral transformation; 312-336.

on the will by how we construe people and situations, but also because it is the place of true and lasting moral change.[37]

As we have seen in this section, to counter the drama of the separation of the will from the psyche, Murdoch draws our attention to two vital areas that, in any sophisticated moral psychology, must be considered as the background to action: character and vision. As temporally extended qualities, character and vision not only require techniques of analysis appropriate for such qualities, but also render existentialist accounts of the will, where the will is the sovereign creator of value and moves freely within a void, dubious. In contrast with the thin psychology behind the Kantian and Surrealist wings of existentialism, Murdoch provides a thick psychological account of consciousness (i.e., vision and character) as the background to action.

Thick Ethical Concepts: Displaying the Union of Fact and Value in Ordinary Language

One cannot hope to understand twentieth-century philosophy, either in its Continental or Anglo-American varieties, without a proper appreciation of what is now commonly called "the linguistic turn." Murdoch was heir to this philosophical movement(s) (in both its Continental and Anglo-analytic forms) and made significant and groundbreaking contributions to this tradition as the linguistic method was applied in the field of ethics. Her most influential and original contribution was a strident critique of what is now called prescriptivism (Murdoch calls this view of moral concepts "factual specification plus recommendation"). She offers an alternative interpretation of moral

[37]After the preceding discussion, we see how Murdoch can, as I asserted earlier, accept the advances in moral psychology from Aristotle to Augustine to Kierkegaard up through Freud, while insisting that Plato has much to remind us of in the field of moral psychology.

concepts as thick ethical concepts or "deep moral configurations of the world."[38] As we will see in the following discussion, her construal challenges two fundamental assumptions. First, it challenges the divisibility of fact and value since thick ethical concepts display the entanglement of fact and value in our language. Second, the serious study of our moral language in its "thickness" implies that we need to study morality historically; thus the attempt to reduce ethics to logic is misguided if we really are committed to the linguistic method.[39] When we study the grammar of moral concepts closely, we quickly realize that in order to understand the rules for the application of moral concepts, we require historical and social understanding, which for Murdoch, includes not only patient attention to various 'forms of life,' but careful consideration of the histories of particular individuals.[40]

Before I comment on Murdoch's alternative account of moral concepts, I hasten to add that she never uses the phrase "thick ethical concepts." In using this phrase, I am,

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[38] Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 95.

[39]Ibid., 84.

[40]Murdoch was one of the first to begin working out, in ethical contexts, the implications of Wittgenstein's grammatical turn. Although she is not an uncritical inheritor, Murdoch's debt to him is especially clear in her interpretation of moral concepts. Murdoch's time at Newnham College, Cambridge (1947-1948), overlapped that of Wittgenstein, and she met with him twice. Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 266. However, as Conradi notes, Wittgenstein's "influence reached her mainly through disciples such as Elizabeth Anscombe [her good friend and the one to whom she dedicated the published version of her Gifford Lectures, *Metaphysics As a Guide to Morals*] and Yorick Smythies." Ibid.

Cora Diamond also suggests this connection between Murdoch's "specialized" moral concepts and Williams's thick concepts: "What she [Murdoch] refers to as "specialized" moral concepts includes but is not limited to the concepts now frequently described, following Bernard Williams, as "thick." "We Are Perpetually Moralists": Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 83.

of course, following the terminology of Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. I adopt Williams's terminology for three principal reasons. First, Williams clearly and succinctly articulates a view which is similar to Murdoch's own alternative interpretation of moral concepts. Murdoch's account, however, is not as clearly or succinctly stated. Williams's account will help us bring order to Murdoch's sometimes sprawling and suggestive comments. Second, insofar as I effectively argue that Murdoch develops an early account of what, as the tradition develops, gets called "thick moral concepts," I am making a genetic argument to the effect that Murdoch ought to be thought of as one of the first, if not very first, sources for the turn to thick concepts.[41] Third, because "thick moral concepts" is a phrase that has gained a fair amount of currency and general recognizibility in our contemporary ethical discussions, I am assuming that the constellation of ideas that Williams's phrase calls to mind will provide a helpful and familiar entry into Murdoch.

There are three particular features of thick moral concepts, which Williams brings to attention, that shed light on Murdoch's account of moral concepts.[42] The first feature is that "thick or specific ethical notions . . . seem to express a union of fact and value."[43]

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[41]In the general context of discussing thick ethical concepts and their difference from the prescriptivist account of moral concepts, Williams, in a footnote, mentions that the first time he heard this alternative construal of evaluative concepts was at a seminar in the 1950s by Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot. (Presumably Williams is speaking of Murdoch's essay, "Vision and Choice in Morality.") *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), note 7, 217-218. He also notes the Wittgensteinian inspiration of this interpretation of moral concepts.

[42]Williams provides a few different catalogues of thick ethical concepts, which he believes still play a role in our culture. In one place he lists *treachery, promise, brutality,* and, *courage*. In another he lists co*ward, lie, brutality,* and *gratitude*. Ibid., 129 and 140.

[43]Ibid., 129.

Williams argues that unlike the prescriptivist who brings the fact-value dichotomy to language, the patient linguist has actually found a host of specific (or thick) ethical notions that merge fact and value.[44] On the prescriptivist account, moral concepts can be divided neatly into a descriptive and an evaluative element. The descriptive element governs the application of a concept to the world, whereas the evaluative element merely gives a stamp of approval (or disapproval) to that neutral description. Williams points to the crucial implication of this account. He says, "It follows that, for any concept of this sort, you could produce another that picked out just the same features of the world but worked simply as a descriptive concept, lacking any prescriptive or evaluative force."[45] But the real point behind emphasizing "thick ethical concepts" is precisely to show that a descriptive equivalent cannot be found. Why not? Because moral concepts are lenses through which we see situations, and if we completely re-described the situation using a "neutral" (i.e., objective) descriptive equivalent, we would no longer be left with the *same* situation. Murdoch explains, "if the concept is withdrawn we are not left with the same situation or the same facts."[46] Moral concepts, then, are rather "deep moral configurations of the world"[47] which merge fact and value. Fact and value come together in the sense that they are moral interpretations of situations that determine what we "see that situation as."

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[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid., 141.

[46]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 95.

[47]Ibid.

One implication of Murdoch's alternative account of moral concepts is that moral differences can again be displayed as differences of concept or vision and not merely (arbitrary) choices against the backdrop of the same world of facts.[48] A further implication of Murdoch's account can be drawn from this one: a system of thick ethical concepts can be a source of moral insight or understanding by making certain areas of moral importance *visible*. Murdoch says, "Great philosophers coin new moral concepts and communicate new moral visions and modes of understanding."[49] I will return to this important implication for the role of thick ethical concepts as sources of moral wisdom; however, for now I merely want to indicate that if one loses one's thick or more specific ethical concepts, one also loses crucial mediators of ethical insight. Thick ethical concepts can illumine obscure moral situations. Murdoch insists that we must "consider here the role of language in illuminating situations."[50] She also argues that rich

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[48]Murdoch, although it is central to her philosophical project for the rest of her life, emphasizes this point again and again in her early essays of the 1950s. In particular see "Metaphysics and Ethics," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), and "Vision and Choice."

[49]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 83.

[50]Ibid., 90. This, I think, is the true and meaningful way of thinking about Murdoch's return to Plato. Murdoch is greatly concerned with the disappearance of elaborate normative vocabularies because with the impoverishment of language comes a corresponding inability to reflect deeply about the moral life. Rich moral vocabularies give us access to and help us explore "the nature of moral progress and moral failure and the reasons for the divergence of one moral temperament from another." "The Idea of Perfection," 336. One fundamental reason for Murdoch's return to Plato is found in his "rich conceptual schemes" through which to understand the depth and complexity of the moral life. This discussion also illumines Murdoch's opinions on why we should do ethics in the first place. We should do ethics as an aid to moral understanding or wisdom and not necessarily in order to develop a moral theory. Moreover, Murdoch's work as a novelist can also be understood as an attempt to contribute to the recovery of elaborate normative vocabularies.

discussions of the virtues can "help to make certain potentially nebulous areas of experience more open to inspection."[51]

The second feature that Williams highlights which helps us understand Murdoch's account of thick ethical concepts is his observation "that such concepts are 'action-guiding.'"[52] An ethical concept is "action-guiding" if it is "characteristically related to reasons for action."[53] For example, if the thick ethical concept *brutal* applies to the case of Nero, then the description of Nero as *brutal* will characteristically give one a reason for action. Thick ethical terms display the general connection between description and reason for action. The description that Nero is *brutal* gives one a reason for disapprobation. Notice that on the prescriptivist account, one would divide the thick ethical term *brutal* into its descriptive (fact) and evaluative (value) elements. The descriptive element that Nero inflicted hard actions on Christians should provide no reason for action. The mere fact of the matter does not guide the will at all. The "neutral" and "value free" description of a situation carries no action-guiding force. On the prescriptivist account, the action-guiding force of an ethical concept comes entirely from the evaluative element, which simply means, "I approve (or disapprove) of these facts."

Before discussing how "action-guiding" illumines Murdoch's account, it will be helpful to discuss Williams third feature of thick ethical concepts, namely, that "their

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[51]Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 346.

[52]Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 140.

[53]Ibid.

application is guided by the world."[54] An ethical concept is world-guided if its use is governed by the facts of a situation. As Williams points out, being world-guided means that an ethical concept "may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired it can agree that it applies or fails to apply to some new situation."[55] A group of people, for example, who understood the grammar of the term *brutality* (within the same language game), could agree on whether it applied to the case of Nero or not. In this case, Nero's actions (the facts "in the world") guide the application of the thick ethical term *brutality*.

The uniqueness of thick ethical concepts is that they are both action-guiding and world-guided at one and the same time, without admitting of division into separate descriptive and evaluative elements. On the prescriptivist account, the action-guiding force comes from the evaluative element, but world-guidedness comes entirely from the descriptive elements. However, as we have seen above, thick ethical concepts, as "deep moral configurations of the world," do not admit of this sort of division (at least without some significant losses). The attempt to find, for example, the descriptive equivalent of *brutality* that lacked the conjoined evaluative force would not pick out the *same* features of the world. We would be looking at a different world. Quoting Murdoch again, "if the concept is withdrawn we are not left with the same situation or the same facts."[56] So, as thick ethical concepts display the entanglement of fact and value, they show themselves to be at once action-guiding and also world-guided.

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[54]Williams, *Ethics and the Limits,* 141.

[55]Ibid.

[56] Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 95.

Murdoch, like Williams, develops her alternative account of moral concepts in contrast to the prescriptivist account, and she too is concerned to argue that, given a thick conception of moral concepts, these concepts can be action-guiding and world-guided at the same time. The combination of these two elements provides a moral structure in which the will can be constrained by the way the world is (or the way we see the world). Our knowledge of how things are constrains our will in important ways. If we see someone carrying out a *brutal* action, the nature of the action not only guides our description of it (world-guideness), but it also carries within it a reason for stopping that action (action-guiding). The will is not left radically free to "make up its mind" once the neutral facts of the matter have been collected. Against all existentialist accounts (like Hare's prescriptivism) that separate will and reason, Murdoch insists that our knowledge of situations constrains our will and gives us strong reasons for action. She gives a brief summary of her thick conception of moral concepts and the implications for the will and reason in "The Idea of Perfection":

> On my view it might be said that, *per contra*, the primary general words could be dispensed with entirely and all moral work could be done by the secondary specialised words. If we picture the agent as compelled by obedience to the reality he can see, he will not be saying, 'This is right', i.e., 'I choose to do this', he will be saying, 'This is A B C D' (normative-descriptive words), and action will follow naturally.[57]

In this compact passage, Murdoch makes reference to "secondary specialised words" (i.e., thick moral concepts), and she touches on the three features Williams highlights. Murdoch's characterization of the words as "normative-descriptive" shows the unification of fact and value. Her observation that "action will follow naturally" shows

[57]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 333.

that thick moral terms are action-guiding, and her reference to "reality" shows the concern with world-guidedness.[58]

Now that I have shown that Murdoch and Williams develop a similar account of ethical concepts, I want to suggest a further fruitful area for reflection which arises when comparing their conceptual accounts. Williams famously and paradoxically declares "*reflection can destroy knowledge*."[59] Here I do not want to explore Williams account of why this is the case, except to mention that he makes this claim in the wider context of the disappearing of thick ethical concepts. The kind of knowledge to which Williams is referring, then, is that which is yielded by thick ethical concepts. Murdoch is deeply concerned by the disappearance of thick ethical concepts and the corresponding loss in moral knowledge. The nature of her concern is deeply revealing about the reasons behind her account of these ethical terms, the overall nature of her philosophical (and novelistic) project as a solution, and why she thinks one should be doing ethics in the first place.

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[58]The connection between the Existentialist thin-self and the prescriptivist account of moral concepts is now clear. Alternatively, a thicker account of moral psychology, where the will is guided by our perceptions of the world, corresponds to the thickness of moral concepts. Murdoch demonstrates that there is a deep connection between moral psychology and the interpretation of moral concepts. She makes this clear in the following critique of the current picture of the self: "Reason deals in neutral descriptions and aims at being the frequently mentioned ideal observer. Value terminology will be the prerogative of the will; but since will is pure choice, pure movement, and not thought or vision, will really requires only action words such as 'good' or 'right'. It is not characteristic of the man we are describing, as he appears either in textbooks or in fiction, to possess an elaborate normative vocabulary. Modern ethics analyses 'good', the empty action word which is the correlate of the isolated will, and tends to ignore other value terms." "The Idea of Perfection," 305

[59]Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 148.

Murdoch is afraid that we are losing the rich language necessary for actually understanding the complexities of our ethical life as moral pilgrims. She believes that if we properly apprehend "the role of language in illuminating situations,"[60] then we will see how misguided and dangerous the elimination of thick ethical concepts will be for moral understanding. Murdoch claims that a rich normative vocabulary full of thick ethical concepts is a fundamental source of moral insight. These concepts actually make certain areas of moral importance *visible* in the sense that without them, we would not see the same world. Rich ethical conceptual schemes help us find our way around in the moral and social world by illuminating opaque situations and rendering "potentially nebulous areas of experience more open to inspection."[61] With the loss of thick ethical concepts, Murdoch contends that we lose significant mediators of ethical insight that, as moral pilgrims, we need to reflect deeply on our moral experience. Practical reason is greatly impoverished if, in the attempt to reduce morality to a single formula (i.e., the pursuit of one general, abstract, and sovereign concept in moral theory), it neglects the thicker secondary moral concepts, which are the real producers of moral insight.

For Murdoch, moral philosophy should attempt to provide moral wisdom.[62] She does not think that the primary goal of ethics should be an ethical theory, if ethical theory

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[60]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 90.

[61]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 346.

[62]For a similar contemporary account claiming that philosophical ethics should make its goal moral wisdom and not an ethical theory see Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions and Virtues: An Essay in Moral Psychology*, (in progress). He says, "I asked what is the point of philosophical ethics, and in particular what is the point of philosophizing about the virtues. I have argued that an ethical theory is not a very promising goal, and have proposed conceptual analysis as an alternative. So far, however, I have argued for its superiority mainly on the grounds that it is a more 'natural' approach to the conceptual

refers to the attempt to reduce morality to a single formula.[63] Indeed, not only does she think that the moral scene is too complex for this reduction, and that "important differences of moral concept may be blurred or neglected,"[64] but also that the drive toward a single philosophical definition of morality leads us to thin, general, and abstract moral terms such as 'good' or 'right' and away from the thickness of specialized normative words. Murdoch argues

> It is a shortcoming of much contemporary moral philosophy that it eschews discussion of the separate virtues, preferring to proceed directly to some sovereign concept such as sincerity, or authenticity, or freedom, thereby imposing, it seems to me, an unexamined and empty idea of unity, and impoverishing our moral language in an important area.[65]

In a similar vein, she claims, "We were too impressed by words when we assumed that the word 'good' covered a single concept which was the centre of morality. We were not impressed enough when we neglected less general moral words such as 'true', 'brave', 'free', 'sincere', which are the bearers of very important ideas."[66] Because Murdoch is fundamentally concerned with moral wisdom, and because she sees that the drive toward

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array, less likely than moral theory to distort the concepts. But this is a rather 'scientific' sounding reason for preferring analysis, and I have also suggested that serious moral philosophy is not just a scientific enterprise, but ought to be contributing something to people's moral lives. I think that a plausible and worthy goal for moral philosophy is the enhancement of moral wisdom," 18.

[63]Roberts characterizes the drive toward an ethical theory as follows: "we find authors preoccupied with *ordering* moral concepts in such a way that some of them are subordinated to or derived from other concepts or some single other concept so that some one or small number of moral concepts become the source, the ground, the foundation, the base, of the others." *Emotions and Virtues*, 2.

[64]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 75.

[65]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 347.

[66]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 73.

ethical theory tends to draw us away from thick ethical concepts (which are important sources of moral wisdom), she remains deeply skeptical about ethical theory. Here we come back again to Williams declaration that "*reflection can destroy knowledge*." A distinctly Murdochian rendering of this would be something like "*ethical theory can destroy moral wisdom*," because specialized normative concepts become marginalized.[67]

Above I mentioned that Murdoch's concern with the lack of attention to thick ethical concepts illumines the overall nature of her philosophical and novelistic projects. This is because her constructive philosophy attempts to reverse this tendency in ethical theory by developing an elaborate secondary vocabulary; for, rich normative vocabularies, according to Murdoch, illumine the complex and often opaque nature of our moral lives. She argues that the task of moral philosophy should be "the provision of rich and fertile conceptual schemes which help us to reflect upon and understand the nature of moral progress and moral failure and the reasons for the divergence of one moral

[67]Murdoch should be read as a unique and early example of an ethical anti-theorist. Although there are, in this respect, family resemblances between Murdoch and Roberts, Williams, Anscombe, et. al., she offers her own version of anti-theory in the context just described along with its special points of emphasis (i.e., the marginalization of thick ethical concepts by the drive for *an* ethical theory and her constructive project of generating rich moral metaphors capable of helping the moral pilgrim understand her moral situation). It is more than just a passing point of interest that each of these philosophers is inheriting and extending fundamental Wittgensteinian insights in this area. Murdoch explicity references Wittgenstein in several of her anti-theory passages. For example, she asserts, "There may be no deep structure. This is the lesson of Wittgenstein—and one which, incidentally, has not yet been taken enough to heart by those who want to reduce morality to a single formula." "Metaphysics and Ethics," 74. And in the context of speaking about a misguided "rationalistic desire for unity" that seeks "a single philosophical definition of morality," Murdoch indicates, "Wittgenstein says that 'What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*.' For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form." "Vision and Choice," 97.

temperament from another."[68] Her turn to Plato, her work as a novelist, her philosophical essays, her insistence that "the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature,"[69] and her Gifford Lectures (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*), should all be considered in light of the constructive aim of her philosophy: to offer us "an area of general discourse, a hall of reflection,"[70] filled with sufficiently rich metaphors for the task of picturing the moral life to ourselves and others.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, a thick account of moral concepts challenges two fundamental assumptions: the divisibility of fact and value and the elimination of historical reflection on morality which follows from the reduction of ethics to logic. The previous discussion has shown how thickness challenges the fact/value dichotomy, but what about the relation of history to morality? What does a thick account of ethical concepts imply about history, ethics, and the linguistic method? In his chapter on "The Linguistic Turn," Williams is quite critical of the linguistic approach, saying that "the linguistic approach certainly does not help us to recognize" that differences in ethical life "require social understanding."[71] In fact, Williams makes the even stronger claim that the linguistic approach "encourages us to neglect it [social understanding] even

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[68]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 336. Incidentally, this is precisely what Murdoch provides in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.

[69]Ibid., 326.

[70]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 296.

[71]Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 130-131. It appears that, in general, when Williams uses the term "linguistic approach" he means the linguistic approach as employed by prescriptivists like Hare. This construal of the meaning of the linguistic approach is rather restricted and does not take into account significantly different ways in which the linguistic approach has been employed. As I explain below, Murdoch, for one, takes the linguistic method to imply social and historical understanding.

as a possibility."[72] Sensing that he may have overstated his case, Williams mitigates this claim saying, "The linguistic approach does not, at some detached level, deny this, but it does not ask any questions that help us to gain that insight or to do anything with it in philosophy if we have gained it."[73] He then steps back even further from this claim conceding, "But it is at least potentially closer to some understanding of the social and historical dimensions of ethical thought than some other approaches." And further, "To draw attention to our ethical language can at least hold out the prospect of our coming to think about it, and about the ethical life expressed in it, as social practices that can change. The linguistic turn could have helped us, even if it has not actually done so, to recognize that ethical understanding needs a dimension of social explanation."[74] Williams, in the short space of a paragraph and a half, moves from the strong claim that the linguistic approach encourages the neglect of social understanding to the claim that it had real promise in terms of revealing the historical and social aspects of ethical thought, even if never turning this possibility into actuality.

Williams is much too hasty in his characterization of the linguistic approach, even in his final, qualified assessment. Murdoch represents a key case in point, as would be the case with any proper inheritor of Wittgenstein's grammatical project, which emphasized language games and forms of life. Murdoch makes several suggestive comments along these lines. She argues,

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[72]Ibid., 131.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid.

> Philosophers have usually tended to seek for universal formulae. But the linguistic method, if we take it seriously, is by its nature opposed to this search. Logic, whatever that may be determined to be, has its own universality; but when we leave the domain of the purely logical we come into the cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men live by—and these are subject to historical change.[75]

Thus, in contrast to Williams, Murdoch argues that the linguistic method actually leads us toward the social and historical. In fact, it can help us "become more patient and historical in analyzing other moralities and more daring and imaginative in exploring our own."[76] Elsewhere, following a Wittgensteinian insight, Murdoch suggests that the object of analysis in ethics should be moral forms of life with all the social and historical attention that implies.[77] The patient attention to the grammar of moral concepts leads straight toward their social and historical embeddeness. She maintains:

> Finally, the notion that moral differences are conceptual (in the sense of being differences of vision) and must be studied as such is unpopular in so far as it makes impossible the reduction of ethics to logic, since it suggests that morality must, to some extent at any rate, be studied historically. This does not of course imply abandoning the linguistic method, it rather implies taking it seriously.[78]

Therefore, Murdoch, like any good Wittgensteinian, realizes the linguistic method implies and requires historical and social understanding. Additionally, Williams is mistaken in his qualified claim about the linguistic method, because, as the example of Murdoch proves, the linguistic approach has in fact led us "to recognize that ethical understanding needs a dimension of social explanation."

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[75]Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 74-75.

[76]Ibid., 75.

[77]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 97-98.

[78]Ibid., 84.

Before dismissing Williams completely, however, I want to suggest that he is not entirely mistaken about one aspect in relation to Murdoch. It would be a mistake to suggest that Murdoch gives systematic and careful attention to social institutions or anything resembling a careful comparison of actual grammars embodied in concrete communities.[79] But this lack of attention is not because the linguistic method (per Williams) tends toward an eclipse of the social or historical. Murdoch provides no robust social explorations because of an equally important implication of the linguistic method. A linguistic and grammatical approach not only suggests the need for social understanding and the importance of sustained attention to the forms of life of a particular linguistic community, but it also, Murdoch maintains, illumines the necessity for patient attention to the histories of particular individuals. This is the case because the rules for the application of a concept (especially a moral concept) are partly a function of an individual language user's history.

For example, in "The Idea of Perfection," Murdoch turns to the thick concept of repentance. She says, "Repentance may mean something different to an individual at different times in his life, and what it fully means is a part of this life and cannot be understood except in context."[80] Similarly she claims, "Words may mislead us here since words are often stable while concepts alter; we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty. A deepening process, at any rate an altering and

[79]At least one major exception to this statement is Murdoch's attention to the grammar of liberal societies. What I have in mind more specifically in terms of what Murdoch's project does not give us is something along the lines of a careful analysis of how the grammars of particular linguistic communities shape their construals of the world.

[80]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 320.

complicating process takes place."[81] If what Murdoch says here uncovers something true about the dynamics of language and grammar, then we need to consider "human historical individuals,"[82] and not just the impersonal, logical network of ordinary public language. The main thrust of Murdoch's turn to the individual here can be grasped in a series of questions she asks about Wittgenstein's key notion of a language game. She queries, "How large or small, local or general, is a language game? How are we to *trust ourselves* to such a concept, what is it to 'accept the *everyday* language game' and to note false accounts?"[83] What Murdoch attempts to indicate with these questions is that in order to answer them, we are led to the dynamic give and take (an ongoing process in a living language) between the public determination of the grammar of a term and an individual's private, and at times idiosyncratic, use of a term. Murdoch holds to this type of double directionality in language. She says, "So there is give and take; words may determine a sense, or a fresh experience may renew words."[84]

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[81]Ibid., 322. Murdoch makes an interesting and analogous point about the way we endlessly reassess fictional characters throughout our lives as we reread novels. "In fact, we may, in the course of time, alter our assessment of a fictitious character. We do not see the same Stavrogin or the same Charlus at forty that we saw at twenty." "Vision and Choice," 91.

[82]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 322.

[83]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*," 276.

[84]Iris Murdoch, "Thinking and Language," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 36. The fact that new experiences can renew language suggests that there is a force in language that resists the ultimate solidification of a term's grammar in public rules, which are then taken completely to determine a sense. (We might think here of the impossibility of an absolute language of truth). Murdoch refers to the renewing force of language as the *poetic*. She says that the renewal of language "is *par excellence* the task of poetry." There are deep connections here between what Murdoch takes to be the poetic and her own conception of what she is doing as a novelist. Murdoch's early papers on language

In the case of Murdoch, Williams is partially correct in noting that the linguistic approach did not lead to a thematic exploration of social institutions and forms of life. However, this is not due to a flaw in the linguistic method, but rather its richness in suggesting two fundamental trajectories of inquiry: one that is general, public, and social, and the other that is particular, private, and individual. It is a mark of Murdoch's genius that she is able to hold these two in tension. Her sense of the philosophical needs of her age leads her to focus on the latter.

The Primacy of the Particular: Variability, Probability, and the Endless Task of Understanding

I want to clarify Murdoch's turn to the particular, away from the universalizability of moral judgment, by making a distinction between two ethical models: insight-prudential models and moral techne models. An insight-prudential model refers to those moral approaches that hold that the manner in which practical reason discerns the right action in a particular situation is far too complex to be captured in a general formula or a universal method for decision-making. On this model, the prudent person needs much more than a set of moral principles or some kind of guiding method for the exercise of moral judgment; he or she needs insight or vision into the particular and variable practical situation. The particular and variable are inexhaustible and mysterious, and thus it implies, as Murdoch calls it, "the endlessness of the task of understanding."[85]

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are vitally important not only for understanding her approach to language, but also for gaining a proper appreciation of its centrality throughout her career. In particular see "Thinking and Language," and "Nostalgia for the Particular," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 33-58.

[85]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 87.

Insight-prudential models enable us "to summon the full range of considerations that are relevant in a particular case,"[86] rather than narrowing and restricting the range of the imagination for the sake of ethical simplicity or parsimony. These models contend that the rationality of moral judgment is not dependent on rules or method, and the attempt to make practical reason merely procedural not only distorts the true nature of *phronesis*, but also diminishes the rich and multi-layered ways we attempt to make sense of our moral situations, including many potential sources of moral wisdom. Robert C. Miner explains, "At best, rules will give us access to the general features of a situation, but in practical affairs wisdom is a matter of insight into particulars."[87]

While rules have a place within insight models their role is primarily instructive rather than legislative. They often function by drawing the agent's attention to important moral features or dimensions of situations. Rules also aid one by alerting one to consistently recurring moral components of particular practical situations, but they do so in a manner that is always underdetermined. Insight-prudential models show that simplicity and generality in moral reasoning is not an unadulterated good, as the object of perception is the particular. Therefore, we might think of insight-prudential models as offering an interpretation of *phronesis* which is not fundamentally methodical. Among the proponents of the insight model I am describing are Murdoch, Giambattista Vico, and Hans-Georg Gadamer.[88]

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[86]I borrow this apt phrase from Robert C. Miner. "Verum-factum and Practical Wisdom in the Early Writings of Giambattista Vico," *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 59, No. 1 (Jan., 1998), 58.

[87]Ibid., 55.

[88]In particular see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-*

The moral techne model, on the other hand, includes those moral approaches that understand practical reason to operate in an analogous manner to technical-theoretical reason. This model attempts to vouchsafe the rationality of practical knowledge by extending the methodological or procedural reasoning of the natural sciences to ethics.[89] In order to be awarded rational status on this view, a moral judgment must always be a product of some traceable, public, and repeatable method. Miner clearly characterizes the moral techne model as

> the desire to ground ethics in principles as universal and certain as those of mathematics. Each of these variants of post-Cartesian ethics claim to have discovered and justified such a principle or set of principles. Maxims deduced

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Aristotelian Philosophy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

[89]This feature of the moral techne model is fundamentally Cartesian in inspiration. According to Descartes's first rule in the *Discourse on Method*, one must accept nothing that is merely probable as true, for these opinions are mere prejudices. Only when one has no occasion to doubt an opinion (i.e., when probable knowledge has become certain), can we claim to have true knowledge instead of prejudice. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations of First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 13. On this account, all insight-prudential models, because they insist on the variability, particularity, and probability in practical rationality, are immediately rendered suspect. The moral techne model maintains that the only credible forms of reasoning and justification are those that are methodologically grounded on some foundational principle or set of principles.

Gadamer maintains that in the Enlightenment, and particularly with Descartes, the concept of prejudice undergoes a crucial and distorting transformation. In Descartes, prejudice comes to mean unfounded judgment, whereas the pre-Enlightenment conception was "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 270. Notice that the interpretation of the practical situation, on the insight account, is always a situation in which a judgment is rendered before all the elements have been finally examined, because insight-prudential models focus on the endless task of understanding. On this account, prejudices are actually an inextricable aspect of the practical situation. However, this need not be understood in any sinister fashion; rather, it opens up the question of how we discern between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices. Ibid., 277f. For an illuminating account of Descartes' notion of prejudice see Peter A. Schouls, *The Imposition of Method: A Study of Descartes and Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 104-109.

> from the principle, if not the principle itself, will arguably enable moral agents to discover the right course of action in a particular situation.[90]

The essence of the moral techne model is the derivation of fundamental axioms (i.e., ethical principles) upon which we can then build certain knowledge, most often by following a technique or formula or process for arriving at the right moral answer. The operations of practical reason strive to be as transparent and predictable as the calculations involved in a geometrical proof.[91] The moral techne model, then, insists on the universal, the publicly accessible, the certain, and the comprehensible, as opposed to the insight-prudential model that attends to the particular, the variable, the probable, and the mysterious. Among the proponents of the geometrical model I am describing are R.M. Hare and John Rawls.[92]

Murdoch's critique of the universal rules model should be seen as an exemplary case of her general rejection of moral techne models in favor of her own particular insight-prudential model. Her insight model focuses on inexhaustible particularity, and by doing so Murdoch hopes to draw attention to important aspects of the moral landscape that the universal rule model (and moral techne models in general) tends to distort. As I discussed in the last chapter, the universalizability model Murdoch describes has two

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[90]Miner, "Verum-factum," 54-55.

[91]In the terms we have already used above, the goal of ethics on the moral-techne account is an ethical theory, which abandons many potential sources of moral wisdom. Gadamer puts the point starkly, "[On this view] The only thing that gives a judgment dignity is its having a basis, a methodological justification (and not the fact that it may actually be correct)." *Truth and Method*, 271.

[92]Rawls, for example, refers to his project as a "moral geometry." John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 121. I owe this insight to P. Christopher Smith. See Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good*, 33.

primary characteristics: 1) a properly moral judgment must be universal in the sense that *any* person placed in an analogous practical situation would have to make the same moral decision; and 2) the universal moral rule the agent uses to justify her action must be articulated in terms publicly available to all rational persons. Further describing this view, Murdoch claims that the universal rule model construes morality as "the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct," that it "emphasizes the repeatability of moral situations," and that it wants a morality "where rules are universal, fairly general without being too general, and where clear and above-board factual reasoning is required to justify choices."[93] She also makes the following revealing suggestion about the potential motives of this model: "The insistence that morality is essentially rules may be seen as an attempt to secure us against the ambiguity of the world."[94]

On Hare's account of the moral, a decision is properly moral only if it is supportable by reasons which may be universalized. Murdoch summarizes his view as follows, "We are being asked to conceive of a structure of would-be universal reasoning as lying at the core of any activity which could properly be called moral."[95] The goods that this account seeks are clear: a consistent, publicly accessible, impartial standard that is designed to prevent moral evasion and exception. Why then is it unsatisfactory? What, in Murdoch's view, does this moral approach tend to distort or even eclipse from view? First, insofar as Hare claims to provide a neutral description of the logic of moral language as such (meta-ethics), he distorts the role that his liberal values (normative

[93]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 88-89.

[94]Ibid., 90.

[95]Ibid., 85.

aspects) are already playing in his account of *the moral*. I discussed this misconstrual in some detail last chapter.[96]

Second, there are at least three features of our practical situation, traditionally emphasized by insight-prudential models, that cannot properly be appreciated on the universal rules model: variability, probability, and the "endlessness of the task of understanding."[97] These three features may be seen as growing out of the conviction that practical reason is fundamentally concerned with insight into the particular situation. First, the variability that Murdoch emphasizes is in contrast to the repeatability of moral situations highlighted by the universal rule model. Whereas the repeatability position maintains that the same feature in one moral situation functions in the same way in other moral situations, the variability position maintains that the same feature in a moral situation can function differently case by case depending on all the other features of a particular case.[98] The role that the same feature plays in different cases is dependent on the situation as a whole. Murdoch thinks that the way in which practical reason takes account of (or should take account of) the practical situation as a whole is much more complex than the application-of-rules-to-situations-model would suggest. On this type of moral model, rules certainly have a place, but they need to be considered as "rules of

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[96]See chapter 2, 36-42.

[97]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 87.

[98]Aristotle's distinction between scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and prudence (*phronesis*) in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is particularly important in this context. *Phronesis* is the intellectual faculty that apprehends that which admits of variation, whereas *episteme* is the intellectual faculty that contemplates the universal and invariable. The entire discussion of the intellectual virtues in Book VI is relevant to understanding Aristotle's distinction between *episteme* and *phronesis*; however, for these particular distinctions see VI. i., 327, ($1138^{b}18$-$1139^{a}17$), and VI. iii, 333-353, ($1139^{b}14$-36).

thumb" (with the corresponding flexibility) because they are both derived from, and applied to, the variable and the particular. This view is radically different from the universal rules model that aims at the specification of invariant rules. Murdoch's emphasis on the irreducible complexity and variability of the practical situation, however, does not prevent her from seeing the dangers that threaten this view, namely, that it can be used as a deceptive device for avoiding "responsibility by pretending that everything is too difficult"; it can also appear non-rational.[99] To this fear she responds in perhaps a somewhat unsatisfying fashion, claiming, "The 'moral' dangers of such attitudes are plain. All that can be said is that we know roughly how to deal with these dangers and part of the moral life is dealing with them."[100]

The second feature of the practical situation which is distorted by the universal rules model is probability. One helpful way of thinking about Murdoch's concern here is to consider her account in the context of Aristotle's comments on the probable nature of ethical thought. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, speaking of how one ought to understand the science of the Good (i.e., ethics), Aristotle famously announces:

> Now our treatment of this science will be adequate, if it achieves that amount of precision which belongs to its subject matter. The same exactness must not be expected in all departments of philosophy alike. . . . Accordingly we may ask the student also to accept the various views we put forward in the same spirit; for it is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the particular subject admits. It is equally unreasonable to

[99]It is only non-rational if one insists that the rationality of moral judgments is dependent on the provision of principles or a consistent method. This position, which is held by proponents of the moral techne model, is precisely what the insight-prudential model rejects. Murdoch is attempting to develop alternative criteria for the rationality of moral judgments which take into account the complexity of practical situations.

[100]Ibid., 93.

> accept merely probable conclusions from a mathematician and to demand strict demonstration from an orator.[101]

Murdoch is in agreement with this Aristotelian insight that one cannot expect the sort of precision in ethics that one can in geometry. For this reason she highlights "particularity," "inexhaustibility," and "obscurity" in practical situations.[102] If the practical situation really is characterized by the probable, then the attempt to achieve the sort of exactness, universality, and generality of the universal rules model will actually hinder one's ability to grasp the true nature of the ethical life and skew one's construal of practical reason. This is due to the fact that the universal rules model focuses on our ability fully to specify rules that would capture the essence of the moral situation without remainder. As this model moves us "in the direction of complete clarity"[103] and exactness, we lose sight of the probable nature of ethics, which is implied by construing morality as insight into particulars. Also, the generality of moral rules tends to obscure the difficult hermeneutical task involved in subsuming a particular under a universal.[104] Miner summarizes this point succinctly:

> Moral rules are characteristically general. In particular situations, their generality often renders them useless. No matter how comprehensive our ethical manuals,

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[101]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I. iii., 9, ($1094^{b}13$-27).

[102]In particular see Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 90.

[103]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 90.

[104]Gadamer highlights the non-methodical aspect of the faculty of judgment saying, "In fact the logical basis of judgment—subsuming a particular under a universal, recognizing something as an example of a rule—cannot be demonstrated. Thus judgment requires a principle to guide its application. In order to follow this principle another faculty of judgment would be needed, as Kant shrewdly noted. So it cannot be taught in the abstract but only practiced from case to case, and is therefore more an ability like the senses. It is something that cannot be learned, because no demonstration from concepts can guide the applications of rules." *Truth and Method*, 31.

> practical life will always include situations where no rules are at hand, where there is a single rule whose particular application is unclear, where there are many conflicting rules which might apply, or where the rule that usually applies demands an exception. There is no method that can reliably bridge the gap between universal and particular in the ethical life.[105]

Prudence, the rational faculty concerned with moral judgment, is characteristically concerned with the perception of the particular and not with universal rules. Aristotle asserts that prudence "apprehends ultimate particular things, since the thing to be done is an ultimate particular thing."[106] Murdoch likewise maintains that our practical situation can, and at times should, be understood in terms of the "apprehension of the unique,"[107] with its corresponding inability to frame universally and invariably binding moral rules. This is due to the inexhaustible complexity, particularity, and thus, probable nature of moral situations. To check the distorting tendency of the universal rules model, Murdoch foregrounds ambiguity and paradox.[108]

The third feature of our practical situation Murdoch believes cannot be properly appreciated on the universal rules account is the "endlessness of the task of understanding." With the emphasis on the endless task of understanding practical situations, Murdoch highlights the fact that we can often be hasty and overconfident in our judgments about people and situations. Endlessness, however, indicates that we need

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[105]Miner, "Verum-factum," 55.

[106]Ibid., VI., viii., 351.

[107]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 87

[108]Murdoch also adds the proviso "that a moral attitude which lays emphasis on ambiguity and paradox is not for everyday consumption." She does this as a recognition of the moral dangers discussed above. Ibid., 91.

to slow down and attend[109] to the *depth* and nuance of moral situations. Murdoch maintains that the universal rules model encourages the belief that practical situations are fairly evident and easy to understand. Murdoch contrasts the two understandings as follows:

> There are people whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct. There are other people whose fundamental belief is that we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual.[110]

Murdoch's sympathies are with the latter view because she believes that moral situations are to be increasingly understood in their depth, implying a certain privacy that flies in the face of full public accessibility.

Finally, I want to address one last danger which Murdoch's insight-prudential model avoids and of which the universal rules model does not have a proper appreciation. The reduction of ethical entities for the sake of communicability and simplicity comes at a great cost. This cost is made apparent if we shift our primary concern from the development of an ethical theory to the cultivation of ethical wisdom. Murdoch's primary concern is with what will provide the moral pilgrim with the best opportunity for ethical wisdom. In other words, what will give us the ability to "summon the full range of considerations that are relevant in a particular case?" The principle of parsimony, the elimination of thick ethical concepts, and the turn to the most general and abstract terms

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[109]Attention is, of course, a technical term Murdoch borrows from Simone Weil. In Weil, as in Murdoch, attention is conceptually linked with waiting, stillness, silence, and receptivity. Indeed, the connection between attention and waiting is etymologically evident in the French as *attention* and *attente*.

[110]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 88.

for the sake of public accessibility (which thins and flattens out concepts which were formerly thick and rich[111]), all of which characterize the universalizability model, work against ethical wisdom. It does this by robbing practical reason of the rich moral language necessary for understanding and exploring the particularity, complexity, and variability of the moral life. On Murdoch's view, the reduction and thinning of ethical entities leads to a diminished moral imagination and a deeply impoverished conception of practical reason. She provocatively asserts, "A deeper realization of the role of symbols in morality need not involve (as certain critics seem to fear) any overthrow of reason. Reason must, however, especially in this region, appear in her other *persona* as imagination."[112]

So, the move to a publicly accessible, general, democratic, and thus, thin moral language, leads to the loss of the more subtle tools we have for the production of moral insight: "rich and fertile conceptual schemes." "Words," Murdoch suggests, "are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them."[113] Murdoch also indicates an important distinction between scientific and moral language that must be insisted upon, which also shows why the operation of reason should not be

[111]On this general tendency, Murdoch says, "We were too impressed by words when we assumed that the word 'good' covered a single concept which was the centre of morality. We were not impressed enough when we neglected less general moral words such as 'true', 'brave', 'free', 'sincere', which are the bearers of very important ideas. The concept of 'goodness', for reasons which it would be interesting to investigate, is no longer a rich and problematic concept." "Metaphysics and Ethics," 73.

[112]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 92.

[113]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 326.

"construed on a scientific model"[114] in practical contexts. She argues, "Scientific language tries to be impersonal and exact and yet accessible for purposes of teamwork; and the degree of accessibility can be decided in relation to definite practical goals. Moral language which relates to a reality infinitely more complex and various than that of science is often unavoidably idiosyncratic and inaccessible."[115]

Murdoch believes one must come to terms with the "unavoidable contextual privacy of language."[116] According to Murdoch, what we gain in terms of a general and accessible theory is not worth what we lose in terms of the actual moral insight provided by rich moral language. Thus, she conceives of the task of the moral philosopher in radically different terms from those concerned with ethical theory. Instead, she asserts, "From here we may see that the task of moral philosophers has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of the language, and enable it to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark."[117] It should come as no surprise, then, that Murdoch will later develop a view in which literature is more important than philosophy (in its "current" form) in this regard. Why? Because literature makes extensive use of a polyphonic, multivalent, and rich language as it attempts to grasp the human situation. She provocatively asserts,

> But the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science

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[114]Ibid.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Ibid.

[117]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 90.

> in human life must be discussed in *words*. This is why it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist: and if there is a 'Shakespeare of science' his name is Aristotle.[118]

Murdoch believes that if we have a richly layered linguistic approach to our practical situation, which is most effectively supplied by the reading of great literature, then we have the best chance of summoning the full range of considerations that are relevant in a particular case. It is also this context in which we should understand her audacious claim, "For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all."[119]

Moral Freedom as a Mode of Reflection

Murdoch develops her conception of the will and moral freedom in opposition to the existentialist account where the will is isolated from the psyche. As we saw above, Murdoch's turn to a thick moral psychology meant rethinking the relationship between the will, character, and vision. Specifically, it meant appreciating the complex and multi-directional ways in which these three elements exert influence on one another. So, what does the will, in particular, look like if it is understood as embedded in a thick psychology? In other words, how does one's conception of the will change if, "Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will," but rather, "a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision?"[120]

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[118]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 326-327.

[119]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 362.

[120]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 332.

Murdoch tells us that in contrast to the Kantian (i.e., Hampshire, Hare, Ayer) and Surrealist (i.e., Sartre) wings of existentialism, which identify "the true person with the empty choosing will" and correspondingly emphasize "the idea of movement rather than vision,"[121] she wants to develop a better account of moral freedom where vision is central. To this end, she adopts Simon Weil's concept of *attention*, which enables her to recast moral freedom primarily as a mode of reflection. Murdoch uses the concept of attention in many different ways, but perhaps the clearest place to begin is the slight control we have over the direction of our vision. In fact, the will, for Murdoch, is just the human capacity for attention, which is this slight control over the focus of our states of mind. Behind this is the idea that states of mind are vitally and morally important as the genetic background to action; one's conception of freedom will be importantly flawed if one does not take into account how continual and habitual objects of attention work behind the scenes to compel the will. This behind-the-scenes activity is not to suggest that the will is entirely determined by what we see (i.e., our vision), but that the will plays a much smaller part in the human psyche than suggested on the existentialist account. The will exerts its freedom as small acts of redirecting our vision or attention. One important implication of this view is that belief patterns become an important locus for moral work/purification.[122] As Murdoch explains, "Will and reason then are not entirely

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[121]Ibid., 327.

[122]It should be noted that this moral psychology is a deep assumption of both cognitive-behavioral and Stoic models. However, Murdoch should not be misconstrued as offering any simplistic account along the lines that all one need to do is change one's beliefs in order to modify behavior. In order to change, one needs *habitual* belief patterns to "take root," so to speak, and one needs to allow the passions time to catch up (i.e., be re-educated). The passions will also, over time and imperceptibly, influence our beliefs. There is a bi-directionality of influence. Murdoch sees this clearly and her

separate faculties in the moral agent."[123] She provides a nice summary of the activity of attending:

> But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. This does not imply that we are not free, certainly not. But it implies that the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicitly moral choices. What happened in between such choices is indeed what is crucial.[124]

There is a particular aspect of attention this passage highlights: the building up of structures of value. The idea is that, as we *look* at situations and people, the quality and manner of our attention generates a value-saturated world which then becomes compulsively present to us and thus to our will. It is as if the way we attend builds a value-screen through which we subsequently see the world. Then the world that we *see* more or less compels our will. Murdoch says, "Innumerable 'lookings' have discovered and explored a world which is now (for better or worse) *compulsively* present to the will

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conception of attention is crafted to do justice to just this sort of complexity in moral psychology. In fact, the "slightness" aspect of the control we exercise over the direction and focus of our vision arises from the fact that our passions deliver to us an immediate (in the way that perception is immediate) and compulsive construal of a situation, a "seeing as" which include beliefs in its structure. A passion or emotion is something which we experience (i.e., something that happens to us), but because beliefs are also part of this structure, they are also capable of re-education and formation. For a nuanced account of emotions along this trajectory, see Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *Spiritual Emotions*, 11-13.

[123]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 331.

[124]Ibid., 329.

in a particular situation."[125] Additionally, "One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see."[126] The way we attend forms our personality in a particular way. It then becomes the formed personality (i.e., character) through which the world appears to us, and the world that appears to us almost automatically compels the will.

On Murdoch's account, the activity of attention builds up structures of value, which in turn are what she calls "psychic energy."[127] In other words, structures of value are imperceptibly knit together from our continual and habitual objects of attention, and these structures generate forces that compel the will. By psychic energy, Murdoch intends to draw attention to the way in which our vision of the world creates almost automatic responses from the will. We really are compelled by what we see. Murdoch shrewdly uses mechanistic metaphors to try to capture the dynamics within the psyche. In one passage she says, "The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine; in order to operate it needs sources of energy, and it is predisposed to certain patterns of activity." Elsewhere Murdoch relates, "Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for

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[125]Ibid., 330.

[126]Ibid., 329.

[127]I think Murdoch's account of "psychic energy" could be clarified and improved upon if, instead of these mechanistic metaphors, one focused on the nature of the emotions. For example, Roberts's definition of an emotion as a concern-based construal manages to account for the complex moral psychology Murdoch is concerned with, while at the same time achieving clarity and approachability. Roberts says, "So an emotion is a way of 'seeing' things, when this 'seeing' is grounded in a concern; and a concern is a disposition to have a range of emotions." *Spiritual Emotions*, 12.

the subject to understand or control."[128] Again turning to Freud, Murdoch declares, "We have learned from Freud to picture 'the mechanism' as something highly individual and personal, which is at the same time very powerful and not easily understood by its owner."[129] She also tells us that "much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind,"[130] and finally, "What we really are seems much more like an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between the moments of choice."[131]

Notice the terms Murdoch uses: "machine," "sources of energy," "patterns of activity," "system of quasi-mechanical energy," "mechanism," "mechanical energy," "system of energy," and "system." Murdoch's reason for using these mechanistic metaphors to describe the relationship between vision and will is illustrated well by her fairly pedestrian example of M and D in the 1962 essay "The Idea of Perfection." If M sees D as "unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement," and that D "is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude,

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[128]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 341.

[129]Ibid., 342. Murdoch was obviously influenced greatly by Freud. However, it would be a great mistake not to recognize Weil's voice here as well. Weil offers an equally mechanistic way of understanding the psyche, using terms such as "gravity," "human mechanics," "vacuum," "void," "energy," "external pressure," "balance," "lever," "scale of qualities of energy," "mechanism," "equilibrium." Weil memorably asserts, "All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception." *Gravity and Grace*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 1, 5, 10, 16, 23, 38, 84, 94, 150.

[130]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 342.

[131]Ibid., 344.

always tiresomely juvenile," then there is a certain kind of psychic energy that this vision of D produces in M.[132] In the same way, if M successfully comes to see D as "not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on," there is a different kind of psychic energy being generated, which then exerts its own mechanical force on the will.[133] Murdoch attempts to show that our vision of the world is motivational in this way, and therefore, morally significant.

I want to clarify further Murdoch's conception of attention first by distinguishing it from mere *looking* and second by picking up on one of its most fundamental aspects, namely, that attention is a form of love. Looking and attention are to be distinguished by the manner in which the focus of our gaze[134] is fixed. According to Murdoch, "looking" is the completely mechanical way in which we fall into patterns or narratives about the way people are or the way the world is. The focus of our gaze is fixed in a self-regarding or self-justifying manner, and we build up "convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary (M seeing D as pert-common-juvenile,

[132]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 312. It should be noted that I am using Murdoch's example to make a different point from the one she presses in trying to argue, against the behaviorists, that the inner life has moral significance even if it does not eventuate in a particular action or judgment. That said, Murdoch does bring in M and D at one point when discussing psychic energy. Ibid., 329.

[133]Murdoch's character Michael Meade in *The Bell* is an excellent example of this dynamic.

[134]I am using the phrase "focus of our gaze" as a neutral way to speak of looking/attending.

etc.)."[135] Attention, on the other hand, is the human capacity to interrupt the mechanical and fundamentally self-defensive (i.e., ego-protecting) and consoling narratives about others and the world. Murdoch explains, "Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion."[136] Attention is, returning to a point made above, the slight control we have over the direction and focus of our gaze, the ability to interrupt the world that is compulsively present to us as a result of our self-regard (i.e., the inordinate love of self). It is the attempt to see the world clearly without the distortions that arise from self-love. The implication is that the ability to see the world rightly is a moral achievement, the result of a process of purification.

Second, the most important aspect of attention, on Murdoch's account, is that it is a form of love. She hints at this when she says, "Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love."[137] Attention has a deeply erotic structure, which means that it is inextricably intertwined with our desires and that it needs objects for attachment (i.e., attention). We cannot change without new objects of attachment/attention. Murdoch intentionally blurs the lines between attention and attachment in order to highlight the erotic structure of attention. Attention is the slight control (i.e., freedom) we have over the direction and focus of our gaze, but the nature of this "freedom" is to be attached. It is as if the "will" appears in-between the shifting of

[135]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 329. Murdoch uses the term "looking" as a neutral term and not, as I am here, as a negative term.

[136]Ibid.

[137]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 344.

attachments, or "the acquiring of new objects of attention."[138] Notice that area in which the will operates on this view of (moral) freedom is massively reduced compared to the neo-Kantian existentialist view. Therefore, instead of heroic efforts of the will running counter to the formed inclinations of the empirical psyche, Murdoch gives her readers a picture of moral freedom as the slight control over our objects of attention, "and thus of new energies as a result of refocusing."[139]

In summary, Murdoch's view of attention (i.e., moral freedom) is *the slight control we have over the direction and focus of our gaze, which itself is erotically inclined*. By saying that attention is *erotically inclined* I mean that its nature, which is fundamental to human nature, is to be attached. In contrast to a Kantian-inspired existentialism that identifies true humanity or personhood with the autonomous will, Murdoch insists that the core of our identity must be construed *erotically*: "Human beings are naturally 'attached.'"[140]

So, what is the picture of freedom that has been emerging out of Murdoch's analysis of attention? Murdoch ultimately wants to convey a very old philosophical position, namely, that freedom is a matter of shifting our attachments (i.e., transforming our loves) to a worthy object. What the nature and character of this object *is*, which would provide the right sort of psychic energy, is a topic which Murdoch will address in her Third Act. The point here is that, for beings who are fundamentally erotic creatures—that is, creatures whose deep concerns and attachments shape the way they

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[138]Ibid., 345.

[139]Ibid.

[140]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 345.

see the world, which then in turn create psychic energy that exerts a mechanical force on our will—moral freedom is a matter of directing our loves rightly. Murdoch says, "What I have called Eros pictures probably a greater part of what we think of as 'the moral life'; that is, most of our moral problems involve an orientation of our energy and our appetites."[141] A moral philosophy that does not address our deepest concerns or loves, therefore, misses a central (if not *the* central) aspect of ethics. Murdoch enjoins, "We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central."[142] To put the point differently, the moral philosopher needs to excel in erotics.[143] For that, however, we must turn, as Murdoch does, to the Platonic, erotic conception of the soul.

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[141]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*," 497.

[142]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 337.

[143]In the *Symposium* (177e), Socrates asks, "How could I not 'No,' when the only think I say I understand is the art of love?" In a pious prayer addressed to Eros in the *Phaedrus* (257a), Socrates confesses, "Forgive us our earlier speeches in return for this one; be kind and gracious toward my expertise at love, which is your own gift to me."

CHAPTER FOUR

Act 2.2 – Restoration (Part 2): A Platonic Vocabulary of Eros and the Retrieval of Purification Practices

Murdoch challenged the Kantian-inspired existentialist picture of the self (whether in its Analytic or Surrealist guise) by developing a powerful rival soul-picture. Her thick account of the self provided a richer psychology, a more sophisticated analysis of moral language, an insight approach to moral judgment, and a more realistic account of moral freedom and motivation. As part of her overall genealogical project, Murdoch *liberated* her reader from the dominant philosophical picture in Act I, and she began to carry out her work of *restoration* by providing an alternative account in the first scene of Act II. Now it remains to explore exactly which thinker lies behind the philosophical picture Murdoch wants to restore, including the practices that picture is meant to inform. Charles Taylor's comments about historical retrieval remain relevant to Murdoch's genealogical project:

> But historical retrieval is not only important where you want to free yourself from some picture. It is very important to my thesis that even in this negative case, where you want to break loose, you need to understand the past in order to liberate yourself. But liberation is not the only possible motive. We may also find ourselves driven to earlier formulations in order to *restore* a picture, or the practices it is meant to inform.[1]

In this chapter, I first show how Murdoch's alternative view of the self is largely a creative recovery of a Platonic, erotic conception of the soul. In the process, Murdoch's

[1]"Philosophy and its History," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, Eds. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 22.

own account of the thick self (i.e., erotic consciousness) will become further clarified. Until Murdoch thinks she has completed her work of liberation, and until she believes she has provided an alternative account, which remains recognizable as a language game of the dominant philosophical position, she is hesitant to begin speaking in terms of a Platonic Eros (and ultimately the Good). She wants to engage the dominant picture on its own terms, because this is the audience she wishes to persuade. However, once these tasks have been accomplished, she is then at greater liberty to develop her own account in a language better suited to her project. Thus, until we see Murdoch's account of the thick self articulated in terms of a Platonic Eros, we will not be able to appreciate it in its fullness and on its own terms.

Second, I argue that one of Murdoch's primary goals in restoring this picture is the attempt to recover important practices or techniques for moral purification. She rightly sees that to recover these practices, and in particular to render them intelligible in ethical contexts, we must be able to speak meaningfully and legitimately about consciousness in philosophy. As Murdoch says, "I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being."[2] I conclude this chapter by arguing that one of the primary reasons Murdoch undertakes her genealogical project is to return to the consciousness of the individual and to make it a viable area for ethical reflection in the

[2]Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 171.

face of the many forces that threaten to undermine it. I show how Murdoch's philosophy as a whole can be read as a sustained effort to return to the primacy of consciousness.[3]

The Platonic Roots of Murdoch's Erotic Consciousness

Murdoch develops an account of the self in which its deepest, most fundamental aspect is its erotic nature. At the core of their being, humans are lovers. This erotic nature, for Murdoch, means both that individuals are fundamentally desiring (i.e., naturally attached) and that they derive energy from the objects of their love. Murdoch tries to capture both aspects of the self—that humans are naturally attached and that those attachments create psychic energy—what she describes as "spiritual energy" in her most common formulation of Eros. There is a lack, need, void, or restlessness within the person that creates the initial force or impulse to begin the quest for satisfaction, wholeness, or rest. This energy attaches individuals to various objects of attention, which are themselves sources of energy. In a pregnant passage Murdoch explains, "'Eros' is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world: good and bad desires with good

[3]Murdoch is loath to ignore structures that transcend the individual, like language, political structures, and historical forms of life. She opts for the priority of the individual consciousness, but always against the backdrop of structures and horizons that transcend that individual. There are strong analogues to Murdoch's conception of the individual in Taylor's dialogical understanding of the self and MacIntryre's notion that we are only, at most, co-authors of our narratives. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (London: Duckworth, 1992), 213; and Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard Universtiy Press, 1991), 31-41. There are always structures of significance and overlapping narratives, institutional and human, into which we are born, and these are always the transcendent backdrops against which any particular individual must be understood. But the relationship between individual and transcendent background is always dialogical.

and bad objects."[4] She indicates that she has taken this image/concept from Plato.[5] Therefore, for the sake of clarifying Murdoch's account of Eros as spiritual energy, I turn to the Platonic roots of her conception that humans are essentially lovers.

When examining love in Plato, it is common practice to turn to the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Lysis*.[6] The *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* take Eros as their theme, whereas the *Lysis* explores *philia*. The *Lysis*, though, is still important for a proper appreciation of Eros in Plato, since it is written "against the background of a love affair,"[7] and also since the rejection of the conception of love at the end of the dialogue bears striking similarities to the acquisitive, self-interested love many commentators have found in the *Symposium*.[8] It is, therefore, an important part of the Platonic account of Eros if an acquisitive theory is undermined in the *Lysis*. However, one need not examine the *Lysis* for Murdoch's notion of Platonic Eros; for the bulk of her interaction with Eros

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[4]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 496.

[5]Ibid.

[6]G.R.F. Ferrari, "Platonic Love," *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 248-276; Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); John M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen*, (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 24; Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," *Platonic Studies* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 3-34.

[7]Ferrari, "Platonic Love," 248.

[8]Catherine Osborne provides an illuminating account of the complex relationship between various readings of the *Symposium* and the *Lysis*. "Arrows, Eros, Agape," and "Eros, the Socratic Spirit: Inside and Outside the *Symposium*," in *Eros Unveiled*, especially 54-61. The classic work arguing for an acquisitive reading of Eros in the *Symposium*—and the Greek world in general—is the highly contested book by Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1969).

is dominated by her reflections on the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*.[9]

In this section, I first discuss Murdoch's reception of the *Symposium*; next I explore the particular insights Murdoch gained from her reading of the *Phaedrus*; and finally, I comment on the role the Allegory of the Cave plays in shaping her erotic conception of consciousness. Focusing on her reception of the *Symposium* illuminates her conception of Eros as "spiritual energy," and looking at the *Phaedrus* clarifies her notion that Eros is fundamental to the structure of "unselfing." In her account, Murdoch surprisingly claims that not only is an acquisitive analysis of Eros insufficient, but that Eros can actually be a source for transcending the ego's self-preoccupation. Finally, turning to the Allegory of the Cave will enable us to appreciate Murdoch's account of the moral life as the progressive purification of Eros. For Murdoch, the Cave represents the quest, journey, or pilgrimage of the erotic consciousness from appearance to reality.

The Symposium*: The Erotic Center and "spiritual energy"*

Murdoch's reading of the *Symposium* yields three fundamental insights that shape her conception of human nature: 1) at the deepest core humans are erotic beings, 2) we desire because we lack the objects of our love, and 3) the objects we love are themselves

[9]She says, "The *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* are two of the great erotic texts of literature." "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 416. The *Lysis* is notably absent, which is suggestive that it does not substantially shape Murdoch's conception of Platonic Eros. Indeed, in her probing treatment of why Plato banished the artists in the *Republic*, a work in which she mentions Plato's *Republic*, *Laws*, *Apology*, *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Hippias Major*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Philebus*, *Gorgias*, *Timaeus*, *Sophist*, *Theatetus*, *Seventh Letter*, *Protagoras*, *Cratylus*, *Politicus*, *Parmenides*, and *Epinomis*, the *Lysis* does not appear. I am not aware of one explicit reference to the *Lysis* in Murdoch's corpus.

sources of energy. The first point is less a matter of the interpretation of particular passages and more a matter of Murdoch taking it to be a deep assumption behind the entire dialogue. Her shared assumption, that humans have an erotic center, governs her habitual practice of returning to the *Symposium* as a source of insight into what is essential to human nature, and thus, crucial for a right estimation of the character of the moral life.

There are a couple of points to be made in favor of Murdoch's assumption that the *Symposium* gives us a view of human nature as fundamentally erotic. First, the explanatory power of the dialogue asserts something true about human yearning, and the corresponding sense that failure to address this aspect of human existence undermines any other insights which might be gleaned about the human soul. Murdoch contends that yearning is present in every aspect of human life from the lowest level to the very highest. Yearning initiates a quest and accompanies the soul at every stage of its ascent.[10] Second, in the *Symposium*, Socrates and Diotima intend to offer this analysis of desire as something that is common to all humanity. Diotima asks, "Now this desire for happiness, this kind of love—do you think it is common to all human beings and that everyone wants to have good things forever and ever? What would you say?" Socrates

[10]For another view of the role and importance of quests in the moral life, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219-220. MacIntyre retrieves the medieval conception of a quest in order to provide the moral life with unity. He maintains, "The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest." Analogously, Murdoch draws upon the Platonic conception of Eros as a way of recovering the important moral notion of quest or pilgrimage, which in turn provides the moral life with its unity. See footnote 79 below.

responds, "Just that. . . . It is common to all."[11] Now the simple fact that some property is common to all humankind does not in itself mean that this is an essential characteristic of human beings. For example, it may be true to say that having a respiratory system is a universal property of humankind without it being an essential characteristic. However, the *Symposium* is analyzing Eros as something both universal and essential to what it means to be human, and insofar as desire and striving relates humans to the Good (Diotima claims, "That's because what everyone loves is really nothing other than the good."[12]), Eros must be a central consideration for the moral philosopher.[13] In sum, Murdoch reads the *Symposium* as offering a view of human nature as erotic to the core. This view is not explicitly stated, yet it is a deep assumption that pervades and enlivens the atmosphere of the entire dialogue.[14]

The second insight Murdoch's reading of the *Symposium* yields is that humans desire because they lack the objects of their love. This well-known doctrine surfaces in

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[11]205a. Unless otherwise noted, all *Symposium* citations are from *Plato III: Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. by W.R.M. Lamb, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[12]206a.

[13]Contrast this with Kant who claims, "It is doubtless in this sense that we should understand too the passages from Scripture in which we are commanded to love our neighbour and even our enemy. For love out of inclination cannot be commanded; but kindness done from duty—although no inclination impels us, and even although natural and unconquerable disinclination stands in our way—is *practical*, and not *pathological*, love, residing in the will and not in the propensions of feeling, in principles of action and not of melting compassion; and it is this practical love alone which can be an object of command." *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 67. For Kant, only practical love, not pathological love, has moral significance.

[14]Osborne disagrees with this reading. See her discussion of Plotinus verses Plato in *Eros Unveiled*, 112-114.

both Socrates' questioning of Agathon and Diotima's questioning of Socrates. Socrates asks Agathon, "Come, then . . . Let us review the points on which we've agreed. Aren't they, first, that Love is the love of something, and, second, that he loves things of which he has a present need?"[15] Agathon assents. Then, in their discussion of similar matters, Diotima reminds Socrates, "What about Love? You agreed he needs good and beautiful things, and that's why he desires them—because he needs them." Socrates responds, "I certainly did."[16] These passages nicely display that the analysis of Eros, as the desire for what one lacks or needs, contains two aspects. First, that desire arises from lack, and second, that desire is directed toward something. There is a void which agitates the soul to seek, and that seeking or yearning is in search of objects which will satisfy it. On Murdoch's account, our lack creates an attachment-seeking energy within the soul, which then seeks for objects to fulfill it. To say that humans have an erotic center is to say that the deep structure of the human creature is a complex of yearning and fulfillment.

This analysis of love has led many commentators to denigrate Eros as a grossly selfish and perniciously acquisitive form of love. On this view, because it is self-regarding or self-centered (there is no significant difference made between the two on this view), it is morally objectionable and therefore should be rejected in favor of a love that is fundamentally selfless and other-regarding. The name put forward to designate this other-regarding sort of love is agape. Some commentators tend to identify Eros with Greek or pagan conceptions of love, whereas agape is presented as something uniquely

[15]200e-201a.

[16]202d.

Christian, a new sort of love that was discovered as a result of the self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

The concerns and issues behind the various positions are manifold. For example, Anders Nygren claims that the Greeks never rose above the selfish, acquisitive notion of Eros evident not only in the *Symposium*, but Greek thought in general.[17] He maintains this position in an attempt to highlight the distinctive and unique conception of love as agape. Others, such as John Rist, think that Nygren is mistaken to maintain that the Greeks had no conception of an other-regarding love, but that he is correct in his interpretation of Diotima's speech as offering an acquisitive account of love. Still others, such as Catherine Osborne, maintain that both Nygren and Rist have over-simplified interpretations of love in the *Symposium*, instead offering a reading that stresses "the aspiration of the lover, rather than the beauty of the object."[18] On this view, Eros is not fully explained by self-interested love, or by "appeal to the desirable nature of the object of acquisitive love."[19] Instead she argues that there is a "more subtle reading of the *Symposium* story, as an account of human aspirations, with its focus on the idea that our aspirations are inspired by the effect of Eros within ourselves, and not by the beauty of the object of desire itself."[20] Osborne offers this account of Eros as a less objectionable account than the purely acquisitive or possessive interpretation. This interpretation is intended to provide an alternative Eros where the unattractiveness of the greedy desire

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[17]Nygren, *Agape and Eros*.

[18]Osborne, *Eros Unveiled*, 54.

[19]Ibid., 56.

[20]Ibid., 57.

model is transcended. The aspirational view of Eros is meant to rescue it from being purely covetous.

Murdoch's reading of Eros in the *Symposium*—insofar as it is responsible for the yearning energy within the soul—is closest to Osborne's aspirational reading;[21] however, Murdoch is conspicuously different in one significant way. The difference rests on the distinction between "transcendence" and "transformation." Osborne wants humans to transcend a notion of Eros as acquisitive, which she tries to do with her aspirational account of Eros. If Eros truly is acquisitive, on her view, then it is something to be

[21]Other commentators have found this aspirational aspect present in Murdoch's philosophy. Melissa Lane maintains, "An aspirational picture of Plato [of which Murdoch is an example] sets out the Good as a moral aim, attractive to us as an extension of our love of beauty, and challenges us to live up to it." *Plato's Progeny: How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind*, (London: Duckworth, 2001), 77. Although Lane correctly identifies the aspirational aspect of Murdoch, I find her analysis deeply problematic in three places: 1) her understanding of the nature of Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality; 2) her conception of Christian morality; and 3) her ill-advised collapse of the distinction between the language of discovery and the language of creation. First, Lane claims that the heart of Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality is that it does not require moral effort, and that the Good is not something that takes effort to achieve. The heart of Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality, however, resides somewhere else entirely. His critique is twofold: 1) the ascetic ideal within Christianity is fundamentally life-denying and 2) the Christian account of morality masks the psychological fact that at bottom, all moralities are based on the will to power. Second, on Lane's view, Christian morality is easy because "a priest or a simple act of belief can automatically achieve" goodness. Ibid., 95. This view displays a deep misunderstanding of the difference between justification and moral perfection (i.e., growing in holiness) in the Christian tradition. It also brazenly ignores the rich tradition of Christian thought on the moral psychology of transformation and purification, in particular the tradition of moral thought on the seven capital vices and the difficulty involved in overcoming them. Finally, Lane claims that a moral language of discovery and insight and a moral language of creation and commitment "may not make a difference to the practice of ethics." Ibid., 96. But the point of Murdoch's ethical philosophy is precisely that the difference between these linguistic habits makes all the difference in the moral world. At the very least, Murdoch's aspirational view cannot be understood as dissolving any meaningful distinction between discovery and creation. Indeed, the wellspring of her philosophy is to subvert views where the will is the creator of value and replace it with patient discovery. Murdoch insists on this distinction because she fears the unchecked self-assertiveness of creation or self-fashioning models.

rejected outright. Murdoch, on the other hand, is content to begin with a conception of Eros as acquisitive and then highlight the importance of the transformation or purification of Eros which follows. In contrast to the somewhat simplistic reading of the *Symposium* as offering an acquisitive theory of love, and separate from the subtler aspirational reinterpretation of Eros, Murdoch offers an interpretation in which Eros is purified as it ascends. As it rises it moves from what, in the beginning, could be construed as a crass, immature, self-interested love (on the lowest levels) toward a genuine awareness and mature regard for the other.[22] In his first papal encyclical, Benedict XVI expresses a similar conception of Eros. He argues, "Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to "be there for" the other."[23]

To understand Murdoch's construal of Platonic Eros properly, we need to grasp its dialectical structure in the *Symposium*, including the various

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[22]In fact she maintains that the experience of falling in love—always an important place to begin when considering erotic love—is "a violent process which Plato more than once vividly describes (love is abnegation, abjection, slavery)" and "is for many people the most extraordinary and most revealing experience of their lives, whereby the centre of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self, and the dreamy ego is shocked into awareness of an entirely separate reality." Murdoch, "The Fire and the Sun," 417. Indeed, the capacity for Eros to pull us out of a selfish preoccupation with the self (i.e., rip the center of significance out of the self) is one of its essential aspects on Murdoch's account, and this erotic dynamic is fundamental to her account of "unselfing."

[23]Benedict XVI, "Deus Caritas Est," sec. 7, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 2005, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html, accessed May 24, 2008.

transformations/purifications of which it is capable.[24] Indeed, the path of Eros can lead one in progressive steps: from an acquisitive desire to possess, to a desire to possess forever, to a desire to beget or create (in body or soul), to a to a desire for immortality, to a desire for which these "love-matters . . . are merely the avenue."[25] Presumably they are an avenue to the Good itself, which includes the Good of the other.[26] Murdoch says,

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[24]See R. A. Markus's excellent essay, "The Dialectic of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*," in *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Vol. 2, ed. Gregory Vlastos, (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday and Company, 1971), 132-143. She uses the term 'dialectic' to evoke a notion of movement where positions on Eros are established and, "though they are continuously subjected to criticism and modification, are never *merely* discarded." Markus succinctly summarizes the way in which his dialectical reading operates: "His [Socrates'] seeming contradictions become phases in the dialectical growth of a notion which, in the course of development, outgrows the language in which it is being talked about, whose terminology necessarily continues to carry the deposit of undertones appropriate to its original field of application." Ibid., 133 and 141. I adopt Markus's sense of the dialectical structure, as does Murdoch, particularly the notion that even at the top of Eros' ascent (i.e., love's perfection) it retains undertones or remnants of its beginning, which are never completely transcended (i.e., merely discarded).

[25]*Symposium*, 204d-205a; 206a; 206c-e; 207a-209e; 210a.

[26]This path I have just sketched is just one of the ascents in Diotima's speech. Eros is not only progressively purified in the separate ascent passages, but also as we move on from one ascent passage to the next. For example, after the first ascent passage I outlined, Eros is still not purified of its excessive attachment and obsession with not dying. One has to accept one's own death to be able to make the existential move with Diotima to the next ascent passage. There is a lower-level or mock acceptance of death in this lower level. Hence, to make the transition from desiring to possessing forever, to desiring to beget, one has to realize that she is going to die. This is the crucial transition from Eros as possessive to Eros as productive. However, the desire to gain immortality in another guise is still present and not fully purified. The productive transition is, at this level, still infected by an Eros hanging on for/to dear life. Not until one accepts real death can one "breed not illusions but true examples of virtue," 212a. Here we see another ascent, from possession, to production, to true virtue. This movement can be read as the denial of death, to the false acceptance of death, to the true acceptance of death which enables true virtue. Murdoch also links the authentic acceptance of death with true virtue: "In this respect there is a special link between the concept of Good and the ideas of Death and Chance. . . . Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of

"Carnal love teaches that what we want is always 'beyond', and it gives us an energy which can be transformed into creative virtue."[27] On Murdoch's account, Eros can ascend when we recognize the insufficiency of any contingent (i.e., created or finite) good for satisfying our true desire. The objects to which we attach leave us wanting and, if we are not deceived, push us beyond. As Simone Weil formulates it: "All created things refuse to be for me as ends. Such is God's extreme mercy towards me. . . . The essence of created things is to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to the other and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading to God."[28]

This is Murdoch's radically different reading of the oft-criticized[29] line in the *Symposium* that a person "may escape from the mean, meticulous slavery of a single

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what virtue is like." "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 381, 385. In "The Dialectic of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*," Markus misses the distinction between false and authentic acceptance of death as a moment in her dialectic.

[27]Ibid., 416.

[28]*Gravity and Grace*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 132.

[29]Gregory Vlastos maintains that Diotima's speech encourages the love of a collection of certain abstract properties within a person, namely beauty and virtue, rather than the love of concrete human beings in all their uniqueness and particularity, as whole persons. Vlastos strongly argues, "This seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato's theory. It does not provide for love of whole persons, but only for love of that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities." "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," 31. Martha Nussbaum agrees generally with Vlastos's interpretation of Diotima, but objects to calling this view Plato's. She remarks, "If a writer describes a certain theory of love and then follows that description with a counterexample to the theory, a story of passion for a unique individual as eloquent as any in literature—a story that says that the theory omits something, is blind to something—then we might want to hesitate before calling the *author* blind." "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of the Symposium," in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 167. Nussbaum does ultimately share Vlastos's opinion that a theory like Diotima's is deeply unsatisfactory, but she thinks we need to consider seriously the role

instance, where he must center all his care, like a lackey, upon the beauty of a particular child or man or single observance."[30] The "mean, meticulous slavery of a single instance" is not meant as a degradation of the particular as such, but as a recognition that narrowly focused, obsessive, and selfish desires imprison individuals within a self-enclosed world. On Murdoch's view, it is only after we have made the ascent to the Good (or insofar as we can catch glimpses or momentarily live in its reality) that we are actually freed up from the selfish-grasping ego, so that we can then turn and actually love the particular individual. Hence, Murdoch, and the Plato that she reads, does not offer the ascent to the Good as a means of transcending individual human particularity, but rather as the only way to appreciate it properly. Murdoch claims, "(Of course Plato did not think that morality consisted in staring at an abstract idea.) The dialectic descends, returning to the particular."[31] In other words, Murdoch reads Diotima's speech not as obliterating the value of the individual, but as a necessary path of purification that Eros must travel in order to arrive at a place where love of the individual is actually possible.

Notice that on this view the (moral) progress of Eros is not the elimination of desire, but its transformation/purification to the point where the deepest passionate desire (i.e., happiness) is for the Good itself, which includes regard for the other. In other

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of Alciabiades' speech in Plato's overall design. Nussbaum's distaste for the sort of view expounded by Diotima fits with her overall project as a sympathetic critic of "removing . . . [our] finite humanity," "risk-taking loyalty," and "passionate love." *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 510. Summarizing Nussbaum's general view nicely, Fergus Kerr explains, "[H]er objection is always to the sorts of aspiration to transcending humanity which would deprive us of our humanity." *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997), 21.

[30]210c-d.

[31]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 497.

words, at higher levels, Eros *desires* the good and happiness of the other. Eros finds its satisfaction in being for the other (other-regarding); however, this love still should be called Eros since it is in fact gaining *satisfaction*.

At this point some may want to protest and argue that Eros, even transformed, is just as self-centered and acquisitive because it is still motivated by self-interest (i.e., satisfaction) and not governed *purely* by other-regarding motives.[32] Yet the Platonic-Murdochian view seems to counter this objection. First, once Eros reaches its higher levels of purification, its objectionable elements drop out. The worry behind calling it acquisitive and selfish disappears. Indeed, it seems quite strange to call someone who gains satisfaction from feeding the homeless selfish because they take pleasure in the act. Second, even if some may want to argue (for whatever reason) for the fundamentally selfish nature of Eros even at the higher levels, there still exists a very important distinction between an Eros that finds its satisfaction in selfish, grasping possession and an Eros that finds its satisfaction in selfless, free gift giving. On the Platonic-Murdochian view—where the moral life is about the purification of Eros—the ideal state is one of *passionate* regard for the Good, not duty for duty's sake where the passions are irrelevant to the moral situation.

Murdoch's overall posture toward the elements of Eros that we might call self-regarding is much more positive than Nygren and Osborne's positions.[33] Nygren and

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[32]The Kantian ancestry of this view should be apparent.

[33]There is another potentially significant difference between Osborne and Murdoch. Murdoch reads the *Symposium* as offering an account of human nature as fundamentally erotic, whereas Osborne maintains that, on Diotima's account, human nature can be thought of in the absence of Eros, or without erotic aspirations. Osborne develops this reading out of a patient exploration of the difference between Plato and

Osborne agree that acquisitive or self-interested Eros must be rejected outright in a non-compromising fashion, and anything less would be morally repugnant.[34] Unlike these commentators, Murdoch does not denigrate the self-regarding aspects of Eros. There is a generous, compassionate, and patient humanism in Murdoch's moral instincts, which prevents her from doing so. This cheerful humanism is present in her Platonic dialogue "Art and Eros" in the figure of Socrates. To the severe, austere, rigidly uncompromising, and puritanical Plato, Murdoch has Socrates say,

> Our home may be elsewhere, but we are condemned to exile, to live here with our fellow exiles. . . . It may be that human beings can only achieve a second best, that second best is our best. (*Plato is shaking his head.*) . . . We are not gods. What you call the whole truth is only for them. So our truth must include, must *embrace* the idea of the second best, that all our thought will be incomplete and all our art tainted by selfishness. This doesn't mean there is no difference

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Plotinus on the question of why Eros should be a daimon and not a god. I do not propose to solve this interpretive difference here, but merely mention it in order to clarify Murdoch's position. The importance of this difference is found in Murdoch's position that once we cease discussing the erotic center of our nature, we are no longer speaking of an entity which is recognizably human. It is the *human* moral situation that we must speak of, and not, so to speak, the rational alien. This point is particularly significant when contrasted with Kantian views in which the center of identity (especially moral identity) is found in practical rationality, as the guarantor of autonomy and the essence of being human (as opposed to a mere beast, heteronomously guided by inclination). The statement Murdoch places in the mouth of Plato in her dialogue "Art and Eros" is significant here. He says, "without Eros man is a ghost. But with Eros he can be—either a demon or—Socrates." Iris Murdoch, "Art and Eros," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 487. The character Plato should by no means be interpreted as always expressing Murdoch's view in her Platonic dialogues. In fact, Socrates more often comes closer to expressing Murdoch's views; however, this particular statement is instructive in relation to Eros being a fundamental aspect of what makes us human.

[34]Even Osborne says, "It is one thing to agree that the notion of acquisitive *eros* that Nygren found in Diotima's speech cannot be satisfactory as a motif in Christianity, but quite another to reject *eros* altogether. We must reject *eros* altogether only if that is the only available notion of *eros* to which early Christian writers might be appealing; but that is clearly not the case." *Eros Unveiled*, 55. With this comment, Osborne announces her intent, contra Nygren, to redeem Eros, but what also surfaces is a deep assumption common to both: acquisitive Eros must be rejected.

between the good and the bad in what we achieve. And it doesn't mean not trying. It means trying in a humble modest truthful spirit. *This* is our truth."[35]

What Murdoch wants to show—in her foray into the world of Platonic dialogue writing—is that, in the moral realm concerned with the purification of Eros, philosophers need to be quite careful with the sort of uncompromising moral extremism that no longer takes account of our humanity. We live in this world as humans and not as gods, and a morality that touches *us* must take account of the complexities of human loves and our deepest longings.[36] Not to do so would be inhuman(e) and even morally dangerous.[37]

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[35]Murdoch, "Art and Eros," 492.

[36]Lane helpfully articulates a similar point as follows: "Socrates chastises Plato for assuming that we should be like gods, that we are not and should not be at home in our weak bodies and emotions which crave and respond to art." *Plato's Progeny*, 87. It should be mentioned as a clarification, though, that Eros is not necessarily a weakness in terms of a moral liability, but an aspect of our neediness as creatures, who are not self-sufficient as a god is.

[37]It is "morally dangerous" to banish Eros for some purely other-regarding conception of agape due to three particular dangers: the pride of self-sufficiency, the objectionable elements of pity (something which Nietzsche so well describes), and the subtle dangers of masochism. That is to say, a wholly other-regarding structure is susceptible to three extremely reprehensible moral failures. First, without a recognition of, and continual reminder of, our own dependency, we are in danger of the morally objectionable arrogance of Aristotle's magnanimous man, who counts it beneath him to receive. He must only be a giver of gifts and not be reduced to the servile position of having to receive. Second, Nietzsche reacted so strongly against pity because he was opposed to the condescension involved in that emotion. This moral danger rears its head when agape is severed from an erotic recognition of one's own neediness. Pity loses its pernicious flavor of condescension when the person pitying recognizes herself in communion with the object of pity. Indeed, then pity is transformed into authentic compassion. Finally, the subtle dangers of a self-punishing masochism can often be lurking beneath the surface of the rhetoric of the denial of self for the other. The feminist critique of the selflessness interpretation of agape is particularly helpful for bringing out the self-hatred or self-negation aspect. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Gender and Christian Ethics" in Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 112-124. Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980); Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing*, (San Francisco:

Socrates' idea of the "second best" should not be read as "moral compromise" (as he fears may happen), but as a generous recognition and love of our creaturliness.

This same love for humanity and the corresponding resistance to moral schemes that degrade Eros can again be seen in Benedict XVI's concern with those who draw too sharp a distinction between Agape (i.e., descending, oblative, or Christian love) and Eros (i.e., ascending, possessive/covetous, Greek love). He maintains, "Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life."[38] Murdoch would agree that the vital relations fundamental to human existence and the complex fabric of human life must be central concerns on any adequate moral scheme. This fabric and these relations include and must take account of the fundamental yearnings and the erotic core of *human* beings. And any moral scheme that does so is not, as such, morally dubious.

If one re-approaches the *Symposium* with a certain generosity of spirit and compassionate humanism, it does not at all appear that the interpretation of Eros as needy

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Harper & Row, 1986); Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2, (April, 1960), 100-112. Darlene Fozard Weaver, *Self-love and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). These feminist perspectives rightly focus on the centrality of mutuality, reciprocity, and communion in any adequate conception of human love. Stephen G. Post summarizes, "Whatever might be said on behalf of the strategic value of selflessness, the experience of women encouraged to embrace the "experience of nothingess" by serving the needs of others while entirely ignoring their own needs casts overwhelming doubt on such arguments." *A Theory of Agape: On the Meaning of Christian Love*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), 65.

[38]Benedict XVI, "Deus Est Caritas," sec. 7.

and lacking provides a picture of a morally repugnant, sinister, and "wholly nefarious"[39] sort of selfish satisfaction. In fact, a frank appraisal of human lack and fundamental neediness can lead toward a deep humility. As a human being, who is not a god, and therefore, not self-sufficient, an individual is dependent on something outside herself.[40] Along these lines, Murdoch believes that, Eros, because of its neediness, has the capacity continually to draw people outside of themselves and lead them progressively into a world where they are not dominated by selfish obsession. She argues that when Eros "is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good."[41] In this erotic context, she also references humility: "Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious

[39]I borrow this formulation from Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 56.

[40]Alasdair MacIntrye explicates well the fundamental vulnerability and dependence of the human animal and the corresponding importance of the virtues of acknowledged dependence in *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. He contrasts the attitudes of Aristotle and Aquinas to this acknowledgment. Ibid., (London: Duckworth, 1999), xi. Aquinas recognizes the importance of benevolence and gift-giving; however, he also rightly affirms the humble position of recognizing one's own neediness and asking for what one lacks as a part of the good human life. Aristotle's magnanimous man, on the other hand, while affirming the greatness displayed in benevolence, disparages dependence and need as servile (i.e., not a part of the most excellent human life). Simply rendered, Aristotle maintains that the most excellent person gives, but does not receive, whereas Aquinas holds that the most excellent person gives, but also possesses the humility and gratitude necessary for reciprocity and receiving. Views that deny Eros an ethical role because of its neediness are perhaps in danger of the arrogance of self-sufficiency.

[41]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 384.

avaricious tentacles of the self."[42] Eros, for Murdoch, is actually a force that when even partially purified can help one move beyond the avaricious tentacles of the self. If Eros can move individuals beyond self-preoccupation—which is the Eros Murdoch finds in the *Symposium*—then the simplistic acquisitive account of Eros seems insufficient.

Before turning to the third fundamental insight Murdoch draws from the *Symposium*, I turn to consider one final, slightly different approach to Eros and its allegedly acquisitive nature. The readings that find Eros morally questionable due to its acquisitive nature also tend to find the notion of self-love problematic, even morally pernicious. The rejection of Eros as crassly self-interested goes hand-in-hand with the degradation of the notion that there is such a thing as proper self-love or self-regard. On these views, only love that is "utterly heedless of self and entirely one-way in its movement" is morally above reproach.[43] A love like Eros, which pursues its own good and considers its own ultimate happiness, is to be rejected as morally insufficient, due to the assumption that there is no proper form that self-love can take without being objectionably acquisitive. Here, no meaningful distinction can be made between proper self-love (i.e., self-regard) and morally repugnant self-centeredness, between true and false self-love. Views like Murdoch's, which distinguish between a good and bad Eros, however, accommodate human yearning into their ethical outlooks, allowing them to make room for a proper form of self-love.

Against those views that hold all self-regarding love as somehow morally inferior, and against those who maintain that Eros has no place in a purified moral existence,

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[42]Ibid., 385.

[43]Stephen G. Post, *A Theory of Agape*, 17.

Murdoch reads in Plato a place for a properly purified erotic self-regard, one that finds its ultimate blessedness (i.e., satisfaction, fulfillment, happiness) in the Good. As she claims, "Plato's Eros . . . is potentially a happy lover."[44] Those who reject Eros and self-love as "wholly nefarious" seem to have a conception of the human person that is essentially Stoic or Kantian where the passions are not only accidental to human nature (and rationality is the human core) but are also moral liabilities that should be systematically repressed. The Stoic/Kantian model is one of self-mastery through rational control, and not one of ultimate harmony between the parts of the soul.

Murdoch argues for a moral outlook in which *moral* significance can be attached to the difference between a person who seeks her own satisfaction in self-interested covetousness, a person who denies her self-interest for the sake of the other, and a person whose self-interest/satisfaction is found in being other-regarding. The first is base Eros at work; the second is an Eros in process of purification; and the third is an Eros deeply purified. The Kantian position erases any meaningful moral difference between the second and the third person. For Kant, the moral worth of an action is completely captured in doing it for duty's sake. The fact that one agent finds deep satisfaction in doing good to another person while another agent does it begrudgingly in response to the call of duty makes no significant moral difference. Murdoch, on the other hand, maintains that there is a significant moral difference between the motivations of the second person and the third person. The third person is not morally suspect because she *enjoys* attending to the other, but the enjoyment is in fact a sign of moral superiority. One's loves, practical *and* pathological, become morally significant.

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[44]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 442.

Insofar as Murdoch's conception of Eros includes one's own happiness, albeit a deeply transformed and purified desire with its corresponding transformed satisfaction, she can be credited with embracing a eudaimonistic account. This claim needs to be greatly qualified and defended, especially in light of some of her more austere and unconditional statements as to the "absolute for-nothingness"[45] of the Good. However, that cannot be considered until I turn to her conception of the Good in the next chapter. There I will show that Murdoch's conception of the Good leaves her with an irresolvable tension between the mystically inclined moral extremism of her Plato and the down-to-earth, generous moral realism of her Socrates, who is prepared to allow Eros and happiness into his moral equation. This same drama can be detected in the back and forth movement in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, this time with Kant as the absolutist and Plato as the generous humanist making room for Eros and happiness. There Murdoch argues that Kant has no "moral role for what Plato calls Eros, the high force which attracts the soul toward Good,"[46] whereas Plato assigns a role for Eros by allowing for the appealing, magnetic nature of the Good (i.e., the Good can ultimately be linked to our happiness without necessary corruption).

The third insight that Murdoch's reading of the *Symposium* yields concerning Eros is that the objects humans love are sources of energy. We are reminded that Murdoch's most common metaphor for Eros is "spiritual energy." We have already encountered one aspect of Eros' "spiritual energy," namely, the attachment seeking yearning created by neediness. This aspect should be understood generally as quest-

[45]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 375.

[46]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 442.

initiating energy. The second aspect of Eros as "spiritual energy" is that which is produced when our yearning attaches to some object in seeking its satisfaction. The nature and quality of the object of our fascination—the object with which we attempt to satisfy our longing—produces its own spiritual energy.

Consider the following passages where Murdoch expresses the notion that the nature of the objects of attachment have a force of their own in terms of degrading or purifying the original energy (love) directed upon them; that is, objects of attachment take on a life and exert an energy of their own and become sources of new energy. She argues, "Plato's Good is not a god, it is an impersonal object of love, a transcendent idea, *pictured* as a magnetic centre of vitality (for instance as the sun). It purifies the energy which is directed upon it."[47] Similarly, Murdoch maintains, "Our desires, our life-energy or Eros, can be purified through our attention to God, or to some magnetic Good inescapably active in our lives."[48] I will comment on the difference between an impersonal Good and a personal God as possible objects of attention in the next chapter. For now, the important assertion to notice is that an object of loving contemplation can act as a morally significant source of purifying energy. Elsewhere, pointing out that the object of loving contemplation can be a source of energy in its own right, Murdoch wistfully remarks, "The religious believer, especially if his God is conceived of as a

[47]Ibid., 344.

[48]Ibid., 109.

person, is in the fortunate position of being able to focus his thought upon something which is a source of energy."[49]

The significance of all Murdoch's talk about the objects we love being sources of energy is to indicate the deep and varied ways that our deepest loves influence and affect us, shaping the way we see the world, conditioning what we see of the world, and governing the way that world moves us. This position implies that the fundamental source of moral transformation is finding new objects of attachment—new objects to love, to attend to, or to contemplate. To explain this dynamic, Murdoch asks us to consider what it is like being in love (romantically) and what it is like to attempt to stop being in love. In this case, she argues that efforts of pure will are often useless; rather, we need new objects to attend to:

> Where strong emotions of sexual love, or of hatred, resentment, or jealousy are concerned, 'pure will' can usually achieve little. It is small use telling oneself 'Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.' What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source. . . . Deliberately falling out of love is not a jump of the will, it is the acquiring of new objects of attention and thus of new energies as a result of refocusing.[50]

She then suggests,

> That God, attended to, is a powerful source of (often good) energy is a psychological fact. It is also a psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps (I will discuss this later) the idea of goodness itself.[51]

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[49]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 345.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

As potential sources of energy, both degrading and purifying, the particular nature of the objects of our deepest attachment become, for Murdoch, an important center of ethical reflection. The objects of our deepest Eros exert a force on us, shaping the way we perceive the world, and thus—since we are motivated by what we see—condition our response to that world.[52]

Where in the *Symposium* does Murdoch muster support for the insight that the objects we love are sources of energy? Murdoch does not seem actually to anchor this insight in any particular text in the *Symposium*. It comes across as more of a hermeneutical presupposition through which she reads the *Symposium*, rather than as a result of any particular exegetical effort. However, Murdoch might have found support for this insight in some of Diotima's final words:

> 'What if he could behold the divine beauty itself, in its unique form? Do you call it a pitiful life for a man to lead—looking that way, observing that vision by the proper means, and having it ever with him? Do but consider . . . that there only will it befall him, as he sees the beautiful through that which makes it visible [presumably the Good], to breed not illusions but true examples of virtue, since his contact is not with illusion but with truth.'[53]

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[52]Augustine expresses a similar thought about love in the final book of his *Confessions*: "My love is my weight: wherever I go, my love is what brings me there." *Confessions*, Second Edition, Trans. by F.J. Sheed, Ed. by Michael P. Foley, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), XIII.9.10. It is noteworthy that Augustine, like Murdoch and Weil, uses physical and mechanical metaphors to describe the dynamics of love in the human soul. This passage in particular is dominated by reference to weight, stones, flame, oil and water, levels, displacement, motion, and rest. Of this passage, Michael P. Foley suggests, "A crucial passage that explains why our hearts are restless until they rest in God (I.1.1). Drawing from classical philosophy, Augustine holds that our loves and desires are naturally good and thus have an end or "weight" to which they naturally tend. Original sin, however, distorts our loves, requiring their reordering or reorchestration by the Holy Spirit for their perfection and hence 'rest.' It may not be coincidental that all of the natural phenomena mentioned in this paragraph have biblical links to the Holy Spirit: fire (Acts 2:3, love (Rom 5:5), weight (Wis. 11:21), oil (1 John 2:20; Exod. 30:25), and water (Mark 1:10)." Ibid.

[53]212a.

With these words, Diotima is hearkening back to a crucial transition earlier in her speech: the transition from possession to production.[54] The idea is that the objects of loving attention are not merely objects that individuals greedily consume, but sources of positive creative energy. Those objects that we (as naturally attached creatures) love, inspire us, and therefore, become sources of inspiration and productivity. The vision of the Form Beauty, so eloquently described by Diotima, exerts a force on its beholder that transforms her into a producer, not simply a covetous consumer.

Here we might ask what the objects of love cause people to produce. Diotima spends the majority of her speech about breeding focusing on immortality. Her suggestion is that mortals try to achieve a mock kind of immortality by reproducing in either body or soul. Diotima uses this discussion to illuminate that what humans are really in love with at this level of ascent is immortality. She claims, "It follows from our argument that Love must desire immortality."[55] Later, she maintains, "For among animals the principle is the same as with us, and moral nature seeks so far as possible to live forever and be immortal."[56]

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[54]206b-e.

[55]207a.

[56]207d. Note that when Diotima originally brings up immortality, the Good is actually present in her account as well. She maintains, "A lover must desire immortality along with the good, if what we agreed earlier was right, that Love wants to possess the good forever," 207a. After this point, however, the Good drops out of the account. I suggest that we should read this as the substitution of immortality for the true Good. Eros, at this level, is still radically attached to this life above the Good. The purification of Eros still needs to bring it to a point where it is more in love with the Good than attached to its own being.

Insofar as Eros is in love with immortality, and not purely in love with the Good, it breeds illusions rather than true virtue. While Eros is still productive at this level, the object to which it is attached is illusory, and therefore, the energy it produces shares in the illusory quality. This is because the quality of the particular objects of attention determines the quality of the creative energy produced. Hence, until humans are in love with the Good, and not with illusions like their own immortality, they will breed such illusions instead of true virtue. The real significance of Diotima's position when considering Murdoch, though, is that Murdoch echoes Diotima's principle that the objects of love are sources of energy; and further, that the quality of these objects determines both the quality of the energy and its products. Murdoch maintains, "When good is loved, even impurely or by accident, the quality of the love is automatically refined, and when the soul is turned towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened."[57] Likewise she claims, "Our desires, our life-energy or Eros, can be purified through our attention to God, or to some magnetic Good unescapably active in our lives."[58]

In this section, then, we have seen that Murdoch develops three insights derived from her reading of the *Symposium*: humans are essentially erotic beings, they desire because they lack the objects of their love, and the objects they love are sources of energy. Attending to Murdoch's reception of the *Symposium* also clarifies her most common formulation of Eros as "spiritual energy." As a metaphor, spiritual energy

[57]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 384.

[58]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 109.

captures Eros as needy and lacking, which creates a quest-initiating energy, and it portrays the productive energy Eros receives from the objects it loves.

The Phaedrus*: Eros and "Unselfing"*

In addition to her formulation of Eros as "spiritual energy," Murdoch is fundamentally concerned with Eros's ability to promote what she calls "unselfing." Simply stated, unselfing is the redirection of consciousness away from our natural state of preoccupation with the self. Murdoch develops this notion out of her reading of the *Phaedrus*. She indicates, "Following a hint in Plato (*Phaedrus*, 250) I shall start by speaking of what is perhaps the most obvious thing in our surroundings which is an occasion for 'unselfing', and that is what is popularly called beauty."[59] She continues, "I take this starting point, not because I think it is the most important place of moral change, but because I think it is the most accessible one. . . . [A]s Plato pointed out, beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct."[60] Murdoch maintains that when the self is confronted with something beautiful, that object has an almost natural ability to arrest the ego's normal patterns of self-directed obsession. Romantic love is the perfect image of this dynamic in action. If beauty in general is the most accessible source of unselfing, erotic (i.e., romantic) love in particular is perhaps the most significant and accessible of those experiences with beauty. Murdoch contends,

> 'Falling in love', a violent process which Plato more than once vividly describes (love is abnegation, abjection, slavery) is for many people the most extraordinary and most revealing experience of their lives, whereby the centre of significance is

[59]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 369.

[60]Ibid., 370.

> suddenly ripped out of the self, and the dreamy ego is shocked into awareness of an entirely separate reality.[61]

Erotic love is a virtually universal experience that has the capacity, however briefly, to remove the center of significance from the self and focus it on another reality. Murdoch thinks that individuals experience falling in love as a blow that redirects our Eros (i.e., spiritual energy).[62] Commenting elsewhere on Plato, Murdoch argues, "Plato envisages erotic love as an education, because of its intensity as a source of energy, and because it wrenches our interest out of ourselves. It may be compared with the startling experience in Zen (perhaps a literal blow) which is to bring about enlightenment."[63] The Murdochian-Platonic account, then, offers the surprising claim not only that the acquisitive analysis of Eros is insufficient, but also that Eros can actually be a source for transcending the ego's self-preoccupation. Eros' response to beauty can be a release from egoism, a source of unselfing.

To explore further this structure of unselfing, I turn to several key passages from the *Phaedrus*. After Socrates convinces Phaedrus to read Lysias' speech praising the

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[61]Murdoch, "The Fire and the Sun," 417. Although Murdcoch maintains that romantic love is a possible source for overcoming egoism, she is certainly not dull to its tendency toward self-gratification. In fact, she warns that it "may be a somewhat ambiguous instructor;" she asserts that "human love is usually self-assertive;" and she maintains that "human love is normally too profoundly possessive and also too 'mechanical' to be a place of vision." Ibid.; "The Sovereignty of Good," 384; and "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 361. Nonetheless, because romantic love is for most people predominantly an experience of pursuing that which gratifies the self, one wonders whether Murdoch should have explored marital love, or even better, parental love as a better example of this dynamic.

[62]In *Listening to the Cicadas*, Ferrari's expresses this blow of Eros as a "massive punch." He explains, "And it is a punch more powerful than any other that he experiences," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 141.

[63]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*," 345.

non-lover over the lover, he offers an initial speech, of which he soon repents before providing a second, and presumably more seriously offered speech.[64] When Socrates finishes with this speech, he and Lysias embark on a conversation about rhetoric in order to explore the nature of the art of persuasive speech-making, in which they have just participated. In the course of this discussion, Socrates gives an illuminating summary outline of his second speech:

> We did say, didn't we, that love is a kind of madness? . . . And that there are two kinds of madness, one produced by human illness, the other by divinely inspired release from normally accepted behavior? . . . We also distinguished four parts within the divine kind and connected them to four gods. Having attributed the inspiration of the prophet to Apollo, of the mystic to Dionysus, of the poet to the Muses, and the fourth part of madness to Aphrodite and to Love, we said that the madness of love is the best.[65]

The concept of madness (*mania*) in the dialogues is rich, varied, and rather complex. However, for understanding the nature and structure of Murdoch's conception of unselfing, these brief remarks of Socrates will suffice. First, these remarks show that being out of one's mind in ecstasy or divine frenzy is not unequivocally evil, according to Socrates. Earlier, in fact, Socrates had claimed, "in fact the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of the god."[66] Second, Socrates describes the good kind of madness as "a divine release from the ordinary ways of men." And third,

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[64]Although, referencing his own speech later in the dialogue, Socrates indicates, "We used a certain sort of image to describe love's passion; perhaps it had a measure of truth in it, though it may also have led us astray," 265b.

[65]265a-b.

[66]244a.

Eros itself is a type of madness.[67] It is clear to see how Murdoch concludes (and I concur) that there is a good Eros. As a type of madness, Eros can draw one outside of oneself (literally out of one's mind) as a source of release from the ordinary ways of humanity.

This image of Eros as a "good madness" illustrates well Murdoch's conception of unselfing. On Murdoch's account, the "ordinary ways of men" from which Eros can provide release are conceived along Freudian lines. Murdoch explains and adopts what she describes as Freud's "thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature":

> [Freud] sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings.[68]

According to Murdoch, the natural ways of humanity, from which Eros is a possible source of release, are powerfully egocentric and selfish. Murdoch describes Eros's

[67]It is noteworthy that poetry makes it on this list of good madnesses. Any adequate account of poetry or art in Plato would have to make sense of Socrates' positive construal of the poetic as a *divine* madness. Additionally, in the chariot myth of the soul, Socrates claims, "but a soul that has seen the most will be planted in the seed of a man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love," 248d. The artist and the lover are placed in the same class as the philosopher in terms of the degree of truth they have seen in a past life. Socrates goes on to distinguish this first class of artists from the sixth class "poet or some other representational artist," 248 e. In Socrates' hierarchy, there is room to for a distinction between good and bad art/artists.

[68]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 341.

ability to interrupt this natural tendency when explicating the nature and structure of unselfing.[69]

The Allegory of the Cave: Progressive Journey of Erotic Consciousness

Murdoch not only articulates a conception of Eros as spiritual energy and highlights its unselfing capacity, but she also develops a whole scale account of the moral life as a quest of the erotic consciousness from appearance to reality, what might be called the progressive purification of Eros. The Allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic* VII is her chief inspiration. Murdoch comments, "Plato's moral education is to be seen in terms of a change of self-being, of mental and spiritual activity and 'stuff', and the modern moral philosopher in search of a concept might profitably reflect upon the myth of the Cave as implying a progressively changing quality of consciousness."[70] Murdoch could just as easily have said that "the Cave implies a progressively changing quality of Eros," as her conception of consciousness is erotic to the core. For example, compare these two statements of Murdoch's, the first on consciousness and the second on Eros. She explains, "Our ordinary consciousness is a deep continuous working of values, a *continuous present and presence* of perceptions, intuitions, images, feelings, desires,

[69]Murdoch's relation to and use of Freud is a complex story. As an interlocutor, Murdoch generally makes use of him as an ally, while at the same time insisting that she is not a Freudian. She maintains, "I am not a 'Freudian' and the truth of this or that particular view of Freud does not here concern me." On 'God' and 'Good,'" 341. It is clear that when Murdoch refers to modern psychology, one should generally think "Freud." Ibid. His positive significance for Murdoch can be seen in at least three areas: 1) he provides a secular picture of fallen humanity, highlighting the natural selfishness of the psyche; 2) he provides a way for Murdoch to reassert the importance of the history of the individual through his development of psychoanalysis; and 3) his conception of the "mechanism" enables Murdoch to articulate a psychologically continuous self.

[70]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 177.

aversions, attachments. It is a matter of what we 'see things as.'"[71] She also states, "'Eros' is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world: good and bad desires with good and bad objects."[72]

These descriptions of consciousness and Eros are strikingly similar and suggest that Eros and consciousness are intimately related in Murdoch's thought. However, Murdoch goes even further and indicates explicitly that we ought to consider her accounts of consciousness and Eros as mutually illuminating commentaries on one another. In a passage where she treats Eros, she explains, "I want here to restate in summary form what I have said earlier in discussing 'consciousness.'"[73] In other words, her comments on Eros are to be interpreted as a summary of how she attempts to describe consciousness. In sum, what Murdoch offers us is an erotic conception of consciousness by which she means a *fundamentally and inextricably desiring awareness that is continually mediating the world to us*.

In the Cave myth, therefore, Murdoch sees the journey of an erotic consciousness moving from appearance to reality.[74] The most influential idea that arises from this reading of the Cave myth is the notion that humans find themselves on various levels of a

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[71]Ibid., 215.

[72]Ibid., 496.

[73]Ibid., 495.

[74]Indeed, Murdoch's tendency is to view the entire *Republic* as the pilgrimage of the soul. She maintains, "that the *Republic* is primarily a spiritual guidebook, a myth of the soul, and not (though it instances many practical matters) a political programme." Ibid., 388.

moral scale that determines the *quality* of their consciousness (i.e., awareness or experience). The quality of an individual consciousness is in large part determined by its habitual objects of attention (i.e., loving contemplation). Each individual consciousness or awareness, then, is not uniform, and its most significant way of divergence, on Murdoch's account, is its level of moral purification. There are varying moral qualities of consciousness which in turn mediate various and different worlds to us. We do not see the world just by opening our eyes.[75] Our deepest loves influence what we "see the world as," and, as such, in order to see the world rightly (i.e., clearly, purely), our loves need purification. Murdoch argues, "The Cave is a religious myth suggesting, what is also accessible to any careful not necessarily philosophical reflection, that there are discernible levels and qualities of *awareness* or *experience* (we need this terminology), which cannot be reduced to acquaintance with neutral factual propositions or analyses in terms of dispositions to act."[76] For Murdoch, then, all seeing is a moral seeing, which is why there can never be a radical and pure separation of fact from value.[77] Murdoch

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[75]Murdoch echoes this sentiment in the context of arguing for a rapprochement between psychology and philosophy and arguing for a reclamation of important concepts like experience and consciousness. She argues, "Psychology might indeed prompt contemporary behaviouristic philosophers to re-examine their discarded concepts of 'experience' and 'consciousness'. By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us." "The Sovereignty of Good," 368-369.

[76]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*," 183.

[77]When Murdoch speaks of the inability to separate fact and value, she is not necessarily thinking about simple statements of fact such as "the cat is on the mat," but rather our deeper interpretations of the world that cannot separate how we see the world from our deepest loves or desires. She maintains, "The defense of value is not an attack on 'ordinary facts'. The concept of 'fact' is complex. . . . We relate to facts through truth and truthfulness, and come to recognize and discover that there are different modes and levels of insight and understanding. In many familiar ways *various* values pervade and *colour* what we take to be the reality of our world; wherein we constantly evaluate our

gravitates toward Plato's account because it does justice to the inextricable ubiquity of value always at work in every moment of human consciousness. She says, "The moral life is not intermittent or specialized, it is not a peculiar separate area of our existence. . . . [W]e are all always deploying and *directing* our energy, refining or blunting it, purifying or corrupting it."[78] Note the erotic content she includes in the moral life here. Murdoch likes the Platonic formulation that individuals see *everything* in the light of the Good, because she thinks that the moral quality of our consciousness is at work screening every experience, thought, activity, decision, emotion, etc.

The main lesson Murdoch adopts from Plato's myth of the soul in the *Republic,* then, seen particularly through the Cave allegory, is that there are varying qualities of consciousness that are largely determined by the nature and quality of human attachments. The implication is that the moral life is largely conceived as a matter of purifying our consciousness through a gradual shifting our deepest attachments.

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own values and those of others, and judge and determine forms of consciousness and modes of being. To say all this is not in any way to deny either science, empiricism or common sense. The proposition that 'the cat is on the mat' is true, indicates a fact, if the cat is on the mat." Ibid., 26. However, in some moods Murdoch does seem to interpret the ubiquity of value (i.e., the connection between epistemology and ethics) in all moments of consciousness as invading even these ordinary facts. For example, she argues, "Subjects begin to see different objects; they have a deeper and wider and wiser understanding of the world. The pilgrim will not only produce a better series of acts, he will have (down to last details) a better series of mental states. He can literally see better, see people's faces and leaves on trees," Ibid., 177. She also maintains, "This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound. . . . I would suggest that the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self. *The necessity of the good is then an aspect of the kind of necessity involved in any technique for exhibiting fact*." "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 353.

[78]Ibid., 495.

Murdoch contends that doing so will not only ensure a purification of desire, but also a purification/clarification of vision. She provides a succinct characterization of the moral life on Plato's account, indicating, "The moral life in the Platonic understanding of it is a slow shift of attachments wherein *looking* (concentrating, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified) energy. This is a progressive redemption of desire."[79] Within this overarching framework, the nature and point of the moral life (even moral philosophy) is essentially a therapy of desire—which is at the same time, on the Murdochian-Platonic account, a movement from appearance to reality.[80] This view leads away from moral schemes solely preoccupied with right action (thought about atomistically) to broader questions of how our consciousness (i.e., the experiential stream or stream of awareness) as a whole might be purified.

As I will demonstrate in the next section, moral philosophies oriented in this way must begin theorizing about techniques toward such purification. In the statement quoted

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[79]Ibid., 24-25.

[80]The phrase "therapy of desire" is taken from Martha Nussbaum's book of the same title. Murdoch's vision of moral philosophy is generally in line with Nussbaum's understanding of the picture of philosophy developed in the three major Hellenistic schools (i.e., Stoicism, Epicurianism, and Skepticism). Characterizing these schools, Nussbaum argues, "Philosophy heals human diseases, diseases produced by false beliefs. Its arguments are to the soul as the doctor's remedies are to the body. They can heal, and they are to be evaluated in terms of their power to heal. As the medical art makes progress on behalf of the suffering body, so philosophy for the soul in distress." *Therapy of Desire*, 14. Pierre Hadot holds a similar view of philosophy, especially of the schools of the ancient philosophers. He suggests, "The philosophical school thus corresponds, above all, to the choice of a certain way of life and existential option which demands from the individual a total change of lifestyle, a conversion of one's entire being, and ultimately a certain desire to be and to live in a certain way." *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase, (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 3. Fundamental to understanding philosophy as a way of life is its role in shaping desire. Hadot remarkably illumines the central role of spiritual exercises or practices when philosophy is understood in this way.

above, Murdoch hints that one of the central techniques for the purification of desire (Eros) is contemplation. However, the point of contemplation is lost when the philosophical self vanishes and is replaced by the atomized self of the existentialist or analytic philosopher. Without some underlying unity, there is no center of consciousness that can be made the continuous subject of purification, causing the contemplative practices of moral purification to lose their meaning and purpose. Murdoch's return to a Platonic erotic conception of consciousness represents her attempt to articulate a substantial and continuous enough self, capable of being the bearer of moral transformation.[81] From this conception, therefore, she can rehabilitate techniques of moral purification as central to the moral life.

Indeed, built into the very concept of a *pilgrimage* or *quest* of the soul is the notion that there is a sufficiently solid self that can be identified as the same center of consciousness making that journey from appearance to reality. Murdoch desires to

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[81]Alasdair MacIntyre makes an analogous move in the context of virtue theory. He wants to be able to speak of the self as a bearer of Aristotelian virtue. To do so, he needs a unified self, so that a human life as a whole can be envisioned. He maintains, "And the unity of a virtue in someone's life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole." He therefore develops his notion that the unity of the self "resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end." *After Virtue*, 205. His narrative concept of selfhood allows him to address more than just atomized right actions on specific, isolated, and episodic occasions. MacIntrye, like Murdoch, criticizes analytic philosophy for "the tendency to think atomistically about human action and to analyze complex actions and transactions in terms of simple components." Instead, MacIntrye argues, "That particular actions derive their character as parts of larger wholes is a point of view alien to our dominant ways of thinking and yet one which it is necessary at least to consider if we are to begin to understand how a life may be more than a sequence of individual actions and episodes." Ibid., 204. Likewise, Murdoch insists that in order to understand human action and personal identity, we must pay attention to the background omitted by the Existentialist and the Analytic philosopher. Murdoch indicates the particular sort of background with which she is concerned: "My argument wants to focus attention upon the experiential stream as a cognitive background to activity." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 267.

portray a thick enough self capable of making this pilgrimage, and she turns to the psychological continuities of personality to demonstrate this continuous self.[82] Her attempt to articulate this continuity of personality is not only evidenced in her turn to Plato's erotic moral psychology, but also in her sustained attention to Freud's erotic "mechanism." Murdoch indicates her own motives by saying, "The self of psychoanalysis is certainly substantial enough."[83] She counters the atomistic self of the existentialist and analytic philosopher "because it ignores what appears at least to be a

[82]The criteria for sameness of person, on Murdoch's account, is not strict identity, but rather one of degrees to be found in the psychological continuities of an individual's personal history—the "densely coloured personally (or historically) owned stream of consciousness." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 223. Murdoch's project notably diverges from MacIntyre's at this point. Whereas Murdoch finds psychological continuity substantial enough for her purposes, MacIntyre finds it lacking. He maintains, "There is no way of *founding* my identity—or lack of it—on the psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self." Instead he argues, "The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character." MacIntyre turns here because he is concerned that "we have to be able to respond to the imputation of strict identity." *After Virtue*, 217.

A closer look, however, suggests that Murdoch and MacIntyre may not be as divergent as first appears. It is clear that the psychological accounts MacIntyre has in mind are those developed by "Empiricists, such as Locke or Hume," who "tried to give an account of personal identity solely in terms of psychological states or events." Ibid. On the other hand, Murdoch's psychological account is one fashioned after the self of psychoanalysis, which attends to the "continuous background with a life of its own." "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 343. And it is precisely this background that MacIntyre worries has been ignored by psychological state accounts. A distinction is needed here between psychological continuity accounts that ignore this background and psychological continuity accounts that do not ignore it. Murdoch turns to a psychoanalytic-psychological-account because it draws attention back to these background features, which MacIntrye is rightly concerned to highlight. Murdoch appreciates the psychoanalytic self because it returns attention to individual, personal histories (i.e., narratives) as morally significant. As she indicates, "There is of course a 'science' which concerns itself especially with the history of the individual: psychoanalysis." "The Idea of Perfection," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 320. From this vantage, no significant difference remains between Murdoch and MacIntrye, especially when considering that Murdoch writes *narratives* to explore and understand individual moral quests.

[83]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 343.

sort of continuous background with a life of its own; and it is surely in the tissue of that life that the secrets of good and evil are to be found."[84] And this continuous background with a life (a largely erotic one) of its own is what Murdoch thinks is most in need of purification.

Techniques of Purification: Recovering the Practices

One of the major failures of modern moral philosophy, according to Murdoch, is that it has neglected to raise—for reasons already discussed[85]—a question of central importance to any adequate moral philosophy: how can individuals actually become morally better? Murdoch believes that the moral philosopher shirks her responsibility if she does not attempt to indicate techniques for moral purification. She addresses this problem in several different contexts. For example, in her essay, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," she suggests, "How can we make ourselves better? is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer."[86] In her essay, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" she makes several comments to this effect. She declares,

> The problem is to accommodate inside moral philosophy, and suggest methods of dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind. In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat.[87]

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[84]Ibid., 343-344. Notice Murdoch's careful word choice employed in the attempt to convey solidity of self: "substantial," "continuous," "background," "tissue." This is vintage Murdoch.

[85]These reasons primarily have to do with the misguided attempt to make moral philosophy neutral, objective, or scientific and with the loss of a continuous self.

[86]Ibid., 364.

[87]Ibid., 342.

Later she maintains, "If this is so, one of the main problems of moral philosophy might be formulated thus: are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly?"[88]

So what techniques of purification does Murdoch herself provide to remedy this lacunae? Answering this question directs the reader to the central area of moral concern for Murdoch: states of mind. On Murdoch's account, states of mind (i.e., consciousness) are the primary objects of purification, as they are "the fundamental mode or form of moral being."[89] The techniques of purification need to correspond to states of mind as objects, so she turns to meditative techniques such as prayer and contemplation:

> The technique which Plato thought appropriate to this situation I shall discuss later. Much closer and more familiar to us are the techniques of religion, of which the most widely practised is prayer. What becomes of such a technique in a world without God, and can it be transformed to supply at least part of the answer to our central question?[90]

Before moving on to the potentially more remote and unfamiliar discussion of the contemplation of the Good, Murdoch suggests that the traditional religious practice of prayer will serve as an introductory image of the more authentic technique of which Plato

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[88]Ibid., 344. For Murdoch's general dissatisfaction with those who neglect techniques of purification, one can also turn to her preference for Plato and Kierkegaard over Schopenhauer, primarily because the latter neglected the actual practice involved with virtue. Describing Schopenhauer, she claims, "His 'impersonal study' might be compared with the experience of someone who imagines his spiritual understanding is increased by reading books about eastern philosophy. The *practice*, the exercise itself, is absent." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 176.

[89]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 171.

[90]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 344. Presumably the technique Murdoch will "discuss later" is the pure contemplation of the Good that does not produce the false consolations that a personal God does.

was a champion. Murdoch specifically defines what she means by prayer: "Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love."[91] Murdoch's conceives of prayer as a loving focus of thought on God, and she believes that focusing one's loving attention upon such an object can be a powerful source of purified moral energy. It is important to notice that Murdoch does not shy away from the erotic nature of prayer. The object of attention is a source of energy precisely because prayer is a form of *love*. Hence, Murdoch asserts,

> That God, attended to, is a powerful source of (often good) energy is a psychological fact. It is also a psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps (I will discuss this later) the idea of goodness itself."[92]

Prayer is a crucial technique of purification, on Murdoch's account, as it can provide a way to counteract the "powerful egocentric mechanism" that characterizes the "empirical limitations of personality."[93]

Murdoch adopts prayer as a significant purification technique because states of mind are at stake. By "states of mind," Murdoch is concerned with the sorts of things that we typically dwell on, including the continual objects of our attention, what we daydream, our fantasies, what narratives we repeat to ourselves about others, and the habitual patterns of thinking into which we fall.[94] On Murdoch's account, each of these

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[91]Ibid.

[92]Ibid., 345.

[93]Ibid., 344

[94]Murdoch recognizes the deep moral significance of habitually narrated scenarios, both personal and cultural. These narratives structure our lives and shape our vision of the world in manifold and subtle ways. They often take on a life of their own

areas is a crucial place of moral formation and transformation, and they need to be attended to as morally significant.[95] Murdoch asserts, "There is nothing odd or mystical about this, nor about the fact that our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends

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and run automatically (i.e., mechanically), compelling certain reactions and eliciting certain emotions. An important technique for moral transformation, then, is the re-narration of destructive narratives. It is helpful in this context to stipulate a distinction between meditation and contemplation. Let meditation stand as an active attempt to internalize a set of beliefs or narratives. Let contemplation, on the other hand, stand as a passive attempt to still the mind to increase one's awareness. The technique of re-narration depends on the coordination of both contemplation and meditation. Insofar as one needs to become aware of harmful narratives, something like contemplation is needed; and insofar as one needs to internalize a new narrative, something like meditation is needed.

Nussbaum helpfully discusses culturally inherited narratives in relation to emotion. She suggests, "Instead, we internalize culturally narrated scenarios that give us the dimensions, pace, and structure of the emotion. And these scenarios are then enacted in our own lives, as we cast ourselves and others in the roles created by them. This account leads to a new appreciation of the role that literary narrative might play in moral philosophy, as indispensable to a full understanding of one of its most central elements—but also to an understanding of some ways in which the power of conventional narrative might deform human relationships," "*The Therapy of Desire*," 508. Nussbaum illumines four aspects of narrative with particular clarity: 1) narratives play an important role in structuring the emotions; 2) narratives are culturally inherited; 3) narratives are internalized scenarios that are then enacted in life; and 4) narratives can be the source of flourishing or deformed human relationships. Murdoch and Nussbaum rightly draw attention to the moral significance and seriousness of these narrated scenarios. I suspect that a similar recognition of the moral significance of narratives is behind Stanley Hauerwas's warning to Christians about the powerful, imagination-shaping effect of Murdoch's novels. He cautions, "Indeed, I wonder whether we Christians should even refrain from reading her novels, since they so powerfully form our imagination, urging us to see our lives in her terms. . . . Whether or not it is good for the Christian imagination to have that [Christian] art renarrated in a manner that may make the Christian understanding of creation unintelligible for us is therefore no mere idle issue. . . . Her novels, even more than her philosophy, become a temptation for us, since being trained through them we lose our ability to imagine any other world," "Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get Through Them If God Does Not Exist?" in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 201, 208.

[95]Murdoch would affirm the biblical insight that one must, "Take every *thought* captive" (II Cor 10:5), though not, as St. Paul asserts, "to the Lordship of Christ."

partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention. 'Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.'"[96] Practically this might mean contemplating the love of God displayed in the passion of Christ instead of stewing over and rehearsing an insult given by an habitually annoying acquaintance. Instead of fantasizing, after the fact, about all the one-line retorts with which one could have responded, gaining a sense of satisfaction due to the assertion of self, a conscious moral pilgrim could arrest these thoughts and meditate upon one's own faults. Murdoch contends that this sort of arrest and redirection of one's thought life is something that should be done deliberately, systematically, and habitually to encourage better states of mind.

Murdoch believes that, in general, the moral life should be understood as the progressive purification of Eros. As a technique for redirecting our loves (i.e., our habitual objects of attention), prayer is an important practice for the reorientation of an energy that is naturally selfish. It is extremely significant that on Murdoch's model one redirects Eros, rather than uprooting it altogether. This position puts her at odds with those who offer therapies for the soul that attempt to eliminate Eros entirely.[97] Indeed, according to Murdoch's Platonic philosophical anthropology, we are naturally and ineradicably attached, erotic creatures. This anthropology leads to a corresponding

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[96]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 345. Murdoch quotes this biblical passage from Philippians 4:8 (KJV).

[97]This position is best exemplified by the Stoic school.

psychological insight of great importance. If we are essentially erotic, the attempt to eradicate all Eros or passion to reach some ideal state of *apatheia*, is a mistaken model of soul therapy. Eros, as an energy of the soul, will inevitably attach to something; therefore, the attempt to uproot Eros merely leads to the sublimation of desire, not its elimination. As an alternative therapy Murdoch suggests, "[W]hen an attachment seems painful or bad it is most readily displaced by another attachment, which an attempt at attention can encourage."[98] Murdoch's solution is not to get rid of Eros, but to direct it to its proper object. Murdoch's commentary on Plato and Freud is worth quoting at length here:

> Both thinkers share the important idea of the soul (mind) as an organic totality, strongly internally related and with a limited available material. 'Anyone who knows anything of the mental life of human beings is aware that hardly anything is more difficult for them than to give up a pleasure they have once tasted. Really we never can relinquish anything, we only exchange one thing for something else. When we appear to give something up, all we really do is to adopt a substitute.' (*The Relation of the Creative Writer to Day-Dreaming, Collected Papers*, vol. IV.) Plato would agree. Never has a philosopher more clearly indicated that salvation concerns the whole soul: the soul must be saved entire by the redirection of its energy away from selfish fantasy toward reality. Plato does not imagine that dialectic can save us, and indeed it will not be possible, unless the whole soul, including its indestructible baser part, is in harmony.[99]

Murdoch also agrees that when Eros gives up one thing, it adopts a substitute. Thus, the best model of therapy for the soul is to find worthy objects of love that generate the right sort of energy.[100] And it is certainly psychologically intelligible to think that a particular underlying love can bring order and harmony to the soul.

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[98]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 345.

[99]Murdoch, "The Fire and the Sun," 419.

[100]Perhaps Murdoch's notion of energy here could be clarified by speaking of it in terms of the *emotions*.

This passage is also revealing about Murdoch's interpretation of Plato and the position she adopts. She reads Plato as offering a psychic harmony model of the relationship between the parts of the soul, as opposed to a self-mastery model. A psychic harmony model emphasizes the integration of the various parts of the soul, whereas a self-mastery model focuses on the rational domination, and in some cases even the elimination of the lower parts of the soul (spirited and appetitive).[101] Anne-Marie Bowery helpfully defines both models: "The self-mastery model regards the *logistikon*, the rational part of the soul, as the highest part of the soul. Ideally, it controls the spirited and appetitive parts of the soul. The self-mastery model seeks to minimize the influence of the appetitive and emotional dimensions of experience."[102] Defining the harmony model, Bowery suggests, "Rather than subordinating the appetites to the rule of reason, the harmony model integrates the different parts of the soul into cooperative accord. The harmony model does not deny that the appetites and emotions can distract us from

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[101]This issue could be recast in distinctly Platonic terms by asking whether the lover or the non-lover is best. Indeed, Phaedrus and Socrates take up this very question in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates, of course, ultimately arguing for the lover. Ferrari also paints a portrait of Plato as one who is concerned with psychic harmony. He says, "Socrates achieves an integrated account of the conflicting impulses in the soul, learning from and harmonizing all its voices. That psychic harmony should be the philosophic ideal comes as no surprise to any reader of the *Republic*." *Listening to the Cicadas*, 140.

[102]Anne-Marie Bowery, *A Philosophic Muse: Plato's Socrates as Narrator*, (in progress), 291. Bowery claims that, in the *Republic*, Socrates presents each of these as possible models to his interlocutors. She argues that on the dramatic level these two models are left in tension, but on the narrated level, Socrates should be read as modeling the harmony model. She argues, "However, the narrative observations that Socrates makes about himself tell a more nuanced story about the role of the emotions and appetites in the philosophical life. In these self-disclosing comments, Socrates does not denigrate or deny the emotional aspects of his experience. Socrates, in contrast to the other characters in the dialogue, exhibits a balanced model of how one should respond to the emotional dimensions of human experience. The emotions shape Socrates' philosophic practice both on the level of his internal search for self-knowledge and on the external level as he seeks to draw others to the philosophical life." Ibid., 292-293.

philosophical pursuits. However, it offers a different model for managing their undeniable presence in our lives."[103]

Murdoch adopts an erotic psychic harmony model of moral therapy, whereas the Stoic tradition, for example, adopts an a-erotic self-mastery model.[104] For Murdoch, the ideal is to reach harmony of the soul through loving the right object. For the Stoic school, the ideal is the elimination of Eros toward a purely rational self-mastery. Murdoch assumes, with Plato and Freud, that the soul does not admit of tidy divisions into parts, and therefore, the salvation of the soul concerns the entire soul working in harmony. The self-mastery model, on the other hand, assumes a distinct difference between the parts of the soul, and therefore, can offer one part as tyrant over the other two parts. Bowery helpfully maintains, "Socrates expresses an affinity for a composite view of the soul, rather than a view of the soul that is strictly divided into parts (436a). This integrated view presents the soul working as a harmony, all together to achieve its aims and goals rather than a self-mastery model that has one part ruling over the other

[103]Ibid., 292.

[104]Scholars continue to be drawn to the a-erotic self-mastery model. Nussbaum, for instance, is deeply attracted by the Stoic attempt to remove Eros from human life, particularly as she believes that they correctly judge passionate love to be the source of many negative emotions inimical to human flourishing, emotions like rage, resentment, and envy. Despite its appeal, though, Nussbaum ultimately rejects the Stoic position because she thinks it is an inappropriate attempt to transcend our humanity, an attempt that would ultimately deprive us of what is properly human. She argues, "The bold Stoic attempt to purify social life of all its ills, rigorously carried through, ends by removing, as well, its finite humanity, its risk-taking loyalty, its passionate love. Abandoning the zeal for absolute perfection as inappropriate to the life of a finite being, abandoning the thirst for punishment and self-punishment that so frequently accompanies that zeal, the education I recommend looks with mercy at the ambivalent excellence and passion of a human life." *Therapy of Desire*, 510.

parts of the soul."[105] Murdoch's therapy, then, is fundamentally about the purification of Eros through the redirection of our loves, not their ultimate suppression.

Returning to techniques of purification, we have seen that Murdoch offered prayer as an initial possibility for redirecting one's loves. However, she takes it as an unargued axiom that God does not exist, or at the very least, that belief in God is no longer culturally viable. So although Murdoch is concerned with prayer, she is concerned with it insofar as some secular equivalent to it might be found for the non-religious. She asks, "[C]an those who are not religious believers still conceive of profiting by such an activity?"[106] She also queries, "Is there, as it were, a substitute for prayer, that most profound and effective of religious techniques?"[107] Murdoch thinks so:

> I think there is something analogous to prayer, though it is something difficult to describe, and which the higher subtleties of the self can often falsify; I am not here thinking of any quasi-religious meditative technique, but of something which belongs to the moral life of the ordinary person. The idea of contemplation is hard to understand and maintain in a world increasingly without sacraments and ritual and in which philosophy has (in many respects rightly) destroyed the old substantial conception of the self.[108]

Murdoch offers contemplation as the secular substitute for prayer, however unclear her notion may be. What does seem fairly clear, though, is that Murdoch intends to substitute an impersonal Good for a personal God as the object of attention. So it may be that prayer, for Murdoch, refers to the loving attention directed toward a personal God, whereas, contemplation refers to the loving attention directed toward the impersonal, yet

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[105]Bowery, *A Philosophic Muse*, 296.

[106]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 344.

[107]Ibid., 356.

[108]Ibid.

magnetic attraction of an impersonal Good (i.e., the attraction of perfection). Whatever Murdoch may mean, it is clear that she thinks the psychological structure of loving attention is analogous in both cases, and indicates an important area for moral reflection. I will discuss the specific difference between God and the Good in the next chapter. For now, let us move on to a collection of different techniques Murdoch suggests.

In her essay, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," Murdoch is again concerned with "devices for the purification of states of mind,"[109] that is, with any technique that might alter "consciousness in the direction of unselfishness."[110] To this end she turns toward several potential sources of unselfing. Since I have already treated the nature and structure of unselfing above, I do not want to dwell too long on these sources; however, some brief comments are in order. The sources of unselfing that Murdoch identifies (all taken from her reading of Plato) are natural beauty, artistic beauty (not strictly Platonic), *technai* (τέχναι)[111], and the Good. Murdoch calls the first three of these "not only an exercise in virtue, they might be thought of as introductory images of the spiritual life." The basic idea linking all of these together is that each one transcends the self and exercises a type of *authority* that may resist "absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness."[112] Therefore, these have the capacity of pulling individuals outside their ordinary egoistic consciousness. They can play the role of

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[109]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 368.

[110]Ibid., 369.

[111]Murdoch somewhat idiosyncratically defines theses as, "the sciences, crafts, and intellectual disciplines excluding the arts." She indicates that mathematics was Plato's *techne* of choice, whereas for her, it is learning a language. Ibid., 373.

[112]Ibid., 370.

training in virtue, as they each demand the suppression of self in one way or another. How, we might wonder, does this relate to techniques for purification? Murdoch argues that in a normal acquaintance with natural beauty, artistic beauty, *technai* (τέχναι), and the Good, humans can, at times and in spite of themselves, be pulled outside of themselves to the sudden awareness of a reality that transcends them. However, people can also deliberately make a practice of attending to these realities in a continual attempt to surrender themselves to a reality that exists independently of them. Speaking of natural beauty, Murdoch suggests, "And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care."[113] So the specific technique of purification that Murdoch offers here is the deliberate and continual attempt to see that which is other than the self in these other realities. The idea is that a loving, patient, and just attention to (i.e., contemplation of) these other realities can initiate a better quality of consciousness, primarily because these realities are potential sites of self-transcendence.

Another significant technique of purification surfaces in Murdoch's discussion of M and D in "The Idea of Perfection." In this famous example, Murdoch describes a situation in which a mother-in-law originally possesses a negative set of normative epithets for her daughter-in-law for whom she feels hostility and disdain. Murdoch relays,

> M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always

[113]Ibid., 369.

> tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him.[114]

Murdoch argues that M is "imprisoned" within this "fixed picture" of D.[115] As a moral thought experiment, Murdoch wants us to imagine a case in which it is morally desirable for M to change her view of D. Assuming that M's view is not something that can be changed by a simple decision to think differently about D, how might M begin to alter her opinion? What sort of moral work can be commended to M as a way of seeing D justly and lovingly? Murdoch suggests,

> However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. . . . D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.[116]

The moral advice Murdoch offers her moral pilgrim is a two-pronged strategy: 1) meditate upon one's own faults particularly as they relate to the unloving vision in question; and 2) substitute a positive, yet related set of normative epithets for the original

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[114]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 312.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Ibid., 313.

negative set.[117] These are two purification techniques that can be deliberately cultivated and practiced as part of a meditative[118] approach to the alteration of consciousness.

One additional context in which Murdoch speaks of techniques of purification is in her sustained attention to consciousness in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Murdoch further clarifies the techniques she believes to be appropriate for the purification of consciousness (i.e., states of mind) in her unorthodox comparison of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological reduction to Katsuki Sekida's (a Zen thinker) notion of pure consciousness. Murdoch explains that both Husserl and Sekida are concerned with the idea of pure consciousness or pure cognition; however, the methods or techniques used to arrive at it are radically at odds.[119] Husserl conceives of the journey toward pure consciousness as a fairly straightforward intellectual or reflective move. The setting aside or bracketing of the ego in order to get back to pure phenomenon is a philosophical-intellectual endeavor. Describing Husserl, Sekida argues, "He carries out this reduction in his head, by changing the attitude of his mind, and seems

[117]Describing what is happening in this example, Murdoch suggests, "I have chosen to describe it simply in terms of the substitution of one set of normative epithets for another," Ibid.

[118]I am using meditation here as an active effort of the mind to internalize a set of beliefs or alternative narrated scenarios (cultural or personal).

[119]Murdoch contrasts Sekida's critique of Husserl with the sort of critique that Wittgenstein would level. She asserts, "Wittgenstein would attack such a programme by pointing out the impossibility of contextless knowledge." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 240. Murdoch is likely thinking about her oft-repeated formulation of Wittgenstein as making the private parasitic upon the public. We access the inner through the fixed, stable, public concepts we learn in public contexts. We thus are prevented from reaching an absolute datum where anything transcendent is reduced or bracketed. There is no pure phenomenon because language remains transcendent as a mediating structure.

to suggest that it can be done without much difficulty."[120] Sekida, on the other hand, conceives of the suspension of the ego as a long spiritual and moral process, something only attained at the end of a lengthy ascetic path. Murdoch asserts, "Husserl's 'purity' is that of a skilled intellectual. Sekida's is that of an enlightened individual who has had an 'arduous training' aimed at overcoming his egoistic illusions."[121] The ability to bracket the ego is not a reflectively-acquired intellectual skill, for Sekida, but a hard won state that results from spiritual and moral discipline. Murdoch sides with Sekida and understands this as the repetition of a deeply Platonic insight. She explains, "Here one cannot separate cognition from an idea of truth as something reached by a spiritual or moral path. This would be, in general terms, a Platonic view."[122] Murdoch's point with regard to techniques of purification is that attaining a purer or better quality of consciousness is achieved through a way of life that includes ascesis and deep meditation. She specifically highlights Sekida's discussion of zazen. Murdoch quotes,

> In zazen [the Zen discipline of sitting in meditation] we effect it not by a simple change of mental attitude, but by hard discipline of body and mind, going through absolute Samadhi [state of deep meditation], in which time, space and delusive thoughts fall away. We root out the emotionally and intellectually habituated mode of consciousness, and then find that a pure state of consciousness appears.[123]

As she did with prayer and contemplation, Murdoch highlights zazen because she is concerned with those techniques for the purification of states of mind.

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[120]Quoted in Ibid.

[121]Ibid., 242.

[122]Ibid.

[123]Ibid., 240.

Murdoch does not turn to Sekida as a means of developing an alternative Husserlian method of arriving at pure essences for the sake of founding a science, which could then be the basis of all knowledge.[124] She instead wants to indicate that every act of consciousness is inextricably moral; thus she continually insists on the importance of speaking in terms of the *quality* of consciousness. One cannot, therefore, place value outside philosophical descriptions of mind. Murdoch argues, "It is impossible to describe mind philosophically without including its moral mobility, the sense in which any situation is individualized by being pierced by moral considerations, by being given a particular moral colour or orientation."[125] Our moment-to-moment awareness, in other words, is always "a process in which value (moral colour) is inherent."[126] Therefore, every activity of mind, including cognizing (i.e., seeing) the world rightly, is a moral task from beginning to end and requires moral purification.

The particular practices or techniques of purification[127] Murdoch offers are highly suggestive of why she finds Plato a better moral source and authority than Aristotle; these practices are concerned with states of mind, which are, on her account, importantly different from dispositions. Murdoch defines a disposition as "a general tendency to

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[124]Ibid., 250.

[125]Ibid., 241.

[126]Ibid., 250.

[127]Although I have not touched on it, following Plato, Murdoch considers philosophy itself—understood as dialectic or *elenchus*—as a spiritual practice/discipline. Speaking of Plato, she explains, "He was concerned throughout with how people can change their lives so as to become good. The best, though not the only, method for this change is *dialectic*, that is, philosophy regared as a spiritual discipline. . . . In the *Sophist* (230 c), dialectic is described as a purgation of the soul by [. . . *elenchus* . . .], argument, refutation, cross-questioning." "The Fire and the Sun," 404.

think and act in a certain way,"[128] whereas, by state of mind, she means the general quality of moment-to-moment, *present* awareness, where quality is the prevailing (moral) color through which one sees the world. Murdoch presents states of mind as something not reducible to dispositions, something more like a "continuous *sense of orientation*."[129] Murdoch explains, "states of mind, for better or worse, colour surroundings. . . . To continue the colour metaphor, within any life there is general or prevailing colour, and also local colour, and both may be spoken of in terms of states of consciousness which are not reducible to dispositions."[130]

Murdoch is not attempting to return to some naïve account of mind where we have unmediated, instant access to atomic mental states. In fact she asserts, "Much conscious activity is habitual. Here a close scrutiny of moment-to-moment awareness would yield no relevant information, one would have to step back a little and look at larger areas."[131] She concludes that this "path might lead back to a dispositional account of mind or states of mind."[132] Murdoch would not want to deny the insights of dispositional accounts, but she is also compelled to include an all important "yet":

> Yet this may still leave one with the familiar feeling of having lost something. One returns to the most obvious and most mysterious notion of all, that this present moment is the whole of one's reality, and this at least is unavoidable. (The weirdness of being human.) Then one may start again reflecting upon the

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[128]Ibid., 264.

[129]Ibid., 260.

[130]Ibid., 261.

[131]Ibid., 257.

[132]Ibid.

> moment-to-moment reality of consciousness and how this is, after all, where we live. The concept of 'experience' is more wide-ranging and more free.[133]

With this "yet," Murdoch attempts to reassert the vital importance of the present moment of awareness, including the all-important notion of the *quality* of that awareness, which the wholly dispositional account of mind, with its focus on action, tends to neglect.

Murdoch is at pains to develop an account of the mind that cannot be *entirely* reduced to a dispositional account in which the philosophical concept of consciousness (i.e., present awareness) plays a fundamental role. In one of the most important, philosophically condensed passages in Murdoch's corpus, she explains the nature of her overall return to consciousness and how the ubiquity of value expresses itself in every moment and aspect of awareness:

> Philosophically, one has to do battle against an excessive use of the idea of a 'disposition' (a general tendency to think and act in a certain way). Of course any account of virtue or of human frailty must include reference to good and bad dispositions and habits; but these are not concepts to which everything can be or ought to be reduced. A purely hypothetical or dispositional account of the mind of a moral agent omits something essential in a way analogous to the omission of the essential in a phenomenalist analysis of perception. What is omitted is what the novelist talks so much about, and what we all know about when we are not being misled by theories. The temptation to simplify by saying that 'he has a bad quality, or state, of consciousness' *means* 'he is likely to commit a bad action', must be resisted. This is important not only on empirical grounds, but because we need the concept of consciousness to understand how morality is cognitive; how there is no ubiquitous gulf fixed between fact and value, intellect and will. Reflection on this concept enables us to display how deeply, subtly and in detail, values, the various qualities and grades between good and bad, 'seep' through our moment-to-moment experiences. This argument concerns our ability to see that value, valuing, is not a specialised activity of the will, but an apprehension of the world, an aspect of cognition, which is everywhere.[134]

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[133]Ibid.

[134] Ibid., 265.

Murdoch aptly shows the connection between the neglect of consciousness and the forgetfulness of the ubiquity of value that shades every moment of human awareness, including every cognition. If Murdoch is correct, then there can be no ultimate separation of fact and value, intellect and will, moral and intellectual virtue. Murdoch's return to consciousness, her emphasis on the purification of states of mind, and her identification of the particular techniques for that purification, all serve to reveal the ubiquity of value everywhere in human life. For Murdoch, Plato is, therefore, a better moral authority than Aristotle, because Plato's is a scheme where the Good (value) is at the center of his account from beginning to end, and where everything else is seen in its light. In addition, Murdoch's emphasis on states of mind as the background to action—where the fundamental moral task is conceived as their purification—makes Plato a more likely hero than Aristotle, where the tendency of Aristotelians (at least in Murdoch's purview) is to focus on dispositional accounts.

The Genealogical Project

After the intervening discussion of Murdoch's retrieval of a Platonic conception of consciousness and the various techniques for the purification of states of mind, which Murdoch argues should again play a central role in any worthy philosophical treatment of ethics, we are in better position to understand the nature of Murdoch's project as a genealogical endeavor. At the end of chapter two, I applied Taylor's insights about historical retrievals to Murdoch's genealogical project. I argued that genealogies have at least two fundamental features: 1) *liberation* from a dominant philosophical picture and, in some cases, 2) *restoration* of a previous picture misguidedly dismissed. Following

Taylor, I want to add a third significant feature: the restoration of *practices* that a previous picture was meant to inform.[135]

In Murdoch's case, we have seen that her first act was a dramatic work of liberation from the dominant current view. Her second act was a restoration of the misguidedly dismissed picture in which consciousness was a philosophically legitimate area for ethical reflection. Indeed, Murdoch's genealogical project as a whole should be read as a continuous attempt to develop a suitable philosophical view of consciousness as the fundamental form of moral being.[136] In her desire to provide us with a suitable vocabulary of consciousness, she returns to Plato, attempting to restore his picture of the self as an essentially erotic moral pilgrim. At the same time, Murdoch's restoration of Plato's erotic conception of consciousness is meant to restore intelligibility to the significant practices or techniques for the purification of states of mind. With an adequate vocabulary of consciousness, we can again understand the practices of purification that it informs. So, Murdoch's project exhibits three fundamental features characteristic of genealogical endeavors: liberation from a dominant view, restoration of a previous view, and restoration of practices no longer intelligible on the dominant view.

Murdoch's *entire* ethical-philosophical project is a grand attempt to provide a rich vocabulary for consciousness: a vocabulary needed to *think* deeply enough about ethics and the nature of moral progress and needed to reflect, in sufficiently nuanced ways, the

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[135]Taylor, "Philosophy and its History," 22.

[136]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 171.

particularity and complexity of moral being.[137] Murdoch insists, "For purposes of ethics, and indeed in general, we lack a suitable philosophical view of 'consciousness' and 'the self.'"[138] Her intellectual work is meant to rectify this situation, and, as the next chapter demonstrates, the most significant dimension of an adequate vocabulary of consciousness, for her, is connected with the richness of Plato's central explanatory image (i.e., metaphor): the Good.

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[137]Although I cannot make the detailed argument here, I also maintain that this applies to her novelistic project as well. There is a deep unity evident in her two-pronged intellectual project, both philosophic and novelistic.

[138]Ibid., 84.

CHAPTER FIVE

Act 3 – An Alternative Grammar: Recovering a Vocabulary of the Good

A great difficulty in understanding Murdoch's philosophy is knowing how to approach her view of the Good. This difficulty exists not only because of the centrality and richness of the Good in her thought, but also because of Murdoch's caginess with respect to it. Sometimes Murdoch appears to be a "Platonic pragmatist,"[1] for her argument strategy often seems to take the form of 'as if' statements.[2] Her approach to the Good could be called a transcendental linguistic approach, by which I mean that the

[1]This formulation is used by Franklin I. Gamwell, admittedly with a different meaning from mine here, to describe Murdoch. "On the Loss of Theism," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 180. Sami Pihlstrom also classifies Murdoch as a pragmatist. *Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

[2]Indeed, Murdoch explicitly argues in this fashion early in her career, not with respect to the Good, but in relation to a different "metaphysical" entity, the self. "Thinking and Language," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 39, 41. She argues in this manner to avoid being saddled with a too "ontological flavour." Speaking about the "concept of reality," she indicates, "This is a place where the word 'being' is also used, which I prefer to avoid. The language of ontology may divide the argument from ordinary testable experience just at the point where it is most important to join it." *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 433. Instead she wants to be understood as positing "a necessary regulative idea, about which it makes no sense to ask, is it true or false that it is *so*?" "Thinking and Language," 39. It is 'as if' the Good were there, which in turn enables us to make certain features of our existence both visible and intelligible (i.e., discussable). In "Above the Gods," Murdoch puts the 'as if' formula in the mouth of Acastos. Timonax address him: "You don't believe that Zeus is always watching!" And Acastos responds, "No, I mean it's *as if*! It's like we're (*expressive gesture*) *immersed*." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 508. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch maintains, "Other Platonic imagery (for instance concerning the soul) should also be understood (as Plato reminds us from time to time) as hermeneutic 'as if'. These are instructive *pictures*." (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 10.

structure of her arguments often run something like: "If we want to be permitted to say X, Y, and Z, then we need to posit the Good as the necessary condition for the possibility of rendering that saying intelligible."[3] However, one cannot simply and easily settle the issue of Murdoch's relation to the Good in terms of her being a Platonic pragmatist. By 1969, she will emphatically assert that her approach "is not a sort of pragmatism or a philosophy of 'as if'."[4]

Nor is it the case that Murdoch can easily be identified as a straightforward moral realist, as some commentators have tried to do.[5] On this usage, a moral realist is one who believes in the independent ontological existence of the Good.[6] According to this view,

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[3]This structure is analogous to Kant's necessary conditions for the possibility of knowledge. Maria Antonaccio argues that Murdoch intends to demonstrate "that the good is neither optional nor relative, but exists necessarily as the 'absolute background' or fundamental condition of human knowledge and existence." *Picturing the Human*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

[4]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 360.

[5]Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997), 76, 84-85; Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, "Introduction," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, xiii; Gamwell, "On the Loss of Theism," 174-176; Joseph Malikail, "Iris Murdoch on the Good, God and Religion," http://www.ul.ie/~philos/vol4/murdoch.html. Elsewhere Antonaccio actually makes the point that Murdoch *cannot* be regarded as a straightforward moral realist. She maintains, "Murdoch is a 'reflexive' rather than a straightforward metaphysical realist." *Picturing the Human*, 118.

[6]In one place, Antonaccio and Schweiker define a moral realist in similar terms: "Against those forms of ethics that insist that morality is something we invent to serve social purposes and that the 'Good' is likewise a matter of utility, Murdoch has insisted on the *reality* of the Good. As a moral realist, she argues for the ontological necessity of the Good in ways reminiscent of arguments for the existence of God." "Introduction," xiii. This interpretation of Murdoch as a moral realist is strained not only for reasons I will suggest below, but also because it misconstrues Murdoch's handling of the ontological argument, particularly ignoring the significance of her division between the logical argument and the argument from moral *experience*. (N.B., Antonaccio has a

the Good is a reality that exists objectively as an independent entity separate from personal opinion, emotive exclamation, or subjective preference. As an independent reality, the Good guarantees that moral value is not merely a function of human choice—where humans *create* or *invent* value[7]—but rather an objective reality existing over against the knowing subject, about which it is possible to *discover* truths. And indeed, the chief enemy at which Murdoch aims is the non-cognitivist tradition where moral claims are not truth-apt, but rather the will becomes the creator of value. In an important moment in one of her Platonic dialogues, Murdoch puts her own sentiments into the mouth of Acastos, a serious questioning youth: "after all morality *feels* more like

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much subtler reading of Murdoch's moral realism than this quotation would suggest. See footnote 11 below. She also offers a much more nuanced interpretation of Murdoch's use of the ontological argument than it would suggest. *Picturing the Human*, 123-129.) When the centrality of the argument from general moral experience is given its due place in Murdoch's handling of the ontological argument, strictly speaking, it is no longer accurate to call it an "ontological" argument. Antonaccio and Schweiker follow Murdoch in continuing to refer to this as an ontological argument. However, it should rather be called a transcendental argument for the existence of the Good. It is a transcendental argument because its structure runs something like: "For our ordinary and general experience of degrees of goodness to be possible—which is something 'we can all recognize and which can be illustrated in many different kinds of human activity'—then the Good is the necessary condition for that possibility." Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 400. Additionally, Murdoch thinks it is impossible to "think away" our *experience* of scales of value, and therefore concludes that the Good is necessary. She claims, "moral value . . . [is] something (uniquely impossible to be thought away from human experience." Ibid., 396. This is the transcendental necessity of the Good and the rationale behind Murdoch's claim, "We gain the concept of this *unique form of necessity* from our unavoidable experience of good and evil." Ibid., 406. Indeed, this is why Murdoch calls this argument "an argument from morality not from design." Ibid., 396. Of course, Murdoch is technically mistaken when she says "not from design," as no one interprets the Ontological proof as a cosmological argument, but the point is that her interpretation is as an argument from moral *experience*.

[7]John Mackie is a defender of the view that we invent morality, rather than discover it. *Inventing Right and Wrong*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1977).

discovering something than just inventing it."[8] Indeed Murdoch disagrees with the non-cognitivist that we merely invent or project our values onto the world. However, when pressed as to the ontological status of the Good, Murdoch balks. She asserts, "If someone says, 'Do you then believe that the Idea of the Good exists?' I reply, "No, not as people used to think that God existed.'"[9]

The obvious follow-up question is "How, then, do you believe that the Idea of the Good exists?" At this point Murdoch responds, "All one can do is to appeal to certain areas of experience, pointing out certain features, and using suitable metaphors and inventing suitable concepts where necessary to make these features visible. No more, and no less, than this is done by the most empirically minded of linguistic philosophers."[10] Murdoch's comment only complicates the question as to whether she is or is not a moral realist.[11] But it also provides us with an important hint as to how one

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[8]Murdoch, "Above the Gods," 506.

[9]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 360-361. Her ambivalence on this issue is readily identifiable elsewhere in this essay: "What is formulated here seems unlike an 'as if' or an 'it works'. Of course one must avoid here, as in the case of God, any heavy material connotation of the misleading word 'exist'. Equally, however, a purely subjective conviction of certainty, which could receive a ready psychological explanation, seems less than enough." Ibid., 351-352.

[10]Ibid., 361.

[11]The vast diversity of views as to what constitutes moral realism also makes Murdoch's status a particularly difficult question. Because Antonaccio writes with the greatest clarity and insight about the issue of Murdoch's moral realism, perhaps it is most helpful to follow her division of moral realisms into three different positions along with the definitions she stipulates. She distinguishes between classical, pragmatic, and reflexive moral realism. Antonaccio maintains that classical moral realism attempts to "ground the truth-status of moral claims in a principle of knowledge *external* to individual consciousness. Classical realism accomplishes this by claiming that values are conceived as ontologically real and are discoverable by human reason. On this view, moral values are grounded in some conception of the objectively real, such as the order of

ought to approach Murdoch's understanding of the Good: as the invention of a suitable metaphor with the hope of making certain features of our moral existence visible.

The reader will recall that Murdoch is embarked on the philosophical-ethical project of providing "rich and fertile conceptual schemes which help us to reflect upon and understand the nature of moral progress and moral failure."[12] She believes that we

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nature." She defines pragmatic moral realism as the attempt to "ground the truth of moral claims in the intersubjective agreement among participants in a language game or form of life. On this view, an objective standard of moral judgment is found in the consensus provided by 'intellectual authority-relations' within a moral and linguistic community." Antonaccio is thinking of views such as Sabina Lovibond's in *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). Defining a reflexive moral realist, the view she assigns to Murdoch, she maintains, "In contrast to both approaches, reflexive realism affirms the truth-status of moral claims by adopting a starting point *internal* to consciousness and looking for an objective standard through the medium of consciousness itself. That is, reflexive realists argue that the search for an objective standard of truth and value can only proceed by means of the first-person standpoint. The good is discovered through the medium of consciousness as it reflects on itself; yet at the same time, the act of reflexivity reveals the good to be a perfection or 'higher condition' that transcends or surpasses consciousness." *Picturing the Human*, 119. While Antonaccio's contention that Murdoch is a reflexive realist is an admirably clear and accurate theoretical reconstruction of Murdoch's position, it tends to minimize her more Wittgensteinian instincts which veer away from realism debates. Sami Pihlstrom contends, "Philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein often regard the disputes between realism and its alternatives as so deeply misguided (or nonsensical) that they seldom even use these notions in their writings, whether ethical or non-ethical." *Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense*, 4-5. Murdoch is one of these philosophers. The reader will recall my discussion of Murdoch's anti-theory, including her scattered Wittgensteinian comments such as: "Wittgenstein says that 'What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*.' For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form." "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 97; and "There may be no deep structure. This is the lesson of Wittgenstein—and one which, incidentally, has not yet been taken enough to heart by those who want to reduce morality to a single formula." "Metaphysics and Ethics," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 74.

[12]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 336.

have lost the rich vocabulary necessary for making sense of the complexity of the human ethical situation. Murdoch's return to the Platonic Good, including the conceptual array in which that Good receives its meaning, is the core of her attempt to provide a rich central image that is rich enough for the task of picturing the moral life to ourselves.

The Good in Murdoch cannot be understood apart from its larger conceptual or grammatical field. In other words, to understand the moral framework Murdoch offers, of which the Good serves as the central ordering metaphor, we must explore the conceptual array of which that Good is a part. Only then we will be able to apprehend rightly the grammar of Murdoch's Good and be able to appreciate rightly the features of our moral existence that it makes visible. The proper approach to the Good in Murdoch is twofold: 1) to understand the Good as a rich explanatory metaphor without which our ethical wisdom would greatly suffer and 2) to recognize the Good as embedded within a wider conceptual array or interlocking system in which it takes on meaning. Murdoch is, in general, less concerned with meta-ethical questions about the ontological status of the Good and more concerned with the type of moral insight that a Platonic conceptual (metaphorical) array can provide the moral pilgrim.[13] Therefore, in order to display the grammar of Murdoch's Good, in this chapter I focus on four key contexts in which it comes to presentation: 1) the Good as explanatory metaphor; 2) the Good as perfection; 3) the Good's relation to Eros; and 4) the Good in contrast to God.

[13]This approach fits generally with her Wittgensteinian insights. Pihlstrom captures this point noting, "Murdoch advises us to turn our gaze from philosophical abstractions—or, in other words, from analytic metaethics—to the endless varieties of moral (forms of) life we engage in. It is here that her . . . Wittgensteinianism also becomes visible." *Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense*, 25.

The Good as Explanatory Metaphor

To understand Murdoch's use of the Platonic Good, it is important to heed her habitual way of speaking of it as an explanatory image or metaphor. She asserts, "The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections upon the moral life."[14] Notice her use of the terms "image" and "picture." Elsewhere she explains, "The central explanatory image which joins together the different aspects of the picture which I have been trying to exhibit is the concept of Good."[15] Again, speaking of the Good, she maintains, "Of course we are dealing with a metaphor, but with a very important metaphor and one which is not just a property of philosophy and not just a model."[16] And finally, alluding to the Good and to Plato, she promises, "The metaphors which I myself favour and the philosopher under whose banner I am fighting, I will make clear shortly."[17] Murdoch also connects her construal of the Good as a fundamental explanatory metaphor to Plato's own understanding of the Good, arguing that Plato himself "referred to many of his theories as 'myths.'"[18]

Murdoch's reference to the Good as an explanatory image or metaphor is not accidental nor is it merely a convenient way of speaking. It is deeply symptomatic of

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[14]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 361.

[15]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 375.

[16]Ibid., 377.

[17]Ibid., 364.

[18]Ibid., 377.

how she intends her readers to understand the status of the Good in her philosophy. To illuminate this status, I must briefly consider Murdoch's general understanding of metaphor. In "The Sovereignty of the Good" she argues that "we are creatures who use irreplaceable metaphors in many of our most important activities."[19] In "Thinking and Language," Murdoch indicates that metaphors are irreplaceable, claiming that individuals "naturally create metaphors in the context of certain kinds of attempt to describe."[20] In addition to being irreplaceable, Murdoch deems metaphor as a "mode of understanding."[21] She asks the reader to "consider here the role of language in illuminating situations. . . . From here we may see that the task of moral philosophers has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of the language, and enable it to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark."[22] Finally, in a passage that summarizes how metaphors aid understanding and illumination, Murdoch contends,

> Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition. . . . Philosophy in general, and moral philosophy in particular, has in the past often concerned itself with what it took to be our most important images, clarifying existing ones and developing new ones. . . . [I]t seems to me impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without resort to metaphor, since the concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance.[23]

So what are we to glean from Murdoch's scattered statements concerning metaphor? For Murdoch, the invention of metaphors is a central and irreplaceable human

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[19]Ibid.

[20]Murdoch, "Thinking and Language," 40.

[21]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 377.

[22]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 90.

[23]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 363.

activity needed for describing and illuminating certain, particularly opaque, regions of reality. Metaphors are modes of understanding, by which Murdoch means that they enable us to grasp, apprehend, or even bring order to certain dark situations or complex human realities. She argues that we must "think of conceptualizing rather as the activity of grasping, or reducing to order, our situations with the help of a language which is fundamentally metaphorical."[24] Murdoch insists that our ethical life in particular is an example *par excellence* of a region in which metaphors are fundamental to our ability rightly to describe, characterize, and explore its complexity.[25] Without metaphors

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[24]Murdoch, "Thinking and Language," 40. This statement continues: "this will operate against the world-language dualism which haunts us because we are afraid of the idealists. Seen from this point of view, thinking is not the using of *symbols* which designate absent *objects*, symbolizing and sensing being strictly divided from each other. Thinking is not designating at all, but rather understanding, grasping, 'possessing'." Murdoch's understanding of metaphor cannot ultimately be divorced from her understanding of the way language in general is related to the activity of thinking. Notice that on her view there is, strictly speaking, no unmediated or non-linguistic access to "the given." Nor is there a pure linguistic idealism that imprisons us within a system of signs. Murdoch maintains that we make use of linguistic tropes to explore, understand, and grasp the content of experience in its irreducible depth. She argues that if we attend properly to thought at work, we will see that thought is the continual interplay between a core of experience and the symbols through which we attempt to explore and grasp that experience. She suggests, "I spoke above of an 'experience', sensible in character, upon which the conceptualizing thought is at work—and such a core may often be detected. We know what it is like to try to recall a state of mind—it is *as if* there is something there the exact character of which we cannot yet quite descry. . . . If the 'truth' involved here cannot be even pictured in terms of correspondence, this is but another case of the breaking down of the dualism. And if it looks as if one approaches a sort of idealism here, it seems to me that that cannot be avoided." Ibid., 41. Perhaps it is best to characterize Murdoch as a linguistic idealist, but not of the absolute sort, as she insists on a core of experience that resists full submersion into the mere play of signs. An image of the Demiurge trying to bring order, via the forms, to recalcitrant matter suggests itself here. In this case, the recalcitrant matter would be our 'as if' core experience and our linguistic symbols would be the forms. The significance of recalcitrant matter in this image is that it resists or "overflows" the order imposed by the Demiurge. There is always some chaotic leftover or remainder.

[25]Concerning the special status of moral philosophy's particular need for metaphor, Murdoch asserts, "Philosophy in general, and moral philosophy in particular,

individuals would actually lose some of the subtlest tools they possess for apprehending the fullness of a moral situation. From this vantage, one can better see the significance of Murdoch's call for moral philosophers to extend the limits of language, as poets often do, through the invention of rich and fertile metaphors, which are fit for illuminating ethical existence. She maintains, "But great moral and political philosophers offer us new concepts with which to interpret the world, and they simplify because they are philosophers."[26]

Returning to the status of the Good in Murdoch's philosophy, we can now properly appreciate her references to it as an explanatory *metaphor*. Murdoch is a moral philosopher-poet, meaning that, first and foremost, her return to the Platonic Good is motivated by the desire to develop a sufficiently rich vocabulary (i.e., an interlocking system of concepts and metaphors), through which humans can picture the nature of their moral lives to themselves. Her construal of the virtues, what she many times calls secondary moral words,[27] also belongs here. She maintains that virtue (and vice) language is "important since they help to make certain potentially nebulous areas of

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has in the past often concerned itself with what it took to be our most important images, clarifying existing ones and developing new ones." "The Sovereignty of the Good," 363.

[26]Murdoch, "Vision and Choice," 83. Notice the two-way movement in moral philosophy Murdoch alludes to here. The moral philosopher is properly employed in the productive project of inventing concepts, *but also* in the critical project of simplification. Murdoch recognizes the importance of both; however, given the state of moral philosophy in her context, she tends to emphasize the need for the productive side in the face of its neglect of rich normative vocabularies, opting instead for "the most empty and general moral terms such as 'good' and 'right'." "The Idea of Perfection," 333.

[27]Secondary to the Good, that is. Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 317, 324, 333. Also see "Metaphysics and Ethics," 73; "Vision and Choice," 94; and "The Idea of Perfection," 305, where she speaks of "general moral words," "specialised concepts," and an "elaborate normative vocabulary" respectively.

experience more open to inspection."[28] Murdoch illustrates what is at stake by asking, "What is it like to be just?" She answers,

> We come to understand this as we come to understand the relationship between justice and the other virtues. Such a reflection requires and generates a rich and diversified vocabulary for naming aspects of goodness. It is a shortcoming of much contemporary moral philosophy that it eschews discussion of the separate virtues, preferring to proceed directly to some sovereign concept such as sincerity, or authenticity, or freedom, thereby imposing, it seems to me, an unexamined and empty idea of unity, and impoverishing our moral language in an important area.[29]

Murdoch argues for a rich, thick, complicated moral language of the Good, surrounded by the virtues, to counter its impoverishment within the moral philosophy of her contemporaries. She does this because an impoverishment of moral language corresponds to an impoverishment of moral insight, as language illumines complex regions and is that through which we explore and grasp the reality of our ethical existence.

Therefore, concerning the status of the Good, Murdoch, quite frankly prefers to downplay the question of whether or not the Good is "real," in any strict sense of the term. Instead, she is much more interested in asking whether her alternative grammar of the Good does a better job of supplying moral insight. As a philosopher-poet, Murdoch is principally concerned with the Good's status as a deeply penetrating explanatory metaphor. Now I turn to the conceptual array in which that grammar comes to presentation.

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[28]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 346.

[29]Ibid., 347.

The Good as Perfection

Murdoch argues that one of the deepest clues to the structure of the concept of the Good is perfection. She asserts, "The proper and serious use of the term refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know ('There is no good in us') and which carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence."[30] As this assertion highlights, the concept of perfection carries with it three related features important for understanding Murdoch's idea of the Good: 1) its separateness from the world we know; 2) its ordering or hierarchy producing function; and 3) its transcendence.

Murdoch is attracted to moral schemes that insist on the separateness of the Good, for one of her continual concerns is preventing the corruption and distortion of the Good at the hands of human selfishness and self-deception. She maintains that the Good is a concept that has "many false doubles, jumped-up intermediaries invented by human

[30]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 376. Immediately preceding this assertion, Murdoch maintains, "[The Good] is not a mere value tag of the choosing will, and functional and casual uses of 'good' (a good knife, a good fellow) are not, as some philosophers have wished to argue, clues to the structure of the concept." One wishes Murdoch would have devoted more attention in the form of argumentation to this dismissal of a very serious (not casual) attempt by Aristotelian contemporaries to challenge the fact/value dichotomy and the so-called naturalistic fallacy. Indeed, they share much common ground with Murdoch, particularly in their opposition to the view that the Good is merely the value tag of the choosing will. One regrets Murdoch's neglect of the Aristotelian tradition, particularly for the light her sustained attention could have shed on the reasons Plato is a better source than Aristotle for transcending an emotivist culture. Her neglect of Aristotle is so thorough that it even becomes a self-mocking joke in her novel *The Book and the Brotherhood*, where the protagonist, David Crimond, is writing a book about "everything. . . . Everything—except Aristotle." Cited in Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 68-69. Despite her systematic avoidance of Aristotle, she does pay him a rather glowing compliment in "The Idea of Perfection," where she argues that "it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist: and if there is a 'Shakespeare of science' his name is Aristotle." 326-327. This is a compliment to be sure, but one directed toward his natural philosophy, not his ethics.

selfishness to make the difficult task of virtue look easier and more attractive."[31] For example, her misgivings for Aristotle and flourishing accounts are partially explained by her suspicion that they are instances of human selfishness at work, making virtue appear attractive. In contrast, true virtue, for Murdoch, is to be good *for-nothing*. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch frequently, and at times approvingly, returns to Kant's separation of the Good from the corrupting influence of the selfish empirical psyche:

> The *Grundlegung* hints that, from the existence of the moral law, we can perhaps intuit a supreme lawgiver who will introduce happiness into the *summum bonum*; but strictly speaking this must be regarded as a slip! Kant fears happiness as Plato fears art. A search for happiness here below would be for Kant heteronomous, a surrender to egoistic desires. Happy love can be an ingenious moral cheat.[32]

Murdoch also argues, "When Kant wanted to find something clean and pure outside the mess of the empirical psyche he followed a sound instinct."[33] And again, she speculates that Kant was afraid of the "old unregenerate psyche," when he "went to such length to draw our attention away from the empirical psyche."[34] Because of this tendency toward corruption, Murdoch continually emphasizes the separateness of the Good/perfection from the world we know.[35] She offers the Good/perfection as a pure source, a "certain

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[31]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 375.

[32]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 438.

[33]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 368.

[34]Ibid., 382-383.

[35]Notice the *prima facie* similarity between Murdoch's formulation here and a position she adamantly rejects because of the fact/value dichotomy that underlies it. She summarizes the dictum of modern ethics: "you cannot attach morality to the substance of the world. And this dictum . . . expresses the whole spirit of modern ethics." "Metaphysics and Ethics," 65. Murdoch actually agrees with this dictum, but in a way

unfailing pure source and perfect object of love,"[36] outside the trappings of the selfish ego—"the rat-run of egoism."[37] Murdoch argues, "Kant and Plato are alike in their intense certainty of the reality of a pure moral source."[38] Perfection, for Murdoch, is a separate and pure standard that resists the happy compromises that the ego makes with pleasure, reward, power, or happiness. As an ever-receding standard, it calls humans to the progressive destruction of consoling pseudo-goods, which they use to secure and

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radically different from that which is intended by modern ethics. For Murdoch, the separateness of the Good (value) from the empirical has nothing to do with the anti-naturalist argument, but rather it is an image of the purity and incorruptibility (i.e., perfection) of the Good as a standard exerting its pressure from beyond the egoistic valuing-knowing subject. Therefore, Murdoch would agree with Moore that the Good is indefinable in terms of any natural property in the world, but, contra Moore, not for particularly linguistic reasons (i.e., What does Good mean? and the open question argument). She maintains the Good is indefinable because it is obscure and mysterious, the world is inexhaustibly variable, and the self-serving ego tends to distort it. The following passage illustrates this reasoning concretely in Murdoch's argumentation: "I have been speaking of the indefinability of the Good; but is there really nothing else that we can say about it? Even if we cannot find it another name, even if it must be thought of as above and alone, are there not other concepts, or another concept, with which it has some quite special relationship? Philosophers have often tried to discern such a relationship: Freedom, Reason, Happiness, Courage, History have recently been tried in the role. I do not find any of these candidates convincing. . . . I want now to speak of what is perhaps the most obvious as well as the most ancient and traditional claimant, though one which is rarely mentioned by our contemporary philosophers, and that is Love. Of course Good is sovereign over Love, as it is sovereign over other concepts, because Love can name something bad. But is there not nevertheless something about the conception of a refined love which is practically identical with goodness? . . . However I think that Good and Love should not be identified." "The Sovereignty of Good," 383-384. Murdoch thinks that the image of the Good as perfection resists the ultimate identification of the Good with any contingent reality that exists in the world as we know it. Perfection is the sort of concept, for Murdoch, that does not exist in the world in any ordinary way; rather it is a continual call from beyond.

[36]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 479.

[37]Ibid., 443.

[38]Ibid., 442.

protect themselves from the "nakedness and aloneness of Good, its absolute for-nothingness."[39]

The second feature that the concept of perfection carries with it, according to Murdoch's account, is an ordering or hierarchy-producing capacity. For Murdoch, the idea of perfection is a natural producer of hierarchies or scales of value. The idea of perfection provides distinctions between better and worse. In everyday human life, there are innumerable ways we begin to rank whether or not we are closer to or further from an intuited standard, which—importantly for Murdoch—is never quite fully concretized. As individuals find themselves within particular contexts and practices thinking about better and worse (i.e., playing a sport, learning a language, composing a symphony, etc.), intuitions of perfection grow increasingly less misleading. Murdoch explains,

> A deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect. Increasing understanding of human conduct operates in a similar way. We come to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously we were prepared to 'let by'. . . . The idea of perfection works thus within a field of study, producing an increasing sense of direction.[40]

As she does here, Murdoch elsewhere connects these principles seen at work in general human activity with human moral conduct, claiming that "moral advance carries with it intuitions of unity. . . . As we deepen our notions of the virtues we introduce relationship and hierarchy."[41]

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[39]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 375.

[40]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 350.

[41]Ibid., 378.

"The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates values by his choices," Murdoch insists. "He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. We are not usually in doubt about the direction in which Good lies."[42] She argues that, in all sorts of particular human practices, individuals compare themselves with standards of excellence or perfection that are internal to those practices (and independent of the will), but also, in a very palpable way, never fully realized. Murdoch illustrates this with an aesthetic example:

> Art gives a clear sense to many ideas which seem more puzzling when we meet with them elsewhere, and it is a clue to what happens elsewhere. An understanding of any art involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority. There are very evident degrees of merit, there are heights and distances; even Shakespeare is not perfect.[43]

As perfection is never quite exemplified in the world, it is a standard that continues to beckon from beyond. For Murdoch, perfection is a call of excellence that "has a kind of unity [which is connected to] facts about our condition from which lines converge in a definite direction."[44] Indeed, one can only sense the direction of perfection, for it has merely a "kind of shadowy unachieved unity."[45] However, for Murdoch, perfection sill serves as a unitive principle, for it produces order and hierarchy into one's conceptions of the world. Murdoch believes that standards of excellence within particular practices, including moral excellence, become clearer as one progresses in them.

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[42]Ibid., 380.

[43]Ibid., 372.

[44]Ibid., 381.

[45]Ibid., 380.

Murdoch's conception of the hierarchy-generating feature of perfection can helpfully be illustrated by comparison with MacIntyre's notion of "goods internal to a practice."[46] In a pregnant passage I quote at length, MacIntyre argues,

> A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. Practices of course, as I have just noticed, have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. Thus the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far.[47]

Then, resorting to an aesthetic example (among others) just as Murdoch did, MacIntyre continues,

> If, on starting to listen to music, I do not accept my own incapacity to judge correctly, I will never learn to hear, let alone to appreciate, Bartok's last quartets. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch. In the realm of practices the authority of both goods and standards operates in such a way as to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment.[48]

MacIntyre, like Murdoch, turns to human practices to illustrate how standards of excellence (i.e., perfection) naturally become articulated within many everyday human activities. These standards are not merely subject to our will; rather our will is subject to the authority of standards that have been articulated within the historical unfolding of a particular practice. The suggestion that the Good is merely the value tag of the choosing will does not seem convincing in light of examples such as these.

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[46]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (London: Duckworth, 1992), 188.

[47]Ibid., 190.

[48] Ibid.

MacIntyre significantly states that these standards only "currently and partially define the practice," that they are not themselves "immune from criticism," and that, within a practice, they have the character of "so far." This means that, for MacIntyre, perfection has not been reached, for the standards are not fully defined and can be reassessed and reformulated based on progress in a practice (i.e., they can be criticized). Further, standards have the character of "so far," which suggests room for potential growth. MacIntyre's account here is importantly similar to Murdoch's in this regard. He, like Murdoch, works in a dynamism to standards by which these standards can be refined and made better. For instance, when a practitioner is initiated into a practice, she first accepts the historically evolved standards internal to that practice; if she masters the practice as received, she then is enabled to try to achieve something better. The apprentice can become the master, and the master can reach new unconceived heights. Hence, practitioners first find themselves accepting the standards articulated "so far," and only then do they have the potential to develop the standards of excellence from within in order to push them further and deeper.

Murdoch argues that, just as we can see a conception of perfection (although not fully defined) generating hierarchies within everyday human practices—hierarchies that we experience as authoritative—so we can see that the conception of moral perfection (i.e., the Good) works in the same way. A conception of perfection generates hierarchies of moral value to which we are subject, but these hierarchies are also in the process of being deepened. For this reason, Murdoch calls intellectual disciplines or practices, such as mathematics or learning a language (her word for these is techne), "introductory

images of the spiritual life."[49] Murdoch contends that there is a significant analogy between the way we experience the standards within a practice as authoritative and the way we experience moral authority. She maintains, "the τέχναι are, to use Plato's image, the text written in large letters. The concept Good itself is the much harder to discern but essentially similar text written in small letters. In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly."[50] Essentially, Murdoch is concerned to show that just as hierarchies of perfection within evolving human practices are not a matter of personal will, so too, "The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality," and not "adjuncts of the personal will."[51] For Murdoch, humans are essentially creatures who experience hierarchies of value as discoveries.

In her treatment of the Ontological proof—which is an argument from perfection and therefore "essentially an argument from morality"—Murdoch contends that we notice degrees of goodness "in ourselves and in all the world" and "in many different kinds of human activity."[52] Murdoch makes a general appeal to experience here with the belief that "our most general perceptions and *experience*" of scales of value will reveal "the fundamental and omnipresent (uniquely necessary) nature of moral value."[53] She

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[49]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 374.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 396, 400.

[53] Murdoch foregrounds this appeal to our ubiquitous and ordinary experience with scales of value in her treatment of Anselm's Ontological argument. She argues that Anselm offers both a logical argument and an argument from experience, which are

argues that our experiences with degrees of value everywhere (i.e., the ubiquity of value), demonstrate that the Good/perfection "cannot be 'thought away' out of human life."[54] With the discovery of degrees of goodness in manifold areas of human life, the idea of perfection (i.e., the Good), as an ideal limit, necessarily thrusts itself upon us. She argues, "We gain the concept of this *unique form of necessity* from our unavoidable experience of good and evil."[55] Perfection, for Murdoch, asserts itself as soon as the first distinction between better and worse is made—a distinction she believes to be a necessary and inextricable aspect of all human activity, including cognitive activity[56]—

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mutually supportive. She contends that commentators have tended to focus solely on the logical argument as fundamental without reference to the argument from experience. Murdoch, on the other hand, wants to shift attention back to the argument from experience (i.e., our experience of degrees of reality) in order to rehabilitate it as an argument to be seriously offered. She maintains, "I would argue that the Proof, as something to be taken seriously, must be understood by looking at Plato. Its deep sense, whose restatement is now of importance in servicing our concept of religion, lies in the degrees-of-reality argument joined to the Platonic, and Pauline, reference to all the world: the argument about necessary existence can only be intelligibly stated in this frame. . . . Plato's arguments include appeals to various kinds of moral experiences, in learning, love, politics and so on." Ibid., 405-406 and 402.

[54] Ibid., 412.

[55] Ibid., 406.

[56]This is yet another place where Murdoch resists the fact/value dichotomy. Our notion of truth and falsity, Murdoch contends, rests upon an ineradicably moral construal of cognition, as truth is a closer accord between thought and reality, which demands a continual moral purification. Murdoch argues, "The contrast between states of illusion (selfish habits or egotistic fantasy) and honest clarified truthful serious thinking suggests a moral picture of the mind as in a continuous engagement with an independent reality. 'Truth' is not just a collection of facts. *Truthfulness*, the search for truth, for a closer connection between thought and reality, demands and effects an exercise of virtues and a purification of desires. The ability, for instance, to think justly about what is evil, or to love another person unselfishly, involves a discipline of intellect and emotion. Thought, goodness and reality are thus seen to be connected." Ibid., 399.

and conversely (i.e., seen from the other side, as it were), a conception of perfection is the natural producer of hierarchies.

Finally, Murdoch's concept of perfection carries with it a third feature, that of transcendence. Although there is no single idea of transcendence in Murdoch, and although she habitually blurs concepts in order to suggest conceptual links, a central notion of transcendence does seem to emerge in her philosophy. She repeatedly and systematically connects her conception of transcendence to an appearance/reality dichotomy. In this dichotomy, the ego corresponds to a place of mere appearance or illusion, whereas reality is that which transcends the self and serves to challenge the ego's current and limited vision of things. The transcendence of the Good or reality, in Murdoch, serves as a sort of regulative ideal always lying "beyond," which possesses the ability to disrupt the ego's personal perspective to reach a more universal perspective. She indicates that transcendence is "a word that I have used to mean a good 'going beyond' one's egoistic self, as in the Platonic pilgrimage or innumerable ordinary experiences."[57] She suggests that there are countless instances of "our ordinary unmysterious experience of transcendence," which she defines as "the progressive illumination and inspiring discovery of *other*, the progressive *experience* of truth."[58] She insists, "I would prefer to speak of our ordinary, fairly describable, experiences of 'transcendence', our apprehensions of what is true and good and real."[59] The transcendence Murdoch attempts to describe is a non-metaphysical or lateral

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[57]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 498.

[58]Ibid., 508.

[59] Ibid., 471.

transcendence, not to be confused with an otherworldly transcendence. William Schweiker defines lateral transcendence as the transcendence of this world in its ability to interrupt or call into question one's current vision of the world distorted by the ego.[60] Murdoch explains,

> The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. This is the non-metaphysical meaning of the idea of transcendence to which philosophers have so constantly resorted in their explanations of goodness. 'Good is a transcendent reality' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful.[61]

Transcendence, according to Murdoch, refers us to a reality that is beyond us and symbolizes that which is more than what appears to us.

Notice how Murdoch links the Good and the True by suggesting that our progress toward joining the transcendent world is at the same time an intellectual and moral journey. These are not separate endeavors for Murdoch. The Platonic formulation of the unity of the Good and the True (and the Beautiful) is Murdoch's inspiration. She indicates, "Plato's philosophy expounds a fundamental connection between epistemology

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[60]William Schweiker outlined this distinction in a paper he gave at the Third International Iris Murdoch Conference titled, "The Moral Fate of Fictive Persons: On Iris Murdoch's Humanism," Kingston University, Kingston-upon-Thames, United Kingdom, September 15, 2006.

[61]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 376-377. Incidentally, immediately following this explanation of transcendence, Murdoch reminds her reader, "Of course we are dealing with a metaphor, but with a very important metaphor and one which is not just a property of philosophy and not just a model. As I said at the beginning, we are creatures who use irreplaceable metaphors in many of our most important activities." Again we find Murdoch foregrounding the metaphorical nature of her discussion as it revolves around the Good.

and ethics; truthful knowledge and virtue are bound together."[62] Murdoch wholeheartedly supports this view, and her conception of the corresponding and interlocking transcendence of the Good and the True is yet another front on which she challenges the fact/value dichotomy.

The Good's Relation to Eros

Another significant site at which Murdoch's grammar of the Good comes to presentation is in its relation to Eros. In "The Sovereignty of the Good," Murdoch explicitly treats this relationship. After speaking about the ultimate indefinability of the Good, she pauses to consider whether there is "really nothing else that we can say about it? Even if we cannot find it another name, even if it must be thought of as above and alone, are there not other concepts, or another concept, with which it has some quite special relation?"[63] The concept she tests is Eros, claiming that it is "perhaps the most obvious as well as the most ancient and traditional claimant, though one which is rarely mentioned by our contemporary philosophers."[64] She queries, "[I]s there not . . . something about the conception of a refined love which is practically identical with goodness? Will not 'Act lovingly' translate 'Act perfectly', whereas 'Act rationally' will not?"[65]

Although tempted by this possibility, Murdoch insists that the Good should still remain sovereign, even over Eros, for two principal reasons. First, Eros is capable of

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[62]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*," 398.

[63]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good, 383

[64]Ibid., 384.

[65]Ibid.

referring to something evil, and "human love is usually self-assertive."[66] In relation to this reason, Murdoch entertains the thought that perhaps a refined love, purified of its self-assertive elements, might work. Yet, she then provides a second reason for the Good remaining sovereign. Even if Eros is *purified*, it and the Good "still play different roles" in her (and Plato's) ethical conceptual array.[67] Although somewhat cryptic—perhaps because, as she admits, "We are dealing here with very difficult metaphors"[68]—Murdoch makes several suggestions:

> Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves. . . . Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it. (In the *Symposium* Plato pictures Love as being poor and needy). . . . Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good.[69]

So what is the role of Eros in distinction to the role of the Good in Murdoch? Perhaps we could summarize it this way: Eros plays the role of an imperfect, though changeable, emotional spiritual energy, which is susceptible to never-ending modification for both better and worse. Eros also possesses a natural affinity for the Good (i.e., perfection or excellence). The Good, however, plays the role of a pure, uncorrupted, impersonal moral source, which is, nonetheless, magnetic (i.e., attractive). Therefore the Good is continually present as an active source at every level of an ordinary, erotic, and

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

recognizable human life—a life characterized by the continuous working of emotions and desires (i.e., Eros). Murdoch struggles with how to articulate the transcendence of the Good while still capturing its immanence and influence *within* ordinary human life. Her comments here are admittedly elliptical and somewhat opaque. She does not give this problem the full attention it deserves until her relentless comparison of the moral structures of Kant and Plato in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, a discussion to which I now turn.

Claiming that she is "inclined to agree with him," Murdoch observes that Schopenhauer "held that the dialogue between Plato and Kant underlies the whole of western philosophy."[70] She also maintains, "I see the deepest aspects of moral philosophy as contained in this dialogue."[71] The whole of *Metaphysics as a Guide* is an expression of Murdoch's fundamental conviction that the dialogue between Plato and Kant is the most important and illuminating conversation in moral philosophy. For Murdoch, they are the chief examples of excellence in moral discussion. Although *Metaphysics as a Guide* presents "an extraordinary range of topics that reflect the breadth of Murdoch's engagement with philosophy, theology, art, ethics, and politics," and although, in the end, Antonaccio may be correct in arguing that "the unifying impulse of the book is placed under a negation by another deep formal pattern which emerges from the narrative flow and which works as a countervailing impulse to unity," one underappreciated way of understanding the deep structure of the book is as the dialogue

[70]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 57.

[71]Ibid., 298.

between Plato and Kant.[72] Even when not explicitly referenced, the presence of these two can be felt on every page, as the essential touchstone and the unmistakable background against which Murdoch's entire exploration of the moral life proceeds.[73] Indeed, the many metaphysical frameworks Murdoch explores, which she tells us are supposed to guide our moral reflection, take their point of departure from, and are continually related to, the metaphysical pictures of Plato and Kant.[74] Fundamental to that dialogue, as rendered by Murdoch, is the problem of how to develop a moral framework in which the Good is transcendent while at the same time omnipresent and immanent within human experience. She asserts, "One of the great problems of metaphysics is to explain the idea of goodness in terms which combine its peculiar purity and separateness (its transcendence) with details of its omnipresent effectiveness in human life."[75] Plato and Kant both attempt to articulate a solution to this problem, and the similarities and differences in their accounts represent a central preoccupation for Murdoch. Her

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[72]Maria Antonaccio, "Form and Contingency in Ethics," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 110 and 136.

[73]See the following pages in *Metaphysics as a Guide*, which merely represent a handful of the explicit references to the interplay between Plato and Kant: 24, 50, 57, 60, 63, 146, 178, 222, 227, 298, 331-332, 406, 408, 438, 442, 494, and 507.

[74]Metaphysical structures, for Murdoch, are large conceptual pictures by which philosophers attempt to illumine deep aspects of human experience and existence. She explains, "This is metaphysics, which sets up a picture which it then offers as an appeal to us all to see if we cannot find just this in our deepest experience. The word 'deep', or some such metaphor, will come in here as part of the essence of the appeal." Ibid., 507. Metaphysical frameworks, then, are large metaphorical-conceptual pictures through which we attempt to make sense of and bring some amount of intelligibility and order to our deepest experiences. Murdoch's understanding of what metaphysics is has a bearing on how we should interpret the image of the Good in her thought. I addressed this point above in the discussion of the Good as metaphor.

[75]Ibid., 408.

preference for Plato is obvious, and yet, she shows great admiration for Kant's solution, even while ultimately rejecting it.

According to Murdoch, both Plato and Kant "gather all the value together in one place." She then asserts, "If this is done the question of how to redistribute it must arise."[76] By gathering value in one place, Murdoch means that Plato and Kant develop metaphysical structures (i.e., pictures) in which value is isolated or segregated to ensure its purity. She argues that Kant does this when he separates science and the determined world of empirical facts (the phenomenal) from morality and the world of freedom, reason, and value (the noumenal). She claims, "Kant's phenomenal world is devoid of value, self-contained and absolute (like the factual world of the *Tractatus*); the command of duty enters from beyond."[77]

Here we have Kant's fact/value dichotomy, which Murdoch contends Kant develops "to *segregate* value in order to keep it pure and untainted, not derived from or mixed with empirical facts."[78] The fact/value dichotomy is evident in Kant's separation of the empirically determined psyche (facts) from the operation of the noumenally free will (values). Kant's motive, according to Murdoch, is to isolate the corrupting and

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[76]Ibid., 50.

[77]Ibid., 222.

[78]Ibid., 25. Murdoch warns of the grave dangers embedded in this view: "This move however, in time and as interpreted, may in effect result in a diminished, even perfunctory, account of morality, leading (with the increasing prestige of science) to a marginalization of 'the ethical'. (Big world of facts, little peripheral area of value.) This originally well-intentioned segregation then ignores an obvious and important aspect of human existence, the way in which almost all our concepts and activities involve evaluation." We should expect, then, Murdoch to look for a metaphysical picture that can account for the evaluative nature of the majority of human activities and concepts. This, of course, is why she prefers Plato.

misleading inclinations (passions, emotions) of the empirical psyche from the purity of the moral demand which comes from another source (i.e., the recognition of the categorical imperative by practical reason). Murdoch explains, "Kant of course officially consigns the emotions to the world of phenomenal appearances. . . . His psychology also excludes any sort of purified love-energy, a notion which he would have regarded as a dangerous disguise of heteronomous egoism. . . . [He offers a] dualism of phenomenal fact and noumenal value."[79]

On Murdoch's reading, Kant gathers value into the purity of the categorical imperative, segregated from the messy, warm empirical psyche with its egoistic desires for pleasure, power, happiness, etc. Murdoch asks, how does Kant redistribute this value once gathered? She answers, "Kant brings value back to the world through conceptions of truth and justice incarnate in particular situations through the operation of practical reason (the recognition of duties)."[80] In other words, value is experienced as the sudden call of duty coming to individuals from a pure, separate moral source, and the moral life is understood as the sudden willed obedience to this call. The understanding of the moral life and its corresponding moral psychology, on Kant's account, is radically distinct from an understanding in which the moral life is a progressive purification of desire and not a sudden decision of the will. As Murdoch indicates, "Kant is an ancestor of the idea that the mind switches or springs into morality and liberty: the sudden call of duty."[81] Here Kant's picture becomes unacceptable to Murdoch. She explains, "If at this point we (I)

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[79]Ibid., 440.

[80]Ibid., 50.

[81]Ibid., 24.

part company with Kant, it is in the interests of a more realistic flexible account of moral progress, as a purification and reorientation of desire."[82] Murdoch finds better company in Plato.

Plato likewise gathers value together into a pure, separate moral source; however, his metaphysical picture is radically different from Kant's, not only in how he gathers value together, but especially in how he redistributes it. Murdoch asserts, "Plato gathers value together in its purest form in the Idea (Form) of the Good, and also sees it as distributed into human variety through the working of truthfulness, knowledge and purified spiritual desire (love, Eros)."[83] According to Murdoch, Plato's image of the Good gathers value, and through his notion of Eros, redistributes it. Murdoch explains how we might think of the gathered Good: "We *experience* both the reality of perfection and its distance away, and this leads us to place our idea of it outside the world of existent being as something of a different unique and special sort."[84]

Although Plato and Kant are similarly concerned to gather value to ensure its purity, Plato's image is crucially distinct in one fundamental aspect: its magnetism (i.e., attractiveness). Murdoch explains, "What is ultimate and above being is the Form of the Good, whose magnetic influence reaches to all."[85] Furthermore, "Good exerts a magnetism which runs through the whole contingent world, and the response to that

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[82]Ibid., 331.

[83]Ibid., 50.

[84]Ibid., 508.

[85]Ibid., 63.

magnetism is love."[86] The magnetism (i.e., attractiveness) of the Good is what draws Eros to itself and connects the transcendent purity of the Good to our ordinary and mixed human lives. In this context, Murdoch reminds us of an insight from the *Symposium*: "Good is what all men love and wish to possess for ever." She continues and expands the insight: "What is desired is desired as, genuinely, good; though many desires reach only distorted shadows of goodness."[87] Similarly she asserts, "Plato's Good . . . can shine through lesser, even false, goods."[88]

The idea here is that humans are attracted and drawn by the Good at every level of Eros, which is to say, that the Good is omnipresent and active on every rung (even the bottom) of the spiritual ladder. Murdoch asserts, "That we can and do love Good and are drawn towards it is something that we have to learn from our experience, as we move all the time in the continuum between good and bad. This is our everyday existence where spiritual energy, Eros, is all the time active at a variety of levels."[89] The Platonic Good, despite its purity and separateness, maintains its omnipresent effectiveness in human life through its connection with ordinary human desire. In sum, Plato accomplishes the redistribution of the transcendent Good into the immanence of human experience through his dual images of Eros and the Good.

Murdoch summarizes the crucial similarity and difference between Plato and Kant: "Kant and Plato are alike in their intense certainty of the reality of a pure moral

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[86]Ibid., 343.

[87]Ibid., 343.

[88]Ibid., 83.

[89]Ibid., 507.

source. They are unlike because Kant has no moral role for what Plato calls Eros, the high force which attracts the soul toward Good."[90] With no moral role for Eros, Murdoch holds that Kant's metaphysical picture is radically insufficient. Without Eros (or some analogous concept playing a similar role), Murdoch maintains that Kant cannot adequately represent moral progress understood as the purification of desire. Therefore, Murdoch adopts the Platonic account because it better represents the moral life as a slow, progressive, and gradual reorientation of desire. She explains, "The moral life in the Platonic understanding of it is a slow shift of attachments wherein *looking* (concentration, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified energy). This is a progressive redemption of desire."[91] Murdoch continues, contrasting the Platonic view with the Kantian one: "The movement is not, by an occasional leap, into an external (empty) space of freedom, but patiently and continuously a change of one's whole being in all its contingent detail, through a world of appearance toward a world of reality."[92]

Murdoch argues that with the loss of Eros, we have lost the ability adequately to picture the moral life as a gradual change of being. Instead, we end up with the sudden call of duty and the immediate response of the noumenally and radically free will. There are no degrees of freedom on this view.[93] Murdoch maintains that "the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is

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[90]Ibid., 442.

[91]Ibid., 24-25.

[92]Ibid., 25.

[93]Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 289.

something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices."[94]

After examining the contrast between the moral structures of Plato and Kant, we are in a better position to understand the difference between the roles of Eros and the Good in Murdoch's ethical conceptual array. Again, the Good plays the role of pure transcendent source, an incorruptible standard that calls us from beyond, but which is also immanent within human life by virtue of its magnetic (i.e., attractive) aspect. The Good is the concept in which, following Plato, Murdoch gathers value. Eros, on the other hand, plays the role of a mixed spiritual desire, which is attracted to the Good in an imperfect, incomplete, yet improvable way. For Murdoch, Eros is the response to the magnetism of the Good, and it represents the way in which, again following Plato, Murdoch redistributes value.

The importance of having two concepts that play these different roles, for Murdoch, is the ability to represent the transcendence of the Good, as Kant is able to do, but also to represent the immanence of the Good within ordinary human existence (without corrupting it). According to Murdoch, Kant is unable to accomplish this in a way that does justice to human moral psychology. In particular, without Eros and the immanence of the Good, Murdoch argues that it is impossible to represent adequately the moral life as a progressive endeavor, namely, a progressive purification of desire. For Murdoch, the goal is to keep the Good pure while at the same time representing it as

[94]Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 329.

omnipresent, active, and immanent within all levels of human reality.[95] Kant severed the connection between goodness and the emotions. Murdoch, following Plato, wants the Good in the midst of life, which means within the messiness of human emotions. If the Good is to redeem us from our egoism, it must transform our "massive unregenerate emotional psyche."[96]

In the previous chapter, I argued that Murdoch offers an erotic psychic harmony model of moral therapy in distinction to an a-erotic self-mastery model as found in the Stoic school. A psychic harmony model focuses on the integration of the various parts of

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[95]Antonaccio nicely summarizes, from a slightly different angle, what is at stake here for Murdoch by relating her position to the question of naturalism and nonnaturalism in ethics. G.E. Moore, the classic representative of nonnaturalism, famously maintained that good is a non-natural property, meaning that the good cannot be defined by any natural property such as pleasure, honor, happiness, etc. (i.e., any natural fact "in the world"). Moore's nonnaturalist position depends on a fact/value dichotomy, which Murdoch rejects. The naturalist, on the other hand, maintains that the good can be defined in terms of some natural property, such as human flourishing. Antonaccio classifies Murdoch as an ethical naturalist (i.e., the good is immanent "in the world"). However, Murdoch insists on the indefinablity of the good and that identifying it with any particular natural fact is also mistaken. The key to understanding this tension in Murdoch is understanding her view of moral language. Antonaccio explains, "In contrast to Moore, Murdoch affirms a naturalistic theory of ethics and hence of moral language that does not depend on a sharp distinction between fact and value. She holds that moral terms cannot be entirely segregated from natural or nonmoral facts; they are not *sui generis*. Yet at the same time, Murdoch's naturalism is, in her own words, 'inconclusive' and 'non-dogmatic' because she does not believe that the good can be wholly *reduced* to some natural fact or state of affairs either (e.g., 'human flourishing'). In contrast both to strict naturalism and to nonnaturalism, Murdoch understands moral language as *mediating* the relation between fact and value through the complex interpretive and evaluative activity of moral perception. This is the crucial insight for understanding her as a reflexive realist in relation to Moore." *Picturing the Human*, 121. Murdoch's insistence that the Good is transcendent, separate, and not "in the world" in any normal sense is her attempt to distance herself from strict naturalism, whereas her insistence that value is ubiquitously present and embedded within every aspect of human life resists the nonnaturalist position.

[96]Ibid., 494.

the soul and attempts to harmonize its conflicting voices in order to arrive at singleness of purpose or soul-integrity.[97] On this model, the appetites, emotions, and reason are depicted as needing to work in concert in order to know and love the Good. The self-mastery model, on the other hand, focuses on the rational domination, even elimination of the, broadly speaking, erotic elements of the soul. On this model, rationality is depicted as needing to control, as a tyrant might, or even beat down the appetitive and emotional aspects of the soul. Murdoch prefers Plato to Kant because, on her reading, Plato offers a psychic harmony model, whereas Kant only offers a self-mastery model.[98] Kant's moral

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[97]For a related suggestion see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 203. In this context, MacIntyre draws attention to Kierkegaard's dictum: "Purity of heart is to will one thing."

[98]Murdoch's interpretation of Plato/Socrates as offering a psychic harmony model of moral therapy is by no means an uncontested view. In fact, Platonic scholarship is divided between those that argue Plato/Socrates is offering a self-mastery model and those that argue for the psychic harmony model. A careful reading of the *Republic* seems to suggest that both models of moral therapy are in play. Anne-Marie Bowery maintains, "Socrates presents his interlocutors with two models of how to regard the relationship between the rational part of the soul and the spirited and appetitive parts: the self-mastery model and the harmony model." *A Philosophic Muse: Plato's Socrates as Narrator*, (in progress), 291. For the self-mastery, intellectualist reading see: J. M. Cooper, "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," in *Essays on Plato's Psychology*, ed. Ellen Wagner (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001); Samuel Rickless, "Socrates' Moral Intellectualism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79, 1998, 355-367; and Daryl Rice, "Plato on Force: The Conflict Between His Psychology and Political Sociology and His Definition of Temperance in the *Republic*," *History of Political Thought X*, 1989, 565-576. For the psychic harmony model see: Bowery, *A Philosophic Muse*; Myles Burnyeat, "Justice in Plato's *Republic IV*," paper presented at Political Thought and Intellectual History Research Seminar, Kings College, University of Cambridge, March 3, 2008; G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 140. Scholars that emphasize the harmony model in Plato/Socrates also tend to point out how it accords with the view of justice as harmony in the *Republic*. This interpretation suggests itself especially if one takes the city-soul analogy seriously. Bowery suggests, "On a conceptual level, it accords well with metaphors of justice as harmony that occur throughout the *Republic* and elsewhere in the Platonic corpus." *A Philosophic Muse*, 292.

That Plato offers both models could imply that the emotions are not inherently evil, although potentially very dangerous. Whether one should prescribe the self-mastery

picture demonstrates the same moral suspicion of the emotions as the Stoic school, and he consequently offers an analogous emphasis on the rational control of our conduct and the marginalization of the emotions. Murdoch explains,

> Kant of course officially consigns the emotions to the world of phenomenal appearances. . . . His psychology also excludes any sort of purified love-energy, a notion which he would have regarded as a dangerous disguise of heteronomous egoism. One may regret or deplore the way in which Kant's dualism seems to deny to human passion any access to the spiritual. Here a general appeal to experience would scarcely be on his side.[99]

Later, Murdoch also maintains, "Kant sees the moral life as a struggle (we are aware of a noumenal reality by which we are touched) but he sees the fight in terms of the rational will straining against the massive unregenerate emotional psyche."[100] Murdoch's rejection of Kant is at the same time a rejection of self-mastery models of moral therapy. Against Kant and the Stoic school, she adopts a Platonic psychic harmony model of moral therapy: where the undeniable presence of the emotions within a recognizably human life is taken into account; where the emotions are given moral significance and attention; and where the emotions are potential allies in the human aspiration for the Good. Murdoch's moral therapy, then, focuses on the purification of desire and

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or psychic harmony model in a particular practical situation depends on the specific features of an individual's psychological makeup and the degree of disorder in the individual's soul. However, if the emotions are given a valid role within the highest human life, then the self-mastery model must be viewed as purely pedagogical and ultimately give way to the psychic harmony model. Bowery makes a similar suggestion, contending, "The intellectualist Socrates is a noble lie. It is useful for overcoming the negative and harmful effects of unregulated emotions on the psyche, but it is not the end of the story about how we are supposed to comport ourselves with respect to the important role that the emotions play in human life." Ibid., 354.

[99]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 440.

[100]Ibid., 494.

redirection of Eros, not its suppression or eradication. Therefore, rather than focusing on the rational mastery of self, Murdoch is concerned with finding a proper or worthy object of love. This search brings us to her discussion of God and the Good.

The Good in Contrast to God: Finding a Proper Object to Love

Finally, Murdoch's grammar of the Good cannot be displayed properly without considering it in contrast to God. Developing an ethical system that is concerned with the purification of desire and the location of a proper object of love, Murdoch endeavors to expand the scope of moral philosophy to include the question of what should elicit our deepest love. Charles Taylor approvingly situates Murdoch within the expansion of moral philosophy from a certain narrowness that has characterized Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy: "Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy has tended to see morality as concerned with questions of what we ought to do and to occlude or exclude questions about what it is good to be or what it is good to love."[101] He maintains that the work of neo-Nietzscheans and neo-Aristotelians has rightly criticized this narrowness and reintroduced issues related to human flourishing and the good life.[102] Taylor contends that Murdoch was arguing for a similar expansion of moral philosophy "well before the present counterwave—and not entirely on the same grounds."[103] But, he suggests, not only did Murdoch take the first step of expanding moral philosophy from the moral to the

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[101]Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

[102]As Taylor indicates, these narrower and wider practical concerns correspond respectively to the now common distinction between the "moral" and the "ethical."

[103]Ibid., 5

ethical, as the flourishing account did, but she also took a further step by pressing the question of the proper object of our deepest love. Taylor summarizes,

> But she takes this beyond the question of a good and satisfying life to the consideration of a good which would be beyond life, in the sense that its goodness cannot be entirely or exhaustively explained in terms of its contributing to a fuller, better, richer, more satisfying human life. It is a good that we might sometimes more appropriately respond to in suffering and death, rather than in fullness and life—the domain, as usually understood, of religion. Put another way, in the terms I suggested above, this takes us beyond the question of what we ought to do to that of what it is good to be, and then beyond that again, to what can command our fullest love.[104]

These progressively expanding, more encompassing aspects of the practical can be divided into three overlapping domains: 1) the moral, 2) the ethical, and 3) the unconditional. As Taylor accurately argues, Murdoch's ethical system expands the province of moral philosophy to encompass the unconditional, including the love that it commands/inspires.[105] At this point in his analysis, Taylor includes a parenthetical warning, saying, "(But I'm already sneaking in a Christian rather than a Buddhist discourse here. There is a disagreement between Dame Iris and me about this, which I will return to later.)"[106] Taylor's warning as to the difference between a Christian and

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[104]Ibid.

[105]Taylor's characterization of Murdoch is entirely accurate with one proviso; in certain moods, Murdoch does not rest so easily in the company of flourishing accounts. Taylor's depiction of Murdoch blunts the way in which the unconditional can and does act, for her, as a radical critique of the ethical (understood in terms of flourishing). Perhaps the two most obvious places to look for Murdoch's most radical critique of flourishing accounts is in her insistence on the absolute for-nothingness of the Good and her treatment of "void" as a moral category that is "an opposing companion piece to happiness." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 498. For her most poignant comments on the for-nothingness of the Good see, "The Sovereignty of Good."

[106]Ibid. From his essay, it is unclear exactly what the nature of the disagreement is to which Taylor is referring. There are a handful of places Taylor flags his disagreement with Murdoch. "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 19, 20, 24, 25, and

Buddhist discourse is a clue to a deep tension in Murdoch's thought, one to which I will return to later. For now, I focus on Murdoch's comparison of two possible objects that are potential candidates for commanding our fullest love: God and the Good.

One way to approach Murdoch's contrast between God and the Good is to consider the reasons behind her preference for the Good over God as the proper object of love. She prefers the Good for three reasons: 1) her general assessment that belief in God is no longer culturally viable; 2) her belief that the Good is the least corruptible image for the moral life; and 3) her overall fear that anything that consoles is likely false, which is importantly connected with the consolation found in the idea of a personal God. Murdoch accepts it as an unargued axiom that there is no God, or at the very least that "we" can no longer believe in God in "our" age. She is quite frank about this assumption in two central essays. In "On 'God' and 'Good,'" Murdoch indicates, "I have throughout this paper assumed that 'there is no God' and that the influence of religion is waning rapidly. Both these assumptions may be challenged."[107] In "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," she asserts, "I wish to mention very briefly two fundamental assumptions of my argument. If either of these is denied what follows will be less convincing. I assume that human beings are naturally selfish and that human life has no external point or τέλος."[108] Explaining her second assumption, she continues, "This is to

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28. However, he does not explicitly connect these to his earlier admission of sneaking in a Christian rather than Buddhist discourse. The way I interpret Taylor's warning about the difference in discourses becomes clear below.

[107]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 361.

[108]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 364.

say that there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term."[109] This assumption is also at work behind Murdoch's project of demythologization in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, where Murdoch maintains, "We need a theology which can continue without God," for as she earlier states, "In this time of deep change, it seems better to drop the old word 'God.'" Likewise, Murdoch contends that we need to "explain more clearly what it is to have lost the old personal God."[110] Because of her assumption, Murdoch asserts, "The 'demythologisation' of religion is something absolutely necessary in this age."[111] I do not intend to address the existence or non-existence of God here. In one way, nothing much needs to be said in response to Murdoch, as she makes no actual argument. In another way, too much needs to be said. What I will say is that it seems somewhat puzzling, especially for Murdoch, to begin her argument from what can or cannot be believed in our age. After all, the cultural forces

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[109]Ibid., 365.

[110]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 511, 469, 431.

[111]Ibid., 460. Whatever Murdoch may mean by 'demythologisation,' it is clear that she remains fundamentally unsatisfied with any demythologization project that proceeds on the basis of a simple distinction between fact and value. She suggests, "Perhaps the term 'demythologisation' is radically misleading; and we only need a shift in our sense of 'myth', rather than radical surgery involving distinctions (for instance between fact and value) and arguments against these distinctions?" Ibid., 459. Fergus Kerr wonders how Murdoch can treat Don Cupitt's demythologizing "remarks so sympathetically" when his "version of Christianity depends so totally on the fact/value dichotomy." *Immortal Longings*, 75. However, Kerr misses the critical stance that Murdoch takes not only to "his completely misguided conception of Plato," but also to Cupitt's view of religion (Christianity). Ibid., 75. She warns, "Yet the point to which the speaker is driven seems unnecessarily extreme. . . . The words 'subjectivist', 'expressivist', 'non-cognitive' suggest such a surrender, and a picture of religion as a matter of private (existentialist) choice. The idea of choosing the spiritual or religious as (an item among others) better, seems oddly abstract. Demythologisation is not a single road, nor need it imply or *mean* a disappearance of myths and icons, or some profound 'rectification' of ordinary language." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 453-454.

making belief in God difficult seem to apply equally (if not to a great degree) to the Platonic Good. The assumption of God's non-existence must have appeared "obvious" to Murdoch given the state of belief in God among her Oxbridge colleagues. However, cannot the same be said for belief in the Good? Was not Murdoch up against an equal challenge in terms of the cultural viability of the Good? Nonetheless, this difficulty does not prevent Murdoch from embarking on the Herculean project of rendering belief in the Good intelligible.[112]

Perhaps the best response to Murdoch at this point is the one made by Charles Taylor. He argues, "In other words, to oversimplify again, the obstacles to belief in Western modernity are primarily moral and spiritual, rather than epistemic. . . . Talking about what cannot be believed seems to accept that the revolution is epistemically-driven, whereas I think that the motor of change is elsewhere."[113] Indeed, an argument of this kind is just the sort that Murdoch would use to argue for belief in the Good. Nevertheless, the important point here for understanding Murdoch's preference for the Good over God is that she takes it as obvious that "we" can no longer intelligently believe in a personal God, whereas the Good can be made culturally viable.

Murdoch's second reason for preferring the Good, while not entirely satisfying, is perhaps more persuasive. She asserts, "The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use

[112]Taylor expresses a similar sentiment in his own words: "On another level, if we want to talk about things it is *hard* to believe, things that go against the grain, then I think this is true today of forest-dwelling [i.e., the unconditioned] in general, whether one is on their path or mine." "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 25.

[113]Ibid., 24-25.

in our reflections upon the moral life."[114] The immediate context in which Murdoch makes this assertion is in considering love as a starting point and potentially central image for reflection on the moral life. Although attracted by love as a possibility, she rejects it because "human love is normally too profoundly possessive and also too 'mechanical' to be a place of vision."[115] The wider context in which Murdoch intends us to understand the Good as the "least corruptible and most realistic" image is in contrast to God. She maintains that the idea of God inevitably tends toward corruption and degeneration, by which she means that the notion of God deteriorates to a sort of "superperson who satisfies all our ordinary desires 'in the end.'"[116] Murdoch also argues that the idea of God is corrupting because it conceals "the fact of death and the absolute contingency of existence which is an aspect of that fact."[117] A personal God does this through the promise of an afterlife and through functioning as the guarantee that all things are meaningful and have a point as a part of an overarching divine plan for the universe. Murdoch indicates, "As soon as any idea is a consolation the tendency to falsify it becomes strong: hence the traditional problem of preventing the idea of God from degenerating in the believer's mind."[118] She similarly asserts, "Almost anything that consoles us is a fake. . . . In the case of the idea of a transcendent personal God the

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[114]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 361.

[115]Ibid., 361.

[116]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 106.

[117]Ibid., 139.

[118]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 346.

degeneration of the idea seems scarcely avoidable: theologians are busy at their desks at this very moment trying to undo the results of this degeneration."[119]

I will comment on the consolation aspect of these comments below, but first, I consider what we are to make of Murdoch's claim that the image of the Good is less susceptible to corruption than a transcendent personal God, and that God's degeneration "seems scarcely avoidable." Anyone familiar with medieval theology, particularly the first thirteen questions of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, should be disabused of the view that God is a hopelessly corruptible concept in the way Murdoch thinks. Murdoch paints a picture in which theologians are frantically at work in a futile attempt to prevent this corruption. However, in my estimation, Aquinas solved this problem, theologically speaking, in his treatment of how our language and knowledge (insofar as knowledge is connected to and mediated by language) of God should be understood analogically, rather than univocally. Murdoch seems to assume that when God is referred to as, for example, a "person," the predication is necessarily meant univocally.[120] But orthodox Christian theology maintains that the names for God apply analogically, thereby securing God's transcendence—something Murdoch is at pains to defend with respect to the Good. Aquinas argues,

> For we can name God only from creatures. Thus, whatever is said of God and creatures, is said according to the order that exists of a creature to God as its principle and cause; wherein pre-exist excellently all perfections of things. This mode of community of idea is a mean between pure equivocation and simple

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[119]Ibid., 348.

[120]Kerr makes a similar point saying, "As we shall see, she has great respect for Anselm's ontological argument, but her knowledge of medieval theology evidently does not include the standard thesis that God is not to be regarded as an object in any kind. Christian theologians who are orthodox enough to believe in God as Trinity would have caveats about referring to God as '*a* person'." *Immortal Longings*, 75.

> univocation. For in analogies the idea is not, as it is in univocals, one and the same, yet also it is not totally diverse as in equivocals, but it must be said that a name used in a multiple sense signifies various proportions as regards some one thing.[121]

Murdoch might respond that the theologically sophisticated may understand these distinctions, but her concern is how the concept of a personal God degenerates in the mind of the *ordinary believer*. This would be a fair critique; however, even in that case, there seems no convincing reason to prefer the Good over God, as the Good also needs a great deal of protection so as not to degenerate.[122] Speaking of the Good, Murdoch

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[121] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q13.5. All citations of the *Summa* come from, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (London: R. & T. Washbourne, 1911). For a proper understanding of analogous predication in Aquinas, one must also read this statement in combination with Question 3, where Aquinas treats the simplicity of God versus the multiplicity of his creation. Aquinas makes use of the notion of *analogy* as a middle way between *univocal* and *equivocal* language. On the one hand, our language does not *univocally* refer to God since our language cannot circumscribe God. On the other hand, our language does not *equivocally* refer to God because as creatures—or effects of God—we maintain some amount of proportion to our cause. The multiplicity of God's effects (i.e., his creation) do not imitate him precisely—or *univocally*—due to God's simplicity; however his creation does still imitate him in some proportion—for an effect has some proportion to its cause. Etienne Gilson draws attention to the proportionality necessarily involved in causality when he says, "That we may have causality in the strict sense of the term means that we must have two beings and that something of the being of the cause passes into the being of that which undergoes the effect." *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, (London: University of Notre Dame press, 1991), 86. Therefore, since God is the cause of his creation, there is some proportion between God and his creation. God may then be known in some way by reference to his creation, although not fully. Although our language is constrained by creation in its definiteness and limitation, it is not completely vacuous in describing God. Aquinas argues, "He can be named by us from creatures, nevertheless not so as to express by the name what belongs to the Divine Essence in Itself." *Summa Theologica*, I, Q13.1. Put another way, our language in not mere *equivocation* when speaking of God. We may speak *analogously* of God, which is to say there is both identity and difference in our words and concepts.

[122]One way Medieval Christian theology guards against God's degeneration is by placing being beyond the Good, rather than the Good beyond being as Plato does. God's goodness is an aspect of his being and not his being an aspect of his goodness. Gilson expresses this sentiment saying, "we do not say that He is because He is perfect, but on

herself argues, "It is a concept which is not easy to understand partly because it has so many false doubles, jumped-up intermediaries invented by human selfishness to make the difficult task of virtue look easier and more attractive."[123] In light of this admission, perhaps it would have been better if Murdoch had not said that the Good is the least susceptible to corruption, but rather that she would prefer to battle the sorts of corruption arising from the Good instead of those that are peculiar to a personal God. But, of course, Murdoch's preference argument here hinges on the fact that the idea of God is *more* susceptible to degradation than the Good. In the end, Murdoch's position on this point seems to be more a dogmatic assumption than a carefully argued thesis.

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the contrary, He is perfect because He is." *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 55. On the Medieval Christian construal of being and goodness, goodness is always subordinate to being. Gilson argues that this distinction is crucial, especially as it relates to the Platonic Idea of the Good. For Plato, existence is subordinate to the Good. On Gilson's account, Plato's subordination is significant because the Good is the highest intelligible, and thus since it is intelligible we may conceive of the Good. If we may conceive of the Good, and *being* is subordinate to the Good, then we will also be able to conceive of *being* in light of our knowledge of the Good. However, if *being* is the first term—and the Good as the highest intelligible is a subordinate term—*being* finally outstrips our conceptual powers. Therefore, God as Pure Being ultimately eludes all our attempts to grasp his essence through our abstract nouns. All our abstract nouns are really an attempt on our part to understand the complete simple act of God—an act which has no parts—in a composite way. In speaking about the way we attempt to describe God simply, Aquinas says, "we are referring rather to the composite way in which our intellect necessarily understands simple things; and not to the composite nature of the things themselves." *Summa Theologica*, I, Q3.3. According to Gilson's interpretation, God is always beyond our conceptual abilities; God is supra-conceptual or, to use a Murdochian way of speaking, indefinable. Murdoch would disagree with Gilson's reading of Plato insofar as she maintains that the Good is indefinable and not intelligible. Gilson's view represents a complete reversal of the relationship of Good and Being when contrasted with Murdoch and Plato.

[123]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 375.

Finally, Murdoch's third reason for preferring the Good to God is rooted in her fear of consolation. She contends, "Almost anything that consoles us is a fake,"[124] and the idea of a transcendent, personal God is a particularly striking example of this fact. According to Murdoch, "human beings cannot bear much reality," and there is an "almost irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy."[125] Murdoch defines "personal fantasy" as "the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one."[126] The idea Murdoch advances is that the self-defensive, egoistic psyche cannot easily bare the fact that life possesses no grand purpose, that it is full of frustrated wishes, that it contains pointless suffering, and that it is marked by real, absolute death. Rather than facing these horrible aspects of human existence, the psyche generates self-deceptive and consoling fantasies in order to make life easier to handle. For Murdoch, God (especially the Christian God[127]) is an especially deceptive pseudo-consolation conjured by the ego as a self-soothing lie. She maintains that a personal God is a uniquely tempting fake due to the fact that God provides life with an ultimate purpose, satisfies our deepest longings, redeems suffering by making it an agent of redemption, and ensures that death in not the end. Essentially, each of these deceptions is a masterfully complex and psychologically subtle way for the ego to avoid and veil real mortality. Only the acceptance of absolute

[124]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 348.

[125]Ibid., 352.

[126]Ibid., 348.

[127]Murdoch argues, "The story of Christ is the story which we want to hear: that suffering can be redemptive, and that death is not the end." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 128.

death can assure one of release from the false constructions of the ego. As Robert C. Roberts summarizes, "Belief in immortality, according to Murdoch, harms human beings, because it gives them an out from the only remedy that is radical enough to make them good."[128]

Murdoch maintains that her image of the Good can accomplish what God failed to do:

> Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves.[129]

Murdoch prefers the Good because it does not provide the ego with a way to falsify its own death. The Good forces humans to accept absolute death (i.e., annihilation), which in turn allows them to attend to that which is other than self. She argues, "The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are."[130] The prerequisite to virtue and truthful vision, on Murdoch's account, is an acceptance of annihilation, which is incompatible with belief in God as the guarantor of an afterlife.

Of the three reasons for Murdoch's preference of the Good over God, this final one seems to be not only the most persuasive, but also the one containing the most insight. The idea of God *is* susceptible to corruption and capable of being transformed into a self-deceptive device by which the ego nurses its own wish fulfillment. The ego

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[128]Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 73.

[129]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 385.

[130]Ibid.

protests its own death and is consistently found fashioning idols for its own comfort. Additionally, there is a long spiritual and moral tradition pointing to the benefits produced by contemplating one's own death.[131] Roberts suggests, "A heartfelt reflection on our own death can help us in our pilgrimage toward seeing every person we meet as our brother and sister."[132] Death has a leveling effect both in the sense that it is no respecter of persons and, in the Ecclesiastes sense, that from the perspective of death, many of one's typical mortal pursuits (i.e., those activities to which one normally attaches great significance) appear meaningless: "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."[133] The ego revolts against this insight by fabricating surrogate immortalities (e.g., power, fame, honor) whereby it distracts and obscures the leveling effect of death.

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[131]Pierre Hadot discusses various traditions and schools in which the meditation upon death has been adopted as a spiritual and moral practice. The role played by this exercise depends on the particular way of life in which it is practiced, including the unique emphases determined by its relation to the wider moral and spiritual framework of which it is a part. For example, in Plato the exercise of death is thought of as the separation of the soul from the body, which is significant as a practice that detaches one from any object to which one has become improperly attached. *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase, (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 67, 190. In the Stoic and Epicurean context, the thought of death can give "value and seriousness to each of life's moments and actions" and also aids in self-awareness. Ibid., 193, 198. For the Christian thinker Evagrius, the Platonic practice of death is construed as the uprooting of the passions to reach the state of *apatheia*. Ibid., 247. For the Stoics, the practice of death is an important technique through which one learns to give loving consent to the universal order. It is also an important element in the Stoic practice of *praemeditatio* ("pre-exercise"), which Hadot glosses as "an exercise which prepares us for facing trials." Ibid., 136-137. In the Epicurean context, "meditation on death is intended to make us aware of both the absolute value of existence and the nothingness of death, to give us the love of life and to suppress the fear of death," Ibid., 197.

[132]Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 73.

[133]Ecclesiastes 1:14, *New International Version*.

Murdoch certainly helps her readers identify the manifold techniques for self-deception, and doubtless these insights are important considerations for any moral philosopher. Yet any theist could endorse each of these insights, which begs the question: What exactly is Murdoch arguing that is uniquely tied to her rejection of God? It seems to amount to two claims: 1) only the acceptance of absolute death can ultimately and finally kill the ego, thereby making a person truly good; and 2) the idea of God, particularly as the cosmic guarantee of an afterlife, necessarily prevents the experience of absolute death. Anything short of absolute death, something that cannot be experienced while insisting on a personal God, leaves space for the "anxious avaricious tentacles of the self,"[134] and therefore, leaves the person in need of further purification. Roberts summarizes Murdoch's view as "the claim that only the confrontation with absolute death can make a person good."[135]

Murdoch prefers the Good to God because the Good allows the possibility of absolute death, whereas the idea of a personal God prevents it. Her claim is an empirical one about human moral psychology to the effect that the only thing capable of defeating the ego is annihilation. It is an empirical claim that would have to be defended or

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[134]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 385.

[135]Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 75. Roberts's view of Murdoch is technically correct; however, an important distinction could easily be missed on his formulation: the distinction between making a person better and making a person good in the absolute sense. It is accurate to say that, for Murdoch, only confrontation with absolute death can make a person good in the absolute sense; however, she would also endorse the relative improvement of a person which might, for example, result from a person falling in love. Roberts's understanding of Murdoch's moral psychology is in danger of missing the *degrees* she allows for in the progressive moral purification of the person. In other words, her moral psychology includes the insight that the confrontation with something other than absolute death can make a person morally better.

defeated by pursuing the question as to whether or not it is a correct claim about human psychology.

This empirical claim can be challenged with Roberts's assessment that, "A faulty psychology or a lack of imagination, or both, lie at the basis of the claim."[136] I do not intend to explore this issue at length here, except to mention another compelling point of Roberts's analysis:

> But I would note too that death, whether understood as utter annihilation or as the passageway to judgment, is not the only and maybe not even the chief way that people are freed from themselves and empowered to live in selfless obedience to God or love of their fellow creatures. Perhaps the most powerful solvent of the self-encased self is another's relentless love for it. 'We love because he first loved us,' says the apostle. In the face of the irresistible affirmation of oneself by a lover, it becomes almost impossible not to open up and forget oneself in responsive love (see the conversion of Raskolnikov at the end of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*).[137]

Roberts's description argues that radical and unconditioned love "enters as a liberating ray of grace into a world of darkness"[138] and has the power to transform and liberate from a system otherwise dominated by the fat, relentless ego looking after itself. Roberts cites Raskolnikov's conversion in *Crime and Punishment* as an example of this dynamic. Additionally, one might also look for this dynamic from the other side, so to speak, in Alyosha's relentless love for others in *The Brothers Karamazov* by registering the redemptive effect of his love in social situations otherwise subject to the laws of self-assertion. Alyosha's love transforms those with whom he comes into contact precisely

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[136]Ibid., 75.

[137]Ibid., 74. Roberts includes a very important caveat along with his view. He maintains, "Love is just as irresistible as death, with one proviso—that the individual to whom love is offered not be completely without love himself." Ibid., 74-75.

[138]Ibid., 74.

because it is shockingly free of self-assertion. As Murdoch suggests, "Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it [humility] positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self."[139] Murdoch seems correct, but what she leaves largely unexplored is what the experience is like for the person fortunate enough to meet someone like this and who is radically transformed as a result. She fails to consider whether the transformative nature of being loved unconditionally could possibly challenge the incorruptibility of the Good over God.

Whatever one may think about the status of Murdoch's preference for the Good over God, it is clear that she is concerned to reopen the question as to the proper object of our deepest love. By readdressing this question, Murdoch hopes to reintroduce the concept of the unconditioned back into ethics, thereby expanding the scope of moral philosophy so that it can again thematically consider the question: What should elicit our fullest love? She maintains that an ethical system is woefully inadequate if it ignores this issue. As the best possible, least corruptible, candidate for commanding our deepest love, Murdoch adopts the Good as the "central explanatory image" of her moral philosophy.

In the context of considering the Good in contrast to God, two aspects of Murdoch's Good have surfaced: 1) its unconditional nature and 2) its worthiness as the best object toward which to direct Eros. One additional aspect now needs consideration: the Good's *for-nothingness*. I briefly discussed this aspect above in the context of flourishing accounts. Murdoch argues,

> The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. 'All is vanity' is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing' in the midst of a scene where every 'natural' thing, including one's own mind, is subject to chance, that is, to necessity. That 'for

[139]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 385.

> nothing' is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself.[140]

Similarly she contends, "Mystics of all kinds have usually known this [that the Good has many false doubles invented by human selfishness] and have attempted by extremities of language to portray the nakedness and aloneness of Good, its absolute for-nothingness."[141] For Murdoch, the only way to be truly virtuous is to be good without the hope of reward or even the consolation that comes from the idea that there is something outside human life, giving actions their meaning, point, or purpose. Her insistence on the for-nothingness of the Good allows her to distance herself from both flourishing accounts and unconditional accounts in which the object of deepest love is a personal God. According to Murdoch, flourishing accounts commit the sin of reward, and unconditional-God accounts commit the sin of purpose. Only the austere idea of the Good is ultimately fit to serve as the "central explanatory image"[142] in Murdoch's ethics, because it reasserts the unconditioned (i.e., what can command our fullest love) while at the same time preventing the corruptions arising from a personal unconditioned (i.e., purpose, afterlife, wish-fulfillment, etc.).

A significant tension arises at this point for Murdoch's account. I alluded to this tension in my last chapter while arguing that Murdoch's conception of Eros justified

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[140]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 358.

[141]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 375.

[142]Murdoch uses this phrase without entirely specifying her meaning. Schweiker, using similar terms, specifies his meaning in a way that helps clarify Murdoch's: "By a first principle I mean the idea, symbol, or root metaphor which gives systematic integrity to an ethics. This idea, symbol, or metaphor is a principle insofar as it is the source of intelligibility within an ethics; it is first because the principle is irreducible and primary." "The Sovereignty of God's Goodness," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.), 211-212.

classifying her project as eudaimonistic. I argued this point because Murdoch allows Eros and happiness into her moral picture, ultimately insisting that the Good can be linked to human happiness without necessary corruption. However, in light of Murdoch's comments on the absolute for-nothingness of the Good, a tension surfaces between her more eudaimonistic and her more austere, absolutist moods. In her eudaimonistic moods she agrees with Plato over Kant that there is a legitimate moral role for Eros in her ethical picture. Murdoch insists on this role primarily to ensure that there is a way in which the pure, transcendent Good can be redistributed and made effective within ordinary human life, so as to touch everyday human experience at various levels of ordinary desire. As we have seen, she adopts this scheme in order to represent the moral life as the gradual reorientation of desire over a leap of the will in answering the sudden call of duty. In her absolutist moods, on the other hand, Murdoch opts for Kant over Plato. Her insistence on the absolute for-nothingness of the Good reveals her Kantian anxiety over happiness and human longing. Kant maintains that the only proper moral motive is to do duty for duty's sake. Murdoch analogously contends, "The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing.'"

Kant rejects eudaimonism not only for issues related to autonomy and heteronomy, but also because he fears that happiness (i.e., the erotic nature of yearning) will introduce corrupting elements into the moral life. Murdoch explains:

> The *Grundlegung* hints that, from the existence of the moral law, we can perhaps intuit a supreme lawgiver who will introduce happiness into the *summum bonum*; but strictly speaking this must be regarded as a slip! Kant fears happiness as Plato fears art. A search for happiness here below would be for Kant heteronomous, a surrender to egoistic desires. Happy love can be an ingenious moral cheat. Happiness is not our business, and speculations about what God might do about it are not only empty, but likely to mislead us into giving it a value. Plato's Eros, by contrast, is potentially a happy lover, at many levels, and the joy which breathes

> in the art of the dialogues is itself a sign or symbol of the possibility of spiritual happiness.[143]

With no moral role for Eros, Murdoch typically holds that Kant's metaphysical picture is radically insufficient, and she maintains that Kant cannot adequately represent moral progress understood as the purification of desire. Therefore, in her eudaimonistic moods, Murdoch adopts the Platonic account since it better represents the moral life as a slow, progressive, and gradual reorientation of desire. However, she also has Kantian absolutist moods where she austerely contends for the absolute for-nothingness of the Good.

I want to sharpen this tension by connecting erotic psychic harmony accounts with eudaimonistic projects and self-mastery accounts with a-erotic, absolutist projects. Above I defined a psychic harmony model of moral therapy as a model in which human emotions, desires, appetites, and aspirations are potential allies in the pursuit of the Good. I defined a self-mastery model, on the other hand, as a model in which our emotions and desires are in need of rational domination, suppression, and even elimination for a virtuous life. I argued that Murdoch rejected Kant in part because he adopted a self-mastery model of moral therapy instead of a Platonic psychic harmony model. Murdoch's loyalty on this issue seems obviously Platonic; however, her Kantian absolutist moods call this into question. In general, it appears that psychic harmony models fit naturally with eudaimonistic projects because they are both willing to allow Eros into the moral story as desire, aspiration, and ultimate fulfillment (i.e., happiness); whereas self-mastery models fit naturally with absolutist projects because they are both

[143]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 438.

supremely suspicious of the role of the emotions and happiness, and thus attempt to eradicate them from the moral scene. At the very least, these connections suggest themselves by the way in which Murdoch frames her discussion of the moral landscape. Murdoch's general adoption of a psychic harmony account makes the tension between it and her insistence on the for-nothingness of the Good (i.e., the absolutist contention) even starker.

If indeed this tension is unresolved, a profitable way of making sense of it may be to consider which aspect gets the final word in Murdoch's account. One strategy for revealing this is to determine what the virtuous person looks like at the peak of Murdoch's ascent. In other words, at the end of her moral education, what sort of person emerges? The first clue to Murdoch's vision of a fully virtuous person comes in her musings on the highest love. She maintains, "That the highest love is in some sense impersonal is something which we can indeed see in art, but which I think we cannot see clearly, except in a very piecemeal manner, in the relationships of human beings."[144] On Murdoch's account, the fully virtuous person loves, but in a way that is somehow radically impersonal. Personal love is something that occupies a lower level on her spiritual ascent, and ultimately something that must be abandoned at the highest. Doubtless this impersonal love corresponds to her preference of an impersonal Good over a personal God; for, positing a personal God as the proper object of love would permit a radically personal love into the highest love. Only an impersonal object of love at the center of her moral structure yields the sort of impersonal love she posits as love's pinnacle. In one place, Murdoch defines love as "attachment or even passion without

[144]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 361.

sentiment or self."[145] Whatever she may mean (as she admits it is certainly difficult to conceive what love without self might be), it is clear that Murdoch is arguing for the elimination of the self. And at this point, perhaps one begins to see the emergence of a Buddhist discourse as dominant over a Christian discourse in her thought.

The second clue to Murdoch's vision of the fully virtuous person surfaces in her characterization of the good life and her subsequent comparison of it with art. She contends,

> [T]he good life . . . *is* the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real. Of course great artists are 'personalities' and have special styles; even Shakespeare occasionally, though very occasionally, reveals a personal obsession. But the greatest art is 'impersonal' because it shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all.[146]

Murdoch's characterization of the good life here is notably different from her earlier suggestion that it is a reorientation of love toward a worthy object. Instead she offers a model where the suppression of the self (i.e., anything personal) is primary. Notably, her critique of the personal standpoint is oriented toward the goal of "seeing the real." In order to see the "real world," one needs to rid oneself of his or her distinctive personality, which includes one's personal loves. The good life no longer appears as cultivating the right sort of attachment, but rather as a steady practice of detachment in order to arrive at the impersonal standpoint.

The third and final clue to Murdoch's conception of the highest person arises when she asserts, "The only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all

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[145]Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good," 373.

[146]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 352.

clearly and respond to it justly which is inseparable from virtue."[147] Her assertion reveals, yet again, the way in which Murdoch consistently ties virtue with being able to see the world rightly. Indeed, she calls it the "only thing which is of real importance." This statement is deeply revelatory in terms of what seems to be Murdoch's ultimate and driving concern. For Murdoch, the Good is conceived as an unconsoled *vision* of the real in the pure contemplation of what *is* without the admixture of the ego's distortions. The point is not, for example, to live in a mutual, perfect, loving, and perpetual communion with God and neighbor, as it is on the Christian view. Rather the point is to see it all clearly, which requires detachment and the ultimate extinction of the ego.

The fully virtuous person, on Murdoch's account, finally arrives at "the ability to sustain clear vision"[148] by transcending the self with its personal loves, various attachments, and distinctive personality. This person lacks the emotions, desires, appetites, and aspirations that are normally associated with a recognizably human life, so much so that, on Murdoch's account, it appears that the self-mastery/absolutist project has the final word over the psychic harmony/eudaimonistic project. Murdoch's picture of the fully virtuous person ends up being utterly discontinuous with a picture of human life in which attachments and emotions are a proper part of even the most virtuous life. Her Buddhist impulses ultimately seem to win over her more Christian impulses. At the end of the day, the Buddhist discourse emerges as the dominant one.

But why, one might ask, is there this tension in the first place? The tension is the result of Murdoch's understanding of the goal of a virtuous human life coupled with a

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[147]Ibid., 372.

[148]Ibid., 373.

subtle understanding of the moral psychology of the normal person possessing ordinary desires. She concerns herself with the sort of moral educational program that it would take to help the ordinary person progress. One needs to understand the dialectic Murdoch tries to lead her reader through, in order to see that she addresses the ordinary person at the point of their everyday desires; however, at the height of her moral ascent, a person must ultimately rid herself of the love that brought her to these heights. There is no ultimate convergence between one's deepest desires and the height of true virtue. Murdoch's path of Eros is merely instrumental toward the ultimate end of the purification of desire until one can altogether leave behind anything recognizably called desire.

In light of the tension between eudaimonism and absolutism in Murdoch, I now return to the question as to the proper object of our deepest love. Last chapter I suggested that Murdoch's conception of the Good as the worthiest object of our love produces the tension between this moral extremism (i.e., absolutism) and the generous moral realism that allows Eros and happiness into the moral equation. I have already hinted above that the nature of Murdoch's ultimate object of love shapes her conception of the nature of the highest "love" and also dictates the animating ideal of the whole ascent. The Good provides Murdoch with an impersonal highest love and an animating ideal of seeing it all clearly, which is the real point and endeavor of true importance on her view. Because Murdoch's object of deepest love is of an impersonal nature and because the point is merely to see it all clearly, she is left with a goal that stands in utter discontinuity with her way. She proscribes a way that touches ordinary humans because it allows and addresses ordinary human Eros and happiness, while also, admirably, insisting on their purification (not yet eradication). However, Murdoch's goal for the fully virtuous person

breaks off from her way, and she leaves her moral pilgrim with a final destination in tension with the entire ascent. She provides an erotic ascent toward an a-erotic destination.

If one returns to Murdoch's discarded God as a possible object of our fullest love, one gets a much different conception of both the highest love and the animating ideal. Because the Christian God is of a personal nature and because the goal is to live in mutual, loving communion with God and neighbor, the way is in continuity with the goal. Like Murdoch, the Christian way is one of purification and redirection of loves toward a worthy object; however, unlike Murdoch, the Christian goal is in continuity with this ascent because personal love is at its core. There is a radically personal love all the way up, so to speak, which reshapes the conception of the fully virtuous person as a radical lover in *mutual* relationship with God and neighbor.[149]

Murdoch rightly opens for us again the question as to the proper object of our deepest love; however, her preference for the Good over God leaves her with an irresolvable tension between her way and her goal. This tension forces Murdoch's moral pilgrim into a kind of schizophrenia with respect to her deepest desires. There is a deep ambivalence, almost discomfort, with being merely human on Murdoch's account. One is tempted to say that Nussbaum's critique of inappropriate attempts to transcend finite humanity applies here. Indeed, from time to time in Murdoch's moral education,

[149]Stanley Hauerwas seems to have something similar in mind when he claims, "Murdoch's world is finally too lonely for those of us called Christian, those who believe that we were created to be friends with God and, consequently, with one another and even ourselves." "Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get Through Them If God Does Not Exist?" in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 207.

particularly in its elimination of the self and one's distinctive personality, one gets a hint of the masochistic, self-punishing hatred that Nussbaum suspects in Stoicism.[150] Perhaps Murdoch would have done better to reexamine her unargued assumption that there is no God. At the very least, she might have plumbed deeper into human moral psychology by the productive engagement with a moral framework that is also concerned with the unconditioned.[151] Murdoch tells us that "philosophers must try to invent a terminology which shows how our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range. It seems to me that the Platonic metaphor of the idea of the Good provides a suitable picture here."[152] Certainly the particular nature of the object that lies beyond our natural psychology would determine the unique nature of its effects. The slow, patient comparison of God and the Good, including their unique effects on human moral psychology, and their particular versions of the nature and goal of moral purification, could provide just the sort of productive dialogue for which Murdoch calls. Nevertheless, Murdoch certainly has left me in her debt by considering in detail how an impersonal, magnetic Good functions in altering our natural psychology, even if I ultimately disagree with her contention that the Good is a better ultimate object for a moral therapy than God.

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[150]Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 510.

[151]In the final paragraph of her last philosophical work, Murdoch insists on the centrality of the unconditioned in moral philosophy. She argues, "Why not call such a reflection a form of moral philosophy? All right, so long as it treats of those matters of 'ultimate concern', our experience of the unconditioned and our continued sense of what is holy." *Metaphysics as a Guide*, 512.

[152]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 358.

Conclusion

Speaking of Murdoch's expansion of moral philosophy from the sphere of ethics (i.e., flourishing accounts) to the sphere of the unconditional, Charles Taylor maintains,

> It is hard to talk about this, and it is, above all, hard to talk about it clearly and in a recognized common language. The forest [Taylor's metaphor for the unconditional] is virtually untracked. Or, rather, there are old tracks; they appear on maps which have been handed down to us. But when you get in there, it is very hard to find them. So we need people to make new trails. That is, in effect, what Iris Murdoch has done.[153]

The image of Murdoch as a linguistic trailblazer, searching to find a language adequate for the task of picturing the full range of human moral existence, including the experience of the unconditional, reveals the final feature of Murdoch's genealogical project: the development or retrieval of an alternative grammar. Murdoch retrieves, or rather reinterprets (somewhat idiosyncratically), a Platonic grammar of the Good, which itself is embedded within a larger conceptual array in which it takes on meaning. This larger conceptual array includes, but is not limited to, the Good as explanatory metaphor, as perfection, in relation to Eros, and in contrast to God. Through her reinterpretation of a Platonic grammar of the Good, Murdoch attempts to provide a rich conceptual scheme through which we can adequately picture the full range of human moral existence, which includes the experience that something greater than our will is authoritative in matters of value and our experience of something unconditioned. From a certain vantage, Murdoch's argument is perhaps best thought of as beginning with a Platonic grammar of the Good, and then suggesting its excellent fit with the fundamental experiences of

[153]Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 18.

authority and the unconditioned, not to mention the ubiquitous perception of scales of value within "any field of human activity."[154]

Murdoch's philosophical project, then, is marked by four fundamental features characteristic of genealogical endeavors: 1) *liberation* from a dominant philosophical picture; 2) *restoration* of a previous picture misguidedly dismissed; 3) restoration of *practices* that a previous picture was meant to inform; and 4) *development* of an alternative grammar. Murdoch's three acts correspond to the three major genealogical movements of liberation, restoration, and development. Her first act was the liberation from philosophical behaviorism and the, broadly speaking, existentialist conception of the self. Her second act was the restoration of consciousness as the fundamental form of moral being along with the practices designed for its purification. And finally, her third act developed a Platonic grammar of the Good in order to provide a language adequate for the task of picturing the full breadth of human moral existence.

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[154]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 350. I borrow this way of framing Murdoch's argument from Robert C. Roberts (although he is not discussing Murdoch). *Emotions and Virtues: An Essay in Moral Psychology*, (in progress), 27.

CHAPTER SIX

Murdoch's Legacy: The Promising and the Problematic

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, Murdoch's genealogical project sought to reassert the primacy of consciousness in the midst of a philosophical climate which was fundamentally hostile to such attempts. She argues that philosophic conceptions of a substantial self are threatened by two seemingly opposite, yet mutually supporting, tendencies within Anglo-analytic and Continental-existentialist thought. On the one hand, there is a widespread "philosophical behaviorism," which focuses on the public structure of concepts where consciousness (i.e., the inner life) is reductively identified "as existing only through the application to it of public concepts, concepts which can only be constructed on the basis of overt behaviour."[1] On the other hand, there is the "existentialist" picture of the individual, which focuses on the solitary, freestanding will, which is deprived of its thick psychological background. Murdoch argues that the present "shallow and flimsy . . . idea of human personality" arises from "the joining of a materialistic behaviourism with a dramatic view of the individual as a solitary will."[2] These views "subtly give support to each other," Murdoch argues, by creating a picture in

[1]Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 288.

[2]Ibid., 287.

which an "unexamined sense of the strength of the machine [scientific determinism] is combined with an illusion of leaping out of it."[3]

The two mutually reinforcing forces that are present within contemporary philosophy and continually undermine an adequate conception of consciousness, then, include: 1) a force effacing (i.e., "erasure") consciousness, which is the consequence of a totalizing conception of language—whether conceived in terms of Wittgensteinian philosophy of language or in terms of poststructuralist linguistic systems;[4] and 2) a force that inflates consciousness, which is the consequence of the existentialist isolation of, and over-identification with, the will—whether conceived in terms of Kantian autonomy and self-determination or Sartrean unconditioned freedom. In contrast to these two forces, Murdoch maintains that human identity is socially and linguistically mediated, but not thereby reductively and exhaustively determined by these public structures. Through her genealogical account, she attempts to subvert these forces and, as Maria Antonaccio has so aptly put it, retrieve "consciousness *beyond* the turn to language to avoid the loss of the ideas of the individual person in neurosis or convention."[5] Antonaccio explains, "By insisting that language is a reflexive medium between consciousness and reality,

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[3]Ibid.; and Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 338.

[4]As Seyla Benhabib suggests, "Whether in analytic philosophy, or in contemporary hermeneutics, or in French poststructuralism, *the paradigm of language has replaced the paradigm of consciousness*. This shift has meant that the focus is no longer on the epistemic subject or on the private contents of its consciousness but on the public, signifying activities of a collection of subjects." *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 208.

[5]Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 166. (N.B. Antonaccio does not frame Murdoch's project as genealogical.)

Murdoch limits the drive of consciousness to reduce all linguistic expression to self-expression, while also avoiding the inflation of linguistic structures to the point of effacing consciousness."[6] Indeed, as Antonaccio has persuasively argued in her book, perhaps the most promising and exciting legacy of Murdoch's genealogical project is in having provided a sustained and persuasive account of how an ethics might retain the primacy of consciousness after the linguistic turn.[7]

Antonaccio's appraisal of Murdoch is thorough and persuasive, and need not be reproduced here in full. Instead, I will briefly consider three additional noteworthy aspects of Murdoch's ethical legacy before turning to three problematic aspects. First, Murdoch convincingly argued for the reconsideration of the unconditional as a vital part of any sufficient account of the role and place of the moral/ethical in human life. She reintroduced a question of central importance, one neglected at our own individual and collective peril: What can (or should) command our fullest love? Any moral philosophy that fails to address questions of ultimate concern, according to Murdoch, neglects a central aspect of ethics. Second, Murdoch persistently insisted that moral philosophers should actually attempt to provide insightful answers to the question: How do we become morally better? As a result, she redirects moral philosophy toward a robust consideration of purification techniques. And finally, as her project laments and criticizes the general loss of secondary moral concepts, she re-sensitized her readers to the importance of rich, thick, and fertile moral vocabularies, necessary for picturing "the substance of our being"

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[6]Ibid., 184.

[7]In particular, see Antonaccio's final chapter, "Prospects for Murdochian Ethics," in *Picturing the Human*, 165-194.

and for conceptualizing the full range of human ethical existence.[8] These three topics represent particularly promising trajectories for any post-Murdochian ethical account.

Despite the promising aspects of Murdoch's ethical legacy, she also leaves behind some particularly problematic features that must be addressed if her project is to remain a viable option. I have three particular weaknesses in mind: 1) her failure to articulate fully her position with respect to moral realism; 2) her stubborn refusal to engage meaningfully with Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition; and 3) her reliance on a somewhat vague notion of a psychoanalytic self in relation to highly important philosophical questions regarding personal identity. In my last chapter, I tried to explain and partially defend Murdoch's failure with respect to the question of moral realism by arguing that she is less concerned with the ontological status of the Good and more concerned with the moral insight that a Platonic moral vocabulary could supply. I also attempted to defend Murdoch by noting—following Sami Pihlstrom—that many philosophers in the Wittgensteinian tradition "regard the disputes between realism and its alternatives as . . . deeply misguided (or nonsensical)."[9] Nonetheless, a certain understandable and lingering sense of dissatisfaction accompanies complete reticence on this issue. However, although Murdoch never explicitly does so herself, Antonaccio has thankfully worked out a

[8]Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 293.

[9]*Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 4-5.

plausible account of Murdoch's position as a "*reflexive* moral realist."[10] Antonaccio has filled this perceived gap in Murdoch's account.

The second problematic aspect of Murdoch's ethical legacy is how to make sense of, and ultimately rectify, her systematic and persistent neglect of Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. In my exposition of Murdoch's genealogy, I have made a number of suggestions along the way attempting to explain the reasons for her disregard. Three of the most significant reasons are: 1) her focus on states of mind as the most important site of moral transformation; 2) her insistence that our moral being cannot be fully captured by a dispositional account of mind, and that the attempt to do so will reinforce the eclipse of consciousness; and 3) her suspicion that flourishing accounts obscure the *for-nothingness* of the Good.[11] As far as rectifying Murdoch's neglect of Aristotle, too much needs to be addressed to be able to discharge that task here; not the least of which is the fact that each of these reasons for disregard (with the possible exception of the third) can be answered by the right sort of Aristotelian account. The real loss for those of us who are readers of Murdoch is the insight that might have been gained from an authentic and serious engagement of Murdoch's brand of Platonism with contemporary virtue accounts.

I want to suggest briefly one possible, promising direction this type of engagement could produce. It involves joining Murdoch's insights concerning thick ethical conceptual arrays with the ideal convergence of practical reason upon the best kind

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[10]In particular see her chapter, "The Idea of the Good and the Transformation of Agency;" in *Picturing the Human*, especially 119.

[11]See the following pages: 78-79, 173-175, 190.

of life and the best social world for human beings. This coordination of Murdoch and naturalistic flourishing accounts discloses a question that is, I argue, one of the best ways to reconceive ethics and rethink its particular type of "objectivity": Which moral vocabulary (i.e., system of thick ethical concepts) is best for humans to use in order to flourish? Bernard Williams recognizes something very similar when discussing the difference between objectivity in science and objectivity in ethics and the role of thick concepts in the latter. He argues that the excellent life

> will involve, for instance, the agent's using some thick concepts rather than others. Reflection on the excellence of life does not itself establish the truth of judgments using those concepts or of the agent's other ethical judgments. Instead it shows that there is good reason (granted the commitment to an ethical life) to live a life that involves those concepts and those beliefs. . . . The objective grounding would not bring it about that judgments using those concepts were true or could be known: this was so already. But it would enable us to recognize that certain of them were the best or most appropriate thick concepts to use.[12]

I cannot fully explore this conception of ethics here; however, I hope it is suggestive of a promising trajectory for ethics, and one that Murdoch may have stumbled upon if she had been more willing to engage the Aristotelian tradition.[13]

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[12]Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 154-155. (N.B. I was assuming this method and conception of ethics when I argued that a thick conceptual array with God at the center is better for humans than one with the Good at the center. Murdoch also argues in a similar fashion, but to the opposite conclusion. I understand my own engagement with Murdoch on this issue as a concrete example of what ethical debate might look like on this construal of ethics.)

[13]Of course, if Murdoch would have adopted this conception of ethics it would have forced her to rethink many features of her project, and it would also entail a shift from her "reflexive realism" to a more recognizably classical realism (e.g., a realism indexed to the best kind of life for the particular type of creature a human being is). On this conception, the biological features of humans would guide the recognition of the best thick concepts to use based on the sort of creatures we humans are. I hasten to add one

The final weakness of Murdoch's project, and arguably the most problematic feature of her ethical legacy, is her reliance on a generally vague appeal to Freud's "psychoanalytic self" at a crucial juncture in her argument. In contrast to the existentialist picture of the self, whether in its surrealist or rational, Sartrean or Kantian, guise, Murdoch argues for a substantial self that refocuses on consciousness and its "continuous background with a life of its own."[14] Exactly when a philosophically robust discussion of the complex issue of personal identity is needed, Murdoch suggests, "The self of psychoanalysis is certainly substantial enough."[15] Murdoch's general meaning is lucid enough: we need to attend to personal histories and their shaping influence on personality as somehow effectually present to one's current awareness. But she sidesteps the very difficult and historically important philosophical discussion of how we might understand personal identity and selfhood. This neglect is particularly problematic for Murdoch, especially in light of the fact that her philosophical project concerns the retrieval of consciousness. Issues of personal identity are fundamental to her account.

Something like MacIntyre's "narrative concept of selfhood" seems like it could fill this gap adequately; in fact, I am tempted to think Murdoch actually had something like

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Murdochian caveat here: the attempt to characterize the pertinent human biological features is an inextricably moral activity and displays a certain ethical way of viewing the world (i.e., the human creature).

[14]Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 343.

[15]Ibid.

this in mind.[16] However, even if she did not, a narrative concept of selfhood certainly fits into the general contours of her account, especially when considering her work in displaying character through her novels.[17] The narrative concept has greater philosophical respectability because it has been developed as a response to analytic philosophy's tendency to think atomistically, and because it has been crafted in dialogue with traditional philosophical accounts of personal identity.[18] That said, I hasten to add one caveat to this possible "fit" between Murdoch's and MacIntyre's conception of identity. Doubtless Murdoch would feel that a narrative concept of selfhood, although rightly attending to a certain omitted "background," still risked the eclipse of that which is of fundamental importance: consciousness. Returning to words already quoted, I will let Murdoch have the final say as to that mystery which ever must retain its central priority in our reflections:

> Yet this may still leave one with the familiar feeling of having lost something. One returns to the most obvious and most mysterious notion of all, that this present moment is the whole of one's reality, and this at least is unavoidable. (The weirdness of being human.) Then one may start again reflecting upon the moment-to-moment reality of consciousness and how this is, after all, where we live.[19]

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[16]Alasdair MacIntrye, *After Virtue*, (London: Duckworth, 1992), especially 204-225.

[17]Murdoch argues that the novel needs to recover "the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character." "Against Dryness," 294.

[18]Ibid., 204, 216-217.

[19]Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 257.

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