

Overcoming the Fantasy of Human Supremacy: Toward a Murdochian Theory of Change in Nonideal Animal Ethics

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Abstract: How may we change ourselves and our society so that animals are treated more justly? To answer this question, I turn to the account of moral change developed by the philosopher Iris Murdoch. The chief obstacle to becoming better, she believed, is an attachment to fantasy, from which we are liberated only through a loving attention directed at the reality of other beings. Building on this account, I argue that human supremacy is one such fantasy—that it acts as an impediment to interspecies justice. I end with a meditation on love as liberatory practice.

Key Words: moral change, nonideal theory, attention, fantasy, human supremacy, veganism

INTRODUCTION

Animal ethics has long been dominated by the search for foundational principles—principles such as the equal consideration of interests (Singer, 2002), respect for “subjects of a life” (Regan, 2004), and legal personhood for sentient beings (Francione, 1995). These efforts have in turn contributed to the development of an “ideal theory”: a compelling vision of the perfectly just society (see, e.g., Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011). Though utopian in taking for granted full compliance by the populace (and, of course, favorable circumstances), ideal theories are required to strive for realism in their assumptions about the capabilities of human beings (Rawls, 1999, p. 216). Being both realistic and aspirational, an ideal theory can be used to orient political agents in relation to a shared goal—thus directing collaborative efforts at societal reform.

However, in the past decade, ideal theorists in animal ethics have been heavily criticized for not having contended with the practical impediments to societal change (Cochrane et al., 2018; Garner, 2013; Kasperbauer, 2018; Müller, 2022). It has been argued

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that the ideal put forward often makes demands that the average person cannot in fact meet (thus failing to be realistic in its assumptions about the actual capabilities of human beings). Ideal theorists have also been criticized for underestimating the extent to which justice will be resisted; also for failing to supplement their vision for the future with concrete strategies that can foster compliance. What is needed, these critics argue, is more of what Rawls called “nonideal theory,” which starts with our actual conditions and attempts to answer the question: How do we reach our ideal society given the obstacles and injustices currently being faced? The concern here is thus with the *process* of moral change.¹

But before we can begin developing an account of what the transition from an imperfect to an ideal society ought to entail—what Nico Dario Müller (2022) calls a nonideal “theory of change”—we must first have an adequate description of the central obstacle: human psychology. This is a task that has been most effectively carried out by T. J. Kasperbauer (2018): “The main obstacle to moral change is that much of our thinking—moral and otherwise—lies outside our conscious awareness” (p. 85) and, as a consequence, “we often lack control over things we would very much like to change and sometimes don’t even understand the content of our own thoughts and beliefs” (p. 86). It would be naive then to expect (as the ideal theorists do) that an individual could simply reason their way to a more just relationship to other animals (Kasperbauer, 2018, pp. 134–135). Instead, change is best pursued through government-sponsored behavioral interventions that “nudge” individuals (without their knowing it) into steering their choices in a certain direction (Kasperbauer, 2018, p. 175). Thus, the only reliable way to change people for the better is by providing them with external assistance (Kasperbauer, 2018, p. 103).

Kasperbauer (2018) is unique among nonideal theorists in animal ethics in that he is clear-eyed about the psychological obstacles that stand in the way of moral improvement. This, undoubtedly, is a valuable contribution on its own. However, because he does not supplement his observations with an ideal according to which we can orient efforts at reform, all of his tactical proposals in the end fail to amount to a fully realized theory of change: a long-term strategy for moral transformation. My intent in this article will be to pick up where Kasperbauer left off and develop a nonideal theory of change that is both realistic in its assumptions about human capabilities and also oriented by an ideal toward we can aspire. It will differ significantly from those that have already been advanced by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011), Robert Garner (2013), and Müller (2022) in that it is concerned not with changes to be made in policy and public institutions but with change as it occurs within a person’s consciousness. Having an account of *this* kind of change is important even if we grant Kasperbauer’s (2018) thesis that self-understanding is limited, that much of our thinking is not under our conscious control, and that moral change is most often (and most effectively) initiated by an outside force. First, it allows us to account for the way that changes in thought and behavior can be integrated into an identity that can endure over time. The appeal to a shared identity can then serve as a means of solidifying the gains that are made by exponents of animal rights; crucially, it may thereby motivate greater participation in the political process by those who define

themselves according to this identity.² Second, the ability to overcome psychological obstacles and the receiving of help from the outside: these are both amenable to training. However, without a realistic theory of internal change, activists will not be able to develop the techniques and strategies that such training requires. In this way, effecting a positive moral transformation in our society depends first on our having a realistic theory of change. It is this latter argument that will be the focus of my article.

The theory of moral change I develop builds on the work of the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. Like Kasperbauer, Murdoch (1998) held a cynical view of human nature, writing of the “psyche” that its “natural attachments are . . . 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” (p. 345). She differs, however, in her proposed method for *overcoming* these obstacles: not data-driven interventions by well-intentioned parties but the individual’s active reimagining of their possibilities as a response to the magnetic pull of the Good. For Murdoch, it is only through contact with the Good, which purifies desire and reorients consciousness, that genuine moral change is brought about. In the pages that follow, I first elaborate on Murdoch’s theory of change; then, I demonstrate its relevance for nonideal animal ethics. Ultimately, I argue that Murdoch provides us with an effective technique with which to dispel what I will be calling “the fantasy of human supremacy.”

IRIS MURDOCH ON “BECOMING BETTER”

In “the fire and the sun,” Murdoch (1998) claimed that “a portrayal of moral reflection and moral change . . . is the most important part of any system of ethics” (p. 457). And yet, the prevailing moral philosophy of her time—unconcerned with the inner life, skeptical of a transcendent reality—had failed to supply a realistic picture of what either process consisted of.³ Questions like “What is the good man like?” and “How can we make ourselves morally better?” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 344)—these could not be answered with the limited vocabulary at hand. Largely responsible for this inarticulacy, Murdoch thought, was a reluctance to seriously engage with values originating in adjacent domains (especially psychology and religion). She held that when moral philosophy becomes, in this way, segregated from other branches of thought, a variety of concepts that could have been used to describe our moral being are placed off limits. Gone too is the possibility of learning from the techniques for improvement that *correspond* to these more substantial conceptions of the self. Stripped down and unencumbered, all that is left is the isolated, choosing will. Not contaminated by desire and personality, nor contained by metaphysical structures that transcend it, the moral agent—now “thin as a needle” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 343)—can only be said to change (morally) through its selection of different values in a condition of total freedom.

“But how ill this describes what it is like for us to alter,” Murdoch (1998, p. 345) writes. First, it does not account for the *difficulty* of change: the internal obstacles, like egoism and ignorance, that stand in its way. And second, it neglects the role that objects

of value external to us play in occasioning a shift in what we desire and are moved by. Without such an account, the *dynamics* involved in change cannot be explained either. It is precisely here, to fill in these gaps, that Murdoch believes it becomes necessary to reach out to disciplines other than philosophy. Primarily, it is Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, and the Christian doctrine of original sin, that influence her account of the impediments to change. She writes, "We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures, sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" (Murdoch, 1998, p. 293). We are "benighted" because we are so often ignorant of our motives (as Freud believes) and benighted also because of our "fallen" nature, our inclination toward egoism (a Christian notion). But if this is so, then genuine change cannot be brought about simply by choosing to value something else; instead, there must be a "change of one's whole being in all its contingent detail, through a world of appearance toward a world of reality" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 25).

As for the techniques that could occasion such a change, Murdoch (1992) finds some promise in the relentless self-searching of psychoanalysis, the way it implores us to "break down false self-pictures" however much they may console (p. 22). But introspection, on its own, is not enough; we must also engage in the act of "unselfing," as practiced by mystics like Simone Weil, in which we "cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else" (Murdoch, 1998, p. 348). Murdoch (1992) argues that this kind of outward-oriented attention in fact functions as the central pivot to the transformation of consciousness. "Moral change," she explains, "comes from an attention to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of the reality of primarily of course other people, but also other things" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 52). And so we could say that attention aims at correct perception and requires that we suppress the self, and through it we become less egoistic. In what follows, I spend some time unpacking these ideas and their implications. As we will see, the work of contemporary Murdoch scholar, Silvia Panizza, will prove indispensable for this project.

Murdoch means by attention more than simple concentration—a selective and sustained focusing of the mind. As Panizza (2022a) rightly argues, it is also and importantly "connected with truth: It enables us to see how things are, including their moral qualities" (p. 129). In this way, attention is "opposed to both fantasy (fabrication) and obliviousness" (Panizza, 2022a, p. 24). But now we may ask: How are we to distinguish between a true perception of our moral reality and a self-serving delusion? The difference has to do, Panizza (2022a) argues, with the direction of our consciousness: It can either be "turned lovingly to the world in attention" or else it is "harnessed by fantasy when turned towards oneself" (p. 114). Only in the former case—involving a "turning away from self-concern" (Panizza, 2022a, p. 140), followed by an "active reaching out to reality" (Panizza, 2019, p. 287)—do we arrive at correct perception.

But what, we may wonder, is responsible for *effecting* this reorientation? Here Panizza (2022a) writes that "attention is aided by *the self* in directing consciousness outwards" (p. 77; emphasis added). Two implications follow from this. First, because the self is "a

subject or agent of attention . . . it also contributes in significant ways to determining and shaping what is perceived” (Panizza, 2022a, p. 71). This of course is not to imply that Murdoch was an antirealist; her stance was rather that our respective “visions” of reality might differ insofar as each of us understand with imperfect concepts with a structure that is largely private (pp. 317–326). The second implication is this: Because the self contributes to the reality that is perceived, attention cannot then require that the self be overcome in its *entirety*. At most, what must be suppressed is only that *aspect* of the self that obscures the truth. Following Murdoch, Panizza (2022a) decrees the culprit the insatiable ego, responsible for the tendency to prioritize “the self as an object of one’s consciousness” (p. 77). Thus, Panizza (2022a) concludes that “unselfing, then, is removal not of self, but of selfishness” (p. 71).

While I agree with Panizza (2022a) that attention involves the reorientation of consciousness, and that the self plays a role in *effecting* this change of direction, it should nevertheless be noted that Murdoch meant more by the term than just this. Attention was, for her, not simply a turning away from the ego but also the means by which desire is “purified,” not only a criterion for correct perception, but a technique for moral improvement. What I now want to show is that without these elements, it is not possible to realistically depict the difficulty of change nor derive practical guidance for bringing such change about.

Let us begin by considering in more detail the central obstacle that Panizza (2022a) identifies as standing in the way of correct perception: the ego. In her account, egoism is synonymous with self-concern, and this self-concern obstructs efforts of attention by creating a series of “distortions”:

On the one hand, there is a distortion about ourselves, about the place that we occupy in the world . . . we live and think as if we were at the centre, inflating our own importance and taking our point of view to have special relevance. . . . Second, distortion about the world follows from this: if self is taken to be central, the external world will be unseen in its reality, given that self fills most of the field of vision. (Panizza, 2022a, pp. 78)

Panizza (2022a) then claims that both kinds of distortions are instances of what Murdoch called “fantasy,” and it is here that I begin to disagree with her interpretation. If the distortion of fantasy consists of nothing more than the inflated estimation of self, then the avowed egoist would (presumably) be the prime example of a person who is subject to its workings. In the context of animals, for instance, we could think of someone who refuses to engage with an activist on the topic of factory farms because “it might ruin my appetite.”

Murdoch, however, would not call this fantasy. She wouldn’t because the influence of fantasy on us is, she believes, far more insidious than that of overt self-concern, or an explicit belief in one’s own importance relative to others. She writes that the “human mind is naturally and largely given to” it (Murdoch, 1992, p. 322)—so much so that “most of the time we fail to see the . . . real world at all” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 14). Because we are not privy to the ways it structures our lives, determining what we take to be of value in it, fantasy can thus be said to “imprison” us. Even introspection, because it reveals

“only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 341), cannot be relied on to distinguish fantasy from reality. Implicit in what Murdoch is saying (and what I do not think Panizza, 2022a, fully appreciates) is that fantasy exerts its influence on us from within the unknowable realm of the unconscious; this is why it is both hidden from us and also difficult to overcome.

That Murdoch really means unconscious fantasy is also supported by her general endorsement of Sigmund Freud’s picture of the human being.⁴ “It seems clear,” she writes, “that Freud made an important discovery, and that he remains still the greatest scientist in the field which he opened” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 341). Specifically, what Murdoch (1998) finds “true and important” is his depiction of the psyche as “an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy . . . whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control” (p. 341). She is here referring to what Freud (1995) called “primary process”: the unconscious mechanism that works to relieve the internal pressure that builds up when certain desires—“wishes”—are repressed (pp. 436–517). The energy that fuels this mechanism (that propels us toward the gratification of a wish) are the drives, the most prominent of which is the sex drive—what Freud, following Plato, later called “Eros”: that animating force that yearns to “form living substance into ever greater unities, so that life may be prolonged and brought to higher development” (Freud, 1981d, p. 258).

A fantasy, in this context, refers to the imagined depiction of an erotic longing fulfilled.⁵ Harmless, everyday instances of this include idle daydreams, imaginative child’s play, and sexy stories we tell ourselves when masturbating. Trouble begins when contemplating the wished for attachment causes displeasure (for instance, when we find disturbing the satisfaction we get in imagining the suffering of an enemy or having sex with someone off limits). In such cases, the desire is repressed into the unconscious, upon which its energy begins to circulate, creating tension and seeking release. As a result of the buildup of pressure, a “transference” may occur: The energy associated with a forbidden wish is “displaced” onto an adjacent or loosely related thought or image that *hasn’t* been censored (Freud, 1995, pp. 304–306). When we encounter in reality the object or idea that the unconscious takes to stand in for the wish, we will react *as if* we are obtaining what we always wanted. And so, when sufficiently well-disguised, an unconscious fantasy can slide undetected into conscious awareness and potentially take hold of a person’s rational thoughts. Such a development is pathological insofar as observed reality begins to be *interpreted* in light of this fantasy; insofar as the fantasy gets “acted out” (Freud, 1981e). In this way, a person who is the subject of a fantasy “turns away” from the real world because it is perceived as unbearable (Freud, 1981a). Reality is then substituted with a fiction more “in conformity with one’s own wishes” (Freud, 2010, p. 51; see also Freud, 1981e). Then, into this fantasy world, Murdoch (1998) would add, we tend “to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own” (p. 216). And all this is a problem, Freud (1981e) believes, because without a firm sense of reality, Eros cannot be channeled toward productive ends; when our energies are instead attached to an unconscious fantasy, inevitably we will feel frustrated, lacking in control.

For examples of pathological fantasy, we need look no further than the villains of Murdoch's novels. Consider Charles Arrowby, the protagonist of *The Sea, the Sea* (Murdoch, 2001). Upon retiring from a successful career as a theater director, he becomes so obsessed with his childhood sweetheart, Hartly, that he abducts her from her home and happy marriage and imprisons her in his seaside mansion. Soon it becomes apparent that what is driving Charles is in fact a desire to regain what time has taken from him: his youth, his sex appeal, his prestige. But why then do his yearnings center on Hartly? Here is where psychoanalysis offers an answer: Because it is impossible to restore in reality what has been lost to the past, Charles's wishes are unbearable to contemplate and thus are buried in the unconscious. Then, a transference occurs. First, in the unconscious, Hartly comes to stand in for the glories of Charles's past. Second, the wish for his past is reincarnated in a new form: the belief that Charles is (and always was) truly in love with Hartly—they are meant to be together. Unbeknownst to Charles, the reason he holds this belief is not because it corresponds to reality but because it enacts an unconscious fantasy and thus gratifies a repressed wish. Essentially, the fantasy here is a performance of power and control and Hartly serves merely as the prop.

With a better sense now of what Murdoch means by fantasy, we can return to Panizza's (2022a) account to see what is missing from it. Remember: She had claimed that the central obstacle to correct perception was egoism, understood as self-concern, and that its overcoming was a matter of reorientation. But consider the nature of Charles's failings: While it is true that he is an egoist, it wouldn't exactly be right to describe his egoism in terms of self-concern. Instead, we saw that Charles desired Hartly because he truly believed that "all the goodness of my life seemed to reside there with her" (Murdoch, 2001, p. 123). Thus, at least in his own post hoc rationalization of his actions, Charles takes himself to be motivated by noble ends. If we call him an egoist, this can only really describe his outward conduct, and his outward conduct is only egotistical in that it enacts a fantasy. However, because this fantasy is unconscious, Charles cannot be said to be fully aware or in control of his egoism. And this is why it can neither be true that Charles could change through the deliberate effort of reorientation. This aligns with Murdoch's (1998) own stance: She writes that because unconscious attachments are "hard for the subject to understand or control" (p. 341), efforts of will "can usually achieve little. It is small use telling oneself [to stop]" (p. 345). Put differently, we cannot change by looking away because inevitably whatever it is we look away *to* will already have been conditioned by the fantasies that lurk within, undetected. This is why Murdoch (1992) says that fantasy "can imprison the mind, impeding new understanding, new interests and affections, possibilities of fruitful and virtuous action" (p. 322).

But if not through an effort at reorientation, then how *does* one effect an interior change? Let us first consider the cure proposed by Freud (1981b), what he called "working through": the process by which a patient moves from the knowledge that unconscious fantasies structure their lives to the practical ability to recognize instances of transference as they unfold, in real time, in order to stop them in their tracks. Murdoch (1998) breaks with Freud here, expressing skepticism over the claim of psychoanalysis that it

can penetrate deep into the unconscious and bring back knowledge of its operations: “Self-knowledge,’ in the sense of a minute understanding of one’s own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion” (p. 355). Murdoch (1998) also worried that getting wrapped up in thinking about the unconscious might actually backfire: “Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power” (p. 355). To be clear, she is not here *denying* that we are influenced by unconscious fantasy; what she is suspicious of is the claim that *knowing* the underlying mechanism of a fantasy can actually aid us in reform. On the contrary, Murdoch argues that having a story that both explains and exonerates one’s behavior might both distract and detract from the true work of moral change: “It is consoling to feel that you are taking part in an inner drama. In a way, psychoanalysis depends upon this idea, doesn’t it? The patient is cheered up by the analyst’s picturing a drama in which the patient figures” (as cited in Dooley, 2003, p. 59). Insofar as it gratifies and consoles, giving us the false impression that we are clear to ourselves and in control, the self-understanding of psychoanalysis can itself function as a kind of fantasy.

But if not by looking inward and not by looking away, then in what does the liberation of the soul from fantasy consist? “In the capacity to love,” writes Murdoch (1998, p. 384). There exists a “tension,” she continues, “between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 384)—what she calls “the Good”—and love is “the response to that magnetism” (p. 343). Like Freud before her, Murdoch is working here with a picture of human motivation that takes the Platonic idea of “Eros” as its structuring principle. In her words, “Eros is the continuous operation of spiritual energy . . . as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 496). Because of our “fallen” natures, we are instinctively drawn to false images and false goods, which only serve to “degrade” Eros further. But it may also happen that we are “graced” by the Good itself which then “purifies the desire that seeks it” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 507). This, Murdoch argues, is the first step to moral change: We must purify an energy that is naturally selfish—seeking to gratify unconscious wishes—so that our attachment to fantasy may thereby be loosened.

And though it is the Good that is responsible for the transformation of a person’s energy (from low to high Eros), it is possible, through training, to become more receptive to its influence. Murdoch (1992, 1998) argues that this can be achieved, specifically, in the practice of “attention”—a term she borrows from the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. “Attention,” writes Weil (1951), “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object” (p. 111). One gets better at this through patience and discipline and of course much practice. But even so, making space within ourselves is no easy task, especially given that “human beings are naturally attached,” tending “to derealise the other, devour and absorb him, subject him to the mechanism of our own fantasy” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 345). Attention, therefore, requires the momentary suspension of erotic activity, wherein the “mind constantly says no and no and no to the prompt easy visions of self-protective self-promoting fantasy” (Murdoch,

1992, p. 455). Only after will “the truth come spontaneously . . . into the space which it is so hard . . . to keep empty against the pressures which are tending to collapse it” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 455).

Of course, purified energy alone does not amount to Goodness. If consciousness is to be improved as well, one must also *do* something with that energy—engage what Murdoch (1992) calls the “liberated truth-seeking creative imagination” (p. 321). This kind of imagination is, at once, an “(inner) activity of the senses, a picturing and a grasping” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 325) and also an outward “searching, joining, light-seeking” endeavor. In it “one elaborates a distinction and defines a concept so as to see further” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 323). Through it, one is able to more deeply reflect on settled habits and stale assumptions about the world. And because it is creative, it allows us to “consider new possibilities” for understanding (Murdoch, 1992, p. 322). Thus, it “prepares and forms the consciousness for action” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 323). A person who exercises the imagination in this way is involved in the steady unmaking of fantasy; the careful, deliberate searching and gradual discovery of truth; and the turning away from the ego toward reality—and the quality of their consciousness will be thereby improved.

In its ability to effect a transformation of consciousness that is more in accord with reality, I take the liberated imagination to be roughly what Panizza (2022a) has in mind by “reorientation.” And though I part ways with her in holding that attention is something more (a trained receptivity to the Good), nevertheless I agree that it is a necessary part of the equation. As Murdoch (1998) writes, it is both “purification *and* reorientation . . . which must be the task of morals” (p. 357; emphasis added).⁶ Her ordering here I think is deliberate. First, attention opens the space for the Good to purify; second, the imagination, fueled by high Eros, comes in to reorient one’s consciousness toward reality. The reason purification must be a necessary first step is because it is only by the *quality of our energy* that we can be sure that the imagination is really aspiring to truth—that it isn’t merely enacting a fantasy.⁷ In other respects, they are, after all, the same: Unconscious primary processes and the liberated imagination both consist in the “continuous detailed conceptual pictorial activity whereby . . . we make and remake the ‘world’ within which our desires and reflections move, and out of which our actions arise” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 325). And so, insofar as Panizza (2022a) does not allow purification a central role, her account might not be able to distinguish a successful attempt at reorientation from a descent into fantasy. We are not given, in other words, a technique for becoming Good nor a method for evaluating our progress.

Having laid out Murdoch’s (1992, 1998) theory of change, I turn now to consider its relevance and applicability to the problem we began with: How can the lives of animals be meaningfully improved when there exists a marked resistance to the demands of justice? Murdoch opens two promising avenues for us to explore and consider. First, a more realistic account of the nature of the obstacle: We are obstinate not because we are each individually cruel and uncaring, not because we lack the objective facts of the matter, not even necessarily because we believe ourselves entitled; instead, we may take the mass subjugation of animals as a symptom of a collective yet unconscious fantasy—what I will

be calling “the fantasy of human supremacy.” The second avenue concerns Murdoch’s prescribed technique for *overcoming* that obstacle: it is not through an effort of will, nor by reason alone, but through love—the fruit of attention—that we are cleansed of fantasy.

THE FANTASY OF HUMAN SUPREMACY

I take human supremacy to refer to the systematic subordination of the ends of animals, however important, to those of humans, however trivial. Those who consume animals, wear their skins, hunt for tradition, fashion them into a spectacle, breed and sell and buy their living bodies (or traffic in their parts, their services, their excretions), experiment on them, “manage” them, and “sacrifice” them for the “greater good” are all complicit in upholding the human supremacist social order. Of course, here one may protest and say in their own defense that even though they *do* sometimes partake in a few of these activities, they nevertheless do not actually *believe* themselves superior to other animals. In fact, they may treat their dog like they would a human friend, for instance, or, when hunting, they may regard their prey as an equal who willingly “gives” their life.⁸ I concede that this is more likely the norm than the exception, and so, what we must do is add a qualification: To be complicit in human supremacy does not mean that there necessarily needs to be, within the individual, an explicit belief in the greater worth of humans relative to other animals—not even a belief in the *permissibility* of what we do.⁹ Instead, complicity comes from the subtle, perhaps invisible biases latent in our thought, from the words and actions that work to reify the very arrangement that sets us on top. Human supremacy is thus a force that works in us and through us without our intentionally willing it, or consciously endorsing it.¹⁰

But here we may wonder: If not a conscious belief in our own superiority, then what, at root, compels a person to enact over and again this ruthless domination over animals? One possibility is that we, knowingly or not, incline toward these exploitative practices because they materially benefit us. We can think here of the advent of domestication in agriculture or the science of vivisection—both bloody practices that quickly became so central to the advancement of human interests that parting ways with them seemed inconceivable at the time. But, of course, this cannot be the whole story, since now it is so often *not* the case that we are materially benefitted by such practices. Those who eat animals today, for instance, do so at the expense of their health, the conservation of land and resources, and the proper functioning of the climate; often meat will be preferred even when the alternative is cheaper or impossible to distinguish in taste and texture. The obstinacy in our attachment to human supremacy cannot therefore be explained by self-interest alone, and yet these behaviors must be doing *something* for us—otherwise, why would they become so entrenched?

Another explanation—the one that I find most plausible—is that human supremacy sometimes functions as a collective fantasy: a complex of shared rituals and customs that are compulsively reenacted by the individual because they are taken to represent the

fulfillment of an unconscious wish.¹¹ This hypothesis strikes me as immediately attractive because it accounts for the mindless and repetitive nature of the violence we inflict on animals. Mindless because the mechanism that prompts our behavior is unconscious and nonrational. Repetitive because the desires that spur the unconscious processes cannot be wholly satiated so long as they remain repressed, confined to the unconscious. Thus, the concept of “fantasy” provides a compelling account of the psychic mechanism underlying human supremacy.

But while one may grant that human supremacy appeals to the individual for reasons unconscious to them, one may still balk at the idea of this fantasy possessing also a social dimension. What, after all, could be more personal and private than the unconscious attachments of fantasy life? So, sure, it could be that human supremacy works to gratify the hidden desire of a discrete individual; nevertheless, how can this same desire be shared at the same time by the whole of society? There is something to this resistance, I think. On the one hand, it is true that the material from which fantasy is built belongs to the individual (is drawn from their own personal history and is therefore largely private). On the other, it cannot be denied that general patterns do exist. Take gambling and the delusion of invulnerability, drug use and the promise of an eternal childhood, retributive justice as the vain attempt to restore what has been lost. The reason fantasies like these are bought into a large scale is, first, because they correspond to fears and anxieties that are common to our species, and second, because acting them out often *does* result in at least piecemeal gratification, however fleeting. Human supremacy, I will now show, is like this too.

There are, I first should say, a great many wish-fulfillment fantasies that could be taken to explain our collective attachment to human supremacy. For instance, it might function as a vindication of masculinity, as a signifier of wealth and abundance, or as a confused attempt to actualize our union with the rest of creation. Here I will focus on what I consider the most likely and far-reaching possibility: that human supremacy incites desire in us by offering an escape from the crippling fear of death.¹² In the corresponding fantasy scenario, the collective denigration of animals proves to us that we are essentially different from them: not of the earth, vulnerable and dependent, subject to entropy, our bodies to be consumed by the mycelium in the soil. Animals thus function as symbols for those aspects of ourselves that remind us of our own mortality: dirt, defecation, disease, unbridled hunger, unprovoked aggression, lust and mindless procreation, instinctual self-preservation, unfreedom, precarious dependency, dull pointless loitering, stupidity. In the exercise of power over their lives, we distance ourselves from that aspect of ourselves that is like them. By destroying the animal in reality, we liberate ourselves (symbolically) from the presence of death.

Note how taking this possibility seriously upends the usual ways of thinking about the problem of human supremacy. Our domination over animals is seen now to occur not because we believe ourselves superior, or because it happens to benefit us, but primarily because of the hidden wish to erase a fact of life that is difficult to become reconciled with. Such a conjecture has worth in that it can deliver fresh insight into facets of hu-

man supremacy that have remained hitherto mysterious. Let us take, as an example, the consumption of animal flesh. Why is *this*, we may ask, the most widely practiced and intractable of the many existing forms of ritualized animal violence? It is plausible, I think, that the ritual plays a pivotal role in the continuation of a collective fantasy. Because it involves the (quite literal) subordination of an animal to the meaning that they carry for us, eating their physical body facilitates their use as a symbol. Through consumption we more fully subsume the animal within the world of unconscious fantasy.

We may also consider again a problem from earlier: that the individual's eating of flesh is so often coupled with curiosity, compassion, and feelings of kinship toward other animals. How are we to explain the dissonance? In psychoanalysis, this would count as a classic instance of a defense mechanism: a compensatory measure designed to shield us from displeasure by distracting our attention from something that normally would appall us (Freud 1981c, p. 184). In this light, our obsessions with animal figurines, companion animals, and "wildlife" documentaries may then all be functioning for us as fantasy—only this time, one of benevolence.¹³

It is true that all this is speculative. As Murdoch (1992, 1998) herself might warn us, it cannot be definitively proved that human supremacy functions as a collective fantasy in exactly the way I described. But then of what use is it to wonder about and search for general patterns of unconscious attachments of the sort that may generate the wide-scale complicity in human supremacy? There are a few uses, I think. To begin, an investigation of this kind demonstrates, at the very least, that the mindless compulsion to partake in ritualized violence *can* be explained as the enactment of an unconscious fantasy. To the extent that we are confident in this diagnosis, we also have reason to be suspicious of beliefs that are connected and that lend support to that fantasy. And while it is true that it might not be possible to determine the exact mechanism that underlies it—and, in any case, this would vary in presentation from person to person—nevertheless, discussing possibilities in the abstract is worthwhile in itself because it invites self-examination over the nature and the reason for one's *own* personal attachments to human supremacy, whatever these may turn out to be. So, if one begins to suspect a fantasy lurking within but cannot glean its exact operations, this still is valuable. The very identification of something *as* a fantasy, to feel its imprint upon one's life, is thereby to diffuse its power, loosen its hold. It is only in this way that we may begin to open ourselves in earnest to the possibility of genuine moral change.

ATTENTION AND MORAL CHANGE

I have argued that it is necessary to have a realistic account of the impediments to moral change in order to develop a technique according to which a person becomes better. If human supremacy *were* reducible to a mere belief in our own importance, then all that would be required is to rationally inspect the foundations for that belief. If it consisted only in the tendency to self-prioritize, then a straightforward exercise of willpower would do. But because, as we've seen, human supremacy extends deep into the unconscious

of the individual (taking hold as “fantasy”), neither reason nor will can entirely undo its influence. And so, what is required instead is a shift in what we find ourselves compulsively drawn to, desiring of. For this to happen, our attachment to human supremacy must be *exposed* to the light of the Good and thus *seen* as the degraded form of Eros that it is—only then can there be a reorientation of consciousness toward reality and away from the easy consolations of fantasy. Barring this, we will neither know the direction nor the shape that change should take. But how, in practice, are we to transform an attachment to human supremacy into a willing compliance with the norms of justice? In what follows, I argue that a transformation of this kind ideally comes through an attention to the reality of individual animals, one importantly that is “inspired by, consisting of, love” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 354).

Though Murdoch typically uses the word “love” as just another word for Eros (see Hopwood, 2018, pp. 484–485), here I will be using it specifically as a success term, referring to those times when it is in truth “the Good” that is the object of our striving. But now one may ask: If what we love is the Good, then where does this leave the individual? It is worth mentioning that there has been worry that Murdochian love necessitates seeing the other only as a minor instantiation of the abstract Good that lies beyond them—a mere “stepping-stone” to the form that is more real than they are (Nussbaum, 1996). If this were true, then love surely couldn’t serve as the foundation for the pursuit of interspecies justice (where respect for the individual is paramount). But this line of reasoning fails to appreciate the nuance of Murdoch’s position, which Mark Hopwood (2018) encapsulates thus: “We love particular individuals in the light of the good, and we love the good through particular individuals” (p. 486). Because love of the Good is always in this way predicated on attention to our material reality, the experience of becoming nearer to the Good is, at once, one of “increasing intuitions of unity with an increasing grasp of complexity and detail” (Murdoch, 1998, p. 379). It should then come as no surprise that in the examples Murdoch (1998) provides, moral change always comes as a result of attention directed at some concrete other—for instance, of a kestrel overhead:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. (p. 369)

Notice the twofold movement—first toward reality, pulled in this direction ostensibly by the Good, and then a return to the self, which is found in the interim to have been transformed—and how it coincides with what I earlier identified as the essential progression of moral change: purification first, followed by a reorientation of consciousness. Additionally, the illustration makes clear that what instigates this change is a moment of direct contact with the reality of an individual.

There is, however, a crucial component that I see missing from this example: the stirrings of passion, a love for the other in all their particularity. Without this, one could

easily imagine the person looking out their window as latching onto the image of the kestrel simply to escape their inner demons and, in this way, seeking a momentary state of peace and tranquility. Thus, the worry reemerges that the individual is being used here as mere stepping stone to one's own self-betterment. But such an interpretation is uncharitable to Murdoch (1998)—that is clearly not what she had in mind. As evidence of this, we can trace her example back to its obvious origin: a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1954), titled “The Windhover” (an English term for “kestrel”), in which love for the individual *is* unquestionably central.¹⁴ It is worth spending some time here on this poem; I think it will help us better understand what Murdoch believed to be the proper role of love in attention. It begins thus:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king—
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple—dawn—drawn Falcon, in his riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
 Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing! (Hopkins, 1954, p. 30)

Hopkins's kestrel, like Murdoch's, is first observed mid-air, hovering in place, scanning the ground. Because he is described as having been “caught,” this seems initially to suggest that Hopkins has somehow *captured* the bird—confined him in his imagination perhaps or in his prose. This interpretation is subverted, however, as it is quickly made clear that it is in fact *the poet* who has become subservient to the kestrel. Notice how the repetition of d's in the second line approximates the rapid beating of wings, how the breathless string of words in line 3 unfurls like a gust of wind. More likely, then, is that Hopkins has “caught” the bird in the sense of having properly *received* him. All this I mention because it exemplifies the initial stages of attention: simultaneously an obedience to the reality before you and an openness in receiving.

As it happens, we see the same “achievement” of attention also in the kestrel's “mastery” of the wind: He “rides” it by adhering to its steadiness; the wind then “rings” him up on the “rein of his wing” (Hopkins, 1954, p. 30). Thus, the attention Hopkins directs to the kestrel can also at the same time be seen as an attempt at emulation—catching the bird in the same way the bird catches the wind. Likely it is because of this growing closeness to the kestrel's essential being that Hopkins's “heart in hiding” becomes increasingly “stirred.” In the triad that follows we witness the sudden climax and release of his feeling:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
 Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier! (Hopkins, 1954, p. 30)

On the “oh,” the kestrel begins his downward dive, “buckling” in his wings to accelerate the descent. Note how the bird's movements are given to us now *not* through direct

description but indirectly through Hopkins's (1954) own *response* to that movement. Metaphorically, the kestrel has also "buckled" himself into Hopkins's own heart, leaving there his imprint. No longer "high there" in the sky, the bird is now "here" in the private quarters of the poet's imagination. This transition, Hopkins is quick to indicate, should be characterized by an "AND," not by a "but." There is, he wants to say, no metaphysical break between the external world and the interiority of consciousness; instead, the relation is one of development. To know another intimately as "thee" requires not only accepting them as they are but also loving them for their uniqueness—in this way feeling, inside oneself, the "fire" of their being. Such love is "dangerous," of course, because it entails a relinquishing of the self by way of the attachments that had previously defined it. The ramifications of this transformation are laid out in the final three lines:

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
 Shine, and blue—bleak embers, ah my dear,
 Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold—vermilion. (Hopkins, 1954, p. 30)

Returning from his brief outpouring of uncontrolled passion, Hopkins finds that the world around him has changed. Even the most mundane of occurrences—the slow deliberate ploughing of the earth, the hot falling and crumbling of coals—now shine forth that same fire that earlier we saw "breaks" from the kestrel. But what is this "fire," and what does it mean that Hopkins now knows it to be inherent in everything? Here we need remember that the kestrel is introduced as being aligned with daylight and is "drawn" by the dawn. He is, in other words, illuminated by the flaming orb that is the sun and is seen to be oriented correctly in relation to it. The sun is, of course, the Platonic symbol for the Good: Both are alike (says Plato) in that they cannot be directly looked at but can nevertheless be known by the objects they cast their light upon. Thus, the fire that breaks from the kestrel can be read as the Good shining *through* him. That Hopkins later finds this same fire present in ordinary objects can then be taken as evidence of his now being (just like the kestrel) successfully orientated in relation to it: Everything seen now shines against the light of the Good.

In my last section, I showed how human supremacy functions as fantasy: Animals are imbued with an unconscious meaning that is then unlocked in their consumption and/or destruction. Consuming them, we take on their qualities; destroying them, we prove to ourselves that we are different—thus, they are made integral to our identity. In this our attachment to human supremacy consists. I want us now to take both Hopkins (1954) and Murdoch (1992, 1998) as providing us with an account of change that is realistic (given the intractability of the problem) and from which may be derived a technique according to which a person may succeed in liberating themselves from such an attachment. We may sum it up thus: Change requires first that we attend to and come to know animals as individuals and on their own terms—thereby, we place them outside the reach of the "anxious avaricious tentacles" of our fantasy life (Murdoch, 1998, p. 385). Second, no longer receptacles for our own repressed desires, we will see in them the very Goodness of the world refracted back at us. Third, that fire that burns in them we internalize—our

desire becomes thereby purified; we find we cannot but love them as they are and care about their lives. Fourth, as the reels of our life so often glossed over begin again their slow unwinding, we become suddenly sensitive to the routine violence that we had once so thoughtlessly inflicted upon animals of all kinds. Pulled in one direction by fantasy and now, in the other, by our newfound compassion—it is here, faced with this internal conflict, fifth, that the active imagination begins the constructive project of reorientation: New possibilities for self-definition are explored and, in this way, our consciousness becomes increasingly aligned with what we know to be Good.

CONCLUSION

I want to end by detailing a few strategic implications that follow from the preceding analysis. First, to the extent that our attachment to the fantasy of human supremacy is a function of our fear of death, animal activists would do well to in some way incorporate the *acceptance* of our own mortality into their conception of what it means to be vegan.¹⁵ Not only would such a move draw attention to what I believe is the root of human supremacy, it would also fashion veganism as a more compelling (because psychically integrated) *alternative* to it. Second, if fantasy can truly be purged in love for the other, then animals would be better off represented not as aggregate sufferers, passive victims of human misdeeds, but as discrete individuals, centers of reality, each of them living according to their own sense of what is Good. Here I am picturing a cow, skipping ahead of the herd to be the first to receive the morning pastures; piglets wrestling, screaming, racing circles and circles around their doting mother; an old hen glowing against the dimming sky, casting off the day's dust with a flutter of feathers. To the extent that these images—instances of pure self-presentation—incite in us a selfless love for the animal other, they can serve as a driving force for moral change. More so than a nagging moralism, it may even be that scenes like these of animal joy—coupled, of course, with an intimate understanding of their lives—will prove effective in inspiring widespread adherence with the norms of justice.¹⁶

The animal rights movement has for too long been preoccupied with the signifiers of human depravity or else of human virtue. What both my proposals have in common is that they work together to undermine this subtle obsession with our own humanity, found even among animal advocates, by decentering the human agent altogether, placing instead animals in the foreground.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Nico Dario Müller (2022) for his excellent overview of this ongoing debate.
2. See the research done by Madeline Judge et al. (2022) on how having a distinctly vegan social identity can foster collective action.
3. See Clare Mac Cumhail and Rachael Wiseman (2022) for a vivid recounting of the intellectual background (i.e., logical positivism) against which Iris Murdoch developed her ideas (i.e., about the importance of metaphysical theorizing to philosophical thought).

4. For an insightful and lucid introduction to Freud's thought, see Jonathan Lear (2015).
5. See Jacob A. Arlow (2008) for an excellent treatment of Freud's notion of fantasy.
6. The centrality of purification to her account is what ultimately distinguishes Murdoch from the will-based theories she found dissatisfying. She had argued that we do not *choose* to change ourselves but *are changed* through our contact with the Good. And though the will comes in later in the form of the liberated imagination, its freedom lies not in the creation of value but in strict obedience to the demands of a transcendent reality.
7. There is an interesting epistemological implication here (one that I do not have the space to discuss at length). I will just say this: Murdoch seems to imply that determining the veracity of our perception of our moral reality requires that we appeal to factors that are *internal* to our experience. Namely, we come to know that we are oriented correctly simply because we feel the characteristic pull of the Good—we feel its energy. As she makes clear, this is not unlike G. E. Moore's stance (Murdoch, 1998, p. 301).
8. This is often called "the meat paradox." See Steve Loughnan, Brock Bastian, and Nick Haslam (2014), who correlate the dissonance to certain beliefs, values, and perceptions and also identify a kind of defense mechanism that "regulate[s] negative emotions associated with meat eating" (p. 1). There is also a related literature in the field of environmental psychology. See, for instance, Anja Kollmuss & Julian Agyeman (2002), who attempt to understand why there is a "gap" between environmental knowledge and proenvironmental behavior. However, limited by their strictly empirical methodology, I find both approaches to be somewhat superficial. In contrast, a psychoanalytic approach, though speculative in nature, at least provides us with a full and coherent explanation for the mechanism underlying the dissonance.
9. See, for example, Derrick Jensen (2016), who defines human supremacy as the "unquestioned belief . . . that humans are superior to and separate from everyone else" (p. 3).
10. In this way, human supremacy can be thought of according to what liberal theorists call "oppression," to be contrasted with "domination." See Sharon Krause (2015).
11. See Todd McGowan (2022), who also works with Freud to make an analogous case about racism.
12. See Kasperbauer (2018) for an overview of the empirical evidence that has been gathered over the past few decades that conclusively shows that "human beings are emotionally averse to reminders of their own mortality" and, specifically, that "animals pose a unique threat" (p. 49). For instance, a study carried out by Ruth Beatson, Stephen Loughnan, and Michael Halloran (2009) has shown that people respond to thoughts of death by adopting more negative attitudes toward animals. See also Lori Marino and Michael Mountain (2015) for a provocative presentation of this hypothesis.
13. Panizza (2022b) identifies "ironic detachment" as another such defense mechanism. Sometimes we exhibit it, she argues, when we are confronted with evidence of our own complicity in the exploitation of animals. Though she does not make this connection herself, making light of animal suffering via ironic humor is yet another instance of a fantasy that upholds the human supremacist social order.
14. I am indebted to Robert Burch for pointing this out to me. Additionally, this wouldn't have been the first time that Hopkins's windhover appears in Murdoch's work. As Paul S. Fiddes (2023) notes, in her novel *Henry and Cato* (Murdoch, 1977), "Murdoch is perhaps alluding to this image when she portrays Cato, who has just given up his priesthood and buried his cassock, as watching a kestrel: 'hovering, a still portent, vibrating with colour and light, [and] it suddenly swoops to the ground'" (Fiddes, 2023, p. 104). Fiddes (2023) also makes a convincing case that there are deep philosophical similarities between the two thinkers (pp. 81–108).

15. Ingrid Newkirk of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, for instance, has requested in her will that her flesh be carved up, barbecued, and served to the public. “Flesh is flesh, and mine is given, not taken,” says Newkirk (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, 2023).

16. Deborah Slicer (2015) argues that examples of animal joy help “portray their fuller subjectivity” (p. 1) and that to share in this joy is to experience a sort of “merging” of minds (p. 16). In either case, she thinks joy can function as “an invitation to moral life, to recognizing a shared boat, a journey” (Slicer, 2015, p. 20). There is already some empirical evidence that suggests this is an effective approach to activism (Cerrato & Forestell, 2022). More thinking needs to be done on how to invite others into this sort of recognition and how to weave it into a shared vision of a just society.

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