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Iris Murdoch's Romantic Platonism

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Ph.D. Thesis in Philosophy

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Abstract

This account of Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy takes the form of a critique. It attempts to show the ways in which she falls foul of what she criticises. Murdoch is concerned about the influence of the romantic tradition upon our contemporary (post-war) accounts of morality. She charges contemporaries, such as Sartre and R.M.Hare with having mistakenly extended freedom in ways that make morality seem like a matter of free choice. Against this, her own most rigorous work (*The Sovereignty of Good*) advances three central claims: (1) an idea of moral perfection (an ideal Good) is built into our ways of thinking and speaking; (2) this idea of Good/perfection is not an unavoidable fiction but a reality principle, it helps to undermine the egocentricity that prevents us from doing justice to the reality of others; (3) this idea of a single, *unitary* Good pulls us towards Platonic metaphors. (We are like pilgrims, trying to move out of dark egocentricity and into the light of attention to others.) My response to this is advanced in the following three parts:

Part One sets out Murdoch's position, complete with an account of the stylistic peculiarities of its exposition. (She believes that value-laden metaphors are unavoidable, and in some cases irreducible.)

Part Two flags up her similarity to what she attacks. Far from being a moral quietist, Murdoch is deeply critical of our everyday lack of moral ambition. (It is as if we are content to lurk about in the dark.) She rejects everyday ('bourgeois') contentment in favour of the command 'be ye therefore perfect'. Having flagged up this shared rejection of everyday contentment, I explore the way that Murdoch's apparently diffuse charge of 'romanticism' is held together by the idea of erotic striving. Such romanticism is the general theoretical correlate of the wrong model of love, romantic love rather than the slow patient love that she wants us to emulate. On this account, avoiding romanticism requires us to meet the following conditions. Firstly, we must direct loving attention towards the contingent reality of persons without puritanically avoiding attention to messy detail. (We should not just 'tag' people symbolically, as one of *these* or one of *those*.) Secondly, our attention to the other should really be about them, it should not covertly redirect attention to the self. Thirdly, we should

not allow our fascinating suffering to obscure the reality of death. (The realisation of our finitude is a crucial aspect of undermining egocentricity.)

Part Three consists of chapter-pairs which examine the central Murdochian metaphors of fallenness, *eros*, and the death of the self in an attempt to show that Murdoch falls foul of what she attacks. The respective arguments advanced in Part Three as follows:

Firstly, by shifting over to a form of Platonism, Murdoch strengthens her early pre-Platonic account of contingency into an account of fallenness. (We are not just finite but incomplete, ontologically *flawed* in ways which cannot be comprehensively overcome.) This is generative of entrapment in a form of ontological guilt. (Guilt about what we are.) Such entrapment is constitutive of puritanism. (Given Murdoch's own understanding of the term.)

Secondly, although Murdoch's concept of love tries to fuse together elements of Kantian *agape* in with Platonic *eros*, it is the latter which serves as the metaphor for the fundamental constitution of the self. (Continuity of character is continuity of erotic orientation i.e. desire.) The ultimate problems of Murdoch's concept of love are, consequently, those of Platonic *eros*. Having established this, I go on to show the applicability of the standing charge that the Platonic preoccupation with a personal *ascent of eros* involves an egocentric preoccupation with one's own moral rectitude rather than the well-being of others. The result is what Vlastos calls 'spiritualized egocentricity'.

Thirdly, Murdoch is critical of the romantic cult of suffering, but she avoids the anti-Platonic charge of pursuing invulnerability because she embraces a form of suffering ('unselfing', after Simone Weil's *decreation*.) This requires her to allow for at least two different modes of suffering: a good one and a bad one. Her criterion to separate them out is that the suffering involved in punitive unselfing is informed by a realistic death orientation. Our ultimate human contingency must not be covered over. Murdoch's problem here is that her own account of death is arbitrary, it does not come to grips with the sheer ordinariness of our mortality. In particular, she wants to use mortality to underpin a self-other asymmetry. (Loving attention is to be directed thus: *I am mortal, hence what is to be valued lies elsewhere*.) However, our shared mortality means that if my mortality devalues me, then your mortality will

devalue you. The ordinary, shared reality of death cannot plausibly be given the sort of dramatic significance that Murdoch needs in order to separate out Murdochian suffering from romantic suffering.

Although what is presented is a critique, it is intended not as a debunking exercise but as a clarification of where the problems lie when it comes to developing Murdoch's insights. That is to say, it may serve as a limited exercise, a propaedeutic to the appropriation of what is of value in her approach towards morals and what is deep in the way that she pictures human experience. As such, it may be seen as a step towards demythologising Murdoch.

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Part One

Introduction: Style and Content

The most systematic account that Iris Murdoch provides of her approach towards moral philosophy is given in *The Sovereignty of Good*. The later (and longer) text, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, elaborates upon the same themes but does so in a more discursive manner. Underlying both (and required for the comprehension of either) is an approach towards fact, value and metaphor that Murdoch developed in a series of articles written during the 1950s. Part One of this thesis will attempt to explain Murdoch's position and will draw upon this earlier work in order to address concerns about the non-standard way in which she sets out her argument.

Murdoch is well known as one of the first post-war philosophers to challenge the fact/value distinction. Part of what is peculiarly-Murdochian about her challenge to the distinction is the way in which it draws in her view of metaphor. In her earliest encounters with Gilbert Ryle and behaviouristic attempts to downgrade the metaphor of inwardness, Murdoch came to the view that metaphoricity, although introducing various dangers, is unavoidable in our attempt to picture humans. Metaphors, on this view are not useful but dispensable devices that may be comprehensively reduced to literal statements with definite, truth-conditions. This attitude towards metaphor is tied into the fact/value question because part of what makes metaphors irreducible is their value-ladenness. They cast a favourable or unfavourable light upon matters. The attempt to reduce metaphors comprehensively to literal statements is viewed by Murdoch as implicated in conceptual loss, an impoverishment of our ability to picture humans in a realistic manner.

It is a consequence of this standpoint (and not a matter of whim or intellectual indiscipline) that Murdoch's own account of morality has to rely heavily upon metaphor. What adds to concern about the metaphoricity of Murdoch's texts is her preference for specifically-Platonic metaphors. This may strike some readers as being quasi-religious, mystical, or (in brief) unrealistic. Her commitment to Platonism raises concerns, that I accept as legitimate, about whether there is anything of general

philosophical value going on, and, if so, how this value can be cashed out. To try and make sense of the work that Murdoch's metaphors do, I draw upon Davidson's idea (not unrelated to Murdoch's own concerns) that the cognitive value of metaphors is to be found in the way that they jolt us out of our regular ways of thinking and redirect our attention to something that we might otherwise be in danger of missing.

What Murdoch believes we are constantly in danger of missing is the complex reality of others. Because of our normal human egocentricity (sometimes acquisitive but sometimes punitive, hence not mere selfishness) we are continually caught up in ourselves and fail to see others realistically. We suffer from something akin to aspect blindness in our view of others. The work that Murdoch's metaphors do is to redirect us towards these failings and possible ways to combat them. She sets out the idea of the need for attention. This is a general (visual) metaphor for the various sorts of efforts that may be made in order to overcome our aspect blindness with regard to others. Morality, for Murdoch, must be rooted in realistic moral vision, it must be rooted in the just discernment of the other person.

Our regular failure to attend (to taken the necessary care and make the necessary efforts) provides an overlap with the novels where this everyday, moment-to-moment failure is a constant feature. In the novels, anger, jealousy, romantic love and complacency involve ordinary, decent, and non-malevolent, characters in views of each other that are seriously flawed. This shared concern of the novels and the philosophical texts is not taken by Murdoch to justify a collapse of the genre distinction between the two. There are limits to the extent to which Murdoch is prepared to break with analytic norms of argument presentation. (Philosophical novels with an axe to grind, tend, in Murdoch's view, to be not only argumentatively weak but also poor novels.) However, this overlap of concerns still indicates that the novels can be used to help cash out Murdoch's view of what humans are like and what it is about the normal human condition that she is concerned to combat via her heavily-metaphorical Platonized account of morality.

The contention of this thesis will be that Murdoch's morality ultimately fails to combat the human problems that it identifies. Instead, it falls foul of what it is seeking to resist. Although this is a critical assessment, I have attempted to encounter Murdoch's texts in an appropriately sympathetic (i.e. attentive) manner. This should be particularly evident in Part One which accepts that she is directing us towards a

real problem and that the stylistic peculiarities, obscurities, ambiguities and difficulties that her texts present to the reader are themselves well-rooted in her arguments. Chapters One and Two will show the way in which the content and style of her texts are intimately related. This, in turn, will allow for the subsequent formulation of an approach towards critique.

Chapter 1: Metaphor and Style

I. Breaking with the Analytic Style

It is one of the quirks of Iris Murdoch that she advocates a simplicity of style that does not characterize her own texts. 'Philosophy too should attempt to use ordinary language and avoid pre-emptive jargon. All right, traditional metaphysics has a certain amount of specialised terminology, but it is not for us to presume to add to it' [M.296 paraphrased at M.172]. This sits uneasily with her earlier view that 'the task of moral philosophers has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of the language'.¹ It sits even more uneasily alongside the programmatic statement that 'We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with...We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being...We need a new vocabulary of attention.'² Her attempts to supply such a vocabulary by writing about *eros* and the void are apparently not to be counted as jargon. Perhaps we can make sense of them as extensions of ordinary vocabulary or else borrowings from the existing 'specialised terminology' of metaphysics. By contrast with the linguistic creativity of someone like Heidegger, Murdoch sticks fairly close to ordinary language and its established extensions in the belief that 'Meta-languages gain their *sense* from the language they are explaining' [M.296]. There is no leaping out of, or instant semantic ascent from, saying what we mean in ordinary discourse.

For Murdoch, truthfulness is associated with lucidity and simplicity, a term with frankly moral overtones, 'the egoist has a narrow moral world, the better man a larger and more complex one; yet...there is a sense in which the good man's world is again simple: simple in the sense that he may see what is right without prolonged doubt and reflection' [M.325]. When she thinks of Christ, Socrates and certain saints 'it is the simplicity and directness of their diction which chiefly colours our conception of them as good'. Contemporary candidates for goodness are also 'perhaps most convincingly met with in simple people'.³ Murdoch's strictures on simplicity of style are moral strictures. 'The great artist, like the great saint, calms us by a kind of

¹ VC, 90.

² AD, 293. For Murdoch's concern with conceptual impoverishment, see Diamond (1988).

³ GG, 50.

unassuming simple lucidity, he speaks with the voice we hear in Homer and in Shakespeare and in the Gospels. This is the human language of which, whenever we write, as artists or as word-users of any other kind, we should endeavour to be worthy.⁴ Insofar as Murdoch advocates such simplicity of style and not just a restriction of jargon, she falls foul of her own strictures. Aware of a modern 'tendency towards mystification and blunting of verbal precision' she introduces her own forms of imprecision. Lucidity is compromised by her extensive deployment of metaphors.⁵ Three in particular will figure prominently in the present study: fallenness, *eros* and figurative death (or 'unselfing'). 'We may have to use very general and ambiguous terms or other images in answer to the question, "How do you mean?"' [M.329]. In extremis, 'Such speculations live near to the edge of nonsense, but are valuable, for instance in reflection upon theological pictures' [M.344].

The simplicity she appeals to is also less of a warning about what to expect from her texts than a way of attacking deconstruction. 'Technical meta-language terminology must be ancillary to basic looking, and not something which (as in deconstruction) takes its place' [M.168]. Her target is abstruse language *in combination with* doctrines which challenge the referentiality of language and where obscurity is used to endorse the idea that language is self-enclosed play. (As if there were nothing beyond the text.)⁶ Other, and different, forms of obscure and referentially opaque discourse, such as mysticism, are admired and in certain respects emulated by Murdoch. She applauds the way that mystics 'have attempted by extremities of language to portray the nakedness and aloneness of Good, its absolute for-nothingness'.⁷ These are not the words of someone unduly bound by the stylistic norms of the analytic tradition. Insofar as the problematic contrast of analytic and continental makes sense, at least in terms of style if not content, Murdoch leans towards the continentals. Her culminating text, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (hereafter the *Metaphysics*) is not written with analytic precision.⁸

⁴ *SW*, 242.

⁵ *SW*, 241.

⁶ This supposed recursive or self-referential enclosure of language is parodied in *A Word Child* where Hilary Burde finds it difficult to interact, learns languages he will never speak, and likes to ride around the circuit of the Underground. He also repeats his mistakes.

⁷ *SG*, 90.

⁸ The *Metaphysics* is a substantially expanded reworking of the 1982 Gifford Lectures.

This does not mean that there are no norms of precision at work there or elsewhere in Murdoch's texts. She aspires to a different kind of precision which relates to content and (metaphorically) to focus, rather than style. Murdoch admires the 'chaste self-critical precision' of great art which is bound up with the idea of truthfulness.⁹ She too is committed to writing with a clear focus upon truths that she believed philosophy, as practised in post-war Oxford and Cambridge, was in danger of obscuring or losing sight of. 'Both art and philosophy constantly re-create themselves by returning to the deep and obvious things of human existence and making there a place for cool speech and wit and serious unforced reflection.'¹⁰ Such deep and obvious things include the way in which art, emotion and morality are about truthfulness. For Murdoch, certain trends within English-language philosophy, while technically rigorous, were in danger of losing this plot. (Specifically: emotivism, prescriptivism and analytic behaviourism.)¹¹

This is a populist attack. Not necessarily false, but it has a certain rhetorical quality, it plays upon good common sense while remaining philosophically respectable. Views similar to (and occasionally stemming from) Murdoch's approach to these trends, have since become well represented within analytic literature where article structure is often influenced by the model of logical proof.¹² This is perhaps one reason why Murdoch's work has been less influential than might otherwise have been the case. In retrospect, we may be tempted to reflect that Murdoch did not need to go down her more experimental road in order to connect at least morality and the emotions to truth, or to point out the difficulty of reconciling behaviourism with our first-person experience of the world. That she did go down this road seems curiously accidental, a drift rather than a conscious break. Her earliest pieces, 'Thinking and Language' and 'Nostalgia for the Particular' may lack strong analytic structure, but we should not mistake the tentative nature of these first texts for a commitment to a

⁹ *SW*, 240.

¹⁰ *SW*, 242.

¹¹ Behaviourism has a range of critics, such as Searle; non-cognitivism in morality faces the Frege-Geach problem and the fact-value distinction faces both narrowly technical attacks (Searle again, and Philippa Foot) and a broader challenge of implausibility (notably by Hilary Putnam). The cognitive component of emotions (whether a belief, construal or *seeing-as*) is championed by Nussbaum, among others.

¹² Murdoch focused upon the following works as problematic exemplars: Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*; Ryle *The Concept of Mind*; R.M.Hare, *The Language of Morals*.

discursive rather than analytic style. Subsequent attempts at a synthesis, her challenge to the fact-value distinction in 'Vision and Choice in Morality' and 'Metaphysics and Ethics' (1956 and 1957 respectively) do combine somewhat discursive individual sections with clear overall argumentative structures. Stylistically they have similarities to Martha Nussbaum's writings with the notable difference that the reader is left to supply the subdivisions. Similarly, in the novels, chapter headings disappear and even when Murdoch experiments with textual fragmentation in the *Metaphysics*, titled subdivisions remain an anathema to her. Directions are largely internal to the sea of text. This stylistic peculiarity should not be allowed to obscure the comparatively strong analytic component of these early articles.

'Vision and Choice' consists of four substantial sections respectively arguing that the inner life has been downgraded; that moral concepts help to structure the particularity of this life; that the contemporary focus upon universalizable moral rules obscured this; and that the idea of a naturalistic fallacy has been misused to provide an apparently neutral logical support for the abandonment of the unique individual. The overall structure of the latter and later of the two texts ('Metaphysics and Ethics') is even more analytic and takes its starting point from opposition to Ayer's logical positivist programme of the 'elimination of metaphysics'. Murdoch advocates the conceptual holist response that a broad metaphysical framework or conceptual scheme, must be in place for individual claims to make sense.¹³ And that framework will lead us to encounter the world in a value-laden manner. The particularity of this moral-metaphysical background is bound up with the particularity of persons, we don't all see the same facts. The crux of her argument is that we encounter the world as always, already, laden with values and the very attempt to separate out facts from values is itself embedded in a liberal attempt to extend freedom into the moral sphere by treating the latter as something that might be chosen.¹⁴

¹³ While she had no hesitation about classifying the prevailing existentialist/analytic vision as 'our Liberal Weltanschauungen', she was less eager to apply the terminology to her own philosophical view. It was, at best, a matter of 'what I have rather vaguely called conceptual or metaphysical frameworks', *PB*, 504. Her sympathy with the conceptual-scheme terminology peaked in 'The Idea of Perfection' (1962) where it was used without qualification: philosophy of mind was about 'the provision of rich and fertile conceptual schemes', *IP*, 43. Although subsequently cautious about this terminology, the equation of metaphysic and *Weltanschauung* does recur in the *Metaphysics*, *M*.84. By contrast with Carnap (and, more ambiguously, Quine) concepts may overflow their linguistic expression. 'Such a description will clearly not cover all that we mean by "mental concepts"', *TL*, 33. Hence conceptual schemes cannot be equated with linguistic frameworks.

¹⁴ Here, she may have a point, although it is clearer in Carnap than Ayer. Carnap's classic paper

The success or failure of her argumentative strategy is not, for the moment, what I am concerned with. What I view as important is that an analytically normal argumentative strategy is there at all. For once, she makes her alignment with the tradition of 'linguistic analysis' clear, 'although a lot of what I have to be say will be critical of recent developments of that tradition, the criticisms which I make will also, I believe, come out of the tradition'.¹⁵ However, within this normal structure, the germ of a quite different approach is already present, 'it would be a pity if, just because we realise that any picture is likely to be half a description and half a persuasion, we were to deny ourselves the freedom in the making of pictures and the coining of explanatory ideas which our predecessors have used in the past'.¹⁶ This is to advance the claim that philosophical writing will -above all- embody a value-laden way of seeing or picturing the world. The significance of the collapse of the fact-value distinction is that argumentative structures will only ever be part of what is going on.¹⁷

Her early acceptance of analytic norms of writing comes to an end almost by accident with her two 1959 articles on the Kantian sublime. Tailored for the more literary readerships of the *Yale Review* and the *Chicago Review*, the close argumentative style of two years previously is dropped. Instead, Murdoch sets up a genealogy of decline from older and better ways of picturing humans that are embodied in the 19th century novel but which have become swamped by the legacy of Symbolism and Romanticism (in which Kant is implicated). 'Against Dryness', two years further on, brings together her literary aesthetic and her philosophical claims to criticize 'a general loss of concepts, the loss of moral and political vocabulary' that she associates with a certain 'dryness' of both 'Anglo-Saxon philosophy' and the novel.¹⁸ This supposed desiccation of texts is a general (perhaps epochal) phenomenon. Her criticism of Anglo-Saxon philosophy is still primarily in terms of its content while it is the contemporary novel that receives a much more direct criticism for its constrained

'Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology' advocates 'tolerance' as opposed to 'prejudice' in allowing the proliferation of linguistic frameworks between which a pragmatic choice may be made. His discussion of the difference between internal (factual) and external (value) questions is thus given an explicitly liberal twist.

¹⁵ *ME*, 59.

¹⁶ *ME*, 75.

¹⁷ Murdoch's rejection of the distinction is well covered by Diamond (1996) and Mullhall (2000).

¹⁸ *AD*, 287.

language use. Explicit alignment is made with T.S.Eliot (and T.E.Hulme) whose claim is precisely that the new sciences of the Renaissance era helped to engender a subsequent 'dissociation of sensibility' in modern writing style. I am inclined to believe that Murdoch is extending a related charge to cover analytic philosophy. However, this is never stated in so many words.¹⁹

What is clear is that Murdoch is a champion of the parallel between philosophy and art rather than the sciences, and that she never again approximates to a normalized analytic style. A year after 'Against Dryness', the first of Murdoch's seminal *Sovereignty of Good* articles was delivered as a lecture (appearing in print a further two years on, again in the *Yale Review*). While it is true that a comparatively strong argumentative structure reappears in each of these three articles, there is also a great deal of metaphor, vagueness and imprecision, coupled with the late inclusion of an alarming appeal to mysticism as insightful about the ultimate ineffability of Good. Whatever merits the *Sovereignty* has (by virtue of homing in on matters of most substance) they are different from the merits of expressive exactitude and the precision aspired to by Ayer, Ryle and Hare. At one point she comments, 'On the state of the argument there is perhaps little, or else too much, to say. In so far as there is an argument it has already occurred. Philosophical argument is always inconclusive, and this one is not of the most rigorous kind'.²⁰ Murdoch's commitment to analytic stylistic norms is never again quite as strong as it was in her early years.

In part, she may be seen as indulging in an affordable luxury. By the time the first of the *Sovereignty* articles had appeared in print she was an established novelist and had a number of good, innovative and influential philosophical articles under her belt. Coupled with her transition from Cambridge and the day-to-day discipline of teaching philosophy to teaching at the Royal College of Art in London, she enjoyed the luxury of writing in a more discursive style, with more or less guaranteed publication and a reasonable prospect of still reaching a philosophical audience. The *Metaphysics* appeared in print thirty years later and whatever its merits, it is even further removed from analytic stylistic norms. However, as well as career and circumstance, there are also matters of substance that help to drive Murdoch's writing style, not only her view of the significance of the value-ladenness of language but also

¹⁹ T.S.Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1936) is the key text here.

²⁰ GG, 72.

her endorsement of its irreducible metaphoricity. (Indeed, we shall see that there is a sense in which Murdoch considers the latter to be an aspect of the former.)

II. Metaphor as Irreducible

Murdoch made her philosophical breakthrough at the start of the 1950s, drawing upon firsthand experience of the Parisian scene and introducing existentialism to an analytic audience. She drew out thematic connections between the two traditions, in particular identifying a shared and flawed idea of human freedom that underestimated pre-formed character. Stylistically, however, the traditions were worlds apart. *Being and Nothingness* employed argumentative structures, but worked and reworked them discursively in a variety of different ways. Its language was unashamedly emotive, tolerant of vagueness and metaphorical throughout. For Murdoch, this was part its attraction. One could see a real connection between the richly textured writing and lived experience. Reviewing Gabriel Marcel's Gifford lectures in 1951 she wrote 'It is not clear, to me at any rate, on what grounds the hygienic and dehydrated analysis of mental concepts which we use in this city (Oxford) can claim to be more accurate than the more lush efforts of M.Marcel.'²¹ He appealed to 'mystery' and deployed metaphors of 'availability' and 'participation'. On the question of metaphor, and particularly its use to describe first person experience, Murdoch leant towards the continentals, albeit cautiously. 'This kind of description cannot escape from metaphor; but unless the metaphors are accompanied by a close critical commentary the result is often vague and confusing.'²² In other words, Marcel went too far.

The use of metaphor to picture mentality was defended in her first major article, 'Thinking and Language' (1951) a contribution to an Aristotelian Society symposium with Gilbert Ryle and taking its cue from *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle wanted to dissolve the Cartesian myth of an inner realm containing a ghostly mind thing. Murdoch held that 'all general descriptions of the mind must involve hypostatisation.'²³ It was a problem we had to live with, a price we had to pay.

²¹ *IM*, 127.

²² *IM*, 127.

²³ *Sartre*, 127.

Metaphors of inwardness were still our best way of picturing experience. "we naturally use metaphors to describe those states of mind, or to describe 'thought processes', in those cases where a sentence giving the verbal content of the thought is felt to be inadequate. In such a context metaphor is not an inexact *faute de mieux* mode of expression, it is the best possible. Here, metaphor is not a peripheral excrescence upon the linguistic structure, it is its living centre."²⁴ This may seem to place Murdoch close to the Cartesian tradition and its modern phenomenological (and existentialist) representatives. However, in the follow-up article on 'Nostalgia for the Particular' Murdoch rejected the phenomenological bracketing of the world, holding that a defence of metaphors of inwardness need not collapse into literal description of discrete ideas, reified thoughts, pains and emotions or indeed anything identifiable independently of the outer context, by simple introspection. (A view that is crucial later on in her rejection of moral progress through introspectively gained self-knowledge.)

Neither the extreme curtailment of metaphor, nor a confusion of metaphor for literality is seen by Murdoch as providing an adequate way forward. She is committed to the view that ambiguity is something that we have to live with and work with if we are not to be unduly reductionist in our account of what it is like to be human. Language is 'fundamentally metaphorical'. Consequently, "We do not 'suddenly' have to adopt the figurative mode; we are using it all the time."²⁵ What this is in danger of doing is broadening the concept of metaphor to the point where it is difficult to tell just what it is. Although one might still be guided by certain paradigm cases, a formal definition may prove difficult. None is given by Murdoch. Instead she remarks that 'I use the words "metaphor" and "image" in the wide sense where one form indicates another and where it may be very easy or very difficult to translate into a non-figurative mode' [M.306]. (Such translation would have, in any case, to be localized and not general.) By the mid-1950s, she had already extended the scope of metaphor to cover not only mentality, but also the phenomenology of moral experience. 'Metaphors often carry a moral charge, which analysis in simpler and plainer terms is designed to remove. This too seems to me to be misguided. Moral philosophy cannot avoid taking sides, and would-be neutral philosophers merely take

²⁴ *TL*, 39-40.

²⁵ *TL*, 40; see generally 36-40.

sides surreptitiously.²⁶ For Murdoch, metaphoricity and value-ladenness go hand in hand and the removal of one is likely to involve removal of the other. This is the basis of her rejection of determinism: a 'total translation' of value-laden metaphors into neutral scientific terms is 'unthinkable'.²⁷ It is in this sense that her view of the irreducible metaphoricity of language is treated as aspect of the value-ladenness of language.

But even if the comprehensive removal of metaphor is no longer a fundamental desideratum (or possibility), putting metaphors on the surface of a theory remains important to avoid the sorts of confusion particularly associated with the continental tradition. Whether or not something is a metaphor 'is of course a fundamental question to be asked about metaphysical explanation, about for instance what we are told in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Phenomenology of Mind*, and indeed such works could not exist without the help of metaphor'.²⁸ Murdoch's *Sovereignty*, *The Fire and the Sun*, her *Acastos* dialogues and ultimately the *Metaphysics* all endorse the ubiquity of metaphor, its partial concealment, and the view that 'Metaphors aren't just ornaments, they're fundamental modes of knowledge'.²⁹ The latter phrase recurs with minor variations: metaphors are 'fundamental modes of understanding' and 'fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition'.³⁰ More technically, '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'.³¹

This is a significant departure from analytic approaches which are geared towards the removal of ambiguity. Indeed, for Ayer, this is precisely what 'philosophical analysis' is all about, the removal of ambiguity and clarification of definite truth-conditions that is exemplified by Russell's Theory of Descriptions.³²

²⁶ *SG*, 75-6.

²⁷ *DPR*, 201. This is later softened by an 'it can be argued' clause *GG*, 51.

²⁸ *FS*, 67. See also *M*.306.

²⁹ *Acastos*, 106-7.

³⁰ *M*.305-6; *SG*, 75.

³¹ *SG*, 75.

³² Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Chapter 3.

Meaningfulness and definite truth-conditions are taken to go hand in hand. This is an area where the continuing influence of logical positivism is still strong. Metaphors are generally viewed either as paraphrasable into literal statements (i.e. as a kind of shorthand with more or less clear truth-conditions) or else as pseudo-propositions lacking any real cognitive content. Disambiguation is a prime consideration. The disadvantage of the alternative (Murdochian) view of the irreducibility of metaphor, is that ambiguity is ineliminable and truth-conditions problematic. As a matter of how things are, we might concede that significant metaphysical discussions do happen to be ambiguous. But Murdoch is claiming that this is an unavoidable state of affairs, that the attempt to make progress by *comprehensively* disambiguating our theories is not going to work. (As well as ambiguity about truth-conditions, we might not even be in a position always to separate out meaningful from unintelligible.)

There is, however, one notable analytic account that does not agree with Murdoch's approach but which can still be used to support the legitimacy of her work. I am referring here to the mixed account set out by Donald Davidson and appealing to a Murdochian-sounding concept of 'attention'. According to Davidson, metaphors have no secondary, ineffable, 'metaphorical meaning', but only their primary literal one, which is usually false. Someone who writes *I fear we are in rat's alley where the dead men lost their bones* is unlikely to be telling us a literal truth. The obviousness of the falsity, or in the case of metaphors which are literally true, the redundancy of stating the truths involved, is part of what makes metaphors recognisable as metaphors. (We do not need to be told that 'No man is an island' any more than we need to be told that 'No man is a G-clamp' and so we infer that something else must be going on.)

What separates this out from cruder non-cognitivist accounts of metaphor is that issues of truth and falsity are still at stake because of the way in which metaphors redirect our attention. What matters is not what they say but what they accomplish. 'Metaphor does lead us to notice what might not otherwise be noticed, and there is no reason, I suppose, not to say these visions, thoughts, and feelings inspired by the metaphor are true or false.'³³ This is a form of truth-aptness by proxy but it does save the appearance of metaphors as both irreducible and meaningful and is well-gearred to separate out the meaningful from the meaningless in theories such as Murdoch's

³³ Davidson (1984), 257.

where intelligibility may sometimes seem strained. When, for example, her speculations 'live near to the edge of nonsense' we might try to make sense of where and how our attention is being directed.

This applies across the board to philosophical texts where ambiguity seems intractable, or at least deep-rooted. A prominent example is Heidegger's discussion of everything as 'nothing' in '*What is Metaphysics?*' Heidegger moves by a series of steps from claiming that Being is not itself a thing, to the claim that it is *a nothing* before going on to write about 'the Nothing'. He plays with 'the Nothing' as a substantive and is charged by Carnap with an elementary confusion about the logic of negation and quantification.³⁴ Along Davidsonian lines, it can be argued that Heidegger is not hopelessly muddled but is directing our attention to a problem of metaphysics: how can we talk truthfully about everything *without* reifying *it* into an actual thing?

Promising though this Davidsonian approach may be as a way to defend the intelligibility of problematic texts such as Murdoch's, its promise is not redeemable in strictly Murdochian terms. For Murdoch, 'attention' is itself a rather complex metaphor. If we stick to her understanding of this concept, Davidson's theory will be circular because set out in metaphorical terms.³⁵ This would deprive the theory of its own cognitive content. (Possibly turning it into a complex form of redirecting.) Curtailment of the sense of 'attention' to remove its metaphoricity might be a way out for Davidson (my point is not to attack his account *per se*) but it is not a way out for Murdoch. Murdochian 'attention' sometimes does work by a kind of redirection, but as a conceptual holist, she binds its meaning to a series of other metaphors which are not comprehensively reducible to literal terms.

III. Working within the Limits of Expressibility

Murdoch's position on metaphor presents literal communication as limited or in some way compromised. The puritanical character Hugo in her first, and most explicitly philosophical novel, *Under the Net*, is drawn towards a Wittgensteinian silence because of such limitations. 'The whole language,' he reflects, 'is a machine for

³⁴ Carnap (1959).

³⁵ See Chapter 2 below for the metaphor of 'attention' in Murdoch.

making falsehoods'.³⁶ In the novel he is seen to have a point. His friend Jake has drawn ideas from their conversations and set them down in a book. Jake is worried about having stolen Hugo's more original thoughts. Meanwhile, Hugo wonders where Jake could have got his quirky ideas from. He does not recognize them as his own. Communication between them is imperfect.

Murdoch refines this idea, she does not abandon it. The first of the *Sovereignty* essays, a decade later, claims that while we initially learn concepts by mastering the public criteria for their application, they then undergo a private and personal refinement that may be obscured since 'words are often stable while concepts alter'.³⁷ We do not have the same concepts of love and courage that we had when we were sixteen. Key moral concepts can have a deeply personal resonance that goes beyond what we can confidently expect others to readily understand. 'We do not simply, through being rational and knowing ordinary language, "know" the meaning of all necessary moral words. We may have to learn the meaning; and 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.'³⁸ What we tend to underestimate is the extent to which 'communication may break down and the same words may occasion different results in different hearers.'³⁹ We may, charitably assume that we do not have significantly different conceptual schemes from others, that interlocutors can readily make sense of what we say and vice-versa, but 'Language has limitations and there are moments when, if it is to serve us, it has to be used creatively, and the effort may fail.' At such moments, Murdoch suggests we rely not upon charity but upon 'faith and hope'.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Under the Net*, 68.

³⁷ *IP*, 28 repeating a point made at *VC* 95. In both cases her exemplar of shifting concepts are 'love' and 'courage'. This meaning variance is one of the mechanisms that Thomas Kuhn later identified for the concealment of conceptual change in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

³⁸ *IP*, 28.

³⁹ *IP*, 32.

⁴⁰ *VC*, 90. This position bears some resemblance to early Quinean 'indeterminacy' of translation, the view that we are not strongly constrained in our interpretations. Davidson's response, his rejection of communicative failure across different conceptual schemes ('On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme') involves the principle of charity to the effect that attributions of language-use must involve the belief that interlocutors are using language in ways that are broadly similar to our own. However, it is formulated in terms that accept Carnap and Quine's equation of conceptual scheme and linguistic framework, hence it does not apply to Murdoch's position *in its current form*.

In effect, Murdoch is presupposing that Frege's strictures on the objectivity of sense, and Wittgenstein's strictures on the impossibility of talking meaningfully about a certain kind of privacy, have been overextended to bolster a behaviouristic downgrading of the idea of inwardness. Neither are tackled directly (at least in the *Sovereignty*). Over-extensions of Wittgenstein come in for criticism rather than Wittgenstein himself.⁴¹ In part, this may be due to an understandable reluctance to get drawn into the private language argument (Depending upon how it is to be read and whether it is correct, it may pose a problem for Murdoch's views on language.) In part it may also be due to an early identification with Wittgenstein as someone who is not reduced to silence but who is an original philosophical stylist, someone who struggles against the limits of language and, in spite of them, manages to make progress.⁴²

Murdoch shares a diagnosis of the limitations of language with a series of different intellectual currents, but also sees herself as struggling against the puritanical response of Hugo, of *Tractarian* silence, and rather differently of literary symbolism which urges us to abandon novelistic prose for the greater expressive adequacy of poetry. For Murdoch, 'Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them'.⁴³ Her Platonic study of the mid-1970s, *The Fire and the Sun* is, in part, a defence of words, of working with what we have. 'The careful responsible skilful use of words is our highest instrument of thought and one of our highest modes of being: an idea which might seem obvious but is not now by any means universally accepted. There may in theoretical studies, as in art, be so-called ultra-verbal insights at any level; but to call ultimate truth ineffable is to utter a quasi-religious principle which should not be turned round against the careful verbalisation of humbler truths.'⁴⁴

The idea of struggling against expressive and discursive limits leads Murdoch towards a rethink about Plato and his myths. Once his myths are taken as exemplars

⁴¹ This does change in the *Metaphysics*, Chapter 9. Under the influence of Kripke, she reads the private language argument as a kind of scepticism and summarily dismisses it for failing to do justice to our experience of what we are able to do.

⁴² For a brief but inconclusive account of Murdoch in relation to the private language argument see Currey (1990).

⁴³ *IP*, 33.

⁴⁴ *FS*, 87-88.

of such a struggle -against those limits which Plato writes about in the *Phaedrus*- the deeply problematic Forms of the middle dialogues recede into the background, as one more piece of imagery among others.⁴⁵ The myths are no longer seen to be accessing a transcendent other place, but struggling against discursive limits in order to picture *this* world. In particular, Murdoch sees Plato's dialogues as an exemplary attempt to picture the problematic reality of Good. On this view, what Plato understood is that Good is in some sense a real force within our lives, something that genuinely helps us to transcend or go beyond our default egocentric or deluded condition. What we need, therefore, is not the abandonment of a realist conception of Good as transcendent, but its demythologisation.

Such demythologisation is taken by Murdoch to be a progression through successive forms of imagery, a metaphorical pilgrimage from appearance to reality. Murdoch's favourite images for this progress are the Platonic metaphor of the Cave (an interior in which movement is possible), and the *Phaedrus/Symposium* myths of *eros*, in which love allows us to ascend in a return to perfection. These are lateral and vertical metaphors of progress out of fantasy and into the more realistic realm of imagination. (The categories of fantasy and imagination are, in a sense, overlaid on top of the Platonic imagery of progress, as opposite favoured and unfavoured ends of a continuum.) The focus upon these particular dialogues and myths as the heart of Platonism owes more than a little to Plotinus, the Neoplatonic tradition and its mystical offshoots.⁴⁶ Important discontinuities between Platonism and mysticism (such as the association of one with mental balance and the other with risking mental instability) are given little consideration. As such, it is a reading which can at times seem a little idiosyncratic, or overly-generous. Through Murdoch's familiarity with, and admiration for the mystical tradition (especially St John of the Cross and Dame Julian of Norwich) Plato is understood in the religious spirit of Pseudo-Dionysius as a successive demythologiser of an ineffable moral absolute (in less mystical terms, an indefinable Good).⁴⁷ This approach is anticipated in her article 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', it is extended in *The Fire and the Sun* and dominates the

⁴⁵ *IP*, 31. The contemporaneous comments on the *Phaedrus* in *The Unicorn* 117-118 may perhaps be read as an accompaniment to this. Similarly, see *SW*, 236; *FS*, 21-23.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 8 below on the *ascent of eros*.

⁴⁷ Of the two cited mystics, St John of the Cross provides the clearer link to Pseudo-Dionysius. Murdoch's interest in these particular examples of mysticism owes something to Simone Weil.

opening and closing chapters of the *Metaphysics*. (Thereby strongly suggesting that it structures what comes in between.) Murdoch makes it clear, but only at the end of the *Metaphysics*, that the reality of Good is in some sense that of an Idea [M.508] and that the notion of a Good beyond being is 'figurative' [M.507]. The idea of 'transcendence' does not ultimately imply 'separation' but concerns 'going beyond' one's 'egoistic self' [M.498]. Transcendence is about getting beyond egocentricity, and as such it is a never completed task.

Such candid statements appear only at the end of the *Metaphysics*. Chapter One makes it clear that only at a more advanced stage of the journey can a demythologised Good be understood without collapsing into a crudely subjective understanding of morality. Prior to this, we have to exercise extreme caution about how we challenge and replace old formulations of the idea of the transcendent, just as we have to exercise caution in our criticisms of transcendence in art and religion if we are to avoid the loss of what is truthful in both [M.511]. The most obvious example of such a demythologising Murdochian movement is that from 'God' to 'Good'. The former is tied up with an idea of moral objectivity that has to be preserved and not simply abandoned.

This approach towards Platonism, first developed in the *Sovereignty* but continued in the *Metaphysics*, has the convenient consequence that it allows us to understand what is going on when Plato, a key influence upon Western art, sets out his censorious strictures against it. For Murdoch, these strictures involve a puritanical refusal to work with an inadequate medium and so put Plato into conflict with his own philosophical output and standpoint. 'Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel) and exemplifies in spite of Plato what his philosophy teaches concerning the therapy of the soul.'⁴⁸ Like the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*, a mythical being who creates our world and in doing so tries to realize perfect form in its darker pre-existent materials, we should accept that the medium we work in will be inherently flawed. *The Fire and the Sun* not only sets out the idea of a demythologising pilgrimage through successive forms of increasingly adequate (but still flawed) imagery, its overall argument is a *reductio* of Plato's puritanical assault upon art. Instead we are given a more cautionary warning about the dangers of self-indulgent and fantasising imagery (such as

⁴⁸ FS, 80.

pornography) and of letting imagery ossify and block further progress (as in organized, doctrinaire religion). In a sense, the identification of Platonism as a doctrine about Form-things is an example of such an ossification, and does not do justice to the transitory role they are taken by Murdoch to play in Plato's dialogues.

IV. The Genre Distinction between Philosophy and the Novel

The range of metaphors and imagery that Murdoch deploys might seem to point to a blurring of the genre distinctions between philosophy and other kinds of literature. (A distinction which impacts upon our view of just what is to count as Murdoch's philosophical work.) With the exception of a couple of years at the starts of the 1950s, her lasting position is that such genre distinctions must be respected.⁴⁹ Indeed, 'literature' is contrasted with 'philosophy' and novels are taken to be better equipped to deal with some aspects of reality than philosophical texts. (Hence, the two cannot be equivalent.) When outlining human contingency, a philosophical text may be overly-systematic, its 'form' can give a misleading impression.⁵⁰ Yet, in her attacks on structuralism Murdoch tends to the view that this is a necessary sacrifice if a philosophical text is to avoid *unnecessary* ambiguity and self indulgence. 'I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration.'⁵¹ This may seem to come (perilously) close to the claim that there is some content-neutral schematic form in which philosophy ought to be written. (Precisely the view that characterises the logical positivist style.) Less alarmingly, it may be taken as a return to Murdoch's calls for a simplicity of style in opposition to the spectre of structuralism. Philosophical writing is to be characterised by a certain

⁴⁹ The view that there is something wrong, from an aesthetic point of view, with the philosophical novel, only emerges in a strong form in *Sartre* (1953). It consolidates several shifts away from her earliest essays on existentialism. 'The Novelist as Metaphysician' (1950) is generally sympathetic to 'the metaphysical novel' and 'The Existentialist Hero' (1950) treats existentialism as an unromantic standpoint, *EH*, 112, 115. This explains the unrepeatedly philosophical character of *Under the Net* (1954). It predates this commitment and may have helped to convince Murdoch that real characters cannot be symbolic exemplars. If so, it sets a precedent for using the novels as a medium for philosophical experimentation.

⁵⁰ Antonaccio (1996).

⁵¹ *LP*, 4. The interview is not *off-the-cuff*. Murdoch was given the opportunity to carefully rewrite her answers.

austerity, but how this works out in the practice of Murdoch's own textual construction is hardly content-neutral.

The carefully rewritten interview from which the above quote is taken occurred only months after the publication of *The Fire and the Sun*, a short and dense work in which Murdoch allots herself only the closing pages as a clue to the general precepts that guided her inquiry.⁵² There is an austere self-constraint. But the whole point about this heavily-Platonic text is that philosophy and art are legitimate and overlapping ways of unifying and making sense of experience. However the ideal 'austere unselfish candid style' was to be conceived, it was not to the exclusion of this important connection. Her follow-up, the first of two Platonic *Acastos* dialogues, leaned back in the direction of literature and Art while still remaining a philosophical text. Both dialogues ignore her aesthetic priorities for the novel by adopting the Platonic norm of using character to express argument. (The *Acastos* Plato not only espouses puritanical views about art, he also acts like a puritan.) With or without some ideal stylistic endpoint, Murdoch's philosophical writing style is continuously experimental.

Her final philosophical text, the *Metaphysics*, is one more piece of experimental writing. In spite of the brevity of the Gifford Lectures on which it is based, the *Metaphysics* is written on an entirely new, grand scale and with serious misgivings about its workability.⁵³ I am not of the opinion that it may be set apart as her final, desired endpoint although it is clearly undertaken as her last chance for a grand synthesis.⁵⁴ The final substantial chapter is a brief important indication of its limits. The whole text moves towards this chapter on the Void, the pace of the text increases as the chapter length shortens. It culminates in this image of incompleteness and lack. On the way to this uncertain destination, the text deploys the same modernist literary devices that had increasingly appeared in her novels during the

⁵² Bronzwaer (1988).

⁵³ Misgivings about a great projected work of synthesis, always detectable in the novels, deepen during the writing-up process for the *Metaphysics*. They colour the plot of *The Message to the Planet* (1989), where a mystical figure cannot write his culminating philosophical work, 'You tried to put it all in order as if it were a single argument, but all I can see is old thoughts placed end to end. You think there's some great further philosophical step, some ultimate move, some ultimate place. But it's no good, we can't get there, human beings can't get there', 340.

⁵⁴ *The Philosophers Pupil*, published a year after Murdoch's Gifford lectures, gives us a character, Rozanov, who has left a synthesis of his philosophical work too late. He expresses doubt about the idea that a philosophical work is ever really finished as opposed to abandoned.

1970s.⁵⁵ Like Hegel's *Phenomenology*, modernist works try to *exhibit* or in some sense to re-enact the character of consciousness, rather than merely describing it. Unlike Hegel, they treat consciousness as fluid, messy, idiosyncratic, repetitive, irrelevant and mundane, above all, not as structured by universal forms of logical progression. The fragmentation of the modernist text tries to exhibit this lack of any single logical progression in the stream of consciousness. Although such devices are normally associated with modernism, and particularly Joyce, Murdoch preferred to appeal to earlier, realistic, precedents such as Henry James.⁵⁶ Whatever its source, fragmentation is a key and recurring feature of the *Metaphysics*. Confusion is treated as an acceptable risk.

In spite of her defence of genre distinctions, the crossover in influence between her literary and philosophical output can be seen to occur in both directions. Whatever its expressive faults (and they may be considerable) I will take it that the *Metaphysics* does not merely heap together a great many rambling or confused thoughts interspersed with repetitive outlines of standing Murdochian themes.⁵⁷ (It does this, but not *only* this.) My preferred reading will be one in which Murdoch is trying to counter expressive limits by engaging in something akin to, but less extreme than, Kierkegaard's 'indirect communication'. Like Kierkegaard, Murdoch is an experimental philosophical stylist with a penchant for deliberately holding back from systematisation and unification of her texts. (They are also both haunted by the spectre of Hegelian systematicity.) However, unlike the more existentialist Kierkegaard, Murdoch makes no attempt to shock and to provoke the reader into a more authentic standpoint. She also continues to explicitly endorse a genre distinction

⁵⁵ The key innovative novels are *The Black Prince* and the stream of consciousness novel, *The Sea*, *The Sea*. Fragments appear and appendices cut across the main narrative. Actions set in a limited time frame are the core, but the dramatic unity is broken by continuing on without apparent direction after the main action is over. The division into discrete chapters also vanishes.

⁵⁶ *M.*169-73 sets out an account of fleeting structures of consciousness typified by *The Golden Bowl*; *M.*173-184 arguably goes on to exemplify the jumbled up way we think.

⁵⁷ Milgram (2002) 82, n.28 suggests what others may have suspected, that Murdoch's Alzheimer's Disease, diagnosed five years later, ie. some fifteen years after the core of the text was delivered in lectures, may explain why the *Metaphysics* is 'disorganised in the extreme'. The timescales make this claim problematic. However, the somewhat rambling and undisciplined novels of the 1980s may well evidence a quite normal weakening of her intellectual powers when she was in her 60s. Stephen Mulhall attempts to defuse the charge that the *Metaphysics* is 'extremely disorganized', Mulhall (1997), 220.

between philosophy and other forms of literature which tends to break down more completely in Kierkegaard.⁵⁸

This does not mean to say that the novels can or ought to be excluded from philosophical consideration. Maria Antonaccio's *Picturing the Human*, an otherwise useful study of Murdoch's moral thought, does just this. It can avoid appeal to the novels because aspects of Murdoch's work which the novels might help us to understand are also bracketed out: fallenness, the void, death and the interest in mysticism.⁵⁹ The category of void can again be used to exemplify the problem. Drawn from the vocabulary of mysticism it tells us something about Murdoch's admiration for, and ultimate disagreement with the religious mystical tradition. However, while it is a concept which figures regularly in the novels, it is underdeveloped in the philosophical texts. It is difficult to resist the view that, for Murdoch, it had already been dealt with elsewhere.⁶⁰

Justification for taking the novels into consideration can be drawn from Murdoch's own commitments, and not just from her treatment of Sartre where novels as well as philosophical texts are allowed to figure. Although she denies that her novels are 'philosophical' in the narrow sense that applies to the literary output of Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre, her aesthetic and philosophical claims, when taken together, will not allow us to deny the broader philosophical significance of the novels. According to her literary aesthetic, the task of the novel is the realistic representation of individual characters. According to her philosophical views on fact and value, we can only picture real individuals against a background of metaphysical assumptions and values. *This* metaphysic and *these* values will always shape our view of what the facts are. Picturing what people are like in the novels will consequently, and unavoidably, embody a broader metaphysic. The novels are formed around

⁵⁸ What I have in mind here is Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, a work broken into aphorisms, discussions of cultural highlights, a diary and a series of lengthy and somewhat dry letters. It is odd that a similar structural fragmentation is taken as an indication of Kierkegaard's mental acuity and Murdoch's mental decline. I would suggest that such fragmentation indicates not enough to indicate anything in the absence of a closer attention to the particularity of Murdoch's writings. Seen in the light of these, there is a certain appropriateness about the *Metaphysics*.

⁵⁹ *The Fire and the Sun* is also more or less ignored in *Picturing the Human*. Antonaccio's other writings on Murdoch present a far less restrictive view.

⁶⁰ The idea of a mystical pilgrimage towards God is usually described as passing through discrete stages. In Evelyn Underhill's classic study *Mysticism* the stages are awakening, purgation, illumination, void and unitive life. By finishing with the void rather than the final move into unity, Murdoch endorses a more unconsoling picture of human limitation. There is no God to save us.

philosophical ideas that they do not necessarily expound. They give us an inkling of how the world has to be if Murdoch's metaphysic is on the right track.

What this means is that the novels are philosophically significant. It does not mean that we can cull snippets of dialogue or internal monologue as uncritical expression of her views. Sometimes she experiments with a theme, and sometime she plays with a familiar motif in unfamiliar ways, inverting or altering it to see the result, generating plausible imitations of her own ideas albeit subtly corrupted. The term 'pastiche' springs to mind. Characters are often engaged in writing philosophical texts with an uncanny, skewed, resemblance to her own.⁶¹ Nor can the significance of plot-lines be appealed to in anything other than a cautious manner. Nevertheless, with these qualifications in mind, the novels do presuppose a world in which consciousness is value-laden, love is fundamental to our being, mutual misunderstanding is a normal condition and self-obsession is delusional. As such, judiciously used, they can help us to tackle the problems of intelligibility with which Murdoch has surrounded her own more narrowly philosophical texts. A cautious attentiveness to the continuity between the latter and the novels seems to be in order. Having said this, there is no need to premise my argument upon any broader collapse of genre distinctions. In what follows, the novels will be viewed as supplementary, a way of deepening our understanding of her metaphysic and categories such as fallenness, *eros*, death and void. The novels will not be used to take us into areas where the philosophical texts simply do not go. Instead, appeal will be made to them in an attempt to disambiguate and clarify the approach towards moral philosophy that Murdoch sets out in *The Sovereignty of Good* and elaborates upon elsewhere.

⁶¹ In *The Time of the Angels* (1966) and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970) characters work on texts akin to the *Sovereignty*. Works contemporaneous with the *Metaphysics* pursue the theme of the failure of any final synthesis. See above, n.51 and n.52.

Chapter 2: The Sovereignty of Good

For Murdoch, philosophy does not collapse into literature but neither does it escape from the metaphoricity and value-ladenness of language. We cannot lift ourselves out of these constraints to write a value-neutral and purely descriptive meta-ethics. Yet the idea of a general characterisation of ethics, or of morality (never a distinction that Murdoch employs rigorously) remains an important one, part of the two-way movement between 'the building of elaborate theories' and 'the consideration of simple and obvious facts' that the *Sovereignty* tells us about.¹ It aims to present a return movement to what is obvious and inescapable about our condition. Subsequent Murdochian works extend and develop its rudimentary moral psychology (the *Metaphysics* adds on an account of public duty to the idea of private pilgrimage) but throughout this steady accretion the core remains the same. I shall focus here upon reconstructing it as it appears in the *Sovereignty*, but with a view to drawing out just what it is that Murdoch is directing us towards in her complex interlacing of metaphor and argument. This chapter falls into two parts, with the first three sections devoted to each of the *Sovereignty* essays and the last two devoted to clarifying just what it is that she is trying to confront. In spite of its unsettling metaphoricity, my contention is that there is substance here as well as stylistic novelty. Once her principal metaphors are clarified (not removed) Murdoch can be seen to direct us towards a genuine problem of moral competence and the effort that is required to improve it. At the same time, such clarification may leave her more vulnerable to critique.

I. Philosophical Diagnosis in 'The Idea of Perfection'

The *Sovereignty* consists of three independent articles written over the course of seven years (1962-69) and reordered so that the final article ('On "God" and "Good"') is placed in the middle. (Suggesting that it was produced as a bridge between the other two.) The Platonism of the opening piece, 'The Idea of Perfection', is the least explicit of the three. Some of its themes are more commonly associated with the argument of Elizabeth Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy': that there are

¹IP, 1.

limits to the dominant (rule-based) Kantian and Utilitarian, views of morality; that they lack any deep superiority to traditional, virtue-centred ethics; that the conception of the self they support is problematic, leaving us in need of the better *moral psychology* that Murdoch is trying to supply.

As well as having far greater reservations about the influence of Wittgenstein, Murdoch differs from Anscombe in pointing towards a return to Plato rather than Aristotle. She focuses not upon the limits of rules but instead argues that moral philosophy has become dominated by a flawed understanding of freedom. For Murdoch, the autonomy championed by Kant has become attenuated, overextended. The problematic idea of moral realism has been displaced by that of free moral agency, with the moral agent tending to be conceived of as a pinpoint of will, an agent without history, a public individual who chooses now this, and now that.² This flawed account of freedom is supported by an approach towards the philosophy of mind in which public action displaces concern for inwardness. There is a consequent slide towards behaviourism in contemporary philosophy, a slide towards ignoring what is private in favour of treating the self as a universal, standardised, free public agent. What in turn supports this approach towards the philosophy of mind is a philosophy of language which accords introspectabilia no role to play (even denies their existence) and sets everybody up as equivalent players of the public language game.

This is Murdoch's sweeping diagnosis of the state of philosophy circa 1962. The article identifies a convergence of various trends, but it lacks any single exemplar. Otherwise dissimilar theories are lumped together. (Behaviourism and Sartre make particularly strange bedfellows.) It also constitutes what might be regarded as a one-dimensional account of multidimensional philosophical trends. As such, even if her idea of the reduction of the self to a pinpoint of will can be given more detailed content, it remains open to the charge of being a straw man, a 'phantom' or (somewhat better) a 'caricature' that has 'a positive philosophical point'.³

² The source of this idea of the unencumbered self as *a pinpoint of will* is Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 5.64 and it re-emerges at *PI*.620. (For this sourcing see *M*.270.) Attempts to fill out this notion include Charles Taylor (1989). Harcourt (1998) attempts to make Murdoch and Taylor's imprecise notion rather more precise.

³ Schauber (2001), 479-80; Moran (2002), 89ff. Harcourt (1998), 329 holds that the unencumbered self *is* intelligible but is cautious about whether it can be justly applied to the theories Murdoch criticises.

For the moment I will content myself with pointing out that just so long as she is directing us towards a real and significant moral problem, and doing so in a unique and interesting way, this charge is unlikely to be decisive.

The view of persons as moral agents rather than moral beings is challenged in Murdoch's only substantially elaborated hard case. Hereafter, they are consigned to the novels where they can be found in great number. 'A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. 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 tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him.' Nevertheless, M behaves 'beautifully throughout', she betrays no sense of her disappointment and chagrin. She thinks as follows, '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'.⁴

Over time she comes to revise her view as a consequence of the 'work of attention'.⁵ She comes to see D as 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay'. M partially overcomes her jealousy and selfishness but this change does not issue in any alteration of behaviour. (There need be no public behavioural criterion for this inner event.) M has always acted impeccably towards her daughter-in-law who might, in any case, now be dead, thereby limiting the scope for altered public demeanour. Whatever change takes place 'happens entirely in M's mind'. If D is dead, there can also be no question of the real alteration having been D's gradual improvement. What is at issue is a change in M's way of seeing, not a change in what is seen. (As in the case of Wittgenstein's 'aspect dawning', what changes is the viewpoint and not the object.)

One might question various features of the example. David Pugmire points to a lack of spontaneity in the revised emotional response, charging it with being contrived, faked-up, inauthentic. Some people do not like to think ill of the dead, even when they were a bad lot. Perhaps M is like this. However, effortful preparation need not exclude spontaneity of response. Improvisation in music relies upon just

⁴ *IP*, 16-17.

⁵ *IP*, 36.

such preparation and the range within which improvisation and spontaneity is possible will be a function of what prior work has been done. (We can only improvise within the bounds that we have prepared for.)⁶ Alternatively, with Peta Bowden, we might challenge the idea that we have any criterion for taking M's shift as a move towards a more realistic viewpoint rather than, for example, sentimental reminiscence about a young woman who can now do no harm.⁷ A satisfactory reply to this is less obvious. It does look as if M is determined to think better of D and not worse. However, one central Murdochian point remains. The alteration, reliable or otherwise, is both morally significant and cannot obviously be *reduced* to public action or dispositions to behave. Murdoch generalises this point to claim that the refinement of moral vocabulary is part of just such a private moral development. We take words with public criteria for their application (such as 'love' and 'courage') and then proceed to develop them privately and unobtrusively, making sense of them through our own particular, unique experience.⁸ In terms of the vocabulary sometimes associated with this view, our concepts start out pretty thin and we thicken them over time.⁹

Such a development of moral concepts and of perception is taken by Murdoch to presuppose an idea of perfectibility. (Thence the article's title.) In an argument that is strongly reminiscent of St. Anselm's ontological proof in the *Monologion*, but perhaps also owes something to contemporary interest in grading as a key form of moral judgement, Murdoch claims that an idea of perfection is implicit in our everyday discernment of gradations and in our attempts to improve the quality of our moral vision.¹⁰ This is another troubling position. It is not clear that everyday grading carries any such presupposition. Consider the game of 'rock-paper-scissors'. In this

⁶ David Pugmire (1994), 118-122. The point about improvisation is drawn from the discussion of D and M in Oakley (1992), 136-9. The improvisation metaphor is used by Nussbaum (1990), 74, 94, 96-7 with much the same point.

⁷ Bowden (1998), 65-6.

⁸ Ayer's section on 'What can we communicate?' in *The Problems of Knowledge* anticipates a Murdochian-type view and is hostile. Suspicion that Murdoch falls foul of the private language argument may be a block upon acknowledgement of the importance of the *Sovereignty*. The praise in Platts (1979), 238-42, is a rare exception to this. However, it is tempered by his trenchant opposition to Murdoch's extension of the concept of morality Platts (1991), 144-50. See also Chapter 6 of Backus (1986) for comments on Platts.

⁹ The thick and thin contrast is particularly associated with Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* but it is anticipated in the *Sovereignty*.

¹⁰ Urmson (1950).

game 'rock' trumps 'scissors' which trump 'paper' which in turn trumps 'rock'. We may play the game and always be in a position to apply criteria of preferability of each to the others, yet there is no single linear scale that they all belong to and no implied standard of an ultimate move. Qualitative differences preclude evaluation in quantitative, hierarchical terms. (More good, less good.) Murdoch, however, presupposes just such a single hierarchy within which goods are ultimately commensurable and in which the hierarchy ends in one single and ultimate sovereign value.

She does not claim that her case for such a unitary Good is decisive, she simply sets it out. The perfection argument is not to be taken as logically compelling, 'a reductionist might argue that an increasingly refined ability to compare need not imply anything beyond itself. The idea of perfection might be, as it were, empty'.¹¹ Murdoch does not agree with this position but she charges it only with reductionism. She does not try to point out some rudimentary logical error in it. Her point is rather that perfection is psychologically inescapable, continuously implied by and presupposed in our ways of thinking and speaking about the world. To lapse into Gricean rather than Murdochian terms, she takes the reality of the Good to be conversationally implicated rather than logically entailed.¹² But unlike Grice, who is concerned with deliberate moves in the conversation game, she is interested in the implications that are still there even though we may be unaware of them or even when we explicitly deny them. Another way of making the same point would be to say that, for Murdoch, the implication that Good is real forms part of the ongoing background to the conversation game. It may periodically resurface within the game but it does not constitute merely another move that might be made or omitted depending upon our personal inclination. It is not something that can be cancelled. (A hallmark of Gricean implications.) Whatever utterances we may make to the contrary, it is much harder than we imagine to stop thinking and speaking about goodness as real. Murdoch is claiming that any such an attempt to escape from this normal human condition cannot be entirely successful. Her treatment of the ontological proof is a

¹¹ *GG*, 60.

¹² Grice (1989).

recognition of this inescapability, although it is 'not exactly a proof but rather a clear assertion of faith'.¹³

II. The Remedial Moral Psychology of 'On "God" and "Good"'

Murdoch wants to set up a strong continuity between her moral psychology and the religious tradition. She goes directly against Nietzsche's warning in *Beyond Good and Evil* that modern secular morality is a thinly veiled continuation of religious morality by arguing that this is just what morality ought to be.¹⁴ For Murdoch, religion has traditionally counteracted human selfishness, human egocentricity.¹⁵ (Her equivocation between these terms will be dealt with below. For the moment they will be used interchangeably.) Murdoch's good man is less caught up in himself and is thereby able to see others more realistically. From this flows a greater ability to act appropriately. Moral competence involves being able to counter preoccupation with self in order to cultivate a realistic view of the other.

The moral realism that is involved here is not primarily about assigning definite truth-conditions to individual propositions. It is connected to a more ambiguous idea of truthfulness that does require appeal to some standards of truth but is taken to be more fundamental than any particular theory of truth.¹⁶ There is, for example, no need to postulate a special class of natural or non-natural moral properties to which individual terms of the discourse can be shown to correspond.¹⁷ Theorizing about morality is an imaginative exercise that helps us to break egocentricity. Alternatively, when it goes wrong, it prevents us from doing so. The problem she identifies with too much contemporary (post-war) moral theory is that it

¹³ *GG*, 61.

¹⁴ See below, Chapter 3, for the Nietzschean connection.

¹⁵ Byrne (1998) explores her continuity with religion.

¹⁶ The formulation of being 'in the truth' is a frequent occurrence in the novels and occurs also in the philosophical texts alongside 'truthfulness', *M*.399 eg. *M*.139, 399. For the limits of coherence, see *M*.194-6; and of pedantic truth-telling, *M*.34-5. Rather than a single criterion (eg. coherence), truthfulness or being 'in the truth' seems to involve applying the right criterion in the right context.

¹⁷ Murdoch rejects the idea of 'bogus' mind-independent moral facts *HT*, 179. She does allow that the 'moral facts' formulation might be unobjectionable if appropriately qualified 'in the sense of moral interpretations of situations', *VC*, 95. But this is not her own preferred formulation. Bagnoli, 'Realism as a Moral Achievement', 57-8, is particularly strong on this. Her 'constructivism' is not faithfully Murdochian but it is closer to the mark than Denham (2001) who translates Murdoch into analytic terms as an exponent of 'evaluative facts' or 'evaluative aspects' that supervene on non-moral properties. Murdoch is quite clear that 'a constructive activity of imagination and attention "introduces" value into the world which we confront', *DPR*, 201.

does the latter. It tends to equate the person with the will, with a rational chooser who is able to exercise a total freedom from the past. For Murdoch this picture is less realistic than the view of mankind as fallen traditionally held by the ordinary religious believer and still depicted by Freud. 'One may say that what he presents us with is a detailed and realistic picture of the fallen man [...] Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings.'¹⁸ However, unlike Freud, who aims to make us into commonplace functional neurotics, Murdoch favours a perfectionism to which Freud is hostile, reading it as a form of narcissistic love for a future, projected self.¹⁹

Murdoch appeals to Platonic metaphors which portray life as an ongoing struggle (or pilgrimage) towards perfection but she reworks the metaphors in a way that gives them heavily Freudian overtones. She reads Plato's hydraulic metaphor of *eros* as if it were a kind of energy that we can direct this way or that but which is (more or less) a fixed quantity. Something of this sort is to be found in Plato, particularly *The Republic* 485d where he writes that 'whenever a man's desires flow in full current towards any one object, like a stream that has a channel dug for it, towards all other objects they flow the more feebly'. In a rather different form it can also be found in the *Phaedrus* 251E where the soul 'channels the stream of desire into herself as through an irrigation trench, releasing the pent-up waters'. However, this is one among many Platonic metaphors, and there is no great or obvious consistency in its detail. In the first case the system is enclosed and finite, in the second, energy flows into the system and out of it in a less restricted, less economical manner. Once read in the light of Freud's concept of the *libido* (a limited energy that may be cathected this way or that) Plato's hydraulic metaphor of *eros* can seem a useful way to make sense of his account of love and displacement, especially as it is set out in the *Symposium*. We shift (indeed ascend) from loving one object to loving another, *eros* is cathected *this* way at the expense of *that* way.

The mediating influence here is Simone Weil.²⁰ Murdoch takes over Weil's Freudian-influenced reading of 'the powerful energy system of the self-defensive psyche' augmented only occasionally by grace and afterwards covers her tracks,

¹⁸ GG, 50.

¹⁹ For a contrast between Freud and Plato on perfectionism see Santas (1998)

²⁰ See especially Weil (1952), 280. Murdoch first moots the 'Need for a new concept of energy' in her review of Weil's notebooks, *KV*, 158.

giving the impression that this is the obvious sense of what Plato means and Freud's big idea is far from new.²¹ 'What we really are seems 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.'²² If we allow *eros* to remain in its default condition it will be directed towards the self and we will leave the illusions generated by egocentricity intact. If we redirect it elsewhere, towards the good, we will partially escape from the fantasies generated by egocentricity. This is what Murdoch assumes that religion does. It makes us into people capable of seeing the other.

This is all very metaphorical, too metaphorical for contemporary analytic tastes and perhaps too allied to a Freudian psychology that no longer commands the respect that it did in the 1950s and 1960s. However, we can allow that there is some sense that can be made of the hydraulic-erotic metaphor in terms of the important and perhaps philosophically undertheorized notion of displacement. If we are happier with this latter notion, then the unsettling nature of the erotic metaphor is perhaps our problem and not Murdoch's. Displacement has always relied upon something akin to the idea of cathecting a limited, metaphorical, intensional resource. Murdoch is advancing an account of degrees of moral competence in which it will be improved by coming to grips with this phenomenon. If egocentricity is a source of illusion, then what we need to do is not just to try and stop being egocentric by an act of will. Instead, we need to displace our concern onto a different object, and one which is sufficiently engrossing.²³

Murdoch asks how this is to be done, '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?'.²⁴ Two

²¹ SG, 81. For an example of Murdoch covering her Freudian tracks see *The Fire and the Sun* where she quotes Freud's comment that 'The enlarged sexuality of psychoanalysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato' [FS, 37] but omits the rest of the quote in which he equates both with the *agape* of St Paul. Freud can hardly be reproducing Plato when he so seriously fails to understand him. (The Freud quote is from the preface to the third edition of *Three Essays on Sexuality*.)

²² GG, 53.

²³ The adequacy of the alternative object is a concern that emerges with great clarity in Weil's *The Need for Roots*. She argues that the antidemocratic ideals of fascism need to be combated with a political ideal (which turns out to be a modern equivalent to Plato's *Republic*) rather than a technical programme for post-war reconstruction. (The latter is closer to the task she was actually set.)

²⁴ GG, 53.

established techniques are successively considered and rejected. Firstly, psychoanalysis is rejected because, although aware of the flaws of the self, its approach is to repay these flaws in their own currency by focusing upon the self and thereby remaining trapped in egocentricity. This problem, briefly rehearsed in the article 'On "God" and "Good"', figures prominently in her Freudian-themed novels of the 1960s and carries over into those of the early-to-mid 1970s. In terms of the Platonic metaphor of the Cave, psychoanalysis is preoccupied with the second-rate illumination of the fiery self. This brings it close to existentialism and analytic accounts of the free agent. In the novels, psychoanalysts routinely provide reductive, complacent explanations that are characteristically less deep than those sought by religious mystics.²⁵

Secondly, there are the traditional techniques of religion: devotional exercises directed towards a transcendent moral standard and exemplified by prayer, not as a form of petition, but as attention to God. (A formulation drawn from Weil.)²⁶ The great virtue of this, from a Murdochian point of view, is that it directs our limited erotic resources elsewhere. God, and not self becomes the object of love, egocentricity is thereby broken. The great weakness of the technique is that a transcendent God-thing is neither extant nor believable. Murdoch holds that as religion (with the possible exception of mysticism) has become dangerously ossified in its focus upon a fictional God-thing. Instead, she holds that we need a concept of Good that will take over the job that God used to perform and direct us away from the self. We need a single, perfect, transcendent, non-representable, indefinable and necessarily-real object of attention.

III. The Ambiguity of Good

The *Sovereignty* essays considered so far have set out the following positions. Firstly, an insistence that we cannot get away from the concept of an ultimate Good (i.e. perfection). The concept of Good is an inescapable part of being human, it is bound up with language and thinking. (It is part of what Charles Taylor calls our

²⁵ The late novel, *The Message to the Planet* is rather unusual because its chief psychotherapist has mystical tendencies and its principal mystic is mentally unbalanced. Earlier mystics and psychoanalysts are contrasting.

²⁶ *GG*, 53. This is a key theme of Weil (1951) and seems to have wider currency in the mid-century e.g. Ortega y Gasset uses it in his study *On Love*.

necessary framework, not so much the picture but the canvas.)²⁷ This inescapability is rather nicely depicted in *The Time of the Angels* (published in 1966 in the midst of the *Sovereignty* essays). 'The girls prided themselves on being theoretical immoralists of some degree of refinement. Being high-minded and superior and tough made them by a natural development non-moral and free. They were not themselves tempted by excesses. They lived indeed the strictly ordered life which Muriel imposed and Elizabeth accepted. But they took it for granted that all was permitted. They despised a self-abnegation which called convention duty, and neurosis virtue. They had disposed of such self-styled morality long ago in their discussions, just as they had at an early age convinced each other that there was no God, and then dropped the subject forever.'²⁸ The point, I take it, is that their lives belie their exciting doctrine.

Secondly, the *Sovereignty* sets out an insistence that being subject to a necessary idea of Good is not a matter of unavoidable fantasy. Good is a reality principle. Attending to it redirects our energies away from the self, hence away from egocentric fantasy. However, even were this a realistic moral psychology (with the concept of realism being understood in a sufficiently broad sense) it seems to demand a high price. One might still wonder about the idea of Good itself as an end-point or goal. Gilbert Harman (whose reservations about Aristotelianism might seem to place him in proximity to Murdoch) claims that we have a tendency to posit end goals which give order (coherence) to our lives. A person may aim for and take up an academic post not because this will allow them to lead a contented life, but because of the distress involved in thinking that all their years of education have just been a waste. In such a case, an end-goal is posited in order to give sense to a way of life that can now be considered not as wasted time, but as an important means to this end.²⁹ This is similar to Murdoch's charge that we tend to impose form upon contingency. There may, however, be a suspicion that Murdochian Good is just such a form-inducing end-point, posited in order to make sense of a self-sacrificial way of living that might otherwise seem utterly pointless. Once posited, whatever else it does, Good may also be liable to supplant attention to the other just as readily as

²⁷ Charles Taylor (1996), Chapter 1.

²⁸ *The Time of the Angels*, 45-46.

²⁹ Harman (1976), 457-463.

egocentricity does. If Good is our necessary detour to the other, is there not also a danger that the detour might displace the destination?

If we chart Murdoch's progress between the 1950s and the *Sovereignty* we might be forgiven for thinking that this is precisely what has happened, that she has moved on from an interest in secularising or rationalising religious themes, and has 'gone native'. A series of suspect shifts does take place. From embracing a fact-value fusion she now embraces the symptomatic importance of the ontological proof. From rejecting Kantian universalisability, she now advocates something called 'unselfing'. From favouring an ambiguous visual metaphor for morality she now favours the idea of a transcendent and *unitary* Good. From defending inwardness against dissolution into public criteria, she now defends private moral pilgrimage. From adopting a view of the emotions as in some sense cognitive, she now places love at the centre of moral being. Finally, from prioritising the reality of others, she now introduces the ambiguous reality of Good. These shifts mark a general transition, a metaphysical move into Platonism with a distinctly Freudian accent.

This transition is acknowledged more openly in 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts' (1967) than in the previous two *Sovereignty* articles. The article opens with a restatement of Murdoch's defence of metaphoricity, but the point of the article is that the idea of a unitary, sovereign good draws us towards specifically-Platonic metaphors, with all the sense of ontological ambiguity that they carry. Metaphors such as the Cave and the Sun are taken as necessary to make even partial sense of the Good as unitary. 'Note the metaphor of "thing" here. Good is a concept about which, and not only in philosophical language, we naturally use a Platonic terminology.'³⁰ This does not, however, imply some actual good 'thing' in some real *beyond* place (an interpretation of Murdoch that sometimes seems implied in Elizabeth Dipple's *Work for the Spirit*).³¹ Good is not a thing among other things, *its* transcendence is only metaphorical, *its* distance only an image.³² When she writes that 'Good is a transcendent reality' this '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

³⁰ SG, 90.

³¹ Dipple (1982), 7,65,101,110,244,251, 291,297,309,327 associates the good with externality but this is not given adequately textual support to clarify (demythologize) the sense.

³² SG, 96 For the metaphor of distance.

about human nature that the attempt cannot be entirely successful'.³³ Transcendence is transcendence of egocentricity.³⁴ Murdoch's Good nevertheless has ontologically-ambiguous overtones. She uses the language of particularity as a device to convey a sense of the unitariness of Good although she is clearly committed to rejecting the view that Good is a thing among other things.³⁵ In the deeply ambiguous Platonic terminology, it is 'beyond being' [*Rep.* 509b-c] or above the gods. This also makes it beyond full comprehension, beyond description, and ontologically suspect.³⁶

Such ontologically-ambiguous overtones introduce an element of messiness that is not necessarily to be resisted or undone in an exposition of Murdoch's moral psychology. Clarification need not result in the wholesale bracketing-off of troublesome ambiguities.³⁷ Tempting though such bracketing is, Murdochian Good cannot be viewed as *simply* an instrumental device or reality principle. For the psychological trick of displacement to work, we must be good 'for nothing' (a point Murdoch repeatedly makes) and not for any reward, not even for the reward of clarity or privileged insight.³⁸ Here, Murdoch really does border on mysticism. As someone who holds it to be at the heart of religion she must to some degree commit to continuing its insights, whatever they may be. She alludes to 'true mysticism'.³⁹ There is, perhaps, a genuine tension here between her instrumental justification for Good and her more mystical substitution of a sovereign unitary Good for God. Perhaps the necessary strong sense of the reality of Good can best be appreciated by someone approaching the problem through a demythologising of their everyday sense of a

³³ *SG*, 91.

³⁴ This aspect of transcendence, which is stressed in the closing pages of the *Sovereignty* is particularly emphasised in Conradi (1994) on Murdoch's Platonism.

³⁵ Her *Gifford* lecture on the ontological proof treats this as the true significance of Anselm's second version of the ontological proof: not the argument that perfection requires existence, but that it requires *necessary existence*. This places it above all mere contingent realities (things). A thing-like absolute would be idolatrous, 'The Ontological Proof', *The Iris Murdoch Newsletter*, 11, (1998); *Metaphysics*, Chapter 13.

³⁶ There is a curious moment of perhaps contrived doubt in the *Sovereignty* when she admits to some sympathies with this view, and with the idea that Good is faked-up and incapable of playing the old role of the fictional God, *GG*, 70-1.

³⁷ Here I am thinking the bracketing out of mystical influences in Antonaccio (2000).

³⁸ The 'for-nothingness' of morality (*SG*, 90) connects Murdoch with Kant's *Groundwork* where the idea of motivation by reward is also rejected, albeit in favour of duty. (A shopkeeper should not be honest *because it pays* but because it is the right thing to do.)

³⁹ *SG*, 99.

moral reality that goes beyond arbitrary choice. Someone from an analytic background, interested only in the instrumental argument, may experience difficulties in making sense of the concept, they may suspect that this particular sovereign is insufficiently clothed. The suspicion may be well founded, but I do not adopt it as my line of attack. It is all too easy for a Murdochian to mount a difficult-to-challenge defence by appeal to conceptual holism. They might, plausibly, point out that Good is indefinable just because it is the sovereign concept, the one that holds everything else together.⁴⁰ This is Murdoch's own response and it partially insulates her theory from direct criticism. My approach will play instead upon this theme of self-enclosure.

IV. Attention and *Seeing As*

The *Sovereignty* presents us with the view that morality is necessary in the sense of unavoidable or inescapable and that it is not a necessary fiction but a reality principle. Also, it is held together by a sovereign concept of a unitary Good, so that perfecting one virtue involves acquiring others. They all pull together in the same direction. The text has a certain precision of focus rather than exposition. If we are inclined towards the charitable view that her metaphors are meaningful then perhaps this is because she directs us exceptionally well towards a genuine problem, the difficulty in coming to grips with the reality of others. There are phenomenological and Wittgensteinian accounts of this difficulty to the effect that solipsism and doubt about other minds may be strictly indefensible (unintelligible even) but they are symptomatic of an everyday moral problem of *making sense of the other*. (Ilham Dilman uses that rather nice expression 'affective solipsism'.⁴¹) The phenomenological formulations of the problem stem from Hegel's claim that our relations with others are characterised by a struggle for recognition. Murdoch is only interested in one side of this opposition, the struggle to recognize others and not the struggle to be recognised. Shorn of such theory-specific ornamentation, the problem is that in our

⁴⁰ We may compare this with Quine's comment at the end of 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' to the effect that, qua lay-physicist, he happens to believe in physical objects and not the gods of Homer, but both are ultimately on the same epistemological footing as posits of the conceptual schemes in which they are embedded, Quine (1980),44. A holism comparable to this should be able to accommodate an ontologically ambiguous Murdochian Good while distinguishing it from God because of the latter's associations with personhood.

⁴¹ This is an abiding problem according to Dilman (1987).

thoughts and deeds, in emotional response and through our actions, we betray an inability to engage with (to 'see') others as complex, unique, private individuals. Our moral competence is thereby compromised.

A visual metaphor plays an important rôle here and does so through a thesis about priority. The point is that prior to reasoning about situations and others we *see* them in particular ways, our representational experiences of the world have *conceptual content* that does not fall apart from their representational content.⁴² In less elegant terms, a process of *construal* precedes inference. Indeed we might want to define this sort of seeing in just these terms, as the non-inferential making sense of (conceptualising) what we encounter. (Rather than defining vision in terms of action.)⁴³ Murdoch's understanding of the visual metaphor as it is deployed in the *Sovereignty* is set up beforehand, in 'Vision and Choice', in terms of this priority thesis: we can only choose within the world that we can see, and our vision of that world is always already value-laden. Moral differences are generally differences of vision and not of choice. Pro and anti-abortionists will not *see* the same neutral set of facts.⁴⁴ If our representational experiences have conceptual content, then they can be altered, restructured, developed, in a word, improved, by an alteration in our concepts.

This allows Murdoch to equate flawed moral vision with a lack of moral competence, part of the treatment for which will rely upon working with (developing) appropriately rich concepts to make sense of persons. Hannah Arendt provides a particularly good example of the failure of moral vision when writing about Adolf Eichman's inversion of the rôles of perpetrator and victim. When someone like Eichman remarks *what horrible things I had to do*, they are presenting themselves in the position of victims. When the torturer remarks *finally the prisoner betrays*

⁴² My formulation here owes something to John McDowell's *Mind and World*.

⁴³ Of the two best-known alternative accounts of moral vision, Nussbaum (1990), 93, accepts the significance of D and M, that vision need not be defined in relation to action. McDowell (1979), 33 continues to view (even define) moral vision in relation to action. The Murdoch-Nussbaum approach is better able to treat moral vision as significant, praise or blame worthy *in its own right*.

⁴⁴ Blum (1991) emphasises priority in his Murdochian-influenced account of 'moral perception', treating it as prior also to judgement (the bringing of particular situations under general rules), 714-8. This helps to ensure that moral perception is not seen as a unitary 'faculty' but it is also informed by the Aristotelian position of Nussbaum (1990) that perception is informed by a multiplicity of potentially-conflicting goods. Hence developing sensitivities to one good may block out sensitivities to other goods.

themselves, they are shifting ultimate culpability onto the victim.⁴⁵ This way of seeing matters is blinkered to the most obvious features of these situations as ones in which horrors are perpetrated upon the defenceless. The Eichmann scenario is extreme but so too is the one in the *Sovereignty* when Murdoch asks what would make someone act without selfishness even in a concentration camp? If we reverse this question we return to Arendt's point that something very basic must go wrong for someone to behave monstrously in such a situation. Are we to think of concentration camp guards as individuals who see the inmates as fully human? Surely we are to allow that there is an important sense in which they are blind to the full humanity of the inmates, that they are caught up in a brutalised way of seeing them. Inferential doctrines to the effect that others are subhuman need to tie into this way of seeing to do their worst. As an effective nazi in a camp situation I would have to see this particular Jew before me as less than human. It would not be enough to hold a view about Jews in general. As in the case of D and M, *seeing* here involves, and is not something separate from, emotional response.⁴⁶

This sort of formulation, and emphasis upon the standpoint of the viewer (rather than the viewed) moves us away from the phenomenological tradition with its struggle for recognition and closer to Wittgenstein's discussion of 'seeing aspects' and adopting 'an attitude towards a soul' in the *Philosophical Investigations*.⁴⁷ In Wittgenstein's account of seeing aspects he works around a number of illustrative figures (picture-objects) such as the Jastrow duck-rabbit figure which may be seen either as a duck or as a rabbit. If asked to draw what we see (and able to do so with tolerable accuracy) we would, when seeing it as a duck and as a rabbit, draw exactly the same thing. As in the case of D and M, what shifts is our perception and not the object. (Although we may be inclined to describe matters rather differently: *now it is a duck...now it is a rabbit*.) Such shifts are also eliminative, we cannot see the figure

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichman in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York, 1965), 106. The point that this dovetails with the 'inversion of suffering' by torturers is made in Farley (1996), 34, a more 'continental' exploration of knowing the other.

⁴⁶ For an Aristotelian formulation of the same idea, see Nussbaum (1990), 79, 'The emotions themselves are modes of vision, or recognition.'

⁴⁷ *Philosophical Investigations*, II.iv and xi especially. I make no claim of originality for pointing out this influence. For example, Denham (2001) 609-13 and Moran (2002), 93-4 emphasis the importance of seeing aspects in Murdoch. I do maintain that the possibilities this opens up for clarifying the effortful side of Murdochian attention have not been fully developed.

in both ways at the same time. Ways of seeing block each other out. Applied to everyday moral contexts, we can develop this idea that ways of seeing the other are laden with construals (as opposed to explicit beliefs or propositional attitudes) which may also be mutually exclusive. For convenience, I will say that seeing the other is laden with interpretation, 'seeing, thinking and "interpreting" are mixed' [M.278].⁴⁸

Murdoch holds that "'seeing as" is everywhere' [M.306]. Vision is always laden with construal or interpretation, i.e. with a way of seeing things that excludes alternative ways of seeing. My representational experience has a conceptual content that might differ from that of some other viewer and by working to improve my concepts I may improve the quality of my moral vision. Where she may depart from Wittgenstein is not merely over the fine-point of terminology but over an important matter of substance. In line with her visual metaphor, she extends interpretation-laden vision beyond instances of actual perception to cover various different sorts of attempts to make sense of the other (for example: imagining, thinking about, or, as in the case of D and M, remembering). To make this move is, admittedly, open to the qualification that what Murdoch has in mind is only an analogue of seeing aspects. She may be open to the charge of extending it beyond the more restricted bounds that Wittgenstein seems to set out.⁴⁹ Seeing aspects can, for example, occur only where there are multiple possibilities for construal, and this is not obviously the case with other persons.⁵⁰ That multiple, and eliminative construals of others *are* continuously available is just Murdoch's point. It is also a plausible enough position. Lawrence Blum has developed it through the following example of seeing an incident as an instance of racism. Suppose that I am at the airport. A cab passes a black man and stops in front of me. It requires sensitivity that is built up over time to see this as a

⁴⁸ Mulhall (1990), 22 ff. points out that Wittgenstein uses 'interpretation' for something inferential. Murdoch departs a little more from ordinary useage by using it for something non-inferential: 'we "interpret" our surroundings all the time, enjoying as it were a multiple grasp of their texture and significance' M.279. However, this need not obscure the main point. For both, seeing/vision is non-inferential.

⁴⁹ She lines up with Strawson's view that all seeing is 'seeing as'. This approach that may be contrasted with Scruton's curtailment of the concept to only those situations where *efforts of will* may be made, i.e. only where it makes sense to try and see something differently. See Strawson (1974); Scruton (1974).

⁵⁰ Here I am following Stephen Mulhall who defends Cavell against this same anticipated objection of overextending aspect perception in Mulhall (1994), 129 and generally 126 ff. Mulhall's point, here and elsewhere, is that Wittgenstein's discussion of our paradoxical experience of certain picture objects is intended to be of general significance.

possible case of racism. It might be that the driver's view was physically obscured, or he might habitually pick people up from just where I am standing. What I have to construe is not a piece of neutral behaviour (driving until he arrives at a particular point and then stopping). What is to be made sense of is the driver's action -an action and not just an event- and this involves attributions of intention and purpose.⁵¹

To see the incident as an instance of racism I have to construe the situation as one in which the driver intentionally bypassed the black man. I must see matters in this way at the expense of the other alternatives. I may subsequently decide that I was mistaken, that appearances were deceptive, but not that I made a wrong choice about how to piece the information together, like someone who had misread a blueprint or schematic diagram. We do not see the lines of the schematic Jastrow figure on the paper and only then decide whether it is one thing or the other. This is a point about the immediacy and non-inferential character of what we call vision.⁵² These alternatives only strike me as possible afterwards, upon reflection.

Making sense of someone as acting in one way rather than another involves seeing some features of situations as the salient ones. Blum's example takes us to the heart of Murdoch's idea of moral vision. It is not about the perception of strange mind-independent moral properties or facts, but about the inescapability of salience perception and *seeing as*.⁵³ The possibility of construing other features as the ones that matter most is there but however we see them, our normal condition is one in which we see others as engaged in various ways (intending, wanting, trying and so

⁵¹ Blum (1991) 706-7. Making sense of persons in this way is continuous with the Wittgensteinian approach towards intentions developed by Elizabeth Anscombe. What matters is not some public, neutrally-observable *behavioural event*, but construing and understanding *actions* whose identity is bound up with answering 'why?'-questions that fit into the language game of appealing to reasons rather than to causes.

⁵² I am drawing here upon the discussion of *PI xi*. in the first chapter of Mulhall (1990).

⁵³ Antonaccio's concern with mind-independence and passivity leads her to downgrade vision in favour of imagination. 'In contrast to the language of vision, which suggests that right action is a matter of *conforming* the self to the order of objective reality (i.e. the Good) by divesting it of selfish desire, imagination suggests the active participation of the self in the building up of the moral world in which desire and will operate.' Imagination suggests 'a more active and constructive activity than the metaphor of vision implies', Antonaccio (1996b), 236. I will take it that neither concern is decisive. Firstly, the concept of attention is developed as a specifically-visual metaphor for effort. Murdoch is also inclined to treat the active-obedient boundary as blurred, not clear cut, 'sharp distinctions of active and passive' break down, *DPR*, 201. Secondly, Murdoch does not shun ontological ambiguity. Given that part of what Murdochian attention/imagination involves is akin to Keats 'negative capability' i.e. toleration for messiness, Antonaccio's move is itself a failure of attention. For 'negative capability', see *SBR*, 284 and Murdoch's short piece the following year, *NC*. For toleration of ambiguity as an aspect of attention, see Adamson (1998), 100-105.

on). It is only in specialised contexts that we come close to seeing them just as objects caught up in events, moved about from here to there, like unconscious patients on a hospital trolley. (Here Wittgenstein is at his least behaviouristic.)

Murdoch claims that choice is constrained by moral vision, not because we are automatically motivated by a strange sort of moral fact but because morally-laden vision forecloses possibilities for decision and action. We encounter the world always as a value-laden reality and our possibilities for action are circumscribed by those aspects of reality that we can see and see as important. What this idea of *seeing as* opens up is a particular diagnosis of the failure of moral vision. We are subject to an analogue of what Wittgenstein is concerned with when he writes about aspect blindness, an inability to construe something or someone in a particular way. In the case of the Jastrow figure, this might be an inability to shift between seeing the duck and seeing the rabbit. (Wittgenstein also gives the more everyday example of an inability to see the similarity between two faces.)⁵⁴ This is just the problem that Murdoch is directing us towards, a certain aspect-blindness when it comes to others. Of course, there are aspects of their humanity that we do readily notice, and it is just this that makes it seem peculiar to remark that we do not see others as real. What we are directed towards is the realisation that there are also aspects that we fail to see, aspects that we are perhaps uninterested in or simply blind to. (Like the complacent husband who is not indifferent to his wife's unhappiness but is unable to see it.)

In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Murdoch gives an example of this kind of blindness. Morgan is an estranged wife who sees only her husband's weaknesses. She needs 'A change of *gestalt*'. Her friends lament this situation. One of them remarks 'If only the picture could change a bit, if only Tallis could *surprise* her in some way, if only she could suddenly see him in a different light'.⁵⁵ This understanding of the failure of moral vision is drawn directly from the idea of aspect blindness. However, while Murdoch is indebted to Wittgenstein, she prefers a grander and more extended ancestry than either Wittgenstein or the phenomenological tradition can supply. Her novels give aspect blindness a pedigree in Homeric ἀτιη, blindness that is associated with the passing on of suffering. However, this is not quite right. Symbolic blindness in Homer (and after him in Sophocles, Euripides, and Shakespeare's *Lear*) is an

⁵⁴ *Philosophical Investigations*, II.xi

⁵⁵ *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Chapter 14, p.168.

exceptional, even divinely-induced, state. For Murdoch it is closer to the default human condition.⁵⁶

This default condition of partial blindness to the other is the key to understanding Murdoch's concept of attention. It is *not* the same concept as moral vision. Attention plays a much more specialised rôle. Consider again the case of D and M: 'psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary. (M seeing D as pert-common-juvenile, etc.) Attention is the effort to counteract such states'.⁵⁷ Attention is *not* to be equated with vision, not even when it is *seeing as*, although it is tempting to assimilate the two because both are eliminative, both are tied into the phenomenon of displacement. (Murdochian attention to what is other operates at the expense of attention to self). Barbara Holland is particularly strong on this point and suggests that some early interpretations of Murdoch, such as Blum's, failed to separate out attention and vision clearly enough.⁵⁸ Attending is what M does in relation to D, she makes the various *efforts* involved in improving the quality of her vision and comes to see D as 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful'.⁵⁹ Attention as such is not vision, it is a general, visual metaphor for the various ongoing *efforts* involved in improving the quality of our moral vision.

But if it is a matter of effort, does this not simply return us to a concept of the free Kantian 'will' by another name? This is just the charge levied by Nancy Schauber, that the example of D and M surreptitiously falls back upon the volitional concept which Murdoch claims to have abandoned.⁶⁰ Schauber's strength here is her

⁵⁶ For ἀτη and moral blindness see the chapter on suffering below.

⁵⁷ *IP*, 36.

⁵⁸ Holland (1988). Where I diverge from Holland is in emphasising a second Murdochian contrast between attention and will.

⁵⁹ *IP*, 17.

⁶⁰ Nancy Schauber (1999), 122; (2001), 484. Much the same charge is levelled in a slightly different form by Moran (2002), 95,99. He suggesting that Murdoch claims hostility to agent-centred morality but actually presents an account of morality that centres upon an extended account of agency (to include inner effort) rather than an alternative to it. Against Moran, the *Sovereignty* clearly restricts the concept of agency that is under attack, 'Actions are, roughly, instances of moving things about in the public world', *IP*,5. Millgram (2002), 77 grasps how alien such an extended conception of agency would be to Murdoch. This is part of her way of blurring the clean-cut distinction between active and passive.

recognition that effort is just what is at stake. Where she goes wrong is in failing to draw out Murdoch's distinction between attention and will as different kinds of effort. This distinction goes back to Weil and its crux is that attention is gradualist and will is not. That is to say, 'attention' is effort in line with the existing grain of our character whereas 'will' involve going against the grain. (We may think here of the special effort that may be required to allow a loved one to give up their life rather than helping them to cling on to it.) Will in the latter sense is associated by Murdoch with the metaphor of 'stepping back', with trying to set aside characteristic inclinations in order to make a choice that goes against the grain.⁶¹ She does uses the idea of 'willed attention' for a brief period during the 1960s to convey the notion of effort and shake off any excessively-Weilian connotations of passivity.⁶² However, this use is only brief. Once the concept has been purged of any suggestion of a comprehensive passivity, the contrast of attention and will is reasserted. In the *Metaphysics* this is done in a way which allows her critique of the Will to sit alongside her approach towards attention. 'It may be better, as I suggested earlier, to restrict the term will, as "willing" or "exercise of will", to cases where there is an immediate straining, for instance occasioned by a perceived duty or principle, against a large part of preconceived duty or principle' [M.300]. Similarly, 'Our busy minds are (for better or worse) not often empty or idle. Such activity constitutes, in my picture of the matter, a large part of our fundamental moral dispositions...I do not want to use the word "Will" to describe this deep level, because of its Kantian and existentialist connections...I would (as I said earlier) see "will", or to be clearer, "effort of will", in a narrower use, as when an act, good or bad, is consciously forced into being against the general tenor of the personality. Obedience to duty may involve force of will' [M.330]. Attention, by contrast, is that kind of steady, ongoing effort which is more in line with the grain of our character. In the case of D and M, an effort is made by M to overcome her jealousy because M is fair minded enough to realize that her initial impressions may not be entirely just. Her effort is in line with, and builds upon, her basic fair-mindedness.

⁶¹ Murdoch is concerned with this metaphor as it is used by Stuart Hampshire, *DPR*, 194-5 the tone for which is set shortly beforehand in their discussion on the BBC third Programme in 1963, Pears (1964), 80-105.

⁶² See section II of the Romanticism chapter below for this brief episode.

Because the effort of attention can be made in different ways (including *really looking*, focusing, concentrating, waiting patiently, resisting convenient answers and holding jealousy in check) we do not need to identify separate episodes of attending and seeing, with the former occurring prior to the latter, any more than the non-Murdochian model of will (where it is allowed to swallow up all efforts) needs to identify volitions that are separate from (and prior to) voluntary actions. A footballer who makes an effort to try and score a goal does not need to do two things, firstly make the effort and then an associated action. The effort just is part of what make the action the kind of action it is. Similarly, we do not need the phantom duplicates of attentive effort and visual episode in order to distinguish between attention and vision at the conceptual level.⁶³ Attention is the effort to improve the quality of our vision even when such efforts take the form of *really looking*. (The metaphor of the artist is an appropriate one here, he *really looks* and this too is an effort of attention.)

We are, at last, in a position to translate these distinctions into the more recognisable terms of *seeing-as*, and thereby relate them to the real moral problem of seeing others. We can clarify matters thus: *attention is the general term covering the various different sorts of efforts that we engage in to overcome aspect blindness*. On its own this is quite an attractive concept. What complicates matters is that Murdoch holds that such efforts are not only continuous with the grain of character, but are also best executed in the context of an ongoing pilgrimage towards absolute goodness. There is nothing in the concept of attention, as it has so far been considered, that requires us to make this move. The concept of attention need not be embedded in a perfectionist doctrine of the sort set out in the *Sovereignty*, indeed it might be developed in a quite different and Aristotelian manner, but this perfectionist direction is the one in which Murdoch goes.⁶⁴

V. Egocentricity and Selfishness

Murdoch only gives grounds for treating our end-goal as indefinable. She gives no reason for treating the problem that underlies our partial blindness to others

⁶³ The formulation here owes something to Ryle's account of volitions in Chapter 3 of *The Concept of Mind* and ultimately to Wittgenstein, for example, *PI*. 615.

⁶⁴ We might, for example develop 'attention' in the manner of Nussbaum, using it to gauge the difference between the ends we claim to value and those we actually attend to, see Bowden (1998), 66-68.

as similarly ineffable. There is no obvious reason why some disambiguation of the underlying human condition may not be carried out. That to be human is to be flawed may be taken as basic here. We are to engage in unselfing and as the name suggests, this is self-sacrificial. The self is to be overcome. But Murdoch provides no explicit statement that might lead us to identify her approach as self-sacrificial in the strong sense of Kierkegaard (who urges us in *Works of Love* to abandon the Hegelian quest for personal recognition). More minimally, we may say that her approach embodies at least the weaker self-sacrifice of what Blum identifies as a self-other asymmetry. The other is given priority over the self. (In Blum's terms, it is, for example, permissible, even laudable, to sacrifice a greater personal good for a lesser good for someone else, but not to sacrifice their greater good for our lesser good.) Murdochian morality is not geared to promote self-interest. She is concerned with others, with loving and not with being loved. (Even if treating the two in this way as separable is already something of an assumption.) Concern for the other is taken to require and constitute 'a suppression of self'.⁶⁵ However, Murdoch's formulations equivocate over just what is to be sacrificed. She equivocates between directing her moral psychology against egocentricity and directing it against selfishness. These two are not at all the same. Egocentricity can be self-punitive just so long as it is self-preoccupied. Selfishness is more concerned with perceived well-being and reward, we might want to say that it is a particular form of egocentricity, but not the only form.

Although some commentators are sensitive to this point (such as Nussbaum, who always writes consistently about Murdoch on egocentricity) Guy Backus is the only commentator who has made an attempt to draw it out in more detail. 'Murdoch does not make clear if this pervasive selfishness is (i) a propensity to act in one's own interest or (ii) a propensity to be obsessed with the workings of one's own "psychical machinery" at the expense of thinking about others'.⁶⁶ Backus opts for (ii) as the more consistent with her overall concerns and I am inclined to view this as the right way to go.

Murdoch's equivocates on the point. At one moment we read 'I assume that human beings are naturally selfish'.⁶⁷ At others we read of the 'cloud', the 'falsifying

⁶⁵ GG, 64.

⁶⁶ Backus (1986), 76.

⁶⁷ SG, 76.

veil, the 'dark veil' and the fog, all images of a miasma which separates us from the real and leaves us trapped in the self.⁶⁸ The latter sort of metaphor goes along with an emphasis upon being preoccupied with oneself rather than narrowly selfish but Murdoch does repeatedly use 'selfishness' and 'egocentricity' with no attempt to differentiate between the two.⁶⁹ On one page of the *Sovereignty* we can read about 'mechanical energy of an egocentric kind', turn the page and we can read about an 'energy which is naturally selfish' and the need to counter 'a powerful egocentric mechanism'.⁷⁰ This represents a conceptual imprecision about what we are trying to overcome. However, the very idea of resisting our default condition makes clear that neither reading involves attributing psychological egoism (or some hedonistic variant thereof) to Murdoch. Self-interest is not the only possible motivation, a condition inside which we must remain comprehensively trapped. For Murdoch, we may be motivated by the Good.

Although neither reading collapses Murdoch's view in this way, I will take it that egocentricity is both further removed from psychological egoism and is also a more defensible diagnosis of a ubiquitous human problem than selfishness. Ubiquitous selfishness is descriptively implausible. We do seem to act in lots of ways that are geared to help others at our own expense and we do so without any special effort. (Perhaps we might want to appeal here to the regular social practices which we are born into and which constrain our individualism. We help people in *these* conditions but not in *those*.) Suggesting that Murdoch may be read as identifying a deeper problem is part and parcel of my contention that she ought not to be summarily dismissed for overestimating our *default* selfishness. She is far removed from any such thesis.

As Murdoch's dominant metaphors are orientational and concern a transcendence of self, a pursuit of what lies outside, egocentricity is (as Backus suggests) the better candidate for what ultimately concerns Murdoch, 'the direction of attention should properly be outward, away from self'.⁷¹ The rejection of an egocentric moral therapy is, after all, the crux of her critique of Freudianism, and -in

⁶⁸ *SG*, 77, 82; *Acastos*, 101.

⁶⁹ *SG*, 82.

⁷⁰ *GG*, 51, 53.

⁷¹ *GG*, 58.

the only substantial and separate philosophical text written during the *Sovereignty* period- the pursuit of freedom through self-knowledge advocated by Stuart Hampshire. For Murdoch, both Freud and Hampshire try to tackle egocentricity by *really focusing* upon the mechanisms of the self in the belief that such a focus somehow allows us to escape (or 'step-back') from the initial problem rather than merely reproducing it.⁷² As such, Freudian-inspired self-analysis is assimilated to the existentialist emphasis upon sincerity. Both rely upon an introspective interrogation that Murdoch believes is always already compromised. Far from having privileged access to our own motives, 'Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive'.⁷³ Systematic self-knowledge (i.e. self-knowledge beyond that rudimentary level that M has of her tendency to be jealous) is more of a by-product than a directly attainable goal. The point is worth emphasising because the argument that follows will place some weight upon a reading in which attention is the effort to overcome egocentricity.

'In such a picture sincerity and self-knowledge, those popular merits seem less important. It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power (for example, through sadomasochistic self-awareness). "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. A sense of such self-knowledge may of course be induced in analysis for therapeutic reasons, but 'the cure' does not prove the alleged knowledge genuine.'⁷⁴ Direct self-analysis fails to yield what it promises. What matters here is not whether Murdoch is right about this but that it requires us not to seek self-knowledge unselfishly, but to pursue an altogether less egocentric approach, accepting whatever incidental insights about the self may come to us along the way.

This egocentricity/selfishness distinction is an important one, Murdoch's failure to make it may insulate her from being charged with her own strictures by

⁷² For her rejection of Hampshire's pursuit of freedom through self knowledge see *DPR*. John Kekes (1995), 152-58, treats both positions as contrasting errors and insights. However, the suggestion has also been made that Murdoch's reading of Hampshire is problematic, Backus (1986), 75-83.

⁷³ *GG*, 50. There is some agreement with Ryle here about the limits of self-knowledge, see *The Concept of Mind*, Chapter VI.

⁷⁴ *GG*, 65-6.

introducing an *unnecessary* ambiguity about what those strictures are directed against. Once the ambiguity is removed, she may be more vulnerable to a *reductio*. In particular, she will be more vulnerable to the charge that by contextualizing individual episodes of attention within the overall project of a pilgrimage in the direction of perfection, she produces a secular version of the spiritualized egocentricity of the religious life. This is an intuition which I will try to develop, defend and render in a more precise manner.

Part Two

Introduction: An Approach Towards Critique

Having set out the substance of Murdoch's position and accounted for her stylistic peculiarities I will now try to develop an account of what she must avoid if she is to escape the charge of inconsistency. This attempt to evaluate Murdoch in her own terms is motivated by the following difficulty. Let us consider two basic Murdochian claims. (1) Because consciousness and language are continuously value-laden we must reject the fact-value distinction. (At least in the form set up by Logical Positivism. She does not rule out the possibility or usefulness of making *any* such a distinction but it will have to be done in a value-laden manner as a normative exercise.) (2), This value-ladenness of language and consciousness is not a matter of inescapable illusion, it is a matter of being truthful or realistic.¹ This claim is substantiated by her rudimentary moral psychology which is continuous with religion but which gives explicit normative priority to disclosing the *reality of others* and not self. Understanding the reality of others is about truthful belief, vision and emotional response. It is about a way of being i.e. being *in the truth*, and is not just concerned with propositional attitudes.

A certain vagueness and ambiguity creeps into Murdoch's writings, but this is underpinned by her views about metaphor so that at least a plausible defence can be made. Real engagement with Murdoch, trying to make sense of her theory *as it is*, in all its particularity and peculiarity, will involve trying to work with this ambiguity in order to clarify it gradually. The concepts so far examined will be developed further as we go along. In a sense, and to lapse into more analytic terms, real engagement with Murdoch will involve determining just what an application of the principle of charity will involve in this non-standard context. Once we have accepted that something significant is being said (and I have already made this concession) a degree of effort is justified in making further sense of it. I will suggest that the most plausible approach towards a critique, the one least likely to miss the target, will be to provide a *reductio*. That is to say, it will involve an attempt to expose the internal tensions

¹ For Murdoch, these two concepts are 'blended' in the Platonic concept of *aletheia*, *FS*, 12, 41.

within her approach and to do so in a manner which genuinely comes to grips with her ideas and does not merely cull isolated propositions or formulations from her texts.

Beyond the idea that this is what a principle of charity will involve as a response to her ambiguities, there is a further reason for preferring such an approach. Any critique of Murdoch will face difficulties which are not only concerned with the peculiarities of her philosophical style. Her plausible (defensible) rejection of the fact-value distinction (1) will make any critique directed against the more problematic and metaphorical moral psychology that substantiates (2) vulnerable to the charge of being a mere value judgement. I am, for example, inclined to believe that Murdoch has an overly-generous view of what religion has traditionally done and hence the value of emulating it. This, however, is a claim that might appeal to someone who is already dubious about a Murdochian standpoint, but it is unlikely to have any impact upon a what I will call a 'faithful Murdochian'. (Someone genuinely, and in detail, committed to what Murdoch is trying to set out.) I intend to raise problems for the latter sort of reader and not just the former. An internal critique fits this bill because it will not be subject to the charge of question begging by working on the basis of non-Murdochian assumptions. Our best, or maximal critique, will be an internal one. It will attempt to show that Murdoch is in some sense inconsistent (and not just descriptively implausible).

This does not quite solve the problem of how to critique Murdoch. *How consistent should we be?* is itself a moral question, and one whose normativity Murdoch is keenly aware of. (In this she is not alone.)² 'The achievement of coherence is itself ambiguous. Coherence is not necessarily good, and one must question its cost' [M,146-7]. This does not automatically collapse Murdoch into a fully-blown mysticism. Coherence, as an intellectual virtue, is not the only virtue.

² In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty questions absolute coherence, suggesting that conflicting conceptual tools may be used in different tasks or language games. Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* points out that conflicting moral commitments are too often confused with logical inconsistency. Both of these may be seen as entirely rational ways to limit the rôle of coherence. Murdoch's views on coherence, by contrast, do show the influence of the mystical use of conflicting formulations as a communicative strategy, but, on the analytic side, they may also be connected to the sort of claim (made by Putnam (1990), 157) that coherence is a value-laden concept that may be set up in different ways. Whereas she formulates this as a questioning of the value of coherence, Putnam formulates it as a questioning of the univocity of 'coherence', an approach that conveys a more obvious continuing commitment to rational standards.

Here we might want to note that there is often a connection between liberality and resistance of morally-intolerable implications. A prominent example of this is Kierkegaard's Abraham. God sets him on a journey, gives him time to mull over a terrible deed. Finally he arrives at the designated place and leads his son Isaac up a mountain to be sacrificed. If he is entirely consistent in his beliefs then he should make the sacrifice. The point, I take it, is that the price of absolute coherence may be moral fanaticism. Absolute consistency is not always what is most important from a moral point of view.³

Murdoch applies a similar restriction. The concept of pilgrimage, to which she is committed, is one which privileges the idea of progress over that of coherence. What matters above all is that we should advance in the direction of the Good, and not that we should be in every conceivable respect, consistent. Indeed she identifies the latter pursuit with egocentric self-enclosure, with the temptation to build 'convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary'.⁴ In some sense, pilgrimage leads us in the direction of an increasing discernment of the unitariness of Good, but there is also an abiding Murdochian concern with the limitations of coherence, reservations that may be set alongside those about the notion of truth as correspondence.⁵ Murdoch rejects any idea of a single criterion for truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic 'as if') posing instead the idea of truthfulness, of being 'in the truth' as a complex moral achievement which involves effort and not just the following of rules. We have to apply the right criterion in any given context and what criterion we apply will be a matter of how we see the world. (It will depend upon the quality of our moral vision.)⁶

What we can draw from this is not that we must abandon the idea of a *reductio* because when it comes to Murdochian standards of coherence, anything goes. Rather, an effective critique will be one which respects Murdoch's strictures on

³ This is, I take it, part of what Kierkegaard is trying to convey in *Fear and Trembling*.

⁴ *SG*, 37.

⁵ Her 1987 libretto, *The One Alone*, is rather unusual as an operatic piece in tackling the relation between the reduction of truth to coherence and the idea of human isolation and self-enclosure symbolised by imprisonment. Unusually, for an interrogation scenario, the interrogator appears to be a sort of Hegelian who insists upon conformity to the system.

⁶ For an attempt to provide a critique of Murdoch through a reductionist account of her criteria for truth, see Gamwell (1996). His point is that abandonment of God is moral loss ergo it is a loss of truth.

coherence by allowing that not all demonstrated inconsistencies will count as a *reductio* of her approach as a whole. On the other hand, Murdoch remains philosophically interesting precisely because, when it comes to coherence, anything does not go. (This is also an implication of the idea of a pilgrimage towards a *unitary* good.) Some inconsistencies *will* conflict with her core normative priorities. Some inconsistencies are tolerable, others are not. We may distinguish weak or tolerable inconsistency, which a faithful Murdochian may put up with as the price of progress, from strong inconsistency which they must avoid. Toleration of strong inconsistency may justly be treated as a fundamental violation of the truthfulness to which Murdoch aspires.

My task here, in this middle section of the thesis, will be to establish some criteria for strong inconsistency. I will do this in two stages. Firstly, in the next chapter, on 'Displacing Contentment' I will be removing an obstacle to a clear vision of what Murdoch is and is not against. In spite of her appeals to what we are all aware of, what we cannot get away from, she is *not* presenting a form of moral quietism. Quite the reverse. Murdoch aligns herself with hostility towards our everyday moral under-achievement..

Secondly, in the chapter entitled 'The Concept of Romanticism', I will shift the discussion away from those individual philosophers (Hampshire, Hare, Ryle, and so on) who are charged by Murdoch with complicity in developing a false view of the unencumbered self (free in the sense of being without a history or inner complexity). Instead I will try to examine that view of the self (and its moral task) in its own right and in the terms that Murdoch herself sets out in the *Sovereignty*. Her general charge, both there and elsewhere, is that this flawed view of the unencumbered self is guilty of a kind of romanticism. I will show that what Murdoch calls romanticism is taken by her to be generative of precisely those egocentric problems that her moral psychology is designed to tackle. What will give cause for concern here is that Murdoch's rejection of everyday contentment is something that she shares with romanticism and this may (should) lead us to question what else her position shares with it. Murdoch has a case to answer. If her approach towards morality and the self reproduces the same core problems of romanticism then it may be judged not only to be tolerably inconsistent, but strongly inconsistent.

This would be an important result in terms of what we can draw from Murdoch, but it would still not invalidate the more localised insights that she generates, nor would it make her any less important as an exemplar of a post-analytic, or at least non-analytic, way of doing philosophy. Evaluation of these insights and this exemplary status would take me beyond the limited bounds of this thesis. Even while remaining within its scope, Part Two has a limited rôle to play. It will be concerned only with setting out the criteria for strong inconsistency. Part Three will then evaluate Murdoch in the light of these criteria. Parts One and Two will together function as a framework within which Part Three can operate as the real engine that powers my argument. It does so by showing the ways in which Murdoch falls foul of what she criticises in others. Setting up this framework is a necessary business, without connecting up to it, the argumentative engine simply revs and revs but fails to go anywhere.

Chapter 3: Displacing Contentment

I. Rejecting Moral Quietism

Murdoch defends moral continuity. She holds that we need a concept of Good that will take the place of the no-longer-believable concept of God. 'I shall suggest that God was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics.'¹ This position, the dominant theme of "On 'God' and 'Good'", remains in place even at the end of the *Metaphysics*: 'The image of good here takes the place of God in its connection with a whole being' [M.492]. More poetically, 'Good represents the reality of which God is the dream' [M.496]. While there is a shift here from the conventional Judeo-Christian moral absolute, the overall tone of her position is one of contentment with traditional morality, perhaps even nostalgia for it.

What Murdoch criticises is a dangerous position (an end-point) which she believes we are led towards by a variety of different theories. (From Sartre, Hampshire, Hare, Ryle, and so on.) Nietzsche often seems to be closest to the ideal viewpoint that she has in mind. He holds a diametrically opposed view on the relation between 'God' and 'Good', namely, that we have abandoned God but timidly instantiated a pale imitation that mimics the departed God's commanding role. Utilitarianism and Kantianism, guilty of this moral half-heartedness, are ruled out as non-starters in favour of a more dramatic break of the sort symbolised by Nietzsche's madman in the village square, someone who shakes people and asks them *don't you realize that God is dead?* His Zarathustra re-enacts the same scene and tells the crowd that it is not our sin but our moderation that cries to heaven.² Nietzsche may well be in the background of Murdoch's texts but direct reference to Nietzsche is conspicuous by its scarcity.³ In part, this may be for diplomatic reasons, the early

¹ GG, 54.

² The allusions to Nietzsche are to *Beyond Good and Evil* (on Good as an imitation of God), *The Gay Science* (for the madman in the village square) and the speech at the end of the Prologue in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

³ There are exceptions. 'The Existentialist Hero' places the existentialist hero after the Nietzschean deluge, *EII*, 109. Similarly, 'It is not such a very long step from Kant to Nietzsche, and from Nietzsche to existentialism and the Anglo-Saxon allied doctrines which in some ways closely

texts were aimed at an analytic audience for whom Sartre was perhaps interesting but Nietzsche was too avant-garde or at least unfashionable and had come too soon or too late or both. Besides which, his political credentials were all wrong, or at least questionable. In setting out her argument, Murdoch's concern has always been with critiquing an approach which has tempting *liberal* credentials as a defence of freedom. She rejects the attempt to democratize morality into a matter of choice, but such a democratic preoccupation is not notably Nietzschean.

Because of her sympathy with what religion has traditionally (and allegedly) done, there is a danger that we may assimilate Murdoch's position to other defences of 'Good' (such as intuitionism), 'the Good life' (of virtue ethicists like Alasdair MacIntyre) and even 'God' (in the case of Charles Taylor and, more popularly, the Wittgensteinian Don Cupitt). We might be inclined to place her within a genealogy of figures making a last desperate, anti-modernist or quietist stand in defence of moral convention against the Nietzschean barbarians (the graphic scenario of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*). I am going to *accept* that there *is* a strong element of continuity between Murdoch and such moral traditionalism. She *is* trying to affirm and (pace Charles Taylor) to begin from an *articulation* of everyday moral common sense, and (more ambiguously) everyday 'intuitions'. She *does* attempt to enrich the theoretical background to what is already believed by what she calls the 'virtuous peasant' (a rather infelicitous expression).⁴ 'The virtuous peasant knows, and I believe he will go on knowing, in spite of the removal or modification of the theological apparatus, although what he knows he might be at a loss to say. This view is of course not amenable even to a persuasive philosophical proof and can easily be challenged on all sorts of empirical grounds.'⁵

It would, however, be quite wrong to situate Murdoch *unequivocally* in this way simply on the basis of her faithful attachment to a traditional-style moral absolute.⁶ What I will be concerned to show here is that her conception of morality, as well as sharing a good deal with accounts of Good, God and *the good life* also

resemble it.' *SG*, 78.

⁴ The virtuous peasant is first mentioned at *IP*, 2, and reappears at *SG*, 98. We may allow that the idea of the peasant was more favourably viewed in the 1960s.

⁵ *GG*, 72.

⁶ One of the strengths of Antonaccio (2000) is her separation of Murdoch from communitarian and Natural Law ethics.

leads her towards a quite different and disturbing element of continuity with the moral radicalism that she criticises. Taylor, for example, writes of the affirmation of everyday life.⁷ But when Murdoch writes that 'A mediocre man who achieves what he intends is not the ideal of a free man', or 'Ethics should not be merely an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct', she shares in the devaluation of what (for lack of a better expression) I will call *everyday bourgeois contentment*.⁸ By this I mean the kind of life that could be led by any one of us pretty much as we already are and that many of us would be quite pleased to lead. For ease of expression I will use 'contentment' and 'happiness' as cognate and untheorized terms, happiness is not a concept that Murdoch spends time analysing.

Hostility towards morally-unambitious contentment is shared by Murdoch and by Milton's Satan who would rather rule in hell than live an easy life in heaven. For Nietzsche too, ordinary contentment is a *miserable ease* and for Sartre it is the lifestyle of *les salauds*. Murdoch is critical of this 'special anti-bourgeois flavour of Sartre's philosophy' and his view that 'the bourgeois social world' conceals an 'unnerving solitude'.⁹ She is also 'not sure how seriously to take this anti-bourgeois attitude' when she encounters it in structuralist aesthetics.¹⁰ Nevertheless, she tries to value humans without endorsing their actually existing, default, condition. She is also intrigued, appalled and somewhat repelled by 'the abysmal sinfulness of humans' irrespective of whether this is conceived of naturalistically or in more socially specific terms [M.483]. Her view, like that of what I will call, (provisionally and in a non-rigorous sense) the romantics, is that we must try to rise above the norm.

This introduces a danger of lapsing into a refined elitism that is at odds with her other commitments. She 'would say no to the term "élite"', it is one she would reserve for heroic existentialism and for structuralism (deconstruction) where the critic stands apart from or above relativism in order to describe it.¹¹ This hostility towards elitism is reinforced by Murdoch's rhetorical alignment with the virtuous

⁷ Taylor (1989) associates this with Marxism.

⁸ *DPR*, 201; *SG*, 76.

⁹ *AD*, 289, *EPM*, 136.

¹⁰ *SN*, 100. See also *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* where romanticism is repeatedly at odds with 'a bourgeois' dream world', 80; *Sartre*, 13, 77; *M*.357.

¹¹ *GG*. 72. This is the core of her argument against deconstruction in *Metaphysics* Chapter 7.

peasant and by a key claim that she shares with intuitionism: awareness of Good is experiential, non-inferential, we do not need to be able to demonstrate the correctness or defensibility of morality. Common-sense, intuition, or 'a non-dogmatic essentially un-formulated faith in the reality of the Good' may be relied upon.¹² On H.A.Pritchard's early version of this argument, moral philosophy may rest upon a mistake precisely because morality is not justified by reasons but by intuitions.¹³ Closer to Murdoch's time it was associated with W.D.Ross and the *prima facie* duties that the plain man intuits to be right, where 'plain man' is one not altered by philosophy or perversity. 'The main moral convictions of the plain man seem to me to be, not opinions which it is for philosophy to prove or disprove, but knowledge from the start'.¹⁴ If Murdoch's 'virtuous peasant' is not exactly this 'plain man' he is at least a close relation. He is part of Murdoch's appeal to 'the level of serious common sense and of ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals'. What the 'movement of return' executed by the *Sovereignty* seems to return us to is something 'the ordinary person' will find perfectly familiar.¹⁵

Murdoch's belief in the reality of good draws upon what we might call everyday moral phenomenology yet she is concerned that this is not enough, that we must rise above our default moral condition, above the moral norm and move closer to perfection. Moral competence is variable. This cuts across her populist appeal to what is commonly accessible, 'if morality is essentially connected with change and progress, we cannot be as democratic about it as some philosophers would like to think'.¹⁶ The tension here may give cause for concern. Commitment to continuity with moral tradition is coupled with a hostility towards moral quietism. She shares a

¹² *GG*, 72. Kerr (1997) classifies Murdoch as an intuitionist but relies rather too much upon the importance of Platonic *anamnesis* in the *Meno* as an influence upon Murdoch. (Intuitive certainty comes from the depths of our being.) This focus upon the *Meno* would set up a connection to an analogy with geometry exploited by some intuitionists but it is textually unsupported. He also overstates the proximity of her position to Moore, a problematic point given her refusal to ground her realism in strange moral facts or properties. (See above, Chapter 2.) For the differences between Murdoch and Moore (whose intuitionism is, admittedly, not the only kind) see Antonaccio (2000), 116-123.

¹³ Prichard (1912).

¹⁴ Ross (1930), 20-21.

¹⁵ *IP*, 1,37,39.

¹⁶ *IP*, 28. This embraces the 'non-liberal' and 'undemocratic' aspect of Weil's Plato that Murdoch acknowledges in *KV*, 159 but suggests that the fault may lie with our political categories and not with Weil.

rejection of commonplace moral condition with anti-bourgeois romantics such as Nietzsche and Sartre. Like the concept of *Bildung* associated with the Romantic Movement, Murdoch's perfectionist concept of pilgrimage rejects the pre-existent self. We are just not good enough as we are.

Here I am concerned only to set up this connection of 'similarity to' or 'continuity with' anti-bourgeois romanticism in a weak sense. The criteria for the kind of similarity I have in mind are accordingly weak ones: firstly, a simple rejection of the adequacy of ordinary contentment as an orientation *and* secondly, a hostility towards it *or* lack of commensurate regret for its sacrifice. (This may involve something more akin to indifference than outright hostility, as we shall see below.) Murdoch is shown to meet these conditions in sections III and IV respectively. To begin with, section II will focus upon outlining those *central* features of Murdochian morality which lead her into this continuity with the anti-bourgeois theme. My overall argument is that this continuity does not emerge in spite of her commitment to Good at the expense of choice, but emerges because of it.

II. Moving Towards an Elimination of Choice

Murdoch holds that moral phenomenology is best understood not as an experience of choice but as a matter of seeing things in ways that oblige us to respond accordingly or obediently. Motivation is internal to our picturing of the world. The extreme and opposite image of freedom as terroristic, as the capacity to write new tables of morality in the morning before tearing them up in the evening, is treated by Murdoch as deeply flawed. *Firstly*, it ignores the background against which choices are made, 'I can only choose within the world I can see' where the quality of personal vision will vary and depend upon prior, sustained patterns of effort to discern justly.¹⁷ This is *not* an unequivocal denial of choice, it is the somewhat weaker thesis that choice is significantly *constrained*. 'We do continually have to make choices - but why should we blot out as irrelevant the different background of these choices, whether they are made confidently on the basis of a clear specification of the situation, or tentatively, with no confidence of having sufficiently explored the details?'¹⁸

¹⁷ *IP*, 35.

¹⁸ *VC*, 88.

Carla Bagnoli uses this limited critique to claim that Murdoch adheres to a 'continuity' thesis whereby vision does not eliminate choice but helps to shape it.¹⁹ This is where Murdoch's argument overlaps with non-Murdochian concerns about the attenuated equation of freedom with choice. For example, Onora O'Neill has suggested that the notion of informed consent (based upon Kantian ideas of rational autonomy) has come to be overemphasised in medical ethics. It is often a fiction because it requires belief about what is consented to, and this opens up the problem of referential opacity. Agreement to a procedure under one description is not obviously agreement to the same procedure when described in a different way. We tend to be asked for consent at the wrong time (when we are least able to make an informed choice) and in the wrong way (when we don't really know what we are giving our consent to).²⁰

Secondly, Murdoch's work generates a theory of freedom not as unimpeded choice but as a matter of the right constitution of character, a state of being that is constructed by 'the prior work of attention' and one which admits of degrees.²¹ 'It is what lies behind and in between actions or choices and prompts them that is important, and it is this area which should be purified. By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act.'²² The upshot is that 'moral freedom looks more like a mode of reflection which we may have to achieve, and less like a capacity to vary our choices...I hardly think this a disadvantage'.²³ Having located freedom elsewhere than in immediate choice, Murdoch's *Sovereignty* strengthens her earlier weak claim about vision merely *bounding* choice into the stronger one that vision tends to *determine* it. This goes beyond Bagnoli's continuity thesis and strays into more mystical territory. 'One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see.'²⁴ The locus of freedom is removed from choice and pushed back into the prior effort of attention that, in turn, shapes moral vision. 'In a way, explicit choice seems now less important: less decisive

¹⁹ Bagnoli (2002), 55-6.

²⁰ O'Neil (2002), where Murdoch's influence is acknowledged but more in terms of diagnosis than remedy.

²¹ *IP*, 36.

²² *GG*, 65.

²³ *VC*, 95.

²⁴ *IP*, 36.

(since much of the "decision" lies elsewhere) and less obviously something to be "cultivated". If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at.²⁵

This is direct paraphrase of Simone Weil and it is here that the crossover into the Platonism of the *Sovereignty* occurs, with an assertion of the non-optional, magnetic pull of morality.²⁶ The elimination of choice is *not* a source of regret. 'The ideal situation, on the contrary, is rather to be represented as a kind of "necessity". This is something of which saints speak and which any artist will readily understand.'²⁷ We end up with 'something very much more like "obedience"'.²⁸ This view is mystically-inclined in the sense that it reproduces a central element of the idealised mystical experience. It is not only transitory, ineffable and knowledge-transmitting, but also passive.²⁹ The desired condition of Murdoch, like that of the mystic is construed as 'obedience to reality'.³⁰ (This introduces a slight conceptual problem: if there is no possibility of disobedience then in what sense is obedience possible?) On the way to this 'ideal situation' where necessity prevails, facile choice and the possibility of 'easy unimportant choice' are not ruled out any more than 'difficult and painful choices' are.³¹ We have no advanced guarantees about the adequacy or quality of our moral perception of situations. However, we may not be able to evade confusion or conflicts between low-level options where the pull of one may be as great as that of another. It is only in some ultimate sense that choice is ruled out in favour of obedience.

This tendency towards the elimination of choice is taken by Murdoch to provide grounds for believing that moral phenomenology ultimately presupposes 'a single object for all men', a unitary sovereign standard of Good.³² (Here capitalised to

²⁵ *IP*, 38.

²⁶ Weil's position is that 'We should pay attention to such a point that we no longer have the choice', cited at *KV*, 159. See *Metaphysics*, 330 for an example of the metaphor of the magnetic pull of love objects.

²⁷ *IP*, 39.

²⁸ *IP*, 39.

²⁹ Passivity, being held or at least motionless is a key characteristic of the mystical state as detailed by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

³⁰ *IP*, 41.

³¹ *IP*, 34.

³² *IP*, 37.

avoid confusion.) If morality is about truth and reality, then differently articulated moral visions (the way I think about things and the way people in Spain, The Old Kent Road and Chelsea think about things) should ultimately converge as the result of appropriate moral effort. Like Plato's unfortunate troglodytes, we are all heading towards a single Good. Here, Murdoch's similarity to intuitionism re-emerges, the attempt to provide some more fundamental explanatory bedrock to morality is eschewed. There is instead a reliance upon our experience of goodness as more convincingly real than any conceivable sceptical arguments against it.

However, unlike some forms of intuitionism (exemplified by W.D.Ross, for whom there was a plurality of principles, incompletely ordered) Murdoch sets up a specifically unitary Good. In both the *Sovereignty* and the *Metaphysics* this is supported by appeal to the apparent unity of the virtues, 'if we reflect upon courage and ask...what distinguishes courage from rashness, ferocity, self-assertion, and so on, we are bound, in our explanation, to use the names of other virtues'.³³ This formulation is a bit elliptical but the main point is, I think, clear: Eichmann's thoroughness was *not* a virtue. Only in the presence of other character traits would it have deserved this title. 'A "list of virtues" must establish not only a hierarchy, but also a sense of interpenetration, otherwise it may mislead us...Being dutiful involves being just, justice makes a pact with mercy...Plato's moral forms cohere and interweave, making a *koinonia* or communion...One point of certainty supports another' [M.295]. My concern is not with the plausibility of this claim but only with the way in which this unitariness and obedience to a transcendent Good impact upon the lesser, non-transcendent goods that are involved in ordinary contentment.

III. Contentment

The idea of God has historically tended to be linked to the promise of happiness (even bliss) to be enjoyed if not here then elsewhere. Murdoch's transcendent Good has no such connection as we can see by developing the following three key points will help to separate out Murdochian commitment from any cohesive or systematic orientation towards contentment. *Firstly*, she is not a virtue ethicist.³⁴

³³ GG, 56.

³⁴ I will bracket-off the controversies about the very idea of 'virtue ethics' and use the term as a convenient shorthand for an approach centring upon character formation as the means to human

Murdoch focuses upon character or *moral being* rather than rules, hence criticisms which are levelled at this priority may be levelled at both. She also offers resources for understanding how moral being or virtuous character can be built up by the work of attention, and this too may be used by virtue ethicists to support their position. But, insofar as we think of virtue ethics *eudaimonistically*, as committed to the pursuit of *the good life*, Murdoch is *not* engaged in the same task. Whereas the good life, if lived at all, is lived *here*, the Murdochian Good is *transcendent*. Although she uses the former term in *The Bell* during her transition to Platonism and during (very) occasional lapses afterwards, when she arrives at a fully-blown version of Platonism in the *Sovereignty*, her commitment is to a perfectionist concept that is remote from any conceivable human existence.³⁵

It might be objected that (i) being good and being contented are legitimate but distinct projects. (Following Bernard Williams, it might be claimed that there are legitimate limits to the moral domain). More Platonically, it might be objected that (ii) the Good and contentment are inseparable, pursuit of the one guarantees possession of the other. The first of these objections is ruled out more or less automatically because it is fundamental to Murdoch's view of the self that we are continuously *moral beings*. We are what Cora Diamond calls 'perpetual moralists'.³⁶ *All forms of care, concern and desire are to be treated as moral phenomena*. 'Morality is and ought to be connected with the whole of our being. I want here to restate in summary form what I have said earlier in discussing "consciousness". The moral life is not intermittent or specialised, it is not a peculiar separate area of our existence' [M.495].³⁷ Therefore, contentment has to be built into the pursuit of the Good or else it will be marginalized by this pursuit.

The second objection -that contentment and the Good do not fall apart- poses a rather more complex problem because it does seem to appeal to a genuinely Platonic claim. The Platonic ideal of moral balance is one in which psychological well-being depends upon virtue. We should not of course just be good for what we flourishing.

³⁵ For 'the good life' see *The Bell* Chapters 9 and 16, and for a lapse into this terminology GG, 63 and SG, 86.

³⁶ Cora Diamond, (1996). The partitioning off of the moral domain by Williams, and more particularly by Nagel, is replied to from a Murdochian standpoint by Blum (1986).

³⁷ It is here that Murdoch is very clearly separate from intuitionism insofar as the latter involves the pairing of specialised moral faculty and special mind-independent moral property.

can get out of it (as a kind of profitable penance) and we should sometimes go, against our inclinations, back into the dim Cave to help others. But there are rewards, pleasures and sources of contentment that come unsought to the virtuous man, albeit they are only rewards and pleasures of the best sort. In an uncharacteristically precise and tenuous Pythagorean argument Plato suggests that the most just man will live seven hundred and twenty-nine times (squared) more pleasantly than the least just [*Republic*, 587]. Shorn of the dubious quantification, what becomes of this Platonic nexus between morality and contentment in Murdoch?

I want to suggest that beyond an association between rudimentary levels of virtue and ordinary psychological health, this connection is no longer in place. Obsessive neurotic conditions are (I think rather plausibly) related by Murdoch to an extreme preoccupation with self that ordinary unambitious morality (such as organised religion) can help to relieve.³⁸ However, what this sets up is a relation between *ordinary levels of virtue* and *ordinary psychological well-being*. It does not set up the Platonic relationship between ideal or perfectionist standards of virtue and ideal contentment. It is exceptionally difficult to do the latter because of the sacrifices that may be involved in securing or maintaining anything like ideal standards of virtue. The sacrifice of one's life is particularly difficult to reconcile with contentment. (It may of course, be better for vicious individuals not to live but that is a quite different matter concerning life at the opposite end of the moral scale.) Plato's ultimate move to maintain the connection between virtue and contentment is a denial of death that ensures everything will come out fine at the end of the day. We will still always be around to enjoy rewards. This is not an option that is open to Murdoch.

She also has a stronger theme of being good 'for nothing', of separating out the idea of morality from *any kind* of motivation by rewards and this is more Kantian than Platonic.³⁹ (We are like the shopkeeper of Kant's *Groundwork* who is moral only if he is honest from a sense of duty and not because he thinks that honesty pays.)⁴⁰ *It has to remain intelligible that we might do what is good and thereby come to real*

³⁸ This is what happens to the disturbed character Tamar in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. She uses religion as a temporary crutch and then refocuses her attention back upon herself.

³⁹ *SG*, 90, 96. This pointlessness or disregard for utility, is a crossover between morality and art [*M.8*]. For a meditation on this theme in the novels see *The Time of the Angels*, 101-2, 187.

⁴⁰ One might argue that there is a covert motivation by reward in Kant's *Groundwork* whereby freedom is the reward for being moral. This would qualify the comparison here but not alter the main point.

harm and even when this is the case we should always still be good rather than looking to save our own skins. The sacrifice of a life exemplifies a broader class of responses. Murdoch poses the same problem in the *Sovereignty* by appealing to the idea of a morality that would lead us to do the right thing even in a concentration camp where the price of goodness could be final. Murdoch's imagery for moral pilgrimage is ascetic, it is an imagery of loss and the abandonment of self-concern. We are *not* to think of ourselves in the Platonic manner as trading off lesser forms of satisfaction for greater ones.

This helps to make sense of a second key point concerning Murdoch's attitude towards contentment. Her textual treatment of it has a 'tagged-on' character. I think we can see that an idea of happiness *is* still there and not just in the novels but in the philosophical texts also. Art, hence aesthetic pleasure, is given a rôle and so too is personal love, hence the pleasures and contentments it affords. But such sources of contentment appear to be mere by-products of the moral pilgrim's progress. Contentment is not in any sense their ultimate goal or something to be valued highly in its own right. This is the reason why Susan Wolf's critique of perfectionism makes the point that moral saints set a bad example, their morality 'unduly dominates' other parts of a well-rounded life, other interests and skills are reduced to the level of 'happy accidents' and not something to be pursued in their own right (and because of this a certain downgrading of their value occurs).⁴¹ This is borne out in Murdoch's deployment of the concept of 'happiness' in her philosophical texts. It makes its appearance *only at the end of texts* and almost as an afterthought. Both of the *Acastos* dialogues end in this way: at the close of *Art and Eros* Plato is 'so happy' and Socrates is 'so glad'; at the conclusion of *Above the Gods* the serious-minded Acastos resolves 'Anyway, let's be happy'.⁴² Apart from this, it is in contrast to duty that the pursuit of happiness reappears, in the penultimate substantial chapter of the *Metaphysics* as one of the two 'most evident' facts of human life [M.493].

My point is that the pursuit of contentment is *not* theorised as a goal, it is not valued in its own right. It is, at best, presumed as a background feature of humans that needs to accommodate itself to the important business of moral pilgrimage. 'Human beings love each other, in sex, in friendship, and love and cherish other

⁴¹ Wolf (1982) 423-5. Her point is about downgrading, not just well-roundedness.

⁴² *Acastos*, 66,121.

beings, humans, animals, plants, stones. Imagination and art are in all of this, and the quest for happiness and the promotion of happiness' [M. 497]. In the novels, lives which include contentment and pleasure form the background against which the effort is made to move from being egocentric and sinful (but perhaps 'nice') towards being 'good'. (Although there *are* also intermittent attacks upon happiness as 'a poor guide'.)⁴³ In the philosophical texts, the above sparse comments are just about as much as we get on the subject. For Murdoch, it is simply a great deal more important to be good than to be happy. Her attention is directed accordingly.

To summarize the two points about contentment made so far: firstly, Murdoch must be separated out from eudaimonistic virtue ethics, her Good is a transcendent reality, it is not embedded in a worldly form of life (the good life); secondly, her treatment of contentment has a tagged-on quality. My third, and final, key point about contentment in Murdoch is that there is just no way for it to rival the Good. The sovereign Good will brook no rivals. The high regard in which it is held by Murdoch comes at the price of losing the possibility of real and intractable (as opposed to merely apparent) moral conflict. My concern here is *not* with conflicts of duties (which I will allow that Murdoch *can* accommodate) or between duties and the cultivation of virtue which, again, she can cope with. Murdoch can and does allow for conflicting requirements 'wherein one seems to have to choose between being two different kinds of person. Such legitimate moral conflict is *not* about the goal, but only about what is subordinate to it. This may be a choice between two different paths in life, or it may be some everyday matter demanding an instant response' [M.483].

To set this off in relief, consider the idea of a good life that contains both a multiplicity of goods and the potential for real, intractable, moral conflicts. We may think about this as the Aristotelian position but with the licensing of significantly different kinds of good life.⁴⁴ Because of the multiplicity of goods involved in any particular form of the good life, there will always be the possibility that desires for goods will be at cross-purposes. For example, if I identify political success and friendship as indispensable parts of the good life, I may, *through no fault of my own*,

⁴³ *The Sandcastle*, Chapter 13.

⁴⁴ For the Aristotelian rejection of a single metric for moral value I have in mind Aristotle *EN*, 1096b and *Politics*, 1283.

happen to find myself in situations where one has to be sacrificed for the other. Or, if I am a contented parent and a Jehova's Witness, I will probably (and reasonably) associate both as necessary or indispensable parts of my good life but I might have to sacrifice my religious ideals or my child if the latter has an accident and urgently requires a blood transfusion.

In both cases, some part of my ideal of the good life will have to be sacrificed, but because both conflicting components are deemed necessary to its realisation I will have no automatic way of deciding which to sacrifice. There will be no *higher standard* than the good life (of which both are necessary parts) by which I might weigh and measure these goods against each other. They not only conflict, they are incommensurable. For the Murdochian, there can be no such incommensurability. Everything is to be seen in the light of a single ultimate standard. It is this which makes sense of her claim that choice declines and vanishes as one approaches towards a better vision of the Good. Choice can only conceivably apply at the lower levels, in the context of conflicts between lesser, subordinate or secondary goods. Because of this, contentment is not only separable from the Good, it is *unable* to rival it. The tagged-on quality of Murdoch's treatment of happiness is appropriate (symptomatic even). She could perhaps refer to it more often but she could not place it more centrally without changing her moral theory.

IV. Limited Regret

This downgrading of ordinary contentment only means that Murdoch meets one of the two conditions I initially set out for weak 'continuity with' or 'similarity to' the romantic rejection of bourgeois contentment. Downgrading such ordinary contentment need not imply outright hostility towards it. However, I will not be concerned with anything quite so strong. This does *not* mean that I hold there to be no indications of such hostility in Murdoch. Indeed as a perfectionist she rejects our ordinary, default condition and urges us to become something quite different from what we already are. She is hostile to 'the abysmal sinfulness of humans' [M.483]. I view hostility as *too strong* a requirement *not* because it is a condition that Murdoch palpably fails to meet, but because it is liable to exclude those romantic exemplars and texts with which I wish to draw a parallel. I want to allow for a greater degree of

romantic ambivalence towards everyday moral standards. Schiller's romantic hero Karl Moor loses his chance for contentment, he does not throw it away; Milton's Satan (a more obviously Murdochian exemplar of romanticism) has a complex relation to what he has abandoned, and indeed to man. Although nominally separate from mankind, and bent upon our corruption, he is one of two models of what humans can be like, the other being Christ. We can imitate the one or the other.⁴⁵ For this to appear possible in *Paradise Lost*, his kinship with man and with ordinary human aspirations must periodically emerge, as they do rather well. Satan is quite clear about the reality of his loss when he bids 'Farewell happy fields Where joy for ever dwells'.⁴⁶ His fall mirrors our fallenness, our exile from a land of lost content, and it creates a moral ambiguity about his status: is he the hero or villain of the piece, or a bit of both?

I would like to allow for a similar ambivalence in Murdoch's texts, apparent hostility towards ordinary contentment may mask deeper levels of attraction. The tension outlined in section I is at least consistent with this possibility: there are push and pull factors, on the one hand our apparent sinfulness, on the other, the central role allotted to everyday moral phenomenology. Given this possibility, I shall be concerned to show nothing stronger than Murdoch's *lack of commensurate regret* for sacrifices of ordinary contentment. (Where both 'regret' and 'commensurate' will stand in need of some clarification.) We may consider such sacrifice in the much-discussed context of Agamemnon. He is called upon by his troops and ultimately by the Gods, to sacrifice his daughter for a fair wind. We might straightforwardly criticize him for being more concerned with transcendent ideals than with tangible human goods. (This is the sort of preoccupation with abstractions that Vlastos worries about in the case of Platonic perfectionism.)⁴⁷ A rather different criticism is levelled by Martha Nussbaum. It is not that he makes the wrong choice, it is, rather that he lacks commensurate regret for what must be done.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ 'Imitate' is used here in the Kempis' *imitatio Christi* sense, and not in the sense of 'fake up'.

⁴⁶ *Paradise Lost*, I.249-50.

⁴⁷ Vlastos (1973). For an evaluation of this charge, see below, chapter 8.

⁴⁸ Here I will abide by the terms in which Nussbaum (1986) discusses the *Agamemnon* without endorsing her reading of Aeschylus which focuses upon Agamemnon's utterances. I am rather inclined to the view that Agamemnon's regret goes deeper and is an integral part of his downfall. He is forever looking for substitutes for Iphigenia, and ultimately trying to go back, to return to the home he has destroyed.

Marcus Verhaegh extends Nussbaum's argument to directly cover Murdoch, 'If one is forced to sacrifice goods, one cannot do so callously; this would be to destroy one's responsiveness to such goods, so that one may fail to see the possibility or desirability of attaining them in cases even where they do *not* come into tragic conflict with other goods'.⁴⁹ I will take it that Verhaegh is right that the following is Nussbaum's underlying claim in her principal article on Murdoch: when casting aside the pleasures of fantasy, pleasures intimately bound up with the goods of actual human sexuality, Murdoch shows a lack of adequate regret about this abandonment. The charge is that there is a certain callousness in Murdoch's rejection of ordinary human pleasures. By contrast, Nussbaum's version of Aristotelianism has a plausible machinery of conflicting goods and regret when one good is sacrificed for another. Because she values multiple goods, all of which are necessary for the good life, the sacrifice of one cannot be made in a callous manner by an agent who knows what they are doing. The non-selected or neglected good continues to be recognised as a requirement and hence will continue to be valued, but now through regret. Agamemnon goes wrong because he aligns himself with fate and fails to regret what has seemed necessary. Granted that this is an inappropriately Aristotelian account, why can a Murdochian not produce a modified version? After all, it is far from obvious that the sacrifices of the Murdochian pilgrim will *always* be made with quite such a glaring lack of regret as the one detected by Nussbaum. Murdoch's attitude, like that of Milton's hero, is more ambivalent, more sensitive to loss. Can it not be accepted that in a rival Murdochian model of valuing and regret it will be known in advance that contentment is always liable to be sacrificed in favour of the Good, but the sacrifice will generally produce regret on a commensurate scale?

My point is that this cannot be the case. Displacement plays a central role in Murdochian moral psychology, we have a quantum of desire (*eros*) that we may generally assume to be fixed and which we redirect or reorient this way or that. Our task is to reorient it away from selfish concerns and towards the Good. Concern for self is to be displaced. What the Aristotelian model outlines instead -and what makes it inappropriate for Murdochian reformulation- is not a form of displacement but a sublimation of desire into regret. Because the goods desired remain necessary parts of the good life, they are still valued in a more or less commensurate manner. On the

⁴⁹ Verhaegh (2002).

Aristotelian account, desire is not really being redirected at all it is merely changing its form. On the Murdochian account, real abandonment of old desires must take place in the ascent towards a unitary Good. Real displacement occurs. While there can and will be regret (in a sense spelled out below) there can be no *commensurate* regret for the loss of ordinary contentment. A corollary of this is a need to exercise care to avoid making premature choices and setting out life-plans, rather than *waiting*, because we may be liable to devalue that which is not chosen.⁵⁰

What regret there is for the road not taken, for the ordinary human goods abandoned in the pursuit of the Good, cannot be a sublimated form of the old desire but may rather be understood as its *residue*. This is to say that matters are slightly more complex than Verhaegh allows and that we should draw back closer to Nussbaum's own criticism rather than Verhaegh's strident extension of it. For Nussbaum, Murdoch is, at a *de facto* level, multiply-oriented in spite of her claimed monism. She suspects that a hidden level of pleasure-loving Aristotelianism is present in Murdoch's texts.⁵¹ Without discounting this possibility (which is one way of formulating the ambivalence indicated above), I will note that a more straightforward and clearly Murdochian explanation is available to us. A Murdochian moral pilgrim *must*, as a central part of their pilgrimage, continue to have at least some *residual* regard for contentment *because of the personal inertia and the gradualism of moral change*. Murdoch is not in a position to endorse any more radical standpoint to the effect that opposing principles are, more or less suddenly silenced by the perception of the Good.⁵²

Verhaegh suggests that Murdoch's account 'demands that we leave behind our cozy narcissistic fog for reality, and the more so, the better'.⁵³ But for a Murdochian we cannot suddenly adopt what Plato calls negative attitudes (*kataphronesanta*) towards the previous objects of our desire [*Symposium*, 210b]. In contrast with

⁵⁰ This favouring of waiting over choice, so curiously reminiscent of Weil, is also advanced by Slote (1989), esp. 41-2. It is premised upon something that is also set out in Susan Wolf's critique of perfectionism, that non-selection tends to involve devaluation, Wolf (1982), 423-4.

⁵¹ Nussbaum (1996), 52-3.

⁵² McDowell (1979) considers that perception of Good silencing all rival considerations. A Murdochian might attribute the unnecessarily clear-cut character of McDowell's position to his treatment of moral vision as important but still defined by its relation to action (a point picked up on by Blum (1991), 713-4).

⁵³ Verhaegh, (2002).

complete indifference or hostility towards abandoned goods, Murdoch pictures moral advance negatively, *as real loss* (loss of self and of self-oriented desires) and this suggests that the pilgrim will continue to feel the pull of that which has been abandoned. Murdoch is calling upon us to aspire to an effectively non-human condition, but to do so in line with the constraints of actually being human. Aspiration is towards something more than human but moral practice is bound by all-too-human limitations.

It is this gradualism which gives us some purchase upon one significant contrast between the Murdochian pilgrim and the anti-bourgeois romantic. Murdoch works with the personal inertia that the latter tries to deny.⁵⁴ Metaphors of being 'terroristic' that Murdoch applies to romanticism, will not, because of this, rebound against her.⁵⁵ She favours a more patient approach. Gradualism in the sense of operating within bounds set by our personal inertia, will henceforth be treated as a basic, background condition that a faithful Murdochian must not violate.

Nevertheless, in respect of their shared rejection of the moral quietism of everyday contentment, there is an element of similarity between Murdoch and the romantic viewpoint that she is engaged against. To summarize, choice is eliminated in favour of a unitary transcendent Good which supplants ordinary contentment as a goal; Murdoch's moral psychology of displacement means that there is a lack of commensurate regret for this abandonment, there can be only a residual attachment due to our personal inertia. The resultant similarity to, or continuity with, the romantic anti-bourgeois theme thus emerges out of key Murdochian commitments and not in spite of them. While this may be somewhat surprising, there is at least one consideration which should lead us to expect just this sort of similarity. Murdoch adheres to, and develops the Platonic idea [*Republic*, 586] that there are shadowy imitations of what is good, 'false doubles...invented by human selfishness to make the difficult task of virtue look easier and more attractive'.⁵⁶ The mistaken orientations which she criticises would not, after all, be so tempting if this were not the case. What will not be tolerable is any deeper identity.

⁵⁴ Especially Sartre: 'There is no inertia in consciousness', *EN*, 61.

⁵⁵ See below, Chapter 4 for Murdoch's strictures on terroristic freedom.

⁵⁶ *SG*, 90 and 98 for the power of the self 'to cast shadows'.

Chapter 4: The Charge of Romanticism

I have sought to draw attention to Murdoch's rejection of moral quietism, something that she shares with the anti-bourgeois theme advanced by various sorts of 'romantic' theories. The classification of 'romantic', used so far in a non-rigorous sense, is Murdoch's own. She is one of a number of contemporary philosophers for whom genealogical questions are inescapable and who highlight the continuing legacy of the Romantic Movement.¹ Murdoch's concern is with Romanticism's negative influence, or at least excesses. 'It has for some time now been the fashion to say that we are in a morass, and to attempt to get out of the morass by attacking Romanticism; and I am going to do this too'.² She writes 'against what I have roughly labelled as "romanticism"'.³ (Here I will use uncapitalised 'romanticism' for Murdoch's charge, and capitalised 'Romanticism' to denote the related but not identical historico-cultural phenomenon.)

These two statements, drawn respectively from 1959 and 1967, from the articles on the sublime and from the *Sovereignty*, frame the crucial period during which Murdoch's core philosophical commitments were settled. Concern about rationalism is an element of continuity between her earliest sizeable work, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* and her subsequent and Platonist moral psychology in the *Sovereignty*, *The Fire and the Sun* and the *Acastos* dialogues. The latter two tend to focus upon Plato's lapse into puritanism over the issue of art and its limits, but for Murdoch puritanism is an example of romanticism. It may be objected that the *Metaphysics*, at least, is more diffuse, less structured by any single opposition between Murdochian moral psychology and a general and cohesive rival (romantic or otherwise). To this I would reply that the diffuse character of the *Metaphysics* is an attempt to avoid imposing too much form upon contingency and this is something which (we will discover) emerges out of her criticism of romanticism and puritanical intolerance for the uncodifiable messiness of our world. It is not a radical break from her previous critiques and we cannot make sense of it without them.

¹ Notably Taylor (1989) and Rorty (1989).

² SBR, 261.

³ SG, 82.

Furthermore, the *Metaphysics* may not be structured by any single binary opposition, but it does continue to set out the view that there are false imitations of the Good and of its demythologisation. It warns that too sudden or precipitate a shift in moral demythologisation may undermine our idea of transcendence. This is part of the argument of *Metaphysics*, Chapter 1 and applies to Art as well as morals. The *Metaphysics* picks up where Murdoch's Platonic studies of the 1970s left off. It also continues to deploy 'romanticism' as a recurring charge. What is less clear is that all of her instances of romanticism have any common core or significant family resemblance. In what follows, Section I. will outline the problem of viewing Murdoch's charge of romanticism as both general and cohesive. II. will set out what it is that gives the charge both of these characteristics, namely a correlation with the problems of romantic love. III. will set out the way in which romanticism reproduces the problems of romantic love. And finally, IV. will examine an attempt to accept that romanticism is a problem and that Murdoch lapses into it, while undermining the significance of the charge.

I. The Apparent Incohesion of the Charge

What Murdoch calls romanticism seems to gain generality at the expense of cohesion. Murdoch levels the charge of owing 'a debt to the romantic tradition' against figures whose theories are in important respects dissimilar.⁴ It is levelled at Hegel and at Kierkegaard whose 'exciting suffering freedom' is 'romantic self-indulgence' albeit of a 'distinguished' sort.⁵ A similar charge is levelled at Schopenhauer, he 'may indeed be said to romanticise asceticism, gratifying himself by speaking grandly of it' [M.176]. It is also levelled at Sartre, at St Paul who is 'romantic' but again, only 'Roughly' and she cites Adorno favourably when he charges Stravinsky with being 'a sentimental romantic' [M.129, 371]. (She may have in mind his continuity with the cult of nature.) A trace of 'great Romantic ideas' is similarly detected in both Nietzsche and Simone Weil whose asceticism is taken to be excessive, romanticising suffering and ultimately death.⁶ On a rather different note,

⁴ *NM*, 101.

⁵ *SG*, 80.

⁶ Murdoch once remarked that 'it is hard not to believe that she in some way 'willed her own early death' *KV*.160. There have been suggestions of anorexia but the precise circumstances are difficult to

we are told that 'Puritanism and romanticism are natural partners and we are still living with their partnership';⁷ that 'puritanism has its own strong magic, its own form of degeneration into a sexually charged romanticism';⁸ that 'romanticism tended to transform the idea of death into the idea of suffering';⁹ that 'what I have roughly labelled "romanticism"' is implicated in 'A self-directed enjoyment of nature';¹⁰ and that symbolism 'is what is left of the other-worldliness of Romanticism when the "messy" humanitarian and revolutionary elements have spent their force'.¹¹ It is not always clear what unites St Paul, Hegel, Sartre, and the enjoyment of nature. Nor is it obvious that puritanism and symbolism, the Kantian sublime, and the evasion of death are thematically linked in any important way. The charge of romanticism is placed centrally in the articles on the sublime, in the synthesis effected in the *Sovereignty* and does keep recurring afterwards, but nowhere is Murdoch systematic in her account of it.

It is tempting to dispel this apparent incohesion by appeal to Murdoch's own (perhaps flawed or over-simplistic) view of the essence of Romanticism, influenced as it is by the post-war rehabilitation of the movement. (The focus upon Romantic freedom as a precursor of liberal democratic ideals by Northrop Frye and M.H.Abrams.)¹² However, while this may help us to identify her view of its genealogical position as the standard one, Murdoch's concern is not primarily historical. She does not supply the detailed historical analysis that would allow us to take this tack, even if there are some indications that she is particularly concerned with 'late Romanticism' and 'lesser ones' rather than 'the great romantics'.¹³ Nor can

discern.

⁷ *SG*, 79.

⁸ *M*.129.

⁹ *SG*, 80.

¹⁰ *SG*, 82-3.

¹¹ *AD*, 292.

¹² Frye's Blake biography, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and Abrams' general study, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) consolidated a shift already begun during the war in Jacques Barzun's 1941 essay 'To the Rescue of Romanticism' and his 'Romanticism and the Modern Ego' (1944). Prior to this, Romanticism had been identified as an important precursor of Nazism and the revolt against Enlightenment reason. This favourable shift paved the way for the postmodernist identification of Nazism as the culmination not of romanticism but of the Enlightenment. Murdoch insists upon *both* the disturbing daemonic element of Romanticism and its democratic inspiration.

¹³ *Sartre*, 12 (Murdoch's Introduction to the 1987 reissue); *SG*, 83.

we fall back upon some standard view of romanticism that may be distilled out of analyses of the Romantic Movement. While the latter may help to give some initial purchase upon Murdoch's concerns, we cannot pursue this approach systematically because Romanticism has far too many ambiguities of its own to provide a non-controversial definition. It is notoriously difficult to pin it down to anything shared and positive. Goethe, Schiller and Kant all rejected the label yet who would make sense of Romanticism without their contribution? Appeal to a combination of doctrine and political alignment is also likely to fail because so many important Romantics shifted their views over time without ceasing to be classified as Romantics. (Notably, Wordsworth and Coleridge shifting from radicalism during the French revolution to their respective positions during the Napoleonic wars.)

Negative definition fares no better. We may treat Romanticism as a movement emphasising the passions as opposed to Enlightenment reason, however these two great movements overlapped and shared personnel: we may think of Rousseau, again Kant and, in his own peculiar way, De Sade. (Her own classification of Sartre as a romantic rationalist also casts doubt upon the relevance of any such fixed distinction.) We may, finally, appeal to Romanticism's apparently modernist opposition to Neoclassicism, however, Romantics also appealed to antiquity, albeit they were more likely to appeal to Republican Rome and its echoes in Ovid rather than the subdued Rome of Augustus and the compliance of Virgil. This generates a distinction of sorts but one that is far narrower than the contrast between innovative modernist and entrenched anti-modernist. Disagreements in this area provide too many ways for Murdochians to insulate themselves from criticism. The option would always remain open of their redefining Romanticism in such a way that Murdochian themes (e.g. the imagination) are downplayed and non-Murdochian themes (e.g. the cult of nature) emphasized.

II. One Charge Among Many?

(a) The Generality of the Charge

We are thrown back upon working with Murdoch's charge as it occurs in her own texts, in all its initial vagueness. A first step towards dispelling this vagueness is to accept the generality of the charge and not to narrow it down in the interests of

greater cohesion. This generality is occluded by treating it as merely one charge among many, an approach exemplified by Maria Antonaccio's *Picturing the Human*. Antonaccio reconstructs Murdoch's realism around her passing (and early) contrast between Liberal and Natural Law conceptions of the self.¹⁴ Murdoch articulates a *mediating* position between various alternatives in current moral enquiry, especially between options influenced by Kant and Hegel.¹⁵ This framework *is* a useful way to integrate Murdoch into the contemporary liberal-communitarian debate and does highlight the important point that while Murdoch is critical of the notion of choice she is not abandoning human freedom *per se*. Nor is she prepared to collapse the individual into traditionalist, communitarian structures. (She does not share the strong communitarianism of moral traditionalists such as Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre.)

On the negative side, Murdoch's own texts are not directly concerned with contemporary liberal-communitarian debates. In and of itself this is not a fundamental problem. Exposition is often (perhaps always) appropriation. However, the attenuation of Murdoch's passing contrast between Liberal and Natural Law can detract from the generality of the charge of romanticism by encouraging us to localize it to one or other side of this binary opposition. Antonaccio prefers to deposit it on the Natural Law side, a position that can be given some textual support. Murdoch does charge Hegel with romanticism.¹⁶ What is awkward about this tidy solution is that it sets romanticism and liberalism against each other and this cannot be quite right. Murdoch's own way of formulating matters is instead to claim that 'liberal political thinking' and romanticism have become promiscuously entangled and that 'it is desirable to purge the Liberal theory of many of its Romantic elements'.¹⁷ After some initial hesitations about Sartre's relation to the romantic tradition in 1950 (because he finds nature 'absurd' and not enthralling) she quickly came to the view that the cult of nature is not decisive and that what lies at the heart of Sartrean liberal-inspired account of freedom is still, ultimately, a variant of romanticism.

¹⁴ This passing contrast is made in *ME*, an essay that Antonaccio particularly focuses upon. The distinction between 'convention' and 'neurosis' is a different way of putting the same point, but its use is restricted to the earlier essays on the sublime.

¹⁵ Antonaccio (2000), 23.

¹⁶ Antonaccio (2000) 8, 28, 202, n.46. For Hegel's romanticism see *SBR*, 264.

¹⁷ *M.487*; *SBR*, 262.

Sartre, as her 1953 book informs us, is a 'Romantic Rationalist'.¹⁸ My point is that romanticism spans the Liberal/Natural Law divide.

This is not, I think, a minor quibble. It impinges upon how we understand the target of Murdoch's criticisms, particularly as they occur in the *Sovereignty* (which in turn is the key to unravelling the *Metaphysics*). She does not represent herself in an Aristotelian manner, as someone attacking rival errors and steering a middle-course through them. I think it is fair to say that she tries to pull different sorts of problems together into a single unified and mistaken position, a position sometimes, rather plausibly, regarded as a straw man.¹⁹ The dominant binary opposition that she does set up in the *Sovereignty* is between different options for replacing the concept of God. On the one hand there is the favoured ideal of Good, and on the other there is 'what I have roughly labelled romanticism' and specifically the ideal of Kantian man. 'Kant abolished God and made man God in His stead. We are still living in the age of the Kantian man, or Kantian man-god.'²⁰

This daemonic, free and unconstrained individual whose freedom extends to the choice of his own morality, is directly related to the Romantic hero. 'Kant's man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer.'²¹ The image of the free individual is taken to be a good political image but 'as Hume once wisely observed, good political philosophy is not necessarily good moral philosophy'.²² The point is that a laudable political commitment to a defence of the free individual has misled us into acceptance of a flawed ontology of the self. When we picture others as free in a negative sense, acting this way, willing that, but against no inner background that necessarily constrains their outward actions, it undermines our ability to encounter them realistically. 'When Kant wanted to find something clean and pure outside of the mess of the selfish empirical psyche he followed a sound instinct but, in my view, looked in the wrong

¹⁸ Murdoch's 1950 position is that existentialism owes 'a debt to the romantic tradition' but also has 'highly unromantic characteristics', *NM*, 101. 'The existentialist tends to find nature absurd', and this is part of the reason why she initially thinks of the existentialist novel as 'unpoetic and unromantic', *EH*, 112, 115. An exemplar of the absurdist encounter with nature would be Roquentin's contemplation of the roots of a tree in *La Nausée*.

¹⁹ See above, Chapter 2.

²⁰ *SG*, 82, 78.

²¹ *SG*, 78

²² *SG*, 79.

place. His inquiry led him back again into the self, now pictured as angelic, and inside this angel-self his followers have tended to remain.²³ Freedom as autonomy has led towards a daemonic picture of the individual as irresponsible.²⁴

As a genealogical claim about contemporary philosophy, Murdoch's account is problematic. We might just about make sense of it in the case of existentialism by playing upon its fondness for Nietzsche, but even here there is a danger of stretching the point. To go further and suggest that Hare, Hampshire and Ryle have adopted a daemonic conception of the self is probably going to be difficult to establish. But Murdoch is suggesting no such thing. 'It may be that no one individual completely adheres to this position, but I think that it will sound familiar and may pass as a summary of what has quite lately been maintained and not authoritatively or as a whole displaced.'²⁵ Her claim is that the romantic *ideal* of Kantian man is an end-point towards which various contemporary positions have, sometimes unwittingly, and in different ways, been drawn.²⁶ Existentialism is specifically charged with inspiring 'by a sort of romantic provocation rather than by its truth; and its pointers are often pointing in the wrong direction'.²⁷

What is at work here is a directional metaphor, there is a focus upon the direction of development. Murdoch's charge against Hare, Hampshire and Ryle is that they follow or reinforce a flawed trajectory towards a shared end-point. In so doing they abandon or at least neglect the truthful pilgrim's path which aims at something quite different.²⁸ Non-controversially, we can say that the *Sovereignty* posits an ideal end-point the pursuit of which is modelled upon love in the sense that Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are modelled upon love. All three are about the redirection of our desire. 'Loving is an orientation, a direction of energy, not just a state of mind' [M.503]. But Murdoch does not model moral progress upon just any model of love.

²³ *SG*, 81.

²⁴ Parallels may be drawn here with Goethe's much-quoted praise of action in *Faust*, especially Bk 1, Scene 3.

²⁵ *VC*, 77.

²⁶ An 'end-point' formulation of this sort is used at *SG*, 98.

²⁷ *GG*, 46.

²⁸ Schaubert (2001), 480, suggests that Murdoch does not realize how unfair her picture is but defends it for identifying 'certain tendencies in modern moral philosophy'.

If we get our model of love wrong, we are liable to be drawn towards the wrong end-point.

(b) The Model of Romantic Love

There is no difficulty in identifying Murdoch's paradigm of the wrong sort of love. It is romantic love. When we look and see just what is wrong with romantic love from the standpoint of Murdochian moral psychology we will then be in a position to recognize that romanticism reproduces these same problems. Romantic love is all about the sudden, dramatic and often hopeless experience of the lover being projected out onto a love-object and thereby occluding its reality. Whatever our preferred formulation, the love object is overestimated or misconstrued into whatever the lover desires. The romantic lover is prone, like Don Quixote, to see washerwomen in whatever way makes them worthy of a knight's true love. Stendhal calls this crystallization, the image of the other becomes encrusted with wonderful jewel-like features. Freud is more prosaic and writes about overestimation.²⁹ Either might count as an instance of occluded vision. Terminology apart, romantic love allows disillusionment to be evaded in various ways, by the love being unrequited, impossible, or, better still, by death.

In the Romantic Movement's depiction of this sort of love, in *Liebestod*, love seems to be *preserved* forever in its pristine condition, uncorrupted. The death of the romantic lover, such as Goethe's Young Werther, is their highest accomplishment, the final stamp on the sincerity of their extreme emotions. Schiller, who had an ambivalent attitude towards these ideas, beautifully summed up this sentiment in *The Robbers*, 'sweet, sweet, as heaven it is, to be lulled into the sleep of death by a lover's song'.³⁰ What is missed by the romantic drama of *Liebestod* is the obvious sense in which death destroys love as it destroys everything else. In the end we lose everything. Moreover, the beloved becomes incidental, at best a secondary character who may obligingly get caught up in the lover's stormy passions. Nominally directed towards another, it is a drama played out within the self. One may be inclined to

²⁹ For Freud, see Santas, (1998), 120-22; 172-6.

³⁰ *The Robbers*, (New York: Penguin, 1979), Act 2, Scene 2. Murdoch thinks that Shakespeare is sometime guilty of this, when he treats death-scenes as love scenes [M.117], but it is alien to the Greeks. This is an exclusion that will be difficult to reconcile with the *Antigone*.

forget the name of Young Werther's beloved, but this will not interfere unduly with the storyline. Romantic love fails to do justice to the real contingency of the beloved.

Although influenced by the historical experience of the Romantic Movement, and texts such as Goethe's *Werther* (charged at the time with making suicide fashionable all over Europe) critical accounts of this sudden, self-dramatising and impetuous love have a relation to Plato's account of the lower sorts of love in the *Symposium*. We might, for example, draw out its comparable theme of impetuous, childish, suddenness. Alcibiades wants to seduce the knowledge out of Socrates. He would have wisdom inserted into himself in a manner that is more direct than Socrates approves of or believes to be possible.³¹ Murdoch picks up on this Platonic connection to the critique of romantic love. Like Plato she favours the model of a slow patient love that has to be worked at. For Murdoch, this is the love that involves true discernment of the character of the other, i.e. the kind of love that Romeo and Juliet would have needed to continue loving if they had not been conveniently killed off but allowed to stay together until he had become fat and she had lost her teeth. This association with the account of love in the *Symposium* also brings out the danger of love. Socrates describes it as a mischievous daemon caught between the gods and man, a strange and sudden empowerment that may be turned to good or to evil and which needs to be therapeutically cultivated, qualitatively improved, steadily redirected towards appropriate objects.³²

For a characteristic example of Murdoch's strong reservations about romantic love I will cite *Nuns and Soldiers*. Any other Murdoch novel would have served, but this one is particularly convenient because it pivots on the relationship of an unlikely couple rather than turning on the influence of particular events. The bereaved Gertrude and the bohemian artist Tim Reade escape suddenly from their respective conditions, Tim from poverty, Gertrude from bereavement. They fall romantically for one another. 'How handsome she is,' thinks Tim, 'an Arthurian girl, a heroic girl out of a romantic picture'.³³ This is an abrupt and shared break-out from dark and depressing places and into a good clean world. Subsequently, and just as quickly, Gertrude finds out a minor deception which Tim allows her to exaggerate through his

³¹ *Symposium* 217-219.

³² *Symposium* 202d-e.

³³ *Nuns and Soldiers*, 180.

own sense of guilt. The couple, already radically mismatched in point of age and informed by onlookers that it won't last, are separated. The magic spell of an apparently-necessary bond is broken. When they get back together, it is on stronger and different terms, a mutual recognition that love like art is something to be worked at and not just a liberating dance in a blue-flower meadow on a beautiful day, nor a dance of life that escapes from the pain of bereavement. I will take it that *Nuns and Soldiers* epitomises the characteristic Murdochian attitude towards romantic love: it *is* an opportunity to progress, but one that can be realised only by going beyond romantic love into something more truthful and stronger. In more Platonic terms, one tries to ascend the ladder of love but the romantic lover remains stuck on the lower rungs in a state of delusion.

Like Plato, Murdoch is trying to articulate a theory of moral progress on this basis of a model of the experience of love. (We are *pulled magnetically towards* what is Good when we recognize it as Good.) She draws upon not just any model of love but one of a slow patient love that is not evaded by convenient, glorious, youthful death, and does not dramatize the sincerity and passion of the lover. The very concept of attention, which Murdoch places centrally within this account of progress, is about patience, effort, even 'waiting', not suddenness.³⁴ Having said this, we are now in a position to advance the claim that any general theoretical correlate of romantic love will tend to misdirect the moral pilgrim. My contention is that, for Murdoch, this is just what happens in the case of romanticism. It is the general theoretical correlate of romantic love in the sense that both are concerned with (1) a failure to do justice to the contingency/particularity of persons; (2) apparent attention to what is other functions as a guise for a return to egocentric preoccupation; and (3) both are implicated in a failure to do justice to the finality of death.

³⁴ Rush Rhees suggests that 'patientia' is a plausible construal of 'attention' as it occurs in Weil [Rhees (2000), 147-8]. The contrast between attention and will (to which Rhees is again sensitive) is drawn from Weil. 'We have to try and cure our faults by attention and not by will' [Weil (1963), 105]]. This contrast is Murdoch's general position with the brief exception of *IP*, 39 and *DPR*, 201. This temporary breakdown of the contrast in the early-to-mid 1960s allows her to write of 'willed attention' in an effort to break from Weilian connotations of passivity. Murdoch's reticence about the terminology of Will is subsequently restored in *Metaphysics* 300, 330 where the introduction of imagination counters any suggestions that attention is passivity. Attention thus carries overtones that are remarkably close to *dynamic stasis* in Milton, the suffering active obedience of Christ, or even of Satan when he is most insightful, transfixed, 'still in gaze' at the wonder of creation, *Paradise Lost*, IV, II. 356.

III. The Problems of Romanticism

These three problems pull Murdoch's romanticism charge together. I will consider each in turn, drawing upon their relation to both the Romantic Movement and the direction of attention (the preoccupation of Murdoch's moral psychology). My concern here will remain with the cohesion of the different elements of the charge and the way in which they combine to reproduce the same problems as romantic love.

(a) Puritanism, Suddenness and Contingency

In the case of romantic love, we fail to do justice to the reality of the other, seeing them as whatever we desire. We overestimate them and their ability to complete us. In *Nuns and Soldiers*, Tim is suddenly lifted out of the bohemian mess of his poverty, Gertrude is rescued from an intolerable bereavement. They see each other in ways that offer a sudden escape, one that subsequently turns out not to be available. It is a kind of fantasy. 'A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate that other place so that it be no longer separate; or it can prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself' [M.17]. More generally, 'Love is the perception of individuals, Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real'.³⁵ Murdoch generalises the same problem of the occlusion of the other that is encountered in romantic love by suggesting that there is a systematic downgrading of inwardness in romantically-influenced philosophical writings that focus upon action and public criteria. There is an occlusion of real persons, but this time not just a specific other. This occlusion is a general problem of moral psychology. Romanticism generates just what a Murdochian moral psychology seems geared to avoid.

Upon reflection, it does however seem rather odd to call the neglect of inwardness in favour of action 'romantic'. After all, the Romantic Movement was closely associated with the concept of the imagination, and with the inward turn away from a disillusioning world. We may think here of pre-Enlightenment pietism in Germany; post-Revolution reaction in France and across elsewhere in Europe. Emphasis upon the inward turn is part of the post-war liberal re-evaluation of

³⁵ *Sub.G*, 215.

Romanticism that Murdoch draws upon. (It is present in both Frye and Abrams and culminates in Harold Bloom's argument that British Romanticism internalizes Quest-Romance.)³⁶ There is a case to be made for her continuity with this aspect of Romanticism.³⁷ Murdoch is drawing our attention not to early but late Romanticism with its emphasis upon 'symbolism' and the inadequacy of prose. ('The sickness of the language' that is used to justify 'the Romantic attack on words'.)³⁸ Symbolism embodies what Murdoch views as a puritanical attitude towards contingency, an intolerance for the messiness of real persons, 'The pure, clean, self-contained "symbol", the exemplar incidentally of what Kant, ancestor of both Liberalism and Romanticism, required art to be, is the analogue of the lonely self-contained individual. It is what is left of the other-worldliness of Romanticism when the "messy" humanitarian and revolutionary elements have spent their force.'³⁹

One does not need to agree with this diagnosis to make some sense of it. Murdoch is concerned with a shift which owes something to Fichte's theory of knowledge: the Ego is ineffable, it cannot be described directly but only in symbols, what is other must be taken up not in its own right, but as a symbolic repository in order to understand the self.⁴⁰ I am not suggesting that she directly traces this view to Fichte, but only that it is this shift that concerns her. It is at the core of her criticism of Sartre. She suggests that in spite of all his supposed concern for contingency, Sartre's novels show a disregard for the particularity and the contingency of individuals. They reduce characters to symbolic stereotypes. Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* trilogy examines 'three main types of consciousness, that of the ineffective intellectual (Mathieu), the pervert (Daniel), and the Communist (Brunet) - and introduces a host of minor characters who are also analysed and "placed"'.⁴¹ This symbolist reduction of character is a romantic attempt to rationalize human

³⁶ Like the second of Murdoch's sublime articles and the first of her *Sovereignty* articles, Harold Bloom's 'The Internalization of Quest-Romance' was originally published in *The Yale Review* (in 1969).

³⁷ Her contrast between imagination and fantasy in the *Metaphysics* is at least reminiscent of the Coleridge distinction between imagination and fancy in *Biographia Literaria*, Vol 1, Ch.V.

³⁸ *SRB*, 285.

³⁹ *AD*, 292.

⁴⁰ Berlin (1999), 99.

⁴¹ *Sartre*, 52.

experience. 'Their reflexions, instead of deepening our sense of their concreteness and complexity, strip them to the base structure of the particular problem which they embody.'⁴²

Murdoch is repeating a long-standing criticism of the Romantic favouring of symbolic over real character, a criticism with some substance.⁴³ Even the earliest of Romantic heroes, such as Schiller's brutal robber Karl Moor are not real characters, they are embodiments of a great deal that we fear and are drawn towards, symbols of human freedom who encounter other symbols of authority, submission, indecision and so on. By going down this road, and by emptying out his conception of consciousness into a nothing, Murdoch suggests that Sartre situates himself in the same camp as the Hegelian system in which everything that is real and actual turns out to be rational. Contingency is squeezed out. 'Sartre at several points makes appeal to Kierkegaard against Hegel. The individual person demands recognition as this person, and not as part of something suprapersonal. Yet Sartre's own picture of the individual strikes one as curiously depersonalised and mechanical. It is as if the Hegelian Absolute had become a person and were striving for self-awareness in what it suspected to be complete solitude.'⁴⁴ *Intolerance for the messiness of the contingent person is viewed by Murdoch as characteristically romantic.* Her own tolerance initially for the messiness of metaphors and, in the *Metaphysics*, for a carefully-deployed fragmented writing style, turns out to be a stylistic virtue that is inscribed within her critique of romanticism.

What she is rejecting is to be understood as a kind of puritanical intolerance for the contingent. She endorses T.S.Eliot's assimilation of puritanism and romanticism. (With the rider that, as a symbolist, Eliot is guilty of both.)⁴⁵ Puritanism characteristically involves *intolerance* for half-measures and the desire to leap *suddenly* into a realm where everything is clear cut (indeed crystalline) and free from confusion.⁴⁶ Symbols have this character, real people do not. We first encounter

⁴² Sartre, 59.

⁴³ In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche attacks Euripides' use of characters to embody an abstract contrast between rationality and irrationality.

⁴⁴ HMD, 149.

⁴⁵ TSAM, 166, 170.

⁴⁶ In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* we first encounter the new Prometheus out in the ice plains. (She is criticising a certain aspect of the isolated, Romantic hero.) The imagery of icy crystalline purity is

Murdoch roundly criticising puritanism in *Under the Net* where it is the suspicion of language that is at issue and where there is a sudden, explosive, symbolic blowing up of barriers between the inside and the outside. (Between what is publicly observable and what is hidden.)⁴⁷ Her position, even as early as 1954 is that even if words are tainted and inadequate, we must still use them in patience and hope rather than reduce ourselves to a puritanical silence. Subsequently, in the novels we become familiar with puritanical characters such as Axel in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* who associates truth with a pedantic truth-telling in which clarity, sincerity and intolerance are all at work.⁴⁸ Axel's attitude is strongly reminiscent of Kant's rejection of lying and characteristic of his desire 'to find something clean and pure outside of the mess of the selfish empirical psyche'.⁴⁹ Axel, Kant and literary symbolism exemplify a general human failing that even Plato falls into. (The central argument of *The Fire and the Sun* is that Plato's 'puritanism' about art, his 'puritanical aesthetic' is at odds with the general tenor of his thinking.)⁵⁰ *A more realistic understanding of persons requires a non-puritanical tolerance for the contingent.*

(b) Nature and the Redirection of Attention to Self

Consider now a second problem. Romantic love involves a surreptitious redirection of attention back to the self. We need to go beyond it to truly see the other. Yet, while failing to do justice to the particularity or contingency of the other, there is a semblance of being preoccupied with them. This strongly parallels what Murdoch sees as taking place in the romantic cult of nature. What she tackles again skips over the early stages of the Romantic Movement (Rousseau and *Émile*) and relates more directly to the 19th century appropriation of Kant's version of the sublime. In his third critique reason is architectonic, it demands the unification of experience. In the

not at all alien to Romanticism, consider Nietzsche's closing appeal in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the verses delivered 'From the Heights' where our task is to unlearn man and god and curse and prayer, and become a ghost, flitting across the glaciers.

⁴⁷ In both *Under the Net* and *Sartre* there is an association between radical (revolutionary) socialism and the immediate availability of clarity and precision, exemplified by Lefty Todd. Marxism, especially Trotskyist 'permanent revolution', are forms of 'romanticism' in *Sartre*, 72, 77, 78.

⁴⁸ The saintly Tallis is Axel's opposite. He is almost pathologically tolerant of mess. 'Hilda thought, wherever Tallis is there's always a muddle! Then she thought, this is unjust. Wherever there is a muddle, there Tallis is.' *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Chapter 14, p.169.

⁴⁹ *SG*, 81; similarly, *M*.171-2.

⁵⁰ *FS*, 12-13 for the classification of Plato as a puritan.

experience of the sublime our imagination cannot meet this demand. It is an encounter with that which goes beyond the bounds of our imagination: namely storms, the Alps, the starry-skies above, and generally that whose immensity of force or whose mathematical scale defies reduction to neat little pictures. It defies reduction to the beautiful. Instead, we experience first a sense of awe and then the thrilling sensation of pitting our free selves against impossible odds. In *The Fire and the Sun* we are told that 'the Romantic movement shockingly cheated him in taking over the sublime'.⁵¹ Previously, in the *Sovereignty*, the appropriation was viewed as legitimate, 'Kant's notion of the sublime, though extremely interesting, possibly even more interesting than Kant realised, is a kind of romanticism'.⁵²

This apparent inconsistency over the Romantic appropriation of the sublime is, rather, a varying emphasis upon its successive stages. Insofar as it concerns the initial humbling experience of human limits, it is unromantic, indeed anti-romantic. Insofar as it proceeds to redirect attention to the self it is thoroughly romantic and in tune with the idea of the hero pitting his freedom against all odds. The more impossible the odds the better, the more sublime his unconstrained, passionate defiance, like that of Milton's rebellious Satan, or Don Giovanni (a non-Murdochian example) who refuses to repent even as he is dragged down to Hell. This places the hero outwith the ordinary, run-of-the-mill bourgeois existence. (In the Don's situation I might gladly be inclined to repent my sins and several others if it offered a way out. He is made of sterner stuff.) Murdoch's criticism has a thematic unity provided by the way in which an apparently-outward focus of attention conceals a return to preoccupation with self. The outer storm is a symbol of inner turmoil and passion, it leads back into self-concern, and in this respect the sublime is unlike the comparable and more favoured experience that Murdoch believes King Lear to have on the heath. Lear's passion is spent in an exercise that humbles and leads to a new concern for others. (For the poor wretch who needs shelter in a hovel and who must enter first; and for his daughter whose words he refused to understand and whose lips he now studies for any sign of movement.) Murdoch's point could perhaps have been formulated in terms of a revised account of the sublime. (Emmanuel Levinas provides something of this sort and her early sublime articles together with her gothic novels

⁵¹ *FS*, 20.

⁵² *SG*, p.71.

suggest that she considered a similar path.)⁵³ But this is conjectural, a Murdochian road not taken, perhaps because of her strengthening conviction that it is romanticism *per se* that is at the root of the problem. Murdoch writes of the lessons of tragedy. She does not directly appropriate the sublime.⁵⁴

What is never at issue here is the question of nature as such but only of the 'self-directed enjoyment of nature'.⁵⁵ Her realism is 'personal' but she is not hostile to the contemplation of the impersonal and the (non-human) natural, 'fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person'.⁵⁶ Attention to the beauty and to the unframed immensity of nature is an exercise which can release us from this preoccupation with self. '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 the kestrel.'⁵⁷ We may legitimately 'give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care' and we may 'take a self-forgetting pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds stones and trees'.⁵⁸ Murdoch's concern that attention to nature is problematic has a narrower target. 'It may seem odd to start the argument against what I have roughly labelled as "romanticism" by using the case of attention to nature. In fact I do not think that any of the great romantics really believed that we receive but what we give and in our life alone does nature live, although the lesser ones tended to follow Kant's lead and use nature as an occasion for exalted self-feeling.'⁵⁹ Similarly, in *An*

⁵³ Alford (2002), the dominant focus of which is Levinas.

⁵⁴ This is not to reject a more indirect influence. Murdoch's first-person male narrators in the novels do seem to go astray in a very 18th century, Burkean manner, seeing women in terms of the beautiful and frameable rather than the elusive and sublime.

⁵⁵ *SG*, 83. In both *FS* and the *Metaphysics*, Plato's concern for nature in the *Phaedrus* is viewed as quite different from the Romantic treatment, *M.* 16-17.

⁵⁶ *GG*, 68.

⁵⁷ *SG*, 82. See also her contrast between Plato and the Romantics on nature in *FS*, 43.

⁵⁸ *SG*, 82. In the *Metaphysics*, the list of appropriate objects is 'other beings, humans, animals, plants, stones', *M.*497. Children in her novels, such as *The Nice and the Good*, are also pleasantly fascinated with stones.

⁵⁹ *SG*.83. Murdoch's allusion here is to Coleridge's *Dejection: an Ode*, where he challenges Wordsworth's idea that there is a consistent harmony between what the individual consciousness contributes to perception and the way the world actually is. For Coleridge it is only an elite of 'the pure' who can sustain this imaginative transaction. Murdoch also connects Eliot's romanticism with

Unofficial Rose, contrived varieties of rose are second rate; and in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* there is unease about zealous motorway building programmes. (They are juxtaposed to terroristic destruction.) The *Metaphysics* does not concern itself closely with nature but it does contain the occasional glimmer of environmental concern, 'It is a new blessing in our modern age that we are learning to love the planet and care for its natural ways. This too teaches something' [M.109].

It is not concern for nature as such that Murdoch attacks, but a particular approach towards it where the encounter with what is other is transformed into a mode of attention to self. This is the crux of why her two articles on the sublime do not lead to an appropriation of the concept, it is seen as too implicated in a romantic redirection of attention back towards the self. This position is anticipated in *The Bell*. (The outgrowth of an earlier Murdoch typescript focusing upon a guild socialist group with all of the craft opposition to mechanisation that this implies.) Within the lay religious community at Imber, there are two factions over the question of the introduction of a mechanical cultivator. James Tayper Pace is a puritan and is against it. He has an apparent concern for nature. Michael Meades is in favour. 'Michael regarded this view as an absurd piece of romanticism and said so...He was answered that they had all of them withdrawn from the world to live a life which was, by ordinary standards, not a "natural" one in any case. They had to determine their own conception of the "natural".'⁶⁰ Real nature is lost sight of by James who, as a country gentleman is particularly keen on shooting birds and squirrels. Michael who is disturbed by this, is revealed as someone with more respect not just for nature but for what is other and not mingled with the self.⁶¹

It is important that we isolate-off the problem in terms of the redirection of attention to self rather than leaving it formulated in terms of a redirection *away-from* nature. Murdoch is not ultimately concerned with nature *per se* but she *is* concerned with the problem of the surreptitious redirection of attention to self. In doing this we will follow her own lead. In 1950 she had reservations about classifying Sartre as a romantic because of his abhorrence of nature. By the time of *Sartre, Romantic*

his elitist views on 'the mob', *TSAM*, 167.

⁶⁰ *The Bell*, Chapter 6, p.91.

⁶¹ This is slightly different from her focus in the sublime articles in the sense that Tayper Pace's position has a close parallel with Rousseau's *Emile* where a natural upbringing has to be *constructed*.

Rationalist this reservation had disappeared. The key theme of Murdoch's rejection of the romanticization of nature is that *an apparent concern for what is other functions as a guise for egocentric preoccupation*. I shall take it that *this*, together with an avoidance of a puritanical account of contingency, is a second problem that she must avoid on pain of a charge of strong inconsistency.

(c) The Cult of Suffering and Occlusion of Death

The third and final core problem with romantic love is the way in which it is associated with the occlusion of death. (Itself an aspect of contingency, we are not necessary beings.) Romantic love seems to be *for ever and ever*, an eternal fire. Perhaps I have no difficulty in owning up that I will die, but it seems almost a sacrilege to suggest that my love will die with me, that it too has limits and cannot be preserved in all its purity. In *Nuns and Soldiers* Gertrude seems, in a rather different way to have escaped from the task of facing up to the reality of death when she falls in love with Tim. Either way, Murdoch associates our inability to realistically encounter others with this inability to face up to the ultimate limits of the self. This is part of the reason why Murdoch was, for a long time, so fascinated by the sublime. At least in its initial stage, it concerns the realisation of personal limits. If we think of others not along the lines of the beautiful (as self-contained symbols) but along the lines of the sublime (as unimaginably complex) we may profit by a sense of humility, of not being able to 'place' them and override their contingency. Subsequently she was able to point to a less equivocal way of coming to grips with human limitedness by attending to the reality of death. This seems much harder to represent in a self-magnifying way, but romanticism still accomplishes the task. *Liebestod*, death as it is so often related to the ideal of romantic love, is a veiled form of self-assertion. Don Giovanni is never so great, so true to himself, so sincere or authentically the Don, as when he is being dragged down into the flames. In this he outdoes even Faust, who gets off on a technicality. Sincerity in the form of heroic suffering in order to remain true to oneself, can operate as a way to turn death into a form of self-glorification. Romantic suffering eclipses the reality of death.

Murdoch believes that the idealised concealment of *Liebestod* has a bearing on 'our ubiquitous (romantic) sadomasochism' [M.121]. This is an everyday kind of deception, a normal egocentric neurosis. While we may not all see ourselves as

romantic heroes, we do all evade thinking realistically about death. We would rather think of it as a special kind of suffering, hence as non-annihilative. The suffering of the romantically-conceived self, the suffering of the free and angst-ridden self that is glorified in existentialist theory, exemplifies just such a commonplace concealment. Personal alienation and the burden of freedom are represented as the worst that we have to face, worse even than death. (Sartre generalises this, Being is more fundamentally terrifying than Nothingness, death is a convenient hiding place bound up with bad faith, a guarantee that we need never be found out.⁶²) For Murdoch, a sadomasochistic occlusion of mortality is taken to be operative not just in everyday life but also in religion, particularly Christianity with its notable penitential structures. (Hence, it does make sense to charge St Paul and religious figures who predate the Romantic Movement, with romanticism.) However dubious we may be about this claim there is nothing unintelligible about it. I will take it that Murdoch must avoid generating *a sadomasochistic cult of suffering that occludes the reality of death*.

If a consistent Murdochian is to avoid double standards they will need to meet these three basic criteria. Firstly, they will need to come to grips with the contingency of persons in a non-puritanical way. Secondly, they will need to avoid an apparent concern for what is other from functioning as a guise for, or route into, egocentric preoccupation. Thirdly, They will need to avoid approaching suffering in a sadomasochistic manner because this will occlude the reality of death. Each of these will be examined in turn in Part Three of this thesis.

IV. Organic Emergence out of Romanticism?

Before moving on to the detailed ways in which Murdoch falls foul of her own criteria, we may anticipate an important objection which threatens to undermine the relevance of the charge. Murdoch's criticism of romantic love is in line with her Platonism. In the *Symposium*, Plato charts out an erotic progression in which we move from an understanding of love which is less adequate to one which is more adequate. We ascend the ladder of love. In line with this view, we might treat

⁶² Sartre (1995), 34-38. Sartre rejects Heidegger's position that death-evasion is inextricably bound up with inauthentic being, a position to which Murdoch's approach bears some similarities, see below, Chapter 10.

romantic love as a lower but unavoidable form of eroticism through which we must pass on the way to something better. The best kind of love only emerges out of lower kinds, including, to begin with, carnality. This is not only good Platonism but it is one of the key themes that separates it off from Christianity (where love is modelled upon divine love and hence does not emerge out of base desires). Perhaps we might want to say that Murdoch too is emerging organically out of romanticism. This is a standard response to the charge of romanticism that has emerged in Murdochian literary analysis. It might be carried over to defend the philosophical texts against a similar charge.

Consider this response, briefly, in its original context. It is a familiar charge that double standards are at work in Murdoch's aesthetic and her novels. She is, for example, highly critical of the romantic device of symbolism but she also relies upon it. The forging of a new bell, from which she draws the title of one of her most successful novels, is a symbol of personal change. (It is a symbol particularly associated with Schiller.⁶³) Her Freudian-themed novels of the 1960s are unavoidably symbolic and she also attacks romantic fantasy while writing novels in the Gothic genre. Shakespeare is praised for his rejection of Arthurian magic, but her late novels are full of Arthurian imagery and (compared to those of the 1970s) assume an increasingly fantastic character [M.141]. In one late novel, a Buddhist postpones death in order to re-enact an updated version of *The Green Knight*; in a second, *The Message to the Planet*, a man is brought back from the brink of death by a daemonic, and perhaps mad, prophet; in a third, *Nuns and Soldiers*, Jesus puts in a personal appearance to a lapsed nun.

Symbolism can admittedly be used in lots of different ways, and the Gothic genre can be deployed 'ironically' to show its flaws. Such uses of irony might themselves be situated within the tradition of the Romantic Movement, but here we need to remind ourselves that it is Murdoch's own concept of romanticism with which we are concerned.⁶⁴ By deploying such themes and techniques Murdoch has nevertheless opened herself up to the charge of reproducing what she criticises. This charge emerged in the early 1960s in an article by Gabriel Pearson and has recurred

⁶³ Schiller's *Song of the Bell* is the key source, recast by Goethe in an *Epilogue*.

⁶⁴ Irony features strongly in Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Richard Rorty.

ever since.⁶⁵ Outright denial being deemed implausible, her literary defenders have deployed variants of the following reply. 'In attending to Romanticism, she finds that she must reject much of what it has created, but she has absorbed much of its vision as well and uses it to look to the future.'⁶⁶ There is a rhetorical flourish here, but also the important claim that Murdoch is looking to the future, emerging *out of* the romantic background. (To write about this as organic emergence would be to draw upon a piece of Romantic terminology that is, for once, appropriately gradualist.)

This image of emergence (organic or otherwise) is set out in the early editions of Peter Conradi's *The Saint and the Artist* and fits nicely with the Platonic imagery of a steady ascent of *eros*. We emerge out of less truthful levels of being rather than bypassing them. However, the revised edition of Conradi shifts towards a firmer location of Murdoch within the milieu of romanticism. 'I would argue that Murdoch is, in the best and most positive sense of the word, a romantic writer.'⁶⁷ What stands between these earlier and later editions is not just a re-evaluation of an unchanging object. (A shift of the *seeing as* type.) The earlier edition was written against the backdrop of the comparatively realistic novels of the 1970s while the later edition was able to draw upon the novels of Murdoch's last decade. The earlier work is re-evaluated in the light of later work which shows no signs of an emergence, organic or otherwise, out of her romantic background. Instead, there is a marked return to fantasy, or alternatively, a drift into a more 'magical' kind of realism with fantastic qualities.⁶⁸

It is not my primary concern to argue about the charge as it relates to the novels. It *is* my concern to see whether a parallel charge holds in the case of the philosophical texts. The reason why it is unlikely to work in the latter context is the comparative constancy of Murdoch's position. The moral psychology of the *Sovereignty* is elaborated further rather than substantially revised in the *Metaphysics*. The most notable shift is one of style rather than substance. The faults of romanticism, if they appear at the core of Murdoch's moral psychology, are liable to

⁶⁵ Pearson (1962).

⁶⁶ Majdiak, (1972), 375.

⁶⁷ Conradi, (2001a), 59.

⁶⁸ An appreciation that the realism has, all along, had a magical quality can be seen in Murdoch's autobiographical allusions to Prospero in *Jackson's Dilemma*, her final novel. Prospero is a magician who, like Shakespeare at the end of his life, finally has to abjure his rough magic.

be a continuing presence. There is no indication of a radical change of thematic direction at all. This leaves only the option of viewing Murdoch's text as an emergence out of romanticism when taken in conjunction with other non-Murdochian philosophical texts that are more comprehensively mired in it. (Sartre's for example.) I would suggest that this would only make sense if Murdoch's lapses into what she criticises were occasional or in some sense marginal. (Hence this romanticism would be pushed into more peripheral areas.) However, the identified key problems of romanticism are ones which I am going to suggest, are far from peripheral. They impact upon the core of Murdoch's moral psychology: our understanding of the contingency of persons; our avoidance of redirecting attention to self; and our basic attitude towards suffering and death. If these core themes of Murdochian moral psychology are executed in terms which reproduce the problems of romanticism, then there is a fundamental flaw at the heart of Murdochian morality: she is reproducing what she criticises, albeit in a different form.

Part Three

Introduction: Philosophical Depth and Surface Tensions

Having set out criteria that Murdoch must meet in order to avoid strong inconsistency, Part III will examine the ways in which she fails to do so. It may be as well, here, to anticipate that Part III may be misread as an attempt to chase Murdoch down the intricate maze of her own categories until she reaches a dead-end, a position from which there is no escape. However, it forms no part of my intention to promote a marginalization of Iris Murdoch's philosophical work, but merely to argue that its significance cannot be cashed out in its own terms. In its own terms, Murdochian morality does not work.

Consider two different sorts of critique that might be made of Murdoch. On the one hand we might proceed by fell-swoop, questioning the legitimacy of her way of doing philosophy by claiming that it is too imprecise, too incohesive, not formal enough. We might suggest that it is more like the thought process that we all go through rather than the finished product. Such a critique might not rule out the possibility that various insights may be gleaned from a study of Murdoch's texts, but it might also allow that similar insights could be gained by settling down for an afternoon with a book of aphorisms. That is to say, the value would be situated in the fine detail, and not at all in Murdoch's way of proceeding.

I have opted for a quite different sort of critique, and not just because of sympathy with at least some of Murdoch's strictures against our predilection for tidiness as a puritanism that can be taken too far, to the point where it threatens to obscure the messiness of experience. My approach has, more generally, and from the first, presupposed that Murdoch has philosophical depth as well as localised insight. Something has gone badly wrong if the text, to this point, appears to be merely an exercise in debunking. At the risk of trying to leap out of my text in order to describe what an appropriate interpretation of it should look like, I will make some general comments about why I hold that Murdoch's approach towards the practice of

philosophy is instructive. I am tempted here to write that she may be *appropriated* although such terminology is at odds with her hostility to all that smacks of acquisition.

Beyond the detail, what I hold to be of especial value in Murdoch's texts is their commitment to a certain kind of philosophical depth. Here, the concept of depth is itself (deeply) ambiguous, imprecise and (in characteristically Murdochian terms) requires some development. Two tasks follow from this claim. Firstly, some characterisation of Murdoch's depth must be given and, secondly, some story must be told about why I am still proceeding with a critique.

To carry out the first task I will begin by pointing out a certain minimal condition for depth. "'Deep' here invokes the sense in which any serious pursuit and expression of truth moves towards fundamental questions' [M.321]. But one can deal with such fundamental questions in a shallow manner, even the consideration of death can be approached as a sort of logical puzzle. (Why are we afraid of it when we won't be there when it happens?)¹ Depth is not simply a function of the subject matter, it depends also upon the manner in which it is treated.² To give some content to this, and to the claim that Murdoch has depth of a particular sort, I will draw upon a charge that Raimond Gaita levels, fairly or unfairly, at a great deal of moral philosophy. (My point is that the charge will make no impact upon Murdoch.) Here, we may need to make allowances for a populist, anti-intellectual framing of the charge in order to accept that there is a point of substance being made. Gaita follows Rush Rhees in claiming that we have neglected the personal in morality, our sense of personal struggle, engagement, effort to find answers to the problems that we encounter.³ Part of the way in which he delineates the bounds of the moral is by appeal to the idea that there are some problems that we cannot pass over to others in the way that we might hand in a car at a garage to get it fixed over the course of a weekend. Moral problems are problems of a sort that might lead us to seek advice or guidance, but ultimately we have to work our own way through them.

¹ This is often taken to be the crux of the Epicurean position on this matter, although it rather misses his point that a certain future-directed emotional response can corrupt the quality of our life.

² See the treatment of the concept of depth in Kekes (1995), Chapter 8.

³ Rhees (1969), 94-6.

By contrast, some of the standard philosophical literature poses moral problems as intellectual puzzles that anyone in particular might solve *for us* and then deliver a conclusive verdict on sometime on Monday morning. Gaita gives the nice example of Kierkegaard parodying Hegel by saying that word had passed around, even in Copenhagen, that 'the System will be finished next Sunday'.⁴ Such an approach is deeply at odds with Murdoch's treatment of morality as a matter of continuous effort to discern, and not a discrete set of puzzles that punctuate our existence. The demands of morality are ongoing and they are not to be shirked or in any other way diminished. Murdoch does not rely on examples of the sort where we are invited to imagine ourselves in the middle of a laboratory at one end of which is a fully loaded and timed baby-squasher, and, at the other end, a timed embryo-flusher.⁵ In Murdoch's texts we are not invited to consider how to respond to the circumstances that we do face by considering circumstances that we are never in.⁶ Her most extreme recurring scenario is that of life in a concentration camp, an unusual circumstance but one which remains within the bounds of lived experience, albeit of a sort that we can perhaps never do justice to, yet are morally required to take into account. People have faced such problems.

This does not mean to say that Murdoch's moral depth is *constituted by* her refusal to engage in a certain kind of puzzling, nor does it mean that such puzzles are always without a point. (Some unreal scenarios are of recurring fascination in a way that may lead us to suggest that they run deep within a particular culture, such as tales from the Gospels or the Faust legend.) Given the way that she works with Platonic myths and metaphors, Murdoch could not plausibly commit to any wholesale rejection of unreal scenarios. If myths and metaphors can redirect our attention to something that might otherwise be missed, there is no reason in principle why unreal puzzles cannot, on occasion, do the same. (They are just not a good, default, all-purpose, tool.) From a Murdochian point of view, the usefulness of such puzzles

⁴ Gaita (1991), 293.

⁵ I have in mind the sorts of Lockean problems that arise during arguments about abortion e.g. protecting a house against people-seeds; being umbilically connected to a talented musician; making life and death decisions about a cat that has been injected with a personhood-inducing drug. We are asked to think of many things but rarely *what is it like to be pregnant?* i.e. *what constitutes a truthful attitude in this situation?*

⁶ There is a rare exception to this is *M.427* concerning how we would respond to an assertion by aliens that they had no value on their planet.

will depend, in part, upon whether they help us to articulate our moral intuitions or whether they obscure these intuitions, by encouraging us to think of that which we are prone to value in terms of that which we are unlikely to value. Murdoch's avoidance of such puzzles is *symptomatic* of her picturing of morality as something that we are deeply i.e. continuously, effortfully engaged with and engaged with in a personal manner. This is one of the reasons why Murdoch is so insistent upon stressing the continuity between morality and religion. She is concerned to preserve the depth of commitment that is associated with the latter. In the *Metaphysics* she concedes at several points that her position may be, in some sense, religious, 'in the continuity which (as I see it) exists between morality and religion, we might feel that we had crossed the border. The absolute demand remains.' [M.506]. Some forms of religious adherence might be taken as exemplars of a depth of (personal) moral commitment that Murdoch is seeking to retain in the face of a diminution of the significance of morality by an emphasis upon lifestyle and upon more or less arbitrary choice.⁷ '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. In this respect metaphysical and religious pictures resemble each other.' [M.507].

Although Murdoch does seem to cross over at times into a religious metaphysic, the idea of moral depth itself need be given no special theological significance. We may see Murdoch's commitment to the depth of morality just as much in her attitude towards metaphysical questions that might tempt us into system building of a sort that is remote from human experience. A case in point is her attitude towards philosophical discussions of time: 'philosophers might be wise to deal with time-problems as aspects of particular contexts. An example would be: can we properly condemn a man of seventy for crimes he committed when he was twenty? We can attempt to clarify this. A general philosophical theory of time is likely to be unbearably abstract' [M.305]. I take it that she is alluding to the same point which she used to open the *Sovereignty*: 'McTaggart says that time is unreal, Moore replies that he has just had his breakfast'.⁸ The point is that lots of interesting things can no

⁷ Antonaccio (2004) develops the theme that Murdoch's commitment to the 'depth' of morality is recognisably theological.

⁸ *IP*, 1.

doubt be said about time but unless we consider it in the moral context of lived experience, of how we experience others as valuable (i.e. how we are emotionally or erotically engaged), we will go astray. We cannot construct a value-free metaphysics of time and then use it to answer questions about morality. (As if metaphysics were a guide to morals in the sense of being *prior to* morals.) Instead, Murdoch insists that morality is deep, it goes all the way down. Having said this, it is characteristic of Murdoch's way of writing that she makes this observation about time and then passes on. She does not develop the insight in any detail and this may leave her account of emotions (such as guilt) which temporalise our experience, dangerously one-sided.

What the above amounts to is less than a demonstration that Murdoch meets some formal specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for moral depth but perhaps the very idea of such a specification is out of place. It is a more restricted case for saying that Murdoch has concerns that are *in some respects* similar to Gaita's and that she does not fall foul of Gaita's charge.⁹ This leaves me with the second task of providing an account of why I think that a critique is nevertheless still in order. The crux of my case depends upon the absence in Murdoch of a quite different sort of depth from the kind explored above, that is to say, depth in analytic detail. Here, I draw upon the sense in which we might say that someone explores a question 'in depth' or looks several moves deep, and considers all of the appropriate possibilities. Quite apart from the absence of contrived, puzzle-type exemplars, what one does not find in Murdoch is a standard call and response of argument-reply-rejoinder (possibly followed by consideration of objections number 1 to 5).

Instead, she often prioritises those aspects of rational persuasion which are not about formal argumentative structures, such as *getting someone to notice* what has been overlooked or *helping the reader to see things* in a different way.¹⁰ (The distinction here is not hard and fast. Drawing attention to the shortcomings of a particular background picture will affect the assumptions from which we proceed.)¹¹ Her philosophical style, and the content of her critique of puritanical tidiness, are

⁹ Gaita happens to hold that Murdoch falls foul of a quite different problem, not a lack of depth but ethical other-worldliness. Gaita (1991), Chapter 12, esp. 216 ff.

¹⁰ This is a feature of Murdoch's way of proceeding that Cora Diamond treats as related to her rejection of rejection of a rigid fact/value distinction, Diamond (1991), 373-80.

¹¹ John McDowell is a prominent example of someone who works with a grasp of philosophical problems as problems of moral vision that lead us to plug the wrong sorts of assumptions into our arguments.

geared to help us appreciate the price that has to be paid for an excessive insistence upon analytic precision. Our world may be *diced up* until we no longer recognise it or see how the descriptions fit into a way of living. However, acceptance of this need not blind us to the price that is also to be paid for imprecision and ambiguity. In particular, I will suggest that there is a danger in assuming that tensions between Murdoch's multiple accumulated commitments will necessarily dissolve upon closer examination or at some further stage of development. It is my contention that some of the tensions in Murdoch's philosophical texts are of this *more-apparent-than-real* sort. But others are not. They are more stubbornly resistant.

The tensions which I am interested in, and which sit close to the surface of Murdoch's commitments are the following. Firstly, a tension between her hostility towards puritanism and her commitment to a Platonic conception of humans as fallen, as (in every case) moral *failures* of some sort. This arises, in part, because of Murdoch's moral depth. She views morality as impossibly demanding. The demandingness of morality outstrips our abilities. We are all, at some level or another, defeated by the scale of the task. 'We are ineluctably imperfect...However good a life is, it includes moral failure...When, in ordinary life, we are rescued or changed by a meeting with a very good person, we do not assume that he is sinless. With or without avatars, we are perpetually reminded of our natural selfishness' [M.509]. This is variously described by Murdoch as a synthetic a priori truth and as a 'metaphysical conjecture'. My claim is that, as Murdoch, formulates it, this 'perpetual reminder' of 'moral failure' is generative of an entrapment in guilt about the nature of our being.

Secondly, there is a tension between her Kantian and Platonic influences. Murdoch is concerned that love should draw us towards perfection. How can she then find room for the sort of *unconditional* i.e. property-independent care for the other that we associate instead with the love of flawed persons, where the discernment of perfection is not at all obvious? This is a tension that I believe Murdoch manages to resolve satisfactorily and without abandoning either commitment. I am *not* suggesting that her problem is any sort of direct failure to combine *eros* and *agape* and certainly not that she fails to realise that two significantly different senses of 'love' are present in her texts. She rarely makes the distinction explicit, but there are moments when she does. "'Love" can be used to mean any desire or tendency. In a more solemn sense we speak of love for people.'

[M.342]. My point is precisely that she *does* combine Platonic *erotic* and Kantian *agapaic* elements in her account of love, contextualising love (respect, compassion, care) for the individual person inside a Platonic perfectionist project ('unselfing') *and thereby* she closes off the escape route of reading her in a more straightforwardly Kantian manner. If we could make sense of Murdochian love in Kantian or *agapaic* terms alone, without contextualising the latter inside an account of erotic ascent, we would have an escape route out of at least some of the standard charges that are levelled at Platonic accounts of love (that they involve preoccupation either with an abstract ideal or else with one's own moral rectitude). My point is that Murdoch deals with the Kantian/Platonic tension, but does so in a way which closes off any such escape route.

Thirdly, there is a tension between Murdoch's commitment to radical personal transformation, i.e. to unselfing and her hostility towards our self-punitive tendencies, 'our ubiquitous (romantic) sadomasochism' [M.121]. Here, again, she is concerned with matters that run deeper than anything akin to lifestyle choice. She says something which can help us to understand one of the self-other asymmetries that Derek Parfitt has drawn attention to: that we are indifferent to our own past suffering in a way that we are not indifferent to that of cherished others. (Particularly when the temptation to adopt their present standpoint has been removed by their death.)¹² If Murdoch is right about our ubiquitous sadomasochism, our response to past suffering may well be more of a pro-attitude than one of indifference. We are nostalgic for our past hardships, we are inclined to think that suffering *per se* builds character, gives us depth, that others who have suffered less do not really know what life is like. I will take it that such an overly-zealous attraction to suffering is a real phenomenon, however, I find Murdoch's response less convincing. Our best response may, perhaps, be one which tries to defuse this danger not by promoting a different self/other asymmetry, but by stressing our *ordinariness* and thereby promoting a more forgiving response to self. It is sometimes the *ordinariness* of ourselves that is the hardest thing to see and it is precisely this which is lost sight of in our enthusiasm for self punishment. Murdoch provides a quite different response. She does not ask us to treat the self as we would treat any other. Instead, we are asked to lose sight of ourselves in the demands and needs of others. For Murdoch, it is not *persons* but

¹² Parfitt (1984), 181-4.

others that matter. My charge is that this reproduces the problem of complicity in a dangerously self-punitive drama. Murdoch is, to some degree, sensitive to this charge and does try to separate out the *right* kind of suffering from the *wrong* sort. However, this is done by appeal to an untenable account of what is involved in a truthful orientation towards death.

Finally, while hostile towards elitism, Murdoch's Platonism introduces a hierarchical theme. (Elitism and hierarchy are not at all the same for her.) She wants the best of both approaches, the democratic commitment reinforced by an emphasis upon humility and personal mortality *and* the recognition of a hierarchy of moral competence. There may be good sense here, hierarchy is inimical to universalizability (which surely has its limits). We might hold that Murdoch's approach compares favourably with the mimetic formula according to which *the right thing to do is whatever the (ideally) virtuous agent would do in the same circumstances*.¹³ Quite apart from there being circumstances which the virtuous person will never be in (what do you do having just mugged an old lady solely for financial gain?), the problem with such a formulaic concession to universalizability is that it may leave us liable to undertake commitments that we cannot carry through or sustain. There is such a thing as moral hubris and Murdoch's novels explore it.¹⁴ However, I do want to suggest that her attitude towards humility creates a tension when combined with the view that moral progress involves a progressive improvement of moral vision. Murdochian humility is both far reaching and an accomplishment. I will try to give (admittedly inconclusive) grounds for holding that her advanced and humble moral pilgrim will end up with a form of self-blindness, and that the nexus between moral progress and moral vision is thereby brought under strain. My intention in ending on this tension, rather than any strong inconsistency, is to help the reader to see that I am not attempting to close-off the discourse on Murdoch's texts.

Here, I have identified a number of tensions which sit fairly close to the surface of her texts, close enough to the surface for them to involve her major themes rather than their remote implications. The identification of what I hold to be intractable

¹³ Here, I have in mind Hursthouse (1999) which draws upon what McDowell (1979) calls an 'inside-out' approach of taking the virtuous person as our key to right action rather than the other way around.

¹⁴ The attempt to act above our moral level is one of the key themes of Conradi (2001a). See also below, Chapter 6 for the case of Michael Meade drawn from *The Bell*.

tensions quite so close to the surface might be seen as itself a problem. It could be charged that there is no plausible story which can be told which will allow for *both* an acceptance of Murdoch's depth and for her toleration of such tensions.¹⁵ My response is that part of what is lost sight of here is that Murdoch's depth is *not* depth of analytic detail. She does have standards of precision, but they are about focus and not about multiply-tiered argumentative structures.¹⁶ Part of the story to be told about Murdoch's omission of a detailed response to particular problems is a *just-so* story about the resulting philosophical style. It provides ample scope for omissions of detail and for localised weaknesses (such as her failure to distinguish between egocentricity and mere selfishness). Murdoch specialises in what we might call the big picture rather than the finely-grained argumentative detail. The result is something that she notes in the texts of others, 'a metaphysic or *Weltanschauung* may be felt to omit something which then peripherally and disturbingly haunts it, or else disappears to be rediscovered later' [M.84]. Murdoch's texts omit a great deal of this sort.

These omissions do not, in any comprehensive way, undermine the philosophical significance of her work. They leave scope for others to produce more detailed and tighter arguments in the context of specific debates. An example of this is the way in which a Murdoch-type critique of the thin 'liberal theory of personality' (which collapses freedom into an absence of constraint) forms the acknowledged basis of prominent critiques of prioritising the right over the good within political philosophy. (Particularly by Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel.)¹⁷ The same critique of the idea of persons as empty units of free agency also informs Onora O'Neil's case for modifying our preoccupation with choice within bioethics.¹⁸ In citing these cases, it is also not my intention to suggest that Murdoch's contribution is purely negative, the debunking of a problematic tendency within liberalism. I cite them only because of the work that has been done in these areas.

We might nevertheless feel inclined to think that if Murdoch has such a high level view of matters then surely this is likely to make any high-level or surface problems stand out in greater detail. On this I am quite happy to concede that an

¹⁵ A suggestion made by David Cockburn in response to an earlier version of Part III.

¹⁶ See Chapter 1 above.

¹⁷ Taylor (1989); Sandel (1982).

¹⁸ O'Neil (2002).

appeal to Murdoch's philosophical style is not enough to make sense of what creates a problem here. The *just-so* story is not the whole story. There are a pair of substantive commitments that must also be drawn upon to explain her dismissive attitude towards apparent anomalies. On the one hand, Murdoch models moral progress (including that of her own moral theory) on mystical progression towards an ideal end point of perfection. On the other hand, she has what Peter Conradi, and after him Maria Antonaccio, have called a 'dualistic imagination'.¹⁹ Binary contrasts abound: contrasts between the nice and the good; the sacred and the profane; existentialists and mystics; the fire and the sun. The latter contrast, drawn from the Cave metaphor and concerning true illumination and inferior or fake illumination, structures the significance of such contrasts in general. *There is the real thing and various faked-up versions*. The latter are all too readily accessible, the former is almost impossibly difficult to obtain. The source is mystically beyond discursive limits, *noetic*, standing in need of the partial insights gained through demythologisation rather than formal definition.²⁰ 'Plato says that higher realities appear at lower levels as images or shadows...But the shadow is not the reality and the reality is unimaginably different, its nature cannot be guessed from below. The "mode of projection" cannot be understood from below' [M.124].²¹

What this all-embracing metaphor of fake and real, not only allows but positively encourages once it is combined with an ideal of progress that is modelled on mystical advance, is a certain attitude towards anomalies. They are liable to be treated either as instances of the fake version or else as partial views of the greater truth and hence liable to disappear as progress is made. Suppose that I have a commitment to a process of unselfing of Murdoch's sort. Repeatedly I come across examples of what looks like similar commitment but which turn out, upon closer examination, to be flawed in some way (perhaps they are guilt-inducing, or conceal a level of spiritualized egocentricity, or embrace suffering in a dangerous manner). I do not need to treat these flawed unselfings as having any devastating implications for my own approach. Instead, especially if I am more concerned with exposition and

¹⁹ Conradi (2001a), 92; Antonaccio (2000), 22.

²⁰ S.98; *Metaphysics*, Chapter 1.

²¹ The 'mode of projection' metaphor used here is Wittgensteinian. Where there is a mode of projection it makes sense to talk of picturing, of comparing an image and reality e.g. *PI*.139.

articulation than defence, I may dismiss them as examples of the faked-up version of unselfing. I might even, treat them as confirmation instances of the presence of a dual structure of real moral progress and imitation progress. (A structure that I might feel needs no further elaboration than that I may have given elsewhere.) The second part of the story to be told about why Murdoch fails to respond to the anomalies that her position generates concerns an ultimate level of commitment. At least some of the time, Murdoch *sees* the anomalies but holds to what I am inclined to call a mystical commitment to the idea that somehow all of this *must* fit together and it is only human weakness that makes matters seem otherwise. It is not just that she is dismissive, it is rather that she has something akin to faith operating in the background. Perhaps the term 'mystical commitment' may be less unsettling, but either way I can see no good reason for ignoring the way in which she blurs the boundaries between philosophy and a religious or spiritual commitment both to the reality of good and to her preferred mode of its discernment.

She adheres to a notion of original sin yet in various comments on Augustine, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Norman Malcolm she is clearly aware that this sort of view *can* lead to entrapment in guilt.²² Yet neither in the *Sovereignty* nor in the *Metaphysics* nor anywhere else in the philosophical texts does she deal with this danger in a systematic manner. This is not blindness to an obvious difficulty, it is rather commitment to (faith in) the view that *somehow it must work itself out*. Similarly, she is aware that a focus upon unselfing rather than directly upon others may be subject to a charge of spiritualized egocentricity. Such a charge periodically surfaces in the *Metaphysics* but again it is never taken up in any detail.²³ It makes little sense to think that she does not see the problem, and a great deal more to hold that she sees it as, in principle, solvable but not because she has any specific solution in mind. Finally, she does make an attempt to separate out her sort of suffering from a different, inferior, romantic sort of suffering. In this particular case I am not suggesting either that she fails to see the problem or that she gives no specific response, but rather that her way out that does not work. In each case, Murdoch's attempt to partition faked-up moral pilgrimage from the real thing is done without

²² For example Murdoch sees a form of motivation by guilt at work in Malcolm's Kierkegaardian influenced account of the ontological proof, *M.486-7* and *M.500*.

²³ For example at *M.498* Murdoch notes that a 'cult of personal goodness' may be 'merely selfish pleasure in disguise'.

providing a defensible and detailed account of how, in the good person, the real thing escapes the limitations of its inferior version.

This leads me to the third and final part of the story of why Murdoch fails to deal adequately with the apparent anomalies or surface tensions to which her position gives rise. It concerns the ineffability of the good person and the role of the novels. Murdoch holds that the good person partakes of the ineffability of the Good or is at least descriptively too problematic for any simple account to be given through a mere 'enumeration' of various goods and virtues [M.492]. 'Formal philosophy can come only so far, and after that can only point; Plato's *Seventh Letter* suggests something like this' [M.236]. The upshot is that 'if we consider contemporary candidates for goodness, if we know any, we are likely to find them obscure or else on closer inspection full of frailty. Goodness appears to be both rare and hard to picture.'²⁴ Christ, Socrates and 'certain saints' are alluded to, but unselfish mothers of large families are initially taken as a better guide. When, on closer inspection, they are found to be full of frailty, or at least prone to 'egoistic satisfactions' it is aunts who 'stand to us in the guise of a demonstration (to show it can be done)' [M.429]

Instead of providing a systematic treatment of the faked-up versions of moral progress and what separates them out from the real thing, what happens is that a good deal of the exploration of what goes wrong in faked-up or flawed unselfing is shunted out into the novels where troublesome questions can be illuminated but not ultimately solved. An example of this is Murdoch's treatment of guilt. She sets out her hostility towards it in the philosophical texts but does not give any account of how her own position will avoid generating it. Most of her treatment of guilt ends up in the novels and not in the philosophical texts. But in the novels we do not see the manner in which the good, advanced pilgrim combines truthful vision and culpability with an avoidance of entrapment in guilt. Murdoch's novelistic pilgrims never get very far. There are some pointers, but that is all.

Perhaps symptomatically, her novelistic pilgrims go astray, but it is never quite as a result of their adherence to Murdoch's own position. (The novels cannot, in that sense, be treated generally as ironic self-criticism.) There are pilgrims who think deeply about the same matters that concern Murdoch, but their views represent at best a *pastiche* of her own approach. The upshot is that Murdoch's position in the

²⁴ GG, 51-2.

philosophical texts is not in any sense vindicated by the novels, nor does she think of this as the task of the novel. What is relied upon instead is her ultimate commitment to the view that anomalies are not grounds for abandoning her kind of moral pilgrimage but are, instead, grounds for seeing that the attempt to live the best sort of life is subject to a great deal of temptation and uncertainty. (A rather more defensible claim.)

What I will do in Part III, is what Murdoch does not do in any systematic way. I will provide an exposition of her approach which explores the case for saying that the surface tensions are simply too great, and that her pilgrimage is not a coherent moral project. If I am right and a plausible case can be made for this charge, it still does not at all follow that Murdoch's texts may be dismissed or otherwise marginalised. It may, instead, be held that our engagement with them must be more problematic than any simple articulation and defence of her position. That is to say, Murdoch's philosophical significance, the value of what is deep in her texts and in her approach towards morality, must be sought, but it must be sought elsewhere than in their provision of a consistent overall metaphysical approach towards morals.

Chapter 5: Two Concepts of Contingency

It is my contention that Murdoch's account of contingency reproduces what she calls puritanism. I will establish this in two stages. In the present chapter I will clarify her treatment of the concept. In the next chapter I will show that her view is inseparable from entrapment in a form of ontological guilt and that this is sufficient to justify a Murdochian classification of puritanism.

Previously, I have emphasized the continuity of Murdoch's thought after her transition to Platonism. Here, I will highlight the impact of this initial shift upon her concept of contingency. In her early critique of Sartre, Murdoch develops an account of contingency which centres upon what is particular, idiosyncratic and unique about humans, i.e. those features of human character which are emphasized (and respected) in the liberal tradition. She rejects the primacy of rule-based morality in favour of an emphasis upon discernment of the particular, unique (in a word *contingent*) individual in definite, particular circumstances. Her subsequent shift towards Platonism impacts upon how the contingency of humans is to be understood. It introduces a concept of ontological flaw or fallenness that is a shared feature of being human. This Platonic account does not efface the earlier liberal one, but continues alongside it, giving Murdoch two concepts of contingency in tension with each other. Her continuing commitment to the liberal concept does not, however, ultimately lessen the sense that humans are ontologically flawed. A concept of fallenness remains at the heart of Murdoch's mature view .

I. Contingency as Diversity

To draw out Murdoch's early account of contingency I will consider three questions: *What are the conceptual connections that give 'contingency' its sense? To what is the term applicable? and How should we respond truthfully to the contingency of the world?* To begin with, Murdoch uses the term in two important contrasts. Firstly, she echoes Aristotle and Leibniz by contrasting contingency with necessity. For Aristotle, what is contingent can 'be or not be'.¹ For Leibniz, everything

¹ *De Interpretatione*, 21b makes the modal point that the *possibility* of being and of non-being imply each other.

must possess a 'sufficient reason' why it should be thus and not otherwise; what is contingent lacks any such reason in its own right and so must be traceable back to something other and necessary, i.e. God.² Murdoch makes Jake Donaghue express the same concern in *Under the Net*. 'I hate contingency,' he says. 'I want everything in my life to have a sufficient reason.'³ The absence of necessity can be alarming. Secondly, she contrasts contingency with aesthetic form. Form is the significant structuring that we give to our experience. Narrative form is one example. Murdoch holds that form conveys a sense of necessity and writes of 'a fear of contingency, a yearning to pierce through the messy phenomenal world to some perfect and necessary form and order'.⁴ She detects a 'tendency to conceal death and chance by the invention of forms. Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete'.⁵ A metaphysic runs the risk of covering over contingency by virtue of its structured exposition and systematicity. Hegel exemplifies this danger but is also acutely aware of the virtues of aligning the form of exposition with the content of what is to be said.⁶ From a Murdochian standpoint, any regularly-organized philosophical text can only do limited justice to the contingent. The novel is taken to be a better way to convey some aspects of contingency but it too has (different) limits.⁷ Tragedy is better at dealing with mortality and this also is an aspect of contingency. (We are mortal hence not necessary.) Tragedy in turn is unlike life because it is tightly structured but attempts to use compactness of form to convey contingency. We see the contingency of characters because their death is inevitable. The trick is only partially successful. No text can comprehensively escape from the constraints of form, hence they can never do full justice to all aspects of the contingent.⁸ All art (all text) is a compromise. We do the best we can.

² Leibniz, *Monadology*, § 32.

³ *Under the Net*, 26.

⁴ *SBR*, 273-4.

⁵ *SG*, 85.

⁶ She is concerned with what Hegel identified as the conflict of form and content. For Hegel, such oppositions were not absolute, see, for example the *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*.

⁷ Antonaccio (1996a).

⁸ These limits are explored in *Metaphysics*, chapter 5.

To what is the term applicable? Murdoch agrees with Sartre that we live amidst 'the brute nameless there-ness of material existence', we encounter the 'brute confusion of the contingent world'.⁹ Nor is there some strictly social determining dialectic. History is not a necessary process of inescapable transformations of the sort envisaged by Hegel and Marx.¹⁰ Yet the key Murdochian focus is not on the contingency of nature or society, but upon the contingency of the individual. 'Contingency must be defended for it is the essence of personality.'¹¹ Priority must be given to 'the whole human being, the contingent eccentric fellow whom John Stuart Mill lovingly envisaged but whom he was unable philosophically to protect'.¹² This charge extends into a literary aesthetic. Murdoch's view in *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* is that the characters in Sartre's novels are symbols for his ideas, they are not realistic individuals. Sartre claims to be doing justice to, even championing, contingency but all the while his approach covers it over.

This emphasis upon the contingency of individuals rescues Murdoch from a serious performative contradiction. There are aspects of contingency which she clearly neglects. Brian Nicol points out that 'While Murdoch's rhetoric in her non-fiction unfailingly is about the necessity of preserving a sense of real, contingent, experience away from the totalising impulse of systems, the fact is that her philosophy performs quite the opposite'.¹³ She tries to lump philosophers together as representatives of broader trends that can be captured in genealogies, usually of decline. Thus, post-war analytic philosophy and existentialism are assimilated and so too are Derrida and the structuralism which he criticizes. Murdoch plays fast and loose with textual detail but by virtue of prioritising *the contingency of the individual*, and not that of theories or texts, she defuses the destructive implications of this criticism. Disclosure of human contingency comes at a price, other forms of

⁹ *EPM*, 135-6.

¹⁰ This is the point of the earlier chapters of Sartre's *Nausea*. His central character faces the problem of writing a history of the Marquis de Rollebon without imposing an artificial sense of necessity. During her late attempt to clarify her attitude towards Marxism in the 1980s Murdoch enthuses about Adorno as a champion of contingency undermining Marxism from within. (1987 Introduction to *Sartre and Metaphysics* Chapter 12.)

¹¹ *SBR*, 285.

¹² *SBR*, 284.

¹³ Nicol (2001), 589.

contingency are covered over in the process. One aspect of contingency is seen at the expense of others but this is a price that Murdoch can afford to pay.

What is to count as a truthful response to contingency? Murdoch frames her early attitude in reply to Sartre's novel *La Nausée*. The central character, Roquentin, is an unhappy consciousness in the following, Hegelian, sense: 'a personality confined to its own self and its own petty actions, a personality brooding over itself, as wretched as it is impoverished'.¹⁴ The Hegelian unhappy consciousness is cursed with an ideal of perfection beyond reach and aspired to vaguely in 'a musical thinking'. Hegel's broader metaphor for this condition is one of exile: like the Jews, the unhappy consciousness is exiled from its promised land.¹⁵ For Hegel, Christian self-doubt and conscience follow historically and conceptually from this exile, this awareness of flaw. Consider now the Sartrean instantiation in *La Nausée*. As in Hegel, music symbolizes perfectionist longing. Sartre's Roquentin listens to a record, scratched and imperfect, but playing a song which has (seemingly) escaped from temporality. So too has the Negress who sings it and the Jew who wrote it. 'For me they are a little like dead people, a little like heroes of novels; they have cleansed themselves of the sin of existing. Not completely, of course - but as much as any man can.'¹⁶ Murdoch's reading states that 'These two are saved, washed of the sin of existing. Why should he not be saved too?'¹⁷

Roquentin encounters the contingent diversity of the world as fallenness and not as glorious particularity and difference. The latter is an alternative suggested by Gabriel Marcel, and explored by Murdoch later in her novels.¹⁸ For Murdoch, Roquentin is a characteristic existentialist, 'this rather bitter view of reality as "fallen" is a persistent feature of existentialist thinking'.¹⁹ Roquentin is a characteristic doubter who 'sees the world of everyday reality as a fallen and bedraggled place - fallen out of

¹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, sections 217, 225.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Phil.Hist.*, 322-3.

¹⁶ Sartre, *Nausea*, 251.

¹⁷ *Sartre*, 41.

¹⁸ *Sartre*, 49; *Metaphysics*, 266. In Chapter 15, 180 of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* the vacillating character Morgan encounters an overgrown disused railway-cutting first with 'nausea' and then as infinitely beautiful. Her neurotic young companion, Peter encounters it as 'just stuff' commenting that 'nothing in the world...is intact and precious and absolutely beautiful. Everything is contaminated and muddled and nasty and slimed over and cracked.'

¹⁹ *EPM*, 135-6.

the realm of being into the realm of existence.²⁰ Her early reservations about this approach are continuous with Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre which places humans more at home in the world.²¹ For Sartre, the world is alien and threatening, we are continually tempted to lapse into bad-faith by refusing to encounter it as it really is. This tendency towards concealment is something that Murdoch can agree with. Although she leaves open the possibility of encountering contingency as diversity, she does not dissent from Sartre's view that we tend to conceal it behind consoling narratives (aesthetic form). What she disagrees with is his diagnosis of *why* this is the case. For Sartre, covering over contingency is primarily a matter of insincerity. For Murdoch it is a matter of egocentricity and poor vision, occlusion rather than a purposive chosen concealment.²²

In Murdoch's early novelistic response to Sartre, *Under the Net*, our quality of vision is *not* improved by the guilt-ridden attitude towards being that characterizes the unhappy consciousness. Guilt is treated as suspect, a concealing emotion. The hero, Jake, is most guilt ridden when he is most deluded. He avoids his friend Hugo because he has purloined and published ideas from their conversations. They are finally reunited when Hugo is taken to the hospital where Jake works as a porter. 'A conflict of emotions filled me. My immediate feeling was one of guilt...I had the curious sense that it was because of some neglect of mine that Hugo had been struck down.'²³ Jake would rather feel guilty than uninvolved. His guilt is bound up with his egocentricity. (A recurring theme in Murdoch's subsequent novels.)²⁴ The existentialist self is dramatized by this move, by this overestimation of responsibility, as if one were to say *everything depends upon me*. This does not help to disclose the contingency of persons, it helps to conceal it.

Under the Net treats (responds to) reality not as fallen but as rich in particularity and uniqueness. In its beginning, Jake visits Dave Gellman, a Jewish character 'with a contingent address' (there being 'some parts of London which are necessary and others which are contingent'). It is then that he tells the reader 'I hate

²⁰ Sartre, 43, 42.

²¹ Notably in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

²² This contrast between Murdoch and Sartre owes a debt to Diogenes Allen (1974), 186-7.

²³ *Under the Net*, 236.

²⁴ See Chapter 6 below for more on guilt.

contingency. I want everything in my life to have a sufficient reason'. He does have his moments of insight too, his moments of truthful response to contingency. He is repelled by the one character who *does* provide a theory of everything (a socialist called Lefty Todd). Instead, Jake is drawn towards Hugo who is to be found in a part of South London 'where contingency reaches the point of nausea'. Hugo tells him that language is inadequate to the task of capturing contingency and that we must restrict its use. (He has pronounced Wittgensteinian tendencies, a penchant for passing things over in silence.) Jake, as a journeyman writer recognizes that we must make the most of what we've got and not withdraw from either the word or the world. (There is a curious connection between Hugo and Lefty, neither is quite right.) In the novel's closing scene, Jake responds to fantasy-generating music not with the otherworldly reverie of Roquentin, instead he says 'Turn it off!'. As in Sartre's *La Nausée*, the novel ends hopefully but not with the possibility of escaping contingency, rather with the possibility of embracing it. Jake shuns the other-worldly and embraces diversity in the shape of newborn and differently-coloured kittens. They are one of 'the wonders of the world'.²⁵ The concluding imagery is homely, kitsch even.

II. Contingency as Fallenness

So far I have considered Murdoch's approach as it is set up in response to Sartre, and briefly alluded to its similarity to contemporary French critiques, notably Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the otherworldly motif of fallenness in Sartre: his self is not at home in the world, it is a disembodied capacity for choice and ignores the real 'sedimentation' of character.²⁶ These critical themes are shared. With Merleau-Ponty, Murdoch also emphasises the enigmatic nature of objects and the importance of perception, rather than unencumbered choice. Consider now what happens when Murdoch shifts over to Platonism and introduces her own account of fallenness. A significant similarity to Sartre rather than his critics, now appears. A clarification of this requires us to separate out the two key concepts (of contingency and fallenness) that are involved. The term 'contingency' derives from the Aristotelian tradition and concerns whatever lacks necessity. This may pertain to propositions (there are

²⁵ *Under the Net*, 26, 156, 275, 286.

²⁶ The metaphor of sedimentation in Merleau-Ponty (1962), 441, may be contrasted with Sartre's insistence in *Being and Nothingness* that consciousness is without inertia.

contingent truths as well as necessary ones) or to things in the world (things that might not have been in the past or might cease to be in the future). The term 'fallenness', by contrast, is embedded in the Platonic tradition but it can be seen as *a strengthening of contingency*. It suggests, firstly, a contrast between what is contingent and something else that is extant, necessary and better. Secondly, it suggests a specific relation of striving or desire between the contingent being and necessary existence. This is often set out via the metaphor of exile, notably, in Plato's *Phaedrus* where humans have tumbled to earth and need to regrow their wings in order to ascend and get a glimpse of home.²⁷ Insofar as we are fallen, we are always going home. I will take it that this *contrast with* and *relation to* necessity give us the minimal criteria for fallenness. Hegel's unhappy consciousness and Sartre's Roquentin would both qualify as types of fallen man.

Whereas Murdoch connects contingency with what is ideosyncratic and particular, fallenness refers to a shared human predicament. When she endorses the latter, it creates a tension between universal predicament and particularity of character. It also occasions a reversal of her earlier critique of Sartre. In 1952 fallenness is treated as 'sometimes Platonic' a 'bitter view' of objective reality and 'a persistent feature of existentialism'.²⁸ By the time of the *Sovereignty*, she has moved to the opposite charge that Sartre, and existentialism as a whole, *deny* 'what might be called a doctrine of original sin'.²⁹ (Where the latter is the the same as fallenness.) What separates these two (incompatible) readings of existentialism, is Murdoch's adoption of Platonism and her encounter with T.S.Eliot. She drops her own charge and adopts Eliot's claim that Romanticism in general is caught up in a 'denial' of original sin.³⁰ Endorsing this position comes at the expense of ignoring certain features of Sartre and indeed Camus, Heidegger and Kierkegaard, all of whom endorse some version of original sin or fallenness. In point of textual detail, the earlier reading of Sartre is the more defensible of the two. Sartrean man's impossible

²⁷ Consider the commentary on the *Phaedrus* and 'Our fallen nature' provided by the Platonist Max in *The Unicorn*, 100.

²⁸ *EPM*, 136.

²⁹ *GG*, 50.

³⁰ *TSAM*, 162. This claim has a pedigree in literary criticism that stretches beyond Eliot. T.E.Hulme viewed the denial of original sin as the central feature of romanticism, albeit basing this upon a skewed view of Rousseau as a champion of human perfectability.

aspiration is strongly reminiscent of an impossible pursuit of perfection. (A desire for equality or unity with God as Murdoch had previously emphasized.)³¹ The closest she comes to a justification for her sacrifice of textual detail is in her suggestion that existentialist 'gloom' is 'superficial' (and not bitter after all).³² The shift does, however, make some sense once we realize that the earlier position was also under strain, combining reticence about fallenness with a sympathetic attitude towards a Christianity that is bound up with it.

Her encounter with T.S.Eliot during her transition to Platonism is noteworthy because it is concerned with fallenness as an integral part of a religious conception of being. She initially conflates Platonic and Christian traditions and even as late as the *Metaphysics* she writes of 'Our incomplete and 'fallen' state, and our bitter awareness of it...independently portrayed in Plato and the biblical tradition.' [M.228]. In both her Eliot article of 1958 and in the *Sovereignty*, fallenness and 'original sin' are used interchangeably.³³ This adds a further layer to the concept. By assimilating Christian 'original sin' to fallenness, Murdoch seems to be embracing overtones of culpability that are less obvious in Platonism. (Am I to blame if I have been chained since birth at the back of a cave?)

These overtones of *culpability for being* create a problem of intelligibility. Does it make sense to think of ourselves as being at fault, not for anything that we have done but for what we are. Perhaps, as Bernard Williams suggests, our reluctance here is merely cultural, an attachment to the liberal ideal that individuals should be free from legal sanctions unless they place themselves in jeopardy by their actions.³⁴ This is not the only norm that has been historically operative, nor is it the sole standard that is still at work, even in liberal societies.³⁵ It also leans upon a preoccupation with agency that Murdoch does not share. Nevertheless, a nagging doubt about intelligibility may remain. Even if, as one of her characters has it, 'The language of sin may be more appropriate than that of science and as likely to "cure"'

³¹ This theme of impossible aspiration, of desiring to be an absolute subject and absolute object provides the title for Chapter V of *Sartre*.

³² *GG*, 49.

³³ *TSAM*, 162 and 163. Freud is credited with a doctrine of 'original sin' that is a 'realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man' at *GG*, 50.

³⁴ Williams (1993), 65.

³⁵ We might think here about blood-feud in feudal society.

we still have not actually tumbled from the skies, nor are we in possession of soul-things with indelible black marks upon them.³⁶ Yet we cannot, I think, deny that these concepts are being used descriptively by Murdoch, and not just as normative pointers or devices. Value-commitment and factual description do not come apart in her writings. But when she uses these seemingly antiquated terms just what is being described?

A tempting suggestion, made by David Gordon and taken up by Maria Antonaccio, is that the terminology of original sin in Murdoch 'has been misunderstood'. It describes nothing more sinister than the flawed character of our moral vision.³⁷ What is amiss here is that both Gordon and Antonaccio focus only upon the Christian concept of 'original sin' and neglect its Platonic counterpart of 'fallenness'.³⁸ This is misleading. Important though vision is, fallenness creates a different network of conceptual interconnections. Not only is it consistent with culpability, it also sets up the idea of our moral vision and being as 'fallen and incomplete', and with it a relation of striving a desire for completeness [M.293]. By *contrasting* our imperfection and incompleteness with the ontological necessity and unity of the Good, and by positing a *relation* of pilgrimage towards it, Murdoch meets the two minimal criteria given above for fallenness. 'Our home is elsewhere,' remarks Plato in the *Acastos* dialogues, and for once Socrates concurs. This account of ontological *endeia* or lack that grounds our desire for progress goes well beyond the idea of flawed vision. (An account of attention, the effort to improve the quality of moral vision, need not be placed in such a Platonic context.³⁹)

Acceptance of Murdoch's commitment to fallenness is bound up with acceptance that she is describing humans in teleological terms. Perhaps we might regard it as a weak form of teleology, one that is built into ourselves rather than inhering in the fundamental structures of the universe, but it is teleology nonetheless. Two problems arise from this observation. Firstly, some theological commentators, such as Peter Byrne, treat Murdoch as an opponent of teleology on the basis of the following assertion in the *Sovereignty*: 'That human life has no external point or

³⁶ *The Philosopher's Pupil*, 81.

³⁷ Gordon (1995), 61ff; Antonaccio (2000), 130-2, 149.

³⁸ For Platonic fallenness see *The Fire and Sun*, 48, 52, 57, 80 and 81. And for 'worthlessness', 20.

³⁹ See the account of attention above in Chapter 2.

τελος is a view as difficult to argue as its opposite, and I shall simply assert it. I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained.⁴⁰ Although perhaps misleading, even geared to mislead, this formulation denies only an *external telos*. (I will take it that 'external' is used here in response to religious ideas of a God who is *out there* in a more-or-less non-figurative sense.)

Secondly, Gordon (but not Antonaccio, who favours a downgrading of vision) is concerned that a concept of 'original sin' which does not reduce to flawed vision may compromise its importance. I would suggest, instead, that it helps to develop the conceptual content of flawed vision. Consider the pilgrim Garth in *An Accidental Man*. He encounters suffering, necessity and death and feels that a more innocent contentment is now lost. 'Was this his fallen state? Was this every man's fallen state? Experience was impure and inextricably mingled with delusion.'⁴¹ The suggestion here is that moral phenomenology involves intermittent awareness of fault that goes beyond awareness of particular moral failures.⁴² This claim is endorsed in the philosophical texts 'To speak here of an inevitable imperfection...may be taken as a reference to our 'fallen' human condition, but this need be given no special dogmatic sense' It may be 'regarded as an empirical fact' or 'as a synthetic *a priori* truth'.⁴³ Awareness of imperfection is a real event, an event that tells us about the *a priori* structure of how we experience (see) the world. This passage is paraphrased in the *Metaphysics* and reinforced by the assertion that 'A picture of humanity must portray its fallen nature' [M.509]. Fallenness imposes limits upon vision, its perfection lies always in the future.

Over time, Murdoch's own awareness of imperfection is strengthened with the increasingly Platonic tenor of her writings. In *The Fire and the Sun* she finally separates out the Christian and Platonic accounts of human imperfection, favouring the creation myth of Plato's *Timaeus* over the Christian alternative of creation *ex*

⁴⁰ *SG*, 77; Byrne (1998), Chapter 5, especially, 111-12.

⁴¹ *An Accidental Man*, 187; see also *The Philosopher's Pupil*, 81-2, for awareness of a deep wound 'so deep that one wants to call it "original", whatever that means'.

⁴² In *The Green Knight* Murdoch toys with the Freudian idea that awareness of fallenness may be bound up with the traumatic end of childhood. The Middle English *Green Knight* is part of a cluster of manuscripts concerned with patience, purity (cleanness) and the first fall from grace.

⁴³ *IP*, 27. I will take it that Murdoch's use of 'synthetic *a priori*' is not intended to be strict, otherwise she would be committed to the problematic view that facts and values are fused but synthetic and analytic truths are not, see Putnam (2002), Chapters 1-2.

nihilo.⁴⁴ A cosmic artisan (the Demiurge) *mediates* between us and perfection, copying perfect forms that only he sees into the imperfect and resistant medium that is our natural element. On this picture, perfection is more distant than ever.⁴⁵ 'In the early dialogues the spiritual world is so close that we seem to be God's children. In the *Timaeus* we are his grandchildren. In the *Laws* we are his toys.' What separates us from Good is now an 'astronomical distance'.⁴⁶ In the *Acastos* dialogues, Murdoch's concern shifts to response rather than diagnosis. Imperfect existence is the lot we must come to terms with. 'Our home may be elsewhere,' comments Socrates, 'but we are condemned to exile, to live here with our fellow exiles'.⁴⁷ Ontological lack is ineradicable.

By the time of the *Metaphysics*, a growing worry is that this rather 'bitter' picture of the human (a picture of the human as in some sense ontologically flawed) should not lapse into fatalism, as if our inability to comprehensively overcome our condition makes any degree of mitigation pointless. Murdoch tackles this in her examination of Schopenhauer's endorsement of original sin. His belief in culpability for 'what we are' is viewed as 'a reasonable generalisation about the natural sinfulness of humans', but what is rejected is his 'fantasising' and 'deterministic' resignation and tendency to undermine our sense of culpability. We must, instead, respond to sinfulness by working to improve our condition [*M*.66-7; *M*.103-4]. What also serves Schopenhauer well, as a mitigation of the dark overtones of 'the fallen scene, everywhere visible' is his 'irrepressible empiricist gaiety'. Murdoch holds these two to be 'in tension' [*M*.70]. She believes that his appreciation of contingency softens his account of fallenness. Below I will consider whether the same is true for her own commitment to contingency simpliciter alongside contingency as fallenness.

III. The Self as Unique and Fallen

Murdoch's commitment to simple contingency is a liberal standpoint. Her view is that we should try to understand the other. By contrast, her commitment to

⁴⁴ The contrast between creation *ex nihilo* and working from preformed flawed materials is emphasized in Hauerwass (1996).

⁴⁵ *FS*, 61.

⁴⁶ *FS*, 60-61.

⁴⁷ *Acastos*, 61.

fallenness is an aspect of her Platonism. This combination is surprising. Platonism is not notoriously liberal. (The *Laws* has a particularly bad reputation.) The later commitment does not supersede the earlier but continues alongside it. Murdoch was a liberal before she was a Platonist and continued to be one afterwards. Her Platonism emerged not in opposition to her liberalism, but as an unusual way of solving some of its problems. In particular, Platonism's account of inner transformation and character offered a way to value 'the contingent eccentric fellow whom John Stuart Mill lovingly envisaged but whom he was unable philosophically to protect', unable because he promoted choice at the expense of character.⁴⁸

In line with this concern there are two related questions that I want to raise. Firstly, *what are the implications of fallenness for Murdoch's own conception of the self?* My concern here is that fallenness implies different things about the self in different theories. In Dante's Christianized Platonic account, he and Virgil travel all the way through Hell and then Purgatory with Virgil continually addressing Dante as 'thou' and 'thee'.⁴⁹ It is only when purged of his sins, at the very end of Purgatory that he is finally addressed as 'Dante'.⁵⁰ His truest self is the redeemed part, the part which remains when everything else is burned away. This is consistent with Christian and Pauline notions: our truest self is not the flesh, it is not that which is to be purged but that which remains after purgation. Plato is equivocal on this matter. He gives a similar impression in the *Phaedo* where the body stands as a symbol for what is perishable, hence inessential. (Even as late as the *Republic* he writes of the soul as an original purity which is encrusted with all manner of inessential stuff, like the Sea-God, encrusted with debris at [*Republic*, 611].) By the time of the *Phaedrus*, his self is more composite in character; we don't ascend by cutting horses loose from the soul's chariot, we constrain them and they stay with us.⁵¹ These are two different versions of the fallen self. Murdoch may be aligned one way or the other. I will return to this question of her alignment below.

⁴⁸ *SBR*, 284.

⁴⁹ *FS*, 34-5 approvingly cites Cornford's comment that Dante provides the best commentary on the *Symposium*. For Dante's general influence on Murdoch see Nussbaum (1996).

⁵⁰ Dante, *Purgatory*, XXX, 55.

⁵¹ I draw here from Nussbaum, without endorsing all aspects of her reading of the *Phaedrus* in *The Fragility of Good*, particularly the view that it marks a major shift in his attitude towards the emotions. In line with her Plato reading, Nussbaum tends to locate Murdoch in relation to the *Phaedrus* rather than the *Symposium*.

My second question is this: *given the persistence of both contingency and fallenness, how are Murdoch's liberal and Platonic commitments combined?* Maria Antonaccio (although not specifically concerned with the fallenness/contingency contrast) proposes the tempting option of allotting Murdoch's Platonism to the private sphere and her Liberalism to the public sphere. On this view, Platonic unselfing helps us to see the other realistically thereby psychologically equipping us to meet our public liberal commitments.⁵² My objection to any such approach is that these contrasts do not line up in the desired manner. Murdoch does use contingency primarily in contexts where she considers others, and fallenness in contexts where she considers the self. However, these categories pertain to the fundamental ontology which is shared by both. They concern the substantial or thick self that is the object of unselfing and not just the thin, minimal self that is a political convenience for according public status.⁵³ Contingency and fallenness somehow have to coexist within the same sphere.

The most straightforward way of representing this coexistence is by saying that each constrains the contribution of the other. We can see that fallenness *must* constrain the contingency of the self by briefly comparing her views with those of Richard Rorty. Like Murdoch, Rorty has an identifiably liberal commitment to contingency. There is also enough proximity in their general philosophical inclinations about philosophical writing and its limits for a comparison to be instructive, although perhaps we might want to allow that Murdoch has more of a cohesive and restrictive view of what is to count as a philosophical text.⁵⁴ Whatever their other differences, both make a great play on the theme of contingency and allow that literature is sometimes (often) a more adequate way of conveying it. For Rorty, the contingency of the self is bound up with individuality. That which makes my self mine is what makes it unique. The genius is the paradigm of the individual. Both admire Freud, but for Rorty, what Freud grasps is that human life involves coming to grips with (and breaking from) past contingencies, rather than living up to some idealized notion of

⁵² Antonaccio (2002).

⁵³ As Antonaccio (2002) points out, Murdoch's shifts from claiming that a thick account of the self is a political necessity (in 'A House of Theory') to the (more Rawlsian) claim that it is a political liability.

⁵⁴ Although embracing a romantic project that Murdoch rejects, Rorty (1979), 280-281; 306ff; 334; 374-375, favors her argument against the fact-value distinction. (She provides one of his exemplars of a discursive style that reconfigures the relation between redescription and argument.)

perfection. There is no Rortian *telos*. Rortian life is simply rewoven, reworked and then interrupted by death. Liberal society is not the end of history, but a contingent and perhaps temporary configuration. Language too is viewed as a contingent, makeshift toolkit with items periodically added and removed.⁵⁵

Of these three aspects of contingency (society, language and the self) Murdoch is only in a position to agree about the contingency of the first. This is because fallenness is an inescapably teleological concept. It requires what Rorty denies, i.e. aspiration towards perfection. (The metaphorical *return home* of the fallen.) For Murdoch, language and the self have built-in moral structures woven around an idea of perfection. This compromises the extent to which language and the self can be contingent jumble. It must also have necessary, invariant moral features. The Murdochian self is, consequently, *less* contingent than the Rortian one. We might be tempted to imagine that if fallenness constrains contingency in this way, it might in turn be constrained by it, and constrained in a way which mitigates or *waters-down* its unwelcome 'bitter' overtones. This is the same claim that she makes in the case of Schopenhauer's treatment of existence as our original sin: that it is in tension with his 'irrepressible empiricist gaiety' and fascination with the detail of the world. My contention is that rather than mitigating fallenness, the mutual constraint of these two categories *rules out* the close identification of the self with its 'better' part. She *cannot* take the line of Dante that the true self is the self without the flaws. The Murdochian self is to be portrayed in a more *warts-and-all* manner.

Before showing why this is the case, I want to suggest that there is a good liberal reasons for ruling out any identification of the self with the better self, ie. there is a good reasons why a Murdochian would want to understand the fallen self in precisely the way that she does. It is bound up with a problem identified in Isaiah Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty'. Berlin divides accounts of freedom into positive and negative theories. Negative freedom is *freedom from* of the sort defended by Mill and exemplified by his harm principle. (Roughly: we should be free to harm ourselves but not others.⁵⁶) This is the sort of liberal freedom which -within bounds that Mill might not have accepted- Murdoch wants for the public sphere. However, she holds

⁵⁵ Rorty (1989), Chapter 2.

⁵⁶ For the harm principle, Chapter 1 of *On Liberty*. I am *not* claiming that Mill advances *only* this negative account of freedom.

that part of our contemporary philosophical mistake (exemplified by Sartre) has been to treat this commitment as the basis for a theory of personality. Murdoch treats freedom as something that has to be worked at, constructed, earned by developing one's imagination and one's ability to attend. It is not about the sheer absence of constraint.⁵⁷ She advocates a variant of what Berlin calls positive freedom, a freedom that he sees as more problematic from a liberal point of view.⁵⁸

Whereas negative freedom involves having all the doors left open, and none barred, positive freedom involves having the competences required to go through them. The problem Berlin highlights is that such an account of positive freedom is vulnerable to illiberal misuse. The moral psychology of a higher and lower self opens up the way for coercive political measures against individuals' stated wishes to be justified as somehow endorsed by their own higher, truest selves against the vocal opposition engendered by their lower, inessential selves. Democracy might then be argued to require ignoring what unpurged, unregenerate, people want in the name of what their idealized, better or reformed selves would more appropriately desire if freed from the detritus and rubble of their imperfections. (They might, in Rousseau's terms, be forced to be free.)⁵⁹

Murdoch's commitment to contingency constrains fallenness by ruling out precisely this Dantean *better self is truest self* model. The trouble with Dante, from a Murdochian point of view, is that his truest self is the bit that desires the same as everyone else. Although an element of personal idiosyncrasy is retained because his love of God is mediated through his love of Beatrice, true selves are all pretty much alike in their aspirations.⁶⁰ Contingency, as a *fundamental* feature of the self, becomes dangerously compromised. Respect for contingency requires respect for difference,

⁵⁷ For an account of the freedom of the self which is heavily influenced by Murdoch's hostility to the 'unencumbered self' but which is more directly concerned with Berlin's contrast between positive/negative freedom, see Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self*. That Murdoch's account of the self is an account of its freedom is convincingly shown in Chapter 6 of Antonaccio's *Picturing the Human*.

⁵⁸ Here we should note that Berlin's own attitude towards positive freedom is unclear rather than hostile. 'Two Concepts' has been plausibly read as straightforwardly rejecting a positive conception of freedom but Berlin has denied any such general hostility.

⁵⁹ Berlin (1969), Section V.

⁶⁰ Nussbaum (1993) treats Dante as more respectful of particularity than Plato. For Nussbaum, this aligns Murdoch closer to Dante than to Plato. Murdoch's own view of Dante is, perhaps, rather influenced by T.S.Eliot's contrast: Shakespeare is messy and contingent, Dante favours order. *TSAM*, 167-8.

and this requires a more inclusive understanding of the self, an understanding that is closer to the self of the *Phaedrus* than it is to the limited self of the *Phaedo*.

That Murdoch endorses just such an inclusive view can be seen in her pronouncements: from the novels, the self is *primarily* constituted by 'rough contingent rubble'; and from the philosophical texts, 'We are, as real people, unfinished and full of blankness and jumble; only in our illusioning fantasy are we complete'.⁶¹ More generally, her endorsement of the inclusive self can be seen in the way that she formulates her views as *an attack upon the self*. What Dante regards as the inessential residue is regarded by Murdoch as an integral part of what we are.⁶² His souls leap into the purgative flames because what suffers is not their truest selves. The Murdochian self is not so detached from its physicality and rubble. If I am to be transformed into a perfect being, my default self which is bound up with contingent, sinful egocentric projects, will, in a figurative sense, be destroyed and not preserved.

The advantage of this standpoint is that once the self is no longer identified with the 'better self', but with what is wrong with us, no defensible authoritarian appeal can be made to its implicit, unstated, or presumed endorsements of enlightened coercive political measures. The disadvantage is that it reconciles fallenness and contingency in terms that *do not* weaken, dilute or mitigate the 'bitter' significance of fallenness. What we are is mostly imperfect rubble, flawed, unable to see others justly, or at least preoccupied and only partly aspiring toward what is good. What this also strengthens is the sense of our culpability for what we are. What sins is really us. To see this, consider again the phenomenology of moral disappointment, our experience of moral failures great and small. It is difficult to see ordinary moral failure as really our fault if we have so little to go on in our choices and if goods happen to conflict. 'English philosophy and popular existentialism are on the same side, with their urgent cry of "we have to choose!" - a doctrine which is, after all, consoling for us sinners who blunder on through a life of continual mistakes.'⁶³ For Murdoch, the disappointment of our best aspirations is ultimately linked to our all too human

⁶¹ *The Philosopher's Pupil*, 81; *Metaphysics*, 97.

⁶² Murdoch's imagery of Apollo's flaying of Marsyas, central to *The Black Prince*, but not exclusive to it, is more appropriate to this than the joyful leaping of Dante's souls into the flames. They know that they will come out mostly intact, Marsyas, by contrast is *torn from himself*. (This latter is the formulation of his punishment-as-transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.)

⁶³ *KV*, 159.

limitations, to 'the abysmal sinfulness of humans' [M.483]. This aspect of our humanity is not disowned as lying outside our true selfhood. It is treated as an integral part of what we are and part of what we are aware of in moral disappointment. 'A picture of humanity must portray its fallen nature' [M.509].

Chapter 6: Fallenness and Guilt

For anyone promoting an exacting moral discipline, puritanism is liable to be a concern. Murdoch not only promotes such a discipline, she also takes a stance against puritanism. The latter is a concept that she associates, on the one hand, with the attempt to suddenly escape from the messiness of the human condition and, on the other, with entrapment in guilt. (An emotion to which Murdoch is hostile). Section I below will set out the concept and danger of puritanism; section II will set out Murdoch's sustained hostility towards guilt, and section III will show that Murdochian awareness of fallenness involves entrapment in guilt.

I. The Dangers of Puritanism

In *The Bell*, the troubled pilgrim Michael Meade and the no-nonsense puritan James Tayper Pace, provide contrasting commentaries upon the text '*be ye therefore perfect*'.¹ James reads it as an exhortation to embrace the good without delay and not to get bogged down with introspective muddle. 'A belief in Original Sin should not lead us to probe the filth of our minds or regard ourselves as unique and interesting sinners. As sinners we are much the same and our sin is essentially something tedious, something to be shunned and not something to be investigated.'² Michael Meade is a more sympathetically drawn character. He sees that perfection cannot be suddenly attained and that one rule will not fit all. 'As spiritual beings, in our imperfection and also in the possibility of our perfection, we differ profoundly one from another.' Our moral level must be taken into account. 'To live in innocence, or having fallen to return to the way, we need all the strength that we can muster - and to use our strength we must know where it lies...Self-knowledge will lead us to avoid occasions of temptation rather than to rely on naked strength to overcome them. We must not arrogate to ourselves actions which belong to those whose spiritual vision is higher or other than ours. From this attempt only disaster will come.'³

¹ *The Bell*, Chapters 9 and 16, picking up on the commentary in Weil (1952), 208, and citing the biblical text *Matthew*, 5:48, see also *IP*, 29; *GG*, 60.

² *The Bell*, Ch 9, 131-2.

³ *The Bell*, Ch 16, 203-4. The idea of moral levels show the influence of Simone Weil, *KV*.158.

Although Murdoch's depiction of Meade is generous, it would be a mistake to think of him as her mouthpiece. He too is flawed, a preoccupation with his own interesting guilt clouds his vision. Following a path of self-knowledge he ends up entangled in the machinery of his own guilt. His warning about gradualism and respect for the particularity of humans is to be heeded, but so too is the warning of Tayper Pace about the lure of neurotic self-absorption, the 'excitement of a spiritual drama' conducted within the self.⁴ (Where "'Neurosis" is characterised, almost in a popular sense defined, by a mechanical repetitive imprisoning of the mind' [M.139].) Michael is aware of this danger but still falls into it. His commentary is, in part, self commentary, a response to what has come immediately before. He is the one who has strayed, he has kissed young Toby (scarce more than a boy) and afterwards felt 'a sheer desire to be hidden' and an intense 'regret'.⁵ His sinfulness is of a very particular (and absorbing) sort and he keeps reminders of his fault close at hand.

I will take it that Murdoch holds both of these problems to be implicated in puritanism. She is driving at a familiar type of claim, that two apparently disparate phenomena, the attempt to suddenly change character and neurotic awareness of fault, are two sides of the same coin. What joins them together, and joins Michael Meade with Tayper Pace (and indeed the whole lay religious community) is a certain intolerance for the messiness (or *contingency*) of normal human life, a desire to step out of the ordinary mechanism of being that is related to a sense that the mechanism is overwhelming. Moral suddenness (as opposed to gradualism) involves the attempt to escape into a guilt-free purity that neurotic awareness of fault diagnoses as painfully absent or metaphorically lost.⁶ This is a plausible enough connection to make. An exemplary form of puritanism in the novels is the substitution of pedantic truth-telling for truthfulness. This puritanical intolerance for the grey areas of human communication is based upon an awareness of personal weakness. It is as if the pedantic truth teller were saying *I know what I'm like. If I go down that road at all, I*

⁴ *The Bell*, 205. 'Neurotic' is used here in Murdoch's own sense, of compulsively attentive to self, the sense established in her contrast between convention and neurosis, *Sub.G*, 217 and *SBR*, 268-70 which is the primary source for the contrast.

⁵ *The Bell*, Ch 12, 163.

⁶ We can see this contrast in Murdoch's classification of Sartre and Marx as 'high-minded puritans' in *M.154*. A noteworthy instance of 'childish puritanism' associated with a desire for the purity of 'violence and pain, not muddle' occurs in *The Red and the Green*, 242-4.

*shan't be able to stop myself.*⁷ Neurotic awareness of fault underlies a need to be strictly hemmed in by convention so that one's natural tendency to stray is held safely in check.

By associating these two themes Murdoch is connecting up her own, particular emphasis upon puritanical suddenness with a more standard idea of puritanism as a guilt-ridden outlook. Unlike 'romanticism', her 'puritanism' is not a term of Murdochian artifice, its normal sense is not strained. She is acutely aware of the connections between the puritan radical tradition, its dissenting, liberal and socialist heirs and the Godly community of *The Bell*.⁸ In addressing whether she too falls foul of her own strictures on this matter I will focus only upon the core themes of suddenness and entrapment in introspective guilt rather than dwelling upon other, arguably puritanical features of Murdoch's outlook (her repeated denunciations of pornography, the exclusion of actual sex from depictions of life in the novels, her praise of simplicity, and her strong reservations about television, so reminiscent of earlier puritan arguments about theatre and dancing).⁹

Suddenness and entrapment in guilt are the core themes that are developed in the T.S.Elliot essay which appeared contemporaneously with *The Bell* (in 1958) and is thematically linked to it by a concern with puritanism. One of the two themes also helps to structure *The Fire and the Sun* (on the subject of Plato's puritanism); and both figure in the *Sovereignty*. There we are told that 'Puritanism and romanticism are natural partners and we are still living with their partnership'. What is at stake is, on the one hand, overestimation of unconstrained freedom to engage in rational choice

⁷ Puritanism of the sort we will be concerned with is notably represented in the novels in the form of puritanical silence as a response to the limits of language (Hugo in *Under the Net*); a similar hostility towards art (Bledyard in *The Sandcastle*); and an insistence upon pedantic truth-telling (Axel in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*). The latter creates a link between puritanism and Kant's inflexible position on lying.

⁸ Her contemporaneous *HT* makes clear that her preoccupations in *The Bell* are specifically with what she sees as guild socialism, something of a spent force. It is noteworthy that she tries to extend her metaphor of energy to political goals, diagnosing the socialist movement in England as suffering from 'a loss of energy' and the dissipation of a 'great accumulation of energy'. *HT*, 172. As Maria Antonaccio (2002) points out, this call for a metaphysic to underpin politics is later abandoned.

⁹ For example, pornography is attacked in the dialogue 'Art and Eros,' *Acastos*, and generally, television is associated by her with image ridden, *eikasia*, the lowest condition inside Plato's Cave. 'Here we should reflect upon the deep effects of television, for instance upon the fact that so many citizens go to bed at night with their heads full of overwhelmingly clear and powerful images of horror and violence...(Television) can also commit terrible crimes against the visible world' [M.330]. For her praise of simplicity see above, Chapter 1.

irrespective of the prior formation of character (Tayper Pace's fault). And, on the other, a 'philosophy of puritanical origin and apparent austerity' (Michael Meade's fault).¹⁰ The T.S.Eliot essay is particularly interesting not only because it is contemporaneous with *The Bell*, but also because it introduces the claim that opposition to puritanism can itself take a puritanical form. For Murdoch, T.S.Eliot is an 'anti-Puritan Puritan'.¹¹ Like Michael Meade, his consciousness of evil and of 'original sin' is taken to *reproduce* important aspects of what he criticises, albeit in a more convention-bound form. This is a problem for Murdoch. Like Eliot, she too comes to hold a doctrine of original sin, or rather, fallenness, and she is more than a little critical of the human condition. Martha Nussbaum is sensitive to this when she writes that Murdoch is 'impatient with characters who live immersed in such messy and uneducated fantasies and even seem to like them. And this makes me feel, as reader, that Murdoch does not altogether like *me*, that she would have me be quite other than I am.'¹² Over time, as she moves away from the fun-loving world of *Under the Net*, Murdoch becomes every bit as critical of the ordinary human condition as early Sartre. Where he castigated self-deception, she now attacks our egocentricity. This places Murdoch at risk of generating her own form of neurotic awareness of fault.

This censorious aspect of her work is highlighted in Elizabeth Dipple's study *Work for the Spirit* where the ontological flaws of humans ensure that moral pilgrimage ends, at best, in a fairly honourable defeat, a collapse into 'the mediocre life' of circularity and repetition rather than progress.¹³ In response to this kind of reading, Peter Conradi has developed an approach which acknowledges a puritanical danger but claims that Murdoch manages to keep it under control. On this view she still fits her own classification of 'anti-Puritan Puritan' but with the emphasis now placed on the 'anti' side. Conradi achieves this by remaining faithful to Murdoch's repeated insistence that the novels and philosophical texts be viewed differently. The ethic of the philosophical texts posits Good as an ideal end-point to be pursued

¹⁰ SG,79. Conradi (2001b), pp.520-523 refers to a note in her papers to the effect that 'Puritanism=Romanticism'.

¹¹ TSAM, 166.

¹² Nussbaum (1996), 49.

¹³ Dipple (1982), Chapters VI, VII, and VIII.

gradually. Conradi ingeniously claims that this philosophical ethic *is itself* 'an ideal limit in the direction of which the artist or moral agent is to be pulled, though neither can reach it'.¹⁴ It is not to be suddenly embraced but successively approximated to. This allows the philosophical ethic to be tempered by the novels, giving us a more everyday picture of the difficulties of being good. In the novels, contentment and life-affirming hedonism are given their due while puritanism and moral overreaching is almost invariably chastised, 'it is the point about Murdoch's philosophy that no one can adequately inhabit it'.¹⁵ We can, however, move closer to the ethic by living an effortful but imperfect life that is informed by it. What we must not do is attempt any *sudden* leap into the life of the good Murdochian pilgrim.

Although mitigating the claims of Dipple, there is a sense in which this argument still concedes what I am concerned to show, i.e. that taken on its own, the ethic *is* puritanical, only the novels are compassionate, finding a place for everyday *amour propre*, pleasure and contentment.¹⁶ However, Conradi's argument opens up an interesting possibility. We expect most philosophical positions to be ready for immediate adoption (like a propositional attitude rather than an emotional orientation). In Murdoch's case, the ethic may plausibly be understood in Conradi's manner, as endorsing its own adoption only in a piecemeal, gradualist and necessarily-incomplete manner, leaving the pilgrim in pursuit of a particular kind of imperfection rather than 'competing with the divine'.¹⁷

There is some textual support for this position in Murdoch's Platonic writings of the 1970s. In the *Acastos* dialogues, the patience of her Socrates contrasts with the impatient 'puritanism' of her Plato. This is done both through the content of what is said and through characterisation. Socrates is allowed to suggest that in 'all our highest speculations, the highest achievements of our spirit are second best.' In other

¹⁴ Conradi (2001a), 374.

¹⁵ Conradi (2001a), 206.

¹⁶ Conradi (2001a) 328-9, for the legitimacy of self-love.

¹⁷ Conradi (2001a) 238, 379. Conradi is particularly influenced by Lorna Sage's 1977 article on Murdoch, 'The Pursuit of Imperfection'. A reading of Plato which would fit nicely with this is given by Raymond Gaita. He distinguishes between the more mystical idea of pursuit of perfection and his preferred claim that Good is the absolute standard in the light of which we live. Inconveniently, this is *not* Murdoch's Platonism. She does try to make sense of the command 'be ye therefore perfect', and, as Gaita recognises, her reading of Plato is influenced by the mystical tradition, Gaita (1991), 202-3, 213.

words, 'second-best is our best'.¹⁸ What this means is that our only reasonable *de facto* goal will be a form of imperfection. Conradi identifies this as a key admission, 'Both Plato and Socrates here are aspects of a single truth...They may also be said to represent two aspects of Iris Murdoch herself.'¹⁹ We must live in the light of the saintly vision of the reality of Good, but work with imperfection like the artist. This is an anti-puritan moral compromise, as indeed all moral compromises are.

We may reconsider the master theme of *The Fire and the Sun* in the light of the proposed compromise. It argues that Plato's 'puritanism', exemplified by his attitude towards art, is at odds with his overall metaphysic because of the latter's emphasis upon mediation and intermediate gradations between the perfect realm of being and what has fallen into the imperfect realm of becoming, our world of temporality and death. The world-creating Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*, is an image of mediation. He exists *between* mankind and perfection. 'In the early dialogues the spiritual world is so close that we seem to be God's children. In the *Timaeus* we are his grandchildren.' What separates us from perfection is now an 'astronomical distance'.²⁰ There can be no sudden leap from here to there. Our distance from Good becomes so great that tolerance for and compromise with imperfection becomes inevitable, a practical necessity. Even the Demiurge has to work with imperfect materials. We, who are less exalted, must do so as well.

There is, however, a narrowness about the account of puritanism in *The Fire and the Sun*. It is concerned primarily with the question of suddenness. It focuses upon Murdoch's view that the gap between imperfection and perfection is lessened, if at all, only by a gradualist pilgrimage. The question of entrapment in a neurotic awareness of fault, in a 'bitter' awareness of being flawed that promotes a desire for character-rectifying conventions, (for adherence to the rules, to the laws) is not directly addressed.²¹ Yet this too is a real and difficult problem with the Platonic picture. If both are seen as opposite sides of the same coin then they should also be accepted as providing independent grounds for classifying someone as a puritan. And if this is so, then a Murdochian ethic that offers a gradualist move into a neurotic

¹⁸ *Acastos*, 61-2.

¹⁹ Conradi (1994), 337, and (2001a), 347-8.

²⁰ *FS*, 61, 62.

²¹ For the metaphorical 'bitterness' of being fallen, see *EPM*, 136.

(inescapable, entrapping) awareness of fault offers only a gradualist move into the other side of puritan intolerance for what we humans happen to be.

II. Guilt as a deceptive emotion

Part of the rationale for Murdoch's retention of the idea of fallenness is that it helps to secure continuity with the religious moral tradition which she is attempting to demythologize and secularize. This attempt to secure continuity is in line with her gradualist strictures on puritanism but it also generates problems. In particular, such close proximity to the traditional Judeo-Christian idea of original sin might seem to expose her to the charge of promoting shame (Nietzsche) or guilt (Freud) or both, by secular means.²² Murdoch takes an early step that seems to defuse this charge when she adopts a hostile stance towards guilt in the philosophical texts. 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts' warns of times when 'feelings of guilt keep attracting the gaze back towards the self'; 'On "God" and "Good"' claims that 'the ideas of guilt and punishment can be the most subtle tool of the ingenious self'; the *Metaphysics* accepts the charge that Christianity has an element of sadomasochism about it and charges religion as such with generating 'an invigorating sense of guilt'.²³ She provides no rigorous account of the fine gradations between guilt shame, remorse, regret and anxiety but what there is on guilt is uniformly hostile.

Murdoch's hostility first emerges as a secondary theme of *Under the Net* but is then carried over into novels of all periods.²⁴ In *The Bell* (1958), Michael Meade's problem is that he cannot escape from his past. The unconsummated entanglement with a pupil, the indiscretion which lost him his teaching post, comes back to haunt him now that he leads a lay religious community. The boy, now a young man, turns to the community for help. Instead of assisting him or (as Tayper-Pace sensibly advises) sending him away to avoid muddle, Michael becomes preoccupied with his own guilty conscience. Hilary Burde in *A Word Child* (1975) is similarly trapped. Guilt over a youthful misadventure which led to the death of his best friend's wife leads to a

²² I am thinking here of Freud's *Society and its Discontents* and the second essay in *The Genealogy of Morals*. There are some striking similarities between the dominant preoccupations of Nietzsche's three essays and the three comprising the *Sovereignty*, both progress from the concept of 'good', constraint of the self, the virtues of the humble.

²³ SG, 99; GG, 66; *Metaphysics*, 80-82.

²⁴ For guilt in *Under the Net* see 'Two Concepts of Contingency' chapter.

repetition of his initial fault. Hilary likes riding on the inner circle of the London Underground, a symbol, as Elizabeth Dipple notes, of repetition rather than progress.²⁵

This predicament of guilty entrapment and self-enclosure becomes a repetitive feature of Murdoch's novels, even a favoured mechanism of egocentricity. To say *I am at fault* is to say *it depends on me* and this slips all too easily into a preference for feeling guilty rather than unimportant.²⁶ In the novels, Murdoch tends to depict the emergence of guilt in contexts where there is real, if only partial culpability. Murdoch shows no interest in trying to disentangle guilt either from a sense of culpability or (on a rather more Freudian note) the desire for punishment. Indeed she makes great play about our sadomasochistic tendencies as normal.²⁷ Guilt and a punitive overestimation of self go hand-in-hand. In *An Accidental Man*, a slightly drunk character knocks down a child who has run carelessly onto the road; in *The Good Apprentice*, a prank goes wrong when a surreptitiously drugged student leaps out of a window to his death. In both cases, culpability gives guilt a foothold and overestimation of culpability follows, the relevant characters are able to place themselves at the centre of a punitive drama.

This shared hostility towards guilt in the novels and in the philosophical texts is not an arbitrary intrusion. It does make sense in Murdochian terms. She holds that the cognitive value of emotions need not be purely situational (truthful in this context, deceptive in another but without any overall tendency). At least some emotions have cognitive tendencies which can be separated out from any particular situation. (Romantic love is a problematic example of a *deceptive* emotion.) This tendential character of emotions arises from their involvement in the direction of attention. They have *aboutness*, intentionality, and for Murdoch there is an appropriate direction of attention, it 'should properly be outward away from self'.²⁸ One of the reasons why the guilt-ridden Michael Meade should not be viewed as a Murdochian mouthpiece is that he extols the virtues of self-knowledge. (This is more akin to Stuart Hampshire

²⁵ Dipple (1982) Chapter VII for her reading of *A Word Child* and Chapter VIII for the theme of circularity versus progress.

²⁶ This aspect of the guilt theme in *An Accidental Man* is dealt with rather well in Todd (1979).

²⁷ See below, chapter on suffering.

²⁸ GG, 58.

and Freud than Murdoch.)²⁹ His response to how original sinfulness works its way out in particular cases is similar to that of psychotherapy. By contrast, Murdoch holds that 'It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates'. Therapy produces new fantasies for old, 'Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power. "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'.³⁰ Because guilt directs attention towards the self, it tends to be a deceptive emotion and not an ally.

This does not mean that the darker side of emotional life is to be shunned. It is just not productive to encounter it through guilt. In both the novels and the *Metaphysics*, guilt is contrasted with 'a tract of experience' called 'Void' [M.500]. This covers 'a lot of different states' in which we experience loss, absence or lack [M.498]. The terminology is drawn from Simone Weil who, in turn, draws it from standard descriptions of the stages of the mystic's progress through awakening-purgation-illumination-void, and finally, unitive life.³¹ This progression is partly derived from Plato's metaphor of the Cave and when overlaid back onto it, void corresponds to the darkness that follows the illumination of the fire (a symbol of the ego according to Murdoch).³² Void is an experience of loss that results from a (sometimes) necessary move into uncertainty and away from an inferior illumination.³³ We move from the fire, through the darkness towards the sun. Alternatively, we can move in the other direction. A crisis of faith can lead us away from Good, back to a preoccupation with self. The *Metaphysics* takes bereavement as an exemplar of void, a confrontation with death that temporarily deflates our high estimation of self. It pains us but cannot be voluntaristically cast off. It must be endured, gone through. But it is *gone through*, we are not entrapped as we tend to be by guilt [M.503]. The focus upon bereavement is symptomatic of Murdoch's concern

²⁹ See Chapter 2 above.

³⁰ GG, 66

³¹ Part II of Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (London: 1911) is structured by this progression.

³² SG, 98; FS, 69, 88.

³³ Loss is necessary within Murdoch's scheme of things. Franklin Gamwell's artful argument that moral value is the criterion of truth; and that loss of God is loss of something morally valuable *ergo* Murdoch cannot consistently abandon God, relies upon a reductionist view of Murdoch's multiple criteria for truth. Gamwell (1996).

to avoid setting this tract of experience exclusively in the context of the mystic or clerics progress. Bereavement is ordinary, everyday, involuntary. (By contrast, in Weil void is regarded as a spiritual achievement.) Nevertheless, the connection to the dedicated religious life is maintained, at least in the novels. The experience of void is characteristic both of clerics who are losing their faith and finding themselves caught up in worldly preoccupation (filling the void with our ordinary fantasies and deceptions) and of clerics who are passing beyond idolatry and abandoning the desire to be admired for saintliness or rewarded for it by the evasion of death. They experience ontological uncertainty about God and/or Good.³⁴ As in Simone Weil, 'During our apprenticeship good appears negative and empty'.³⁵ By contrast, guilt is guaranteed at least one secure object: the fiery self.

Given this general hostility towards guilt, a number of problems arise. Firstly, Murdoch appears to be attacking an important mode of attending to what is other. Guilt is *not just* about ourselves, its intentionality is mixed, it is about ourselves and something else that is to be valued (and has not been given its due). Raimond Gaita (whose work bears a family resemblance to Murdoch's through their shared interest in Simone Weil) considers guilt in a similar context to Murdoch but takes up the opposite position: 'remorse is not self-absorption. It is, amongst other things, a form of the recognition of the reality of others - those we have wronged'.³⁶ Similar considerations are applied to shame and the intermediate emotional sense of being in some way 'polluted' by the actions of our parents or forefathers. The use of this antiquated term is Gaita's, but I think one can see what he means. Can the descendants of Australian emigrants justly face Aborigines without some sense of personal connection to wrongdoing? The contentment of one may seem closely related to the misfortunes of the other. Similarly with the children of Germany's war generation, how could they face the Holocaust survivors without a sense of connection to radical evil? Anything else would seem dismissive, a failure to accept disturbing realities.³⁷

³⁴ This is the case with Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers* and Brendan Craddock in *Henry and Cato*.

³⁵ KV.158.

³⁶ Gaita (1991), 48.

³⁷ Gaita (2000), pursues these more concrete cases of guilt and shame.

The other-orientedness of such partially-introspective emotions opens up alternative possibilities for making sense them. Indeed, Carla Bagnoli has extended Murdoch's idea of attention by incorporating it into an account of practical reason whereby we experience regret not when brooding on the past but when engaging in the piecemeal construction of new, action-guiding values.³⁸ If I regret not having done x, it does not necessarily mean that I have done something wrong, it may just mean that x is the road not taken. Through the constructive work of regret, I may become be more likely to do x if another opportunity arises. Murdoch may be passing up an important way of giving content to the ambiguous concept of attention. However, this approach, while it is about valuing what is other, may also be problematic from a Murdochian point of view because it leads us back into a model of practical reason where considerable emphasis is placed upon choice (albeit counterfactually: *I did this but I wish I had done that*).³⁹

Secondly, what is at stake in the above observation that guilt is other-attending, is only one version of a broader claim that there are good and bad variants of guilt. According to Gaita, Murdoch is only right about 'corruptions' of this emotion and not the emotion as such.⁴⁰ What stands in the way of Murdoch's applying this approach is the following: (i) if guilt is associated with culpability then it is still necessarily *indexed to the self*. Gaita writes of remorse where Murdoch writes of guilt, but only because he treats guilt as an objective condition of the being that is recognised in remorse. Hence remorse, even if partly other-oriented, is also by-definition indexed to the self. Moreover, and this is point (ii), Murdoch already has a candidate emotion to contrast with bad guilt. Not a better form of the same emotion, but the different emotion of void. Murdoch favours void over guilt. In *An Accidental Man*, Mavis compares her years of religious faith with what has come after. 'During the wild years she had woken every morning to some guilty problem. Above any pain except that of guilt one can hope to climb by seeing what is above, by seeing that there is something above. Guilt and remorse had trapped her during those

³⁸ Bagnoli (2000). It should be noted that Bagnoli is drawing creatively upon Murdoch but is not a Murdochian.

³⁹ This connects to Bagnoli (2002), 55-6 which underestimates Murdoch's downgrading of choice. See above, Chapter 4. Bagnoli is a constructivist who posits multiple goods and conflicts between them, Murdoch is a realist who holds that there is a single, unitary Good without rivals. Their views on choice diverge.

⁴⁰ Gaita (1991), 50.

years. Now she woke to clarity, to an emptiness full of the urgent needs of others.' This emptiness, felt upon the loss of God, is later clarified as that of 'void'.⁴¹ She writes as if she has no need for a good kind of guilt.

This leads me to a third and still broader problem with Murdoch's account. Coping with the requirements of commonplace moral phenomenology must surely be an adequacy condition for any moral theory. Emotions such as remorse and guilt, even where they are (in part) self-attending, also seem to be, as Gaita suggests in his pollution cases, necessary (not in the sense of unavoidable, but in the sense of it being a good thing to have even at the risk of an imagined culpability).⁴² Consider Bernard Williams' idea of agent-regret. (He sees this as a form of guilt but the term 'regret' plays down any overtones of actual culpability.) Suppose a driver runs over a child through no fault of his own, he *must* feel a different (more intense) kind of regret than a spectator. Otherwise he does not fully realize what he has done. A truthful reaction must be indexed to his causal involvement in harm to the other, 'that there is room in the area for irrational and self-punitive excess, no one is likely to deny. But equally it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind towards anyone'.⁴³ Murdoch's focus is instead upon the dangers of guilt as a personal indulgence. This places her in danger of trying to get away from a necessary (desirable) feature of moral phenomenology.

Without broadening the point into an anti-theory critique of Murdoch (for evading real experience) she may indeed be begging an important question about how far we can go without in some sustained (not brief or fleeting) manner directing attention towards ourselves. I will take it that while this is a genuine problem concerning the workability of a Murdochian moral psychology (let alone its advisability) it is her problem and not mine. In her defence it may be pointed out that she does seem to allow, at least in the novels, that in extreme cases of personal collapse, systematic egocentric 'magic' such as conventional religion or psychoanalysis, may be appealed to.⁴⁴ After all, functioning egocentric humans are a

⁴¹ *An Accidental Man*, 46-7, 125-6.

⁴² For Gaita, this may be less of a risk than for Murdoch by severing the nexus between guilt and culpability.

⁴³ Williams (1981), 29.

⁴⁴ For example, Georgie Hands in *A Severed Head* and young Peter in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* fall so far that they do need the 'magic' of psychotherapy.

minimal starting point for unselfing. This does not, however, substantiate the truthfulness of whatever egocentric deliberations take place. 'A sense of such self-knowledge may of course be induced in analysis for therapeutic reasons, but "the cure" does not prove the alleged knowledge genuine.'⁴⁵ *The Book and the Brotherhood* explores this scenario rather nicely, with a young woman, Tamar, going through the morally ambiguous experience of abortion, and with it a degree of personal disintegration before finally discovering religious repentance as a disposable tool to restore functioning egocentricity.

Murdoch's acceptance of therapeutic introspection to establish normal egocentricity does not require any fundamental revision of her hostility towards self-attending in more normal circumstances, and certainly not at more advanced levels of moral being. Nor can this hostility plausibly require those of average or normal egocentricity to evade guilt in its entirety. Guilt avoidance, especially if we are the imperfect creatures that Murdoch claims we are, cannot plausibly be entirely successful. To make sense of where this leaves us, what we now need is perhaps not any new argument that goes beyond the above, but only the right kind of formulation of Murdochian hostility towards guilt. Here, the Murdochian metaphor of movement and moral progress may be helpful. Guilt is something that we cannot perhaps get away from, but we should not be moving towards it. *We move truthfully into the void, not into guilt.*

III. Fallenness as Productive of Ontological Guilt

What places Murdoch in difficulties here is her tendency to accumulate new philosophical arguments without paring back her old ones. The hostility towards guilt which is a subordinate theme of *Under the Net* (a response to the transcendent, quasi-Platonist musings of Sartre's Roquentin concerning his fallenness) is carried over and built into her subsequent writings of both sorts, novels and philosophical texts. However, when Murdoch turns towards Platonism, in the later 1950s, she commits to perfectionist standards (grasped via metaphors of distance and fallenness) and the legacy of her earlier critique is not adjusted to make it consistent with the new position. The result is that successive, guilt-opposing and guilt-generating

⁴⁵ GG, 66.

commitments are piled on top of each other. This is exacerbated by the heavily Platonic works of the 1970s which strengthen her views on our fallenness and stretch out our distance from perfection. The upshot is that the moral pilgrim who advances into greater clarity of vision will have greater awareness of fallenness and so will be advancing, gradually or otherwise, into a guilty mode of being.

Once it is accepted that Murdoch is thoroughly committed to an account of fallenness, there are two broad ways that a Murdochian can respond to the problem of guilt-generation: an *argument from separation*, denying that there is any necessary connection between fallenness and guilt, and an *argument from containment* accepting that there is such a connection but that the guilt involved is non-threatening or otherwise limited. The problem that any argument from separation will face is Murdoch's accumulated commitment to a holistic approach towards meaning, such that individual terms are embedded in networks of value-laden interconnections. This is basic to getting her more analytic early arguments about fact and value off the ground, but now it comes back to haunt her. Why can we not acknowledge, *attend to* or *regard* our fallenness and then simply *pass on* without any entanglement in guilt? Why can we not (as Peter Conradi suggests) take the standpoint of Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov* that 'although guilt may unite all of humanity, it must be embraced with a fundamental joy and lightness of heart'?⁴⁶ The reason why this cannot be done is that it involves a particular view of the relation between culpability and the experience of guilt such that our moral crimes are *causally related* to psychological self-punishment. (We might call it the Dostoevskian view.) However, the connection between fallenness and guilt is not of this sort. It is not causal but conceptual. Experienced guilt is part of grasping our objective guiltiness, it does not *follow on* from it as an experiential postscript that might somehow be sliced off.⁴⁷

Murdoch shows some awareness that this is a problem in the *Metaphysics* when she contrasts the tension between Schopenhauer's dark commitment to original

⁴⁶ Zossima is speaking of objective guilt ie. sinfulness and not the subjective experience. This option is suggested by Conradi (2001a), 379. In fairness to Conradi, it should be noted that he does not believe that this light hearted acknowledgement of fallenness is effected in the philosophical ethic, but only in the novels.

⁴⁷ We might think here of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. He theorises about two sorts of men, but fails to pull off the trick that the novel's amoral realist (Svidrigailov) manages, of being the kind of man who is untroubled by conscience and convention. (His torments are of a different sort.)

sin and his cheerful love of existence (evidenced in his love for animals and for the particular). Perhaps she believes that these tensions are not so great in her own work because Schopenhauer is a determinist and she is not. (Original sin and determinism are a particularly bleak combination.) Murdoch's account of human flaw is situated in a context of being that is less fixed, it can to some degree be mitigated [M.103-4]. Yet, in spite of moral progress, there remains no sense in which an actual escape from fallenness is possible. Even the best of us remain all too human. Once it is accepted that we are effectively entrapped in a fallen condition, Murdoch's problem is that guilt does not just *ensue* from a sense of such fallenness or original sin, (like so much fallout in the aftermath) it is part of their full recognition. Murdoch is committed to the view that part of being aware of *anything* in the fullest sense is having the right emotional response to it. Emotional response is a component of moral vision. If we do not have this, we have a diminished awareness. For example, knowing the reality of the other involves not just adopting a particular propositional attitude but something closer to what Wittgenstein calls 'an attitude towards a soul'.⁴⁸ If we do not have the right emotional response then we do not construe reality correctly and we are not (in the fullest sense) aware of what confronts us. In the case of culpability, where our culpability is nothing more than having authoritative moral claims upon us that we fail to meet, the appropriate emotion *is* some form of guilt. (Or, alternatively, shame, an option dealt with below.) If we *regard and pass on* without experiencing the call of conscience, we have not seen what there is to see.

There is more to understanding a concept, according to Murdoch, than labelling the world in some preferred (chosen) way or conforming to public rules for correct usage. The very idea of a concept is of a term whose meaning is given by a complex (thick) network of interrelations and metaphors rather than a thin set of Tarskian truth-conditions, 'what philosophical concepts we use will be a function of what we regard as real and important'.⁴⁹ Murdoch cannot make sense of fallenness in just any way that she likes, unencumbered by the prior values that are built into language and consciousness any more than she can appropriate the concept of God rather than Good... it has too many connotations of a supernatural being. She cannot, by either specification or an effort of will, make a thin picture of fallenness that has

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, *PI*, IIiv.

⁴⁹ *PB*, 517.

just any significance she wants it to have. This would involve leaping out of the prior value-ladenness of our thinking, imagery and language. Nor can she plausibly expect the reader to do this, any more than she can plausibly ask them to treat 'vermin' as the generic name for humble pilgrims.

Her commitment to making sense of picturing the world as a comprehensive emotional engagement is crucial to making sense of moral progress. Because emotions are more responsive to ways of seeing than they are to formal demonstration, Murdoch is tied to accepting responsibility for the imagery that she produces and the concepts that she uses. With our concepts and picturings we partly fabricate the world we confront, 'and we must admit moral responsibility for this "fabricated" world, however difficult it may be to control the process of fabrication'.⁵⁰ A Murdochian can only escape from guilt as an awareness of fallenness if the latter happens to be separable from the language and imagery of culpability. Her problem is that this is not the case. Murdoch is one of those who associate Platonic fallenness with original sin, baptising the former in the light of the latter and entailing a clear sense of culpability or blameworthiness. She refers to Plato's 'hierarchy of subjects and their objects' but for Murdoch such hierarchy is linked to culpability [M.454]. For example, she refers to Plato's 'imagery of different levels of awareness wherein each subject *has the object he deserves*', repeating the same formula elsewhere, e.g. 'Plato's Cave where subjects have the objects they deserve' [M.282].⁵¹ The chained men in a state of *eikasia* are no longer innocent dupes, they (and they are characteristic of human everydayness) are at fault. We each have the quality of vision that we deserve. Similarly in the *Acastos* dialogues Socrates is made to say 'a religious attitude sees our life as an interconnected whole and a religious man would feel responsible for the *quality* of all his thoughts and experiences, even his perceptions'.⁵² More crudely, for the Plato of the *Acastos* dialogues, lacking as he is in the finesse of Socrates, 'We're

⁵⁰ DPR, 201.

⁵¹ For this view of Platonic fallenness as proximate to original sin and carrying notions of culpability, see E.R.Dobbs, another of Murdoch's old lecturers. Dobbs (1951), 155-6 highlights passages such as the Pindar quotation in the *Meno* which refers to 'the requital for ancient doom' [*Meno*, 81b] and the passage in the *Laws* which refers to 'old misdeeds unpurgeable by man' [*Laws*, 854b]. Murdoch is not simply following Dobbs because the latter sees this view of original sinfulness as already puritanical and is concerned to outline a progressivist shift from shame to guilt.

⁵² *Acastos*, 89.

bad, we have to become good, its a long way'.⁵³ Not only does culpability enter into the picture (as in original sin) but so too does a metaphor of contamination. Quality of consciousness is not just to be improved, but *purified*. This is a recurring Murdochian image, she has, on a single page, not only three occurrences of 'purified' but also 'purification', 'pure', 'purgation' and 'purged' [M.109].⁵⁴

There may be a certain ambiguity here, a characteristic absence of any clear distinction between a shameful condition and a more straightforwardly culpable one, but there is nothing particularly odd about her reading of Plato's Cave metaphor. It may well imply blameworthiness. Nevertheless, Murdoch does not always give due attention to the way in which her central preoccupations often diverge from those of Plato. She is, aware of the danger of 'inventing my own Plato' but doesn't not always take adequate steps to avoid it [M.510-11]. Plato is concerned with epistemology as such while she is concerned only with moral psychology and interpersonal-realism. Although, here, she is not so much in danger of inventing her own Plato as she is of adopting the Plato of the mystics and Neoplatonic Christianity.

Once her priorities are set, and her views about meaning holism and value-ladenness are put in place, she must abide by the value-ladenness of her terms. 'Our speech is moral speech, a constant use of the innumerable subtle *normative* words whereby (for better or worse) we texture the detail of our moral surround and steer our life of action. We cannot over-estimate the importance of the concept-forming words we utter to ourselves and others.' [M.260]. To see what this means in the case of 'fallenness', consider its use in Heidegger. Murdoch is generally critical of Heidegger (with some cause) for trying to set aside the value-implications of his imagery. He wants *Being and Time* to be all ontology with no ethical intrusions. When he writes about human fallenness he tries to specify that 'This term does not express any negative evaluation'.⁵⁵ For a Murdochian, or indeed anyone who places a great deal of weight upon the normativity and value-ladenness of language and imagery, this qualification must ring hollow. The connotations of a bad condition

⁵³ *Acastos*, 99.

⁵⁴ Purification imagery is the crux of her section on consciousness, comparing Husserl with the Buddhist Sckida, 239 ff. But this is no specialised image. Our task, right from the beginning of her use of the *eros* metaphor in the *Metaphysics* is to 'purify our energy' [M.25]. Void is to be regarded as bound up with this process, 'Here our purification takes place as exposure to a pure source. Void.' [M.109].

⁵⁵ Heidegger SZ, H.175.

and responsibility for it are too firmly entrenched to be plausibly set aside. In his favour, it may be noted that Heidegger is insistent that the nexus between fallenness and guilt is a solid one.⁵⁶

The failure of the argument from separation throws us back upon the option of localising or minimising guilt via an argument from containment. It may appear to be only an exercise in damage-limitation, but even in this limited capacity, I will suggest that it is none-too-successful. It may be further divided into two sorts of claim: that containment will be due to the *character* of the guilt or else due to the *extent* of the guilt (a qualitative and a quantitative option). I will take it that a quantitative limitation of the extent of guilt must rely upon directing attention away from self in some way, either (i) by focusing upon a concern with guilt only in others or (ii) by emphasising the collective nature of fallenness and guilt.

Version (i), a concern with guilt and fallenness only in others is *just about conceivable* given a framework where attention is to be directed towards others but I am not suggesting that any actual Murdochian would hold to such a view. It must be ruled out on the grounds that awareness of others as fallen coupled with a lack of awareness that we are also fallen would *constitute* a sense of their inferiority. Version (ii) is tempting because fallenness and original sin *are* doctrines of collective guilt, and consequently do seem to hold out some possibility of diluting the sense in which guilt is indexed to the self. Gaita refers to this as the situation in which 'all are guilty and so none are' but he views this as a 'consoling corruption' and it hardly seems consistent with Murdoch's approach.⁵⁷ There is an inbuilt self-other asymmetry in Murdoch. While we are to see others as appropriate objects of love we are each to see ourselves as badly flawed and in need of remedial unselfing. An awareness of our own fallenness is an important motivation to unself. Its significance cannot be diluted without marginalizing the motivating personal impact of fallenness itself. We have to, more or less continuously, *see* ourselves as needing to unself.

Consider now the rather more interesting qualitative option for containing the significance of guilt as part of the recognition of fallenness. The problem here may be clarified by examining the claim that the emotion bound up with fallenness is not

⁵⁶ Heidegger, *SZ*, H.280, "'Being-guilty", in the sense last mentioned, the breach of 'moral requirement', is a *kind of Being which belongs to Dasein*.'

⁵⁷ Gaita (1991), 47.

really guilt at all but shame, a response which would preserve the appropriate negative connotations without perhaps falling into the dangers of guilt. At a rudimentary level we may separate the two out as an awareness of culpability and an awareness of exposure to view in a discreditable manner. I am rather inclined to think that Murdoch ought to give more weight to shame than she does. In particular, it may make sense, from a Murdochian standpoint to understand awareness of fallenness in just this manner. Once we have disposed of the idea that shame is merely about vanity, about how one appears to others (after all one can be ashamed on one's own, before one's own gaze and when there is no-one else around) the substantial difference between shame and guilt may turn upon the way that they are indexed on the one hand to actions, omissions and outcomes (about which we are guilty) and failure to live up to an internalized moral standard of character (about which we feel shame). In both cases some form of reparation and amendment may be due.⁵⁸

Murdoch's emphasis upon character rather than agency should perhaps lead her to lean more upon an analysis of shame rather than guilt because it is more concerned with character and its corruption than it is with individual acts. There may, however, be a problem in the way that shame is indexed to an internalised standard of actually-attainable (worldly) goodness that the shamed person fails to achieve. Sophocles' Ajax kills himself because he cannot bear to stand before his father as a shamed man. His internalised standards are tangible, parental, and this-worldly.⁵⁹ His shame relates to a special failure, not a generic human condition, it is not about measuring himself against a *non-transcendent* possibility exemplified by others. It is difficult to make a judgement about how much sense it would make to feel shame as an awareness of fallenness, partly because of the multiplicity of stories that we can tell about the concept of shame and partly because Murdoch says nothing significant on this theme in the philosophical texts.⁶⁰ (The rehabilitation of shame postdates her classical education.) While this may seem a plausible extension of the Murdochian position, it is not obvious that it helps her case in the present context.

⁵⁸ For a response to the treatment of shame as a kind of vanity before others, see Williams (1993), 81 ff.

⁵⁹ See the discussion in Williams (1993).

⁶⁰ Whereas guilt is a recurring theme of earlier novels, she does make shame a central feature of the plot in her final novel *Jackson's Dilemma*, but this is too late to influence the philosophical writings.

What is ultimately implausible about the qualitative claim that guilt, shame, or both may have a favourable character is that it takes us down a road where Murdoch does not go, and does not go for a very good reason, i.e. 'feelings of guilt keep attracting the gaze back towards the self'.⁶¹ Shame and guilt involve *attention* to the self but Murdochian attention is *not* set up in terms of good and bad forms of attention to self but attention to self as such, i.e. egocentricity and not selfishness. While it is intelligible that we might (indeed do) experience guilt or shame that is unselfish, it is unintelligible that we might experience either in a way which is *not* strongly indexed to the self. Irrespective of whatever other favourable characteristics they may have, guilt and shame are self-directed emotions. The great strength of picturing the ordinary human condition in terms of fallenness is that (once removed from a deterministic context of the sort supplied by Schopenhauer) it can be strongly motivating. It has normative force, it promotes unselfing, a move towards a higher state of moral being. The great weakness is that it is a form of motivation by guilt. Even if we allow, with Conradi, that Murdoch's ethic is only to be gradually approximated to, and not suddenly adopted, the question arises: towards what will we be moving? Any move into this way of picturing, gradual or otherwise, will still be a move into an inescapable sense of fault, a guilt about the character of our being, an awareness that we will never match up to our internalised standards of Good and that our life will be at best an honourable defeat.

As Murdoch's picture is developmental, concerned with the direction of progress. The precise point at which one becomes a puritan will be unimportant if progress in this direction is, in any case, a move towards puritanism. This will render the position of the advanced pilgrim -the one who has done something to mitigate fallenness- unintelligible. Given the greater clarity of vision at the more elevated (but still human, hence fallen) levels of moral being, the higher we go, the better our grasp of our fallenness and the more an ongoing, inescapable sense of ontological guilt will be brought into play. (Together, perhaps, with the desire to punish the self that must surely go with such an awareness.) If Murdoch wants to hold onto her hostility to the puritanism of a religious-type guilt (and it appears that she does) then she will need to compromise her continuity with religious morality by abandoning the idea of fallenness that generates this puritanism.

⁶¹ SG, 99.

Chapter 7: Respect and Love

One of the problems that Murdoch has to avoid is the covert redirection of attention back towards the self. A difficulty here is that Platonic accounts of love seem to make just this move. They are about a certain kind of self-improvement, a preoccupation with personal rectitude or moral well-being. In the next chapter I will try to give content to this charge and to show that Murdoch falls foul of it. Here, I am only concerned to establish that the problem cannot be avoided or evaded by highlighting the non-Platonic component of Murdochian love, that element which might be called *agapaic*, or otherwise comparable to Kantian respect. The crux of what follows is that Kantian respect can help us to understand the sorts of low level responses that go to make up *loving Murdochian attention*. Nevertheless, Murdoch's account remains primarily Platonic, its ultimate problems are those of Platonic *eros*. In what follows below, Section I will outline the contrast between Murdochian love and Kantian respect (classifying approaches towards them as compatibilist and incompatibilist). Section II will set out the untenability of the incompatibilist position. Section III will separate out two different senses of 'love' in Murdoch (personal love and *eros*) and together with Section IV on the self, it will show why we should continue to accord primacy to the Platonic component of love even within a compatibilist account.

I. Compatibilism and Incompatibilism

Murdoch writes about love and Kant about respect. There is a *prima facie* opposition between the two. Kant suggests that respect preserves what love eliminates, our distance from the other, their independent existence as a self in their own right with all the dignity of personhood that implies. This reluctance to embrace love does not mean that Kant collapses the distinction between loving care and pathological sexual desire. He treats the right kind of (benevolent/beneficent) love as a bolster to morality. There are, consequently, duties of love, such as those of charity towards the poor but 'no one is wronged' when we neglect them'.¹ By contrast,

¹ Kant, *DV*, 134. I am also drawing Kant's *Lectures on Ethics* rather than the sparse comments in the *Groundwork* where he tries to equate duty with *agapaic* practical love rather than pathological love.

Murdoch's wise old Abbess in *The Bell* warns that 'all our failures are ultimately failures in love'.² This extremely un-Kantian sentiment runs through Murdoch's work.³

What stands in the way of any simple separation of Kantian respect and Murdochian love is the ambiguity of both. Understood in her own terms, Murdoch is engaged in a project to 'deepen our concept of love' and does not possess the finished article.⁴ Our concept of love progresses as life and our experience of loving progress.⁵ The result is a lack of analytic precision which makes it tempting to try and appropriate at least some of the content of Kantian respect in order to render Murdochian love more intelligible. One difficulty here is that Kantian respect has ambiguities of its own. It is one of a pair of related emotional experiences. The other is awe (*achtung*), a sense of our limits in the face of that which outstrips the imagination, part of the experience of the sublime. By contrast, respect (also *achtung*, but in a different context) is connected to a sense of our own worth. What I am called upon to respect in the other is precisely what is worthy of respect in myself.

I will classify approaches towards Murdochian love and Kantian respect as compatibilist and incompatibilist. Lawrence Blum is the most prominent exponent of an incompatibilist approach, emphasising that a commitment to universalisability is built into Kantian respect as opposed to the concern for particularity, for the contingent unique character of persons, that is the hallmark of Murdochian love.⁶ On the compatibilist side we have Robin Dillon, who wants to improve upon Kantian respect by effecting a fusion with Murdoch; David Velleman, who merely wants to soften some of the more abstract formulations of Kant's *Groundwork* in the light of Murdochian arguments; and finally, Carla Bagnoli and Maria Antonaccio, whose

² *The Bell*, 235.

³ Concern for the moral dimension of love predates *The Bell*, e.g. *VC*, 87.

⁴ *VC*, 95n.

⁵ *IP*, 28, 41, where love is likened to an end-point or Kantian Idea of Reason.

⁶ Murdoch's concern with particularity focuses upon persons rather than situations. (Different agents should act only in line with their particular moral levels, and not in line with universal rules.) She does not advance the 'polarizing argument' whereby *a reason for doing x* can generally become *a reason for not doing x* if some other feature of the situation changes. She is not, *in that sense*, a 'moral particularist'.

concern is not to vindicate or rethink Kant but to use him to make better sense of Murdoch.⁷

What Blum's incompatibilism draws upon is the convenient genealogy set up by Anscombe and given a gendered edge by Carol Gilligan. This divides modern philosophical ethics into two great camps.⁸ On the one hand there is the traditional, care or virtue-centered and particularistic ethics of Aristotle (and Plato). On the other, there is the modern impartialism of the justice and rule-based approach of Kant and Utilitarianism. For Anscombe, it is modernity's failing that it favours abstract rules over human flourishing. For Gilligan, such rule-base morality is masculine (chappish even) as opposed to care which is a characteristically feminine concern. Blum situates Murdoch prestigiously at the origins of the renewal of interest in the care perspective. This can be given general support by appeal to Murdoch's nostalgic reservations about the modern world and more detailed textual support by appeal to her criticisms of Kantian universalisability and its culpability in downgrading, indeed *loosing* concepts essential to the adequate portrayal of individual character.⁹

The compatibilist position also has its advantages. Maria Antonaccio, in a broadly Kantian account of Murdoch, has argued that the conception of freedom involved in Murdoch's theory of the imagination vindicates a sense of human dignity that may be extended into appropriate standards of individual recognition in the face of anonymous bureaucratic structures.¹⁰ Antonaccio's point is that Murdoch's critique of our default egocentricity must be seen as working in combination with her liberal concern for the dignity of the free individual as such. Antonaccio may be cautious about having recourse to the language of 'respect' but the Kantian overtones of her approach are clear. There is good sense in this emphasis upon Murdoch's Kantian leanings. Platonic love on its own does not offer adequate resources for concern

⁷ Antonaccio (2000); Blum (1986), (1991) and for the Gilligan connection, (1994); Dillon (1992); Bagnoli (1999); Velleman (1999), which is commented on with some reference to Murdoch in Swanton (2003) 108-115.

⁸ Anscombe (1981); Gilligan (1982).

⁹ Conceptual loss in Murdoch involves both proceeding *as if* we lacked a complex conceptual background to our idea of freedom and the danger of consolidating this *as if* impoverishment into real impoverishment by going on to theorize freedom without an adequate account of the inner life, Diamond (1988).

¹⁰ This is the master theme of Antonaccio (2000) with the extension to bureaucratic encounters advanced in the final chapter as a possible application of Murdoch.

about the individual. It holds that we love what we lack, i.e. perfection, and that which carries intimations of what we lack. Platonic love is the striving of the imperfect for the perfect. It is not, ultimately a mode of concern for what is flawed and fallen. 'One cannot feel unmixed love for a mediocre moral standard,' writes Murdoch, 'any more than one can for the work of a mediocre artist.'¹¹ This sort of Platonic claim is Murdochian but it is problematic because Murdoch also views humans as intrinsically flawed or imperfect. Perfection is not *here*, it is (metaphorically) elsewhere. Kantian respect, by contrast, secularizes Christian *agape*, loving *caritas* for the other which is modelled upon God's love for us, the love of the perfect for the imperfect. Like *agape*, Kantian respect is due to the other irrespective of who they are or what they have done, irrespective of fallenness and flaw. By including something like Kantian respect within our account of Murdochian love we might better equip it to cope with the dual requirements of loving perfection and loving fallen, flawed individuals, irrespective of their peculiar properties or character.

II. The Trouble with Incompatibilism

What gives the incompatibilist reading its initial plausibility is (i) its ready-made way of assimilating Murdoch into the major trends in moral theory by placing her within the *two great camps* picture; and (ii) her early, and sometimes strident, criticism of Kant and theories that 'enter through a back door left open by Kant'.¹² I will consider these two points in turn. Concerning (i) it should be pointed out that Murdoch fits awkwardly into the *two great camps* picture. Blum's path-breaking articles situating Murdoch as a champion of particularity and an opponent of Kant predate the much more overtly compatibilist *Metaphysics* where it is made clear that she is pursuing a 'dialogue between Plato and Kant' rather than writing footnotes to only one of them [M.298]. Her long-standing Kantian emphasis upon inescapable moral structures built into language and consciousness; her long-standing commitment (since the mid-1960s) to developing an account of the 'good constructive imagination'¹³; and the new emphasis on duty in the *Metaphysics*

¹¹ GG, 60.

¹² SG, 79.

¹³ DPR 199.

(to which I will return) have prompted a rediscovery of the Kantian influence that was temporarily eclipsed by the Platonic element of her writings in the 1970s. (These are the themes on which Antonaccio makes great play.)¹⁴

Against the backdrop of this attempt to fuse elements of Kant and Plato, we can make sense of Murdoch's repeated lapses into the language of respect: 'love should be inseparable from justice, and clear vision from respect for the real.'¹⁵; 'Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness.'¹⁶; 'a love which, still loving, comes to respect the beloved and (in Kantian language again) treat him as an end not as a means, may be the most enlightening love of all.'¹⁷; and latterly, 'Aesthetic insight connects with moral insight, respect for things connects with respect for persons' [M.495]. Murdochian love, *if it excludes Kantian respect*, may fall foul of a deconstructionist charge of drawing its meaning from a repressed idea of the latter that is continually returning, insinuating its way back into the warp and weft of the text.

This leaves us with point (ii), and a focus upon the important and specific charges against Kant that she makes in her earlier writings (up to and including the *Sovereignty*).¹⁸ These are not always directed against respect but they do impinge upon it. The charges are as follows. Firstly, a marginalization of emotion in Kant's account of human relations. Secondly, a related preference for overt behaviour over messy inwardness. Thirdly, a neglect of contingency or particularity in favour of universal humanity. Finally, a preoccupation with the self in the emotion of respect and in the related experience of the sublime. In short, 'Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts. In so far as we are rational and moral we are all the same, and in some mysterious sense transcendent to history'.¹⁹ Individually or together, these points seem to imply that Kantian respect is incapable of providing an adequate form of

¹⁴ Antonaccio (2000).

¹⁵ *SG*, 88.

¹⁶ *Sub.G*, 216.

¹⁷ *FS*, 36.

¹⁸ Particularly *SG*, 79.

¹⁹ *Sub.G*, 215.

attention to others. Let us consider the first three of these charges in turn (I will reserve the fourth and return to it in the next section).

Given that both respect and the experience of the sublime *are* emotional responses, the charge of a neglect of the emotions *per se* is hardly applicable. A reformulation of the charge into one of a lack of emotional intensity, does however, seem to be implicit in Murdoch's articles on the sublime. Love is 'very like' the sublime.²⁰ The latter fascinates and impresses Murdoch in a way that respect never does, partly because it includes a revelatory moment of personal humility in the face of what is other and goes beyond the bounds of the imagination. Compared to the emotional intensity of personal love or the experience of the sublime, respect seems to be bloodless, anodyne. But drawing the distinction between love and respect in these terms is problematic given that Murdochian love is an orientation of universal applicability, it is *attention* to the other, any other and not just some intimate companion. Attention can involve all manner of things from waiting, coming to someone's assistance, thinking about, remembering faithfully, really trying, and so on. Intense personal relations may provide the exemplar of attention, and an exemplar that is similar to the impressive sublime, but not all forms of attention are dramatic or intense. Praying is intense, waiting may be less so.

Connected to the charge of a lack of emotional intensity is the idea that respect is bound up with the behaviourist drift of post-war analytic philosophy, a preference for the cleanness of willed action over the messiness of the inner life. Against this, Murdoch posited a form of private moral effort (loving attention) that need not register at the level of publicly observable action. Attention is an inner effort that stands in need of no outer criterion. A Mother-in-law (M), through laudable effort, might revise her view of her daughter-in-law (D) and yet not change her (already impeccable) behaviour. Following Bagnoli, among others, I maintain that this emphasis upon inward struggle is *not*, as Murdoch believed, a significant difference between her and Kant.²¹

²⁰ *Sub.G*, 216.

²¹ Bagnoli (1999) presents the most detailed case for this widely held criticism; see also Nancy Schaubert (1999), (2001).

What Murdoch fails to give adequate attention to is the mixed *formation* of Kant's Will, its emergence out of an account of inner struggle.²² His position is that natural, biologically given, selfish inclinations vie with our capacity to act in accordance with universal rational standards. Even when agreeing about what is to be done, these two motivations compete. (Am I helping the other because of their need or because of a sense that I alone am capable of sorting things out?) On this model, respect is not primarily a block on actions but a block on inner motivations. Like the loving attention of the Murdochian mother-in-law, it may be active without any discernible change in overt behaviour. Where we have rational grounds for doing x as well as selfish ones, a shift in motive will not generate a public criterion for the inner process, but it will still involve a (morally important) triumph of respect over selfishness.

Bagnoli goes too far in *identifying* Murdochian and Kantian models of moral agency (for reasons that will emerge at the end of this chapter) but the basic point, that they are *not* differentiated in the way that Murdoch claims is well made. We can see this more clearly when we consider the resultant view of evil that they share. Both are concerned to show that evil should not be seen as radical freedom.²³ (In the manner of Milton's heroic Satan.) For a Kantian, someone like Eichman does not exercise radical freedom. Their moral failure is a cognitive failure, a loss of the inner battle between rational freedom and the determinism of natural inclinations. (I rather think that this is Milton's point too, his Satan admires mankind but loses an inner struggle before he loses the other one.) This equation of transgression with cognitive failure is the same concern that Murdoch is pursuing in her critique of existentialist heroic freedom. She is trying to present freedom as more than *do whatever thou wilt*. Instead it is something that must be constructed, fought for inwardly and imperfectly realised, but on this, she and Kant are in agreement.

This leads us into the third Murdochian charge against Kant: respect is what is due to all persons simply by virtue of their being persons. Even an Eichman is due the

²² Bagnoli (1999).

²³ Their proximity on the question of evil as cognitive failure becomes clear once discussion is not limited to the *Groundwork* (Murdoch's principal source) and the Third Critique but takes in Kant's treatment of evil in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Murdoch does not devote enough attention to the particularity of Kant's texts to produce an entirely just account of his position. Then again, this is not her priority.

respect involved in trying, judging, and condemning him *as a human* and not as *vermin*. Love, by contrast, seems to be concerned less with generic humanity than with particularity, with the way you wear your hat and sip your tea (in David Velleman's pleasing formulation).²⁴ Kant's troublesome comment in the *Groundwork* to the effect that all respect for persons is properly only respect for the moral law that their rationality instantiates, threatens to radically disassociate him from concern for the concrete individual.²⁵ Here we need to proceed with some caution. Taken on face value, this formulation posits something quite bizarre, a direct encounter with an abstraction. Dillon and Velleman have (respectively) suggested that (a) this *ought not to be*, and (b) this *is not*, Kant's understanding of respect.

Dillon revises the Kantian account to allow for a form of respect that he calls 'care respect'. (He is concerned to bridge the gap between the two great camps.) Care respect is a form of recognition of the other's humanity rather than an appraisal of particular accomplishments.²⁶ It involves having our *agency* constrained in such a way that we are disposed to promote the other's well-being. But given that the other's well-being is tied up not with our projects but with theirs, and that (for Dillon) 'we are *essentially* fully specific and concretely particular individuals', *we need to be able to think ourselves into their situation* in order to promote their projects.²⁷ Hence care respect, because it involves promoting the other's well-being, will necessarily require attention to their particularity, to what it is like to be that person. For Dillon, this form of respect, which is not about the appraisal of particular accomplishments, *can be* a form of Murdochian attention to particularity.

For Velleman, no revision of Kant is needed to bring the two into line. Nor need we appeal to Dillon's potentially intrusive disposition to help others. (This loses the metaphorical distance that Kant sees as the hallmark of respect.) Sheer recognition of the selfhood of the other, their status as an end in themselves, *although it is recognition of what everybody has*, can proceed only via their particularity because we do not encounter disembodied personhoods. In love and in respect

²⁴ Velleman, (1999), 371.

²⁵ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4.400.

²⁶ Dillon (1992) is drawing upon the distinction in Darwell (1977) between recognition respect (due to all) and appraisal respect (which registers particular accomplishment).

²⁷ Dillon (1992), 116.

(which for Velleman are analogous, mutually-informing but not identical forms of attention) we recognize the other as an end in themselves, but we do so only through their particularity. (The quirk that makes us realize that here too is another human.) It is because of this that we can mistakenly imagine that what we love is the particularity, the quirk, the fetishized body-part and not the person. We do not (normally) love or respect someone because of the way they sip their tea; we do not love someone warts and all *because of their warts*. Idiosyncrasy functions as a pointer to a unique instantiation of personhood. Because we work better with some pointers than with others, we are better able to value one person than another. We need these pointers, these contingent peculiarities.

This is a view that does have its roots in the philosophical genealogy to which Murdoch belongs. It is precisely the argument that Weil uses to link what is due to *all* humans with attention to particularity. What is sacred in the other is 'impersonal' in the sense that *all* humans have it, but this humanity *is expressed in their contingent detail*.²⁸ The point is well made. Consider, for example, the rather mundane circumstance of attending to a succession of papers presented by different speakers in a series of seminars. If our efforts go into a mechanical (rule-governed) deconstruction (or some similar response that fits all arguments) it is not clear at all that we are showing an appropriate respect for the speakers. (Even if we are quiet at the appropriate moments and smile pleasantly.) Only by attending to the particularity of their arguments are we showing to each the respect that is due to all. However faithful this treatment of respect is to Kant's intentions (and however consistent the later were) it seems to be just the sort of familiar emotional response that Murdoch appeals to when she writes about loving attention to particularity. A disturbing example of this is given in the *Metaphysics*: Dr and Mrs Goebbels are hustling their children up to bed, about to give them poison when one of the children says to a guard '*Misch, Misch, du bist ein Fisch*' [M.95]. It is the detail that makes us think of a real person who deserved better. Murdoch is making no inappropriate move when she slips or lapses into the (Kantian sounding) terminology of respect in order to give content to what she calls loving attention.

²⁸ Weil (1986), 51.

III. The Emotions are Contextualized by *Eros*

Working with this understanding that respect can be sensitive to particularity, and hence is compatible with Murdochian love, Dillon wants to subsume the latter under the former. Velleman and Bagnoli want to sit the two alongside each other as complementary but different emotions. While I am more sympathetic to the latter position (it preserves a fuller range of emotional distinctions) I want to suggest that both approaches involve a conceptual loss, a confusing elision of different roles played by the concept of 'love' in Murdoch. There is a sense in which Murdoch preserves the distinctions between love, respect, compassion, and other morally-desirable emotions, but there is also a sense in which love subsumes them all. 'Love is the general name of the quality of attachment'.²⁹ In this second sense of the term, "'Love" can be used to mean any desire or tendency' [M.342].

To set out how this is done, I will turn to the final Murdochian criticism of Kant that was set aside earlier: his account of respect (and of the sublime) redirects attention back towards the self. This is a charge that sticks. Love, as Murdoch understands it from Plato, is *other*-directed. Kantian respect is *person*-directed and, as such, it is tied up with a sense of our own value as a dignity and not a price. (We are not replaceable tokens of the human type.) This is a core difference in their grounding of good relations with others. Kant grounds good interpersonal relations on a sense of one's own value, Murdoch grounds them on a sense of one's unimportance. As Blum puts it, Murdoch endorses a self-other asymmetry, what is primarily valued is the other.³⁰ Murdochian love is a metaphorical death of the self. Her idea of moral pilgrimage is aligned with (problematic) Renaissance Neoplatonist readings of the *Phaedo* and the Orphic symbolism of *The Symposium*: love draws Orpheus into the underworld on a quest that fails because he cannot grasp that death is the price of love.³¹ This Neoplatonic conceptual linkage between love and death is

²⁹ SG, 100.

³⁰ Blum (1986), 27-8.

³¹ Murdoch's understanding of this (and her grasp of the connection of art to Platonism) owes a good deal to Edward Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* and Titian as an interpreter of Ovid. A reworking of the Orphic elements of Plato's *Symposium* structures *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974). Attempts at *katabasis*, descent into the underworld as symbolised by subways, tunnels, downward-sloping caves, basements and bomb shelters.

reproduced in both Freud and Murdoch. Love and death, *eros* and *thanatos*, are conceptually related in a way that death and respect are not.³²

In one sense of the term, love is just another familiar emotion, like jealousy, anger, pity and shame. It is something that we all experience, a complex phenomenon which may have an affective component (a racing pulse, increased perspiration, and so on) but most importantly, it will have a cognitive component: we will see the world in a particular way. In line with her visual metaphor, I will take it that the cognitive component of emotion (as Murdoch understands it) is best understood in the non-inferential terms of *seeing as* rather than belief. These sorts of particular emotional experiences, episodic and protracted, are described frequently and well in her novels. This is also what she seems to have in mind when she gives her *Sovereignty* example of the love of a mother for her son and her shifting attitude towards her daughter in law, whom she may take pains to see 'lovingly'.³³ The limits of our precision here are the limits of her exposition.³⁴ Her view of the emotions is broadly cognitive but it is also imprecise, ambiguous, metaphorical. In the *Acastos* dialogues, she writes of 'feeling-thought'.³⁵ In *Jackson's Dilemma*, she explores shame but neither there, nor in the philosophical texts does she give any definition of the form 'shame is x'. Love, in the sense of personal love, 'love in its everyday manifestations', is one emotion among others.³⁶

However, some disambiguation is possible, although care is needed to avoid producing an extension of Murdoch's account rather than a clarification of it. I will take it that within the Murdochian scheme of things, personal love *can* sit alongside respect and both can sit alongside compassion, the sympathetic Schopenhauerian

³² I have in mind the death *trieb* in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Murdoch's thanatology is detailed in the closing chapter.

³³ *IP*, 22.

³⁴ It is not obvious whether Murdoch wants us to identify particular emotions as examples of moral vision or as examples of attention. The latter is the inner effort that shapes the former. Alternatively, emotions might be treated as covering both, depending upon how 'effortful' they are. Her treatment of emotions is not detailed enough to provide a definitive answer to this question but there is no reason in principle why it should be couched exclusively in terms of one to the exclusion of the other.

³⁵ *Acastos*, 25-6.

³⁶ *GG*, 73. The *Sovereignty* also values courage and humility, *SG*, 93. The two senses of 'love' are respectively at work in the *interpersonal* discussion of D and M on the one hand, and the discussion of Platonic love of the Good, which is more *intrapersonal*, concerned with the constitution of the self, *Sovereignty*, 16-23, 99-101.

alternative to Kantian respect and duty.³⁷ (In the context of art, Murdoch connects 'realistic vision' with 'compassion' and with justice.)³⁸ These are valued and, in a broader sense, they are 'loving' emotions. They are favoured orientations of the self and their differences can be explored and *finessed*. We might formulate the distinction in terms of a Kantian metaphor: respect is an emotion that preserves distance while personal love involves a desire for proximity, for being closer; compassion involves something more like an identification with the suffering of an other.³⁹ To this Kantian metaphor of distance it is sometimes objected that love involves keeping one's distance, and this is true enough, but such an exile is self-enforced and difficult, it may negate actual proximity but not the desire for it. (The objection flows out of a failure to differentiate between desire and intention.)⁴⁰

We can see how in-tune this metaphor of distance is with Murdoch's way of thinking when we reflect that her concept of love is a privileged one precisely because it involves a desire for proximity. The pilgrim loves the Good (perfection), and desires to move closer to it. What underpins and allows such emotional parity as there is between personal love, respect and compassion, what places them all on the same level as loving attitudes towards the other, is an erotic model of the self in which we are on a pilgrimage towards the good, our desire is channelled by these emotions and sometimes by emotions of a much baser sort.

By relating love to moral pilgrimage Murdoch uses 'love' in a second and broader sense. (I am tempted to write of love-1 and love-2, it strikes me as a clearer but unMurdochian way of putting the matter.) Love in this broader sense is

³⁷ Kant claims in the *Groundwork* that acting from sympathy may be laudable but lacks specifically-moral worth. Schopenhauer's *On the Basis of Morality* champions a more sympathetic, compassionate response to the other and is highly regarded in the earlier sections of the *Metaphysics* (Chapters 3 and 5, esp. 63-5 for compassion). This balances out the interest in duty in later chapters (10-12 and 17).

³⁸ SG, 85; *Acastos*, 28.

³⁹ Although Blum is keen to promote Schopenhauerian compassion, and it is favoured in Weil's *Notebooks*, compassion is a bad candidate for an *exemplary* Murdochian emotion when it is understood in Schopenhauerian terms: it undermines not only the self-other asymmetry, but any self-other barrier: 'the bad (that is, uncompassionate) man everywhere feels a thick partition between himself and everything outside...the good character, on the other hand, lives in an external world that is homogeneous with his own true being. the others are not a non-ego for him, but an "I once more".' Schopenhauer, *BM*, 211-2.

⁴⁰ A good example of this in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, is the relationship between Hilda and her son Peter. She keeps her distance but still longs (desires) to be close. Desire for proximity is not the same as having the intention to bring it about.

sometimes referred to as 'eros' in Murdoch's texts. However, there is no rigorous division of labour between the two terms. Her preference in the philosophical texts (and less so in the novels) is (confusingly) to use 'love' in both senses. In the (already Platonic) *Sovereignty*, 'eros' is avoided in favour of 'love', but from *The Fire and the Sun* onwards into the *Metaphysics*, it appears with greater frequency.⁴¹ Ambiguities apart, the broader sense of love as *eros* is used to contextualize all emotional experience, including interpersonal love, the experience of which may be much more intermittent. We are continuously erotic beings, irrespective of whether we are *in love* or not. Love in this second sense, is not one more *orientation* of the self, as *eros*, love is a metaphor for that which is oriented, i.e. a fundamental metaphor for the *constitution* of the self.

This is where Murdoch is at her most Freudian. She is, as Velleman notes, critical of Freud, but what Velleman omits to point out is that while she is critical of his egocentric therapeutic proposals she does not attack, but rather embraces, a variant of the Freudian hydraulic metaphor of *libido*.⁴² Unable to reduce human complexity to neurophysiology, Freud introduced the metaphor of a more or less fixed quantity of intentional desire that could be cathected (channelled) this way or that. Because the quantity is fixed, it is subject to a principle of displacement.⁴³ Desire for one object supplants desire for another. For Murdoch, such desire is a more or less fixed quantity, but varies qualitatively depending upon its objects. The desire which is directed towards some part of a woman's body is not qualitatively the same as the desire that is directed towards the Christian God. Murdoch thinks that it makes sense to say that Good 'purifies the desire which seeks it' and that 'Desire for what is corrupt and worthless, the degradation of love, its metamorphosis into ambition, vanity, cruelty, greed, jealousy, hatred, or the parched demoralising deserts of its absence, are phenomena often experienced and readily recognised' [M.496-7]. Love, in the sense of *eros* is metamorphosed into this emotion or that; it is channelled,

⁴¹ She makes three attempts to provide a general account of *eros* in the *Metaphysics*: at the end of Chapter 1 (pages 21-25); at the end of Chapter 11 (pages 342-6) and in the brief tail-ending Chapter 17 (pages 494-7).

⁴² Velleman (1999), 249, n.34. claims that his rejection of Freudian love because it is conative is 'an attempt to make clear and explicit what is implicit in Murdoch's brief allusions to him'.

⁴³ Freud's early *Project for a Scientific Psychology* even uses a terminology of attention. At the time of Weil's writings, but not Murdoch's earliest texts, this text was unpublished. It should also be noted that libido in Freud is only fixed at distinct stages of sexual development, between which it alters.

moved, deployed in various (good and bad) ways. 'As in Freud, 'cure' lies in the redeployment of energy.' [M.24].

Under the influence of Simone Weil, who is responsible for this promiscuous association of Freud and Plato, Murdoch treats the hydraulic metaphor as an appropriate way of representing what we are. Emotions are all forms of *eros*, channelled this way or that.⁴⁴ Although the concept of *eros* is clearly ancestral to *libido*, I am far from endorsing this Weilian-influenced reading of Plato. The hydraulic metaphor is conspicuous in the *Republic* 485d-e (cited in *The Fire and the Sun*) 'we know that whenever any man's desires flow in full current towards any one object, like a stream that has had a channel dug for it, towards all other objects they flow the more feebly'; and at *Phaedrus* 251E where the soul of the lover 'channels the stream of desire into herself as through an irrigation trench, releasing the pent-up waters.'⁴⁵ However, Freud's discussion of libido owes a good deal to the idea of modelling human consciousness upon 19th century dynamics. It is, in a sense, a psychodynamic model, a modern conception of energy rather than merely a flowing current. As such, assimilating *libido* and *eros* seems somewhat ahistorical. The idea of a sexualised erotic stream also seems to play a more consistent role in Freud and Murdoch than it does in Plato. In both it is troubling. We may be inclined to reflect that *surely people are not really like that?*

IV. Eros and the Self

Considered from a Murdochian point of view, there are also two conspicuous problems with the metaphor of energy flows: the energy part and the flow part. Firstly, dynamics is a branch of mechanics and Murdoch is trying to account for a human freedom that contrasts with mechanical response. This metaphor seems to promote a very mechanical view of persons. Murdoch tackles this problem directly not by ignoring the disadvantages but by suggesting that the advantages outweigh them. 'Eros is sexual energy as spiritual energy. Freud's libido is also a concept of the *energy* of the *Seele* or *Psyche* which can make or mar the life of the individual. Our life problem is one of the transformation of energy. Here too there is a contrast

⁴⁴ Weil (1952), 280.

⁴⁵ I have used the translation of this passage given in Nussbaum (1996), 30. It conveys the relevant nuances.

between the Platonic religious concept and its quasi-scientific modern version...Some modern views of freedom, aware perhaps of an anti-personal deterministic use of the idea of fundamental energy, emphasize discontinuity...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' [M.24-5]. Against the problematic deterministic overtones of energy, we have to set its advantageous overtones of continuity and the idea of 'shifting attachments', i.e. the real and familiar experience that we all have of displacement. "Eros" is the continuous operation of spiritual energy, desire, intellect, love' [M.496].

Her second problem with the metaphor relates to the gradualism of personal change. The imagery of a fluid energy may generate a misleading impression of the ease of personal transformation or misrepresent emotional responses as in some way voluntary. Hence, Murdoch builds in what I will call a principle of inertia. The terminology is not her own, but I think it makes sense of her position and its sources, particularly Weil and Sartre who deploy metaphors whose content is, I believed, carried over into Murdochian *eros*. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre argues that even our tastes (whether we like oysters or a particular style of dress) represents (expresses) our choice of being. Our fascinated dislike for the viscous reveals the character of our self-conscious freedom as continually under threat of becoming bogged down, trapped or engulfed by the sticky thickness of the world. The viscous (*visqueux*) as Murdoch opts to favourably translate the term 'represents in itself a dawning triumph of the solid over the liquid' or 'a threatening mode of being that must be avoided', it is 'the invisible suction of the past' a gradualist constraint upon freedom, 'its fluidity exists in slow motion'.⁴⁶ Sartre is also, albeit rather vaguely interested in comparing viscosity and a conception of the eroticized self as constituted by Freudian libido. It is the kind of conception to which he contrasts fluid 'choice of being'.⁴⁷ Sartrean self-consciousness is subject to a danger of collapsing into viscosity,

⁴⁶ Sartre, *EN*, 607, 611, 610, 607 respectively. Hazel Barnes translates *visqueux* more pejoratively as 'slimy'. However, this will not do for Murdoch, she likes the imagery of viscosity, *Sartre*, Chapter 1 and M.154.

⁴⁷ Sartre makes a passing contrast between viscosity and the William James metaphor of the 'stream of consciousness', but this is a metaphor that Sartre was never very happy with, preferring to treat consciousness as a nothing, hence free. (An approach with deep roots in the tradition of Augustine: God is omnipotent he does not share his power, hence man's freedom to create evil is not real power, but negativity, an ability only to undo.)

a condition at odds with the recognition of freedom.⁴⁸ If consciousness is viscous, it will be subject to a principle of inertia, and this is a view of the self that Sartre believes we should avoid. Roquentin in his novel *La Nausée* feels bogged down in Bouville (*mud-town*) where it is difficult to generate real movement.⁴⁹ He must escape. For Murdoch, such an escape would amount to a flight from the human condition. Our erotic configuration changes only slowly and with much effort.

The same imagery of being bogged down in the mud reappears in Murdoch's *The Bell*. (The forging of a new bell is a long-standing literary image of personal change.) In this novel the bell of the title, the voice of love (the *vox amor*) is stuck in a river bed and must be raised or else it will be replaced by an entirely new bell. At this point the Sartrean metaphor of being bogged down joins to a Weilian one of a necessary struggle against gravity. (Morally, we have a tendency to fall downwards.) What results from this multiply-layered picturing of personal change as subject to inertia, is deeply ambiguous, it involves speculations that, as Murdoch remarks, may 'live near to the edge of nonsense' [M.344]. Near to the edge, but not quite over it. (The danger of 'a kind of nonsense' is taken to be the price of 'trying really hard to get a glimpse of an idea'.)⁵⁰ Sudden change, except where it is the cumulative result of long-standing effort, is ruled out by Murdoch. We are not free in the radical, existentialist (romantic) sense. The complex fabric of our being (another and rather different metaphor) can be reweoven only piecemeal and slowly. (Like Neurath's ship that must be rebuilt at sea.) Perhaps we are in danger here of introducing too many metaphors, but this too follows Murdoch's own overlaying of metaphors which intimate an underlying position that is pulled together not by any explicit statement that escapes from metaphor but only by the metaphor of eros itself. A reconfiguration of the self is a reconfiguration of *eros*. (Later we will encounter it as an *ascent*.) What Murdoch relies upon is the reader's ability to make *enough* sense of *eros* to go on.

What we are, on the Murdochian account, is largely conative, a system of pre-existent desire, subject to transformational constraints. It may be shifted towards

⁴⁸ 'There is no inertia in consciousness', Sartre, *EN*, 61.

⁴⁹ Strictly speaking, Sartre reserves the term 'inertia' for solids, the 'in itself' and not the viscous, which only threatens the 'for itself' with entrapment and reduction to solidity. I am using the term to suggest that change is constrained or encounters resistance, that it takes place 'in slow motion'.

⁵⁰ *Acastos*, 25.

or away from objects but exists independently of and prior to them.⁵¹ If John did not meet and fall in love with Mary, his *eros* would be directed in some other way and towards some other object or objects. Episodic, intermittent and transitory emotions such as respect, compassion and personal love as well as those of ambition, vanity, cruelty, greed and jealousy are to be understood as contextualized by the continuously erotic character of our being. As such, they must be seen as conative as well as cognitive. Without being more precise than Murdoch's texts allow, I think we can safely say that a Murdochian emotional experience will have affective, cognitive and conative dimensions. Emotions direct, channel or help to shift, desire. As such they are ways of seeing or (if they involve 'effort') they are forms of attention that alter (improve) our ways of seeing. This strongly conative aspect of Murdochian love as *eros*, downplayed or denied, in Kantian-inclined compatibilist readings (and that of the incompatibilist Blum). It is at the heart of Murdoch's Platonic view of inwardness.⁵² 'Let us call it Eros. Art comes from the deep soul where a great force lives, and this force is sex and love and desire - desire for power, desire for possession, sexual desire, desire for beauty, desire for knowledge, desire for God - what makes us good, or bad - and without this force there is no art, and no science either, and no - no man- without Eros man is a ghost. But with Eros he can be - either a demon or - Socrates.'⁵³

The self is identified with this system of desire and with its more idiosyncratic (contingent) channelling and directing network of concepts and images. *Eros* is present within all humans but it is configured in unique ways. Morality is not, as in Kant, about negating desire, it concerns (to borrow a phrase from Nussbaum) a *therapy of desire*, or (back with Murdoch) 'a progressive redemption of desire', a matter of its gradual reorientation away from the fantasy-generating ego and towards what is other [M.25]. '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' [M.497].

⁵¹ This emphasis upon desire places Murdoch close to a good deal of 'continental' philosophy.

⁵² Velleman (1999) is most emphatic about this. It is at the core of his attack on Freud and what he sees as analytic accounts of love which repeat his assumptions by making love property-dependent. It is also the position of Bagnoli (1999).

⁵³ *Acastos*, 53.

However, even if we allow that a form of (particularity regarding) respect is one among other favoured 'loving' ways of channelling Murdochian *eros*, there is still another, more abstract and impersonal kind of respect that her approach leaves room for. (The kind that her earlier texts are so dismissive about.) Whereas the *Sovereignty* argues for the primacy of love over this kind of abstract, impersonal respect, the *Metaphysics*, as a safeguard against the dangers of private erotic failure, reintroduces a secondary and clearly Kantian tier of morality that consists of public duties (as requirements to act in ways that may go against preformed inclinations or desires) and axioms (inflexible rules about what is to be done and not to be done).⁵⁴ A different kind of respect, more akin to the *Groundwork's* impersonal respect (for the moral law) may be located here, albeit in tension with the system of erotic motivation. This kind of respect goes against our inclinations.

Murdoch writes of the occasional need for efforts of 'will' rather than gradualist 'attention'.⁵⁵ Only the latter is in line with our core, direct desires. This way of separating attention from will and *eros* from duty does create problems about how the two levels of morality are then to be related. (They are certainly not to be understood as competing standards. Duty may compete only with actual inclination, not with the Good.) It also gives more detailed content to the earlier charge that some Kantian-influenced approaches tend to reduce selfhood down to a pinpoint of will. The content of this charge now becomes one of eliminating desire (and not just emotion) from the concept of self. In spite of Kant's conception of the moral struggle as an inner struggle, and in spite of the emotional status of respect, he identifies the truest self with a capacity for freedom that operates *at the expense of desire*. The Kantian approach does tend to sideline what she views as the basic stuff of the self. Murdochian inwardness need not be intense or dramatic but it must be desirous, conative, *erotic*. At the core of her conception of love is a Platonic eroticization of the self. The core problems of Murdochian love are consequently those of Platonic *eros* and its uneasy relationship with her other commitments.

⁵⁴ This tagging on of an account of public duty, resulting in a two-level morality (private pilgrimage and public duty) is a standard move for eroticized mystical theories. It differs from standard analytic two-tiered moralities typified by R.M.Hare's *Moral Thinking*, in prioritising the personal, spiritualized level rather than deflating it through a justification in terms of a more basic universalizable level of moral reasoning.

⁵⁵ See *Metaphysics* Chapters 10, 12 and 17 for duty and axioms. Murdoch's exemplar for the scope of duty and axioms is the field of politics (Chapter 12).

Chapter 8: Moral Progress as an Ascent of Eros

Murdoch is hostile towards our tendency to be wrapped up in ourselves. An example of this is her criticism of the Kantian sublime. Although it involves a moment of humility in the face of what is other and unimaginably great, attention is subsequently directed back to the (fragile, defiant) self. Murdoch holds that in the sublime (and more generally in the Romantic attitude towards nature) an apparent fascination with what is other conceals an ultimately egocentric preoccupation.¹ She cannot afford for her own account of love to operate in the same way. I will suggest that it does.

I. The Ascent of Eros

Murdoch advocates a moral 'pilgrimage' that is a reworking of the Platonic idea of an *ascent of eros*. Such an ascent is a progressive improvement in the orientation and character of love. Although Murdoch's concept of love includes something akin to Kantian respect for the other it is the Platonic idea of a progressive redemption (a purification) of desire that sits at its heart. '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.' [M.497]. For Murdoch, to love is to desire. This makes sexual attraction a better exemplar of love than maternal care.² When appropriately disciplined and directed, this desire provides the impetus for moral-cognitive improvement. In Plato, this improvement is depicted as a forward movement out of the darkness and into the light (in the Cave metaphor of the Republic). Elsewhere it is an upwards movement: in the *Symposium*, we are trying to ascend a ladder of love and to reach ultimate beauty; in the *Phaedrus* we are trying to regrow our atrophied wings so that we can fly up towards the form of the Good. We advance or ascend in pursuit of what we lack, in pursuit of a metaphorically lost completeness, and ultimately (if sometimes unwittingly) in pursuit of perfection.³

¹ See above, Chapter 4 on Romanticism.

² As a result of this, feminist appropriations of Murdochian love which draw upon the exemplar of maternal nurturing, especially Ruddick (1980), have to be treated with caution.

³ This deficiency model whereby we love something that we lack is first set out in the *Lysis* in the

The orientation of the imagery varies but in each case advance is not cumulative. As we move onwards or upwards, less adequate objects of desire are left behind and seen as the limited realities that they are. In the *Symposium*, we begin with desire for beauty in another's body and move on to recognition of beauty in their character. This turns out to be no different from beauty in the character of others in general and leads us on to a more impersonal conception of beauty that is to be appreciated in nature and scholarship. Finally, we ascend to love for beauty as such, for the form of the beautiful which sits at the top of a hierarchy of love objects. Love is a trickster in the sense that we are duped into pursuing this distant -and perhaps initially unappealing- goal by a successive shifting of the goalposts. A final shift occurs between the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* where beauty is recognized to be only an accessible introduction to the ineffable and even higher love object, the Good itself.

The *Phaedrus* relates moral ascent directly to the Platonic three-part soul. We are desirous, divided selves, like a charioteer and two horses each with their own idea of where it is best to go. What we desire depends upon which part of our soul is in charge. Plato occasionally suggests that the struggle is for control over a limited supply of *eros* which flows towards this at the expense of that. *Eros*, in this sense, is akin (and ancestral) to the hydraulic metaphor of *libido* in Freud. Both Plato and Freud recognize the continuity between sexual desire and more abstract, intellectualized desires. But whereas Freudian *libido* has its proper home in the bargain basement of the soul, *eros* is an upwardly mobile principle, initially discernible in its more sexual manifestations but rising out of, and above, them. It is a human striving to *return* to perfection. As *erotic* beings, we are always going home.

Now consider Murdoch. She has no fixed tripartite division of inwardness but she does try to restore the concept of love to favour, a move which she begins in the mid-1950s and which culminates in an unambiguous commitment to erotic ascent in 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' (1967). Its final pages paraphrase the Platonic metaphor. 'Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves. False love moves to false good. False love embraces false death. When true good is loved, even impurely or by accident, the quality of the love is automatically

context of *philia* as familial love. The Platonic versus Socratic status of the *Lysis* is disputed and Murdoch avoids reference to it. *Eros* in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* nevertheless continues to presuppose ontological lack (*endeia*).

refined, and when the soul turns towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened. Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it.⁴ From the start, there is a clear Freudian-influence in this reading of *eros*, with particular emphasis placed upon the theme of displacement or *transference*. The reading is open to support by appeal to Neoplatonic mystics such as John of the Cross who also draws upon Plato via Plotinus and shares much the same idea, 'it is not possible to direct your eyes towards one thing without withdrawing them from another'.⁵ We love *this* at the expense of *that*; we love self at the expense of others or others at the expense of self and we do so because of the finite supply of love (care, concern, *eros*) that we have at our disposal.⁶ As an energy metaphor *eros* may seem a little contrived and must not be overextended to the point where it appears other than metaphorical (as a piece of primitive pseudo-science) but the phenomenon it tries to capture, the personal experience of displacement, is entirely familiar. The metaphor, however problematic, is related to a real process.

Although 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' marks Murdoch's open commitment to a form of Platonism, it avoids the use of *eros* and refers instead to 'energy'. As the concluding essay of the *Sovereignty* it is set within a context that is already heavily metaphorical and Murdoch is initially more than a little defensive about her experimental way of writing, appealing repeatedly to the claim that metaphors are fundamental modes of understanding and that without them we have conceptual loss. Metaphors are seen as being *morally charged* and the attempt to do away with them is taken to be an extension of the (flawed) separation of facts from values. Not only does the text deploy the recurring metaphor of (a) 'energy': with the psyche described as a 'powerful energy system';⁷ it also uses three other important metaphors: (b) 'reorientation' away from self;⁸ which is necessary to (c) pierce the 'veil' or 'cloud' that surrounds self and cuts us off from reality;⁹ and thereby (d)

⁴ SG, 100.

⁵ St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk.3, Ch.22. line 2.

⁶ For an example of the finitude of *eros* see FS, 38. This Freudian reading of Plato follows Simone Weil, reorientation of love is 'transference', Weil (1951) 122-3.

⁷ SG, 76, 81.

⁸ SG, 90.

⁹ SG, 77, 82, 86, 91.

improve (purify) our quality of consciousness in a process sporadically referred to as 'unselfing'.¹⁰ (This Weilian term has caught the imagination of Murdoch readers and I will treat it as singularly appropriate even though Murdoch is sparing in its use.)

Within this network of morally-charged metaphors, the concepts of love and Good 'play different roles'. The concept of 'Good' unifies the virtues by setting a single goal that love drives us to pursue.¹¹ 'Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves.'¹² (Love of the right sort.) Murdoch tries to work with and to make sense of this Platonic-derived claim that we are akin to a system of *eros* that is misdirected, turned towards the wrong sorts of objects. Beauty is taken to provide an accessible clue to remedying our misdirection, it clears the mind by providing a way out of selfish fantasy. (The central character in *The Bell*, Dora Greenfield, stands before the Gainsboroughs in the National Gallery and clears her mind.) Art 'to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul'.¹³ Art, or indeed any *techne* or skill, is taken to be inseparable from the recognition that results are earned by virtuous effort directed towards what is other.

The exemplary virtue which Murdoch repeatedly appeals to in both 'The Sovereignty of Good Over other Concepts' and in the subsequent essay 'On "God" and "Good"', is *humility*, a recognition of our own unimportance that is truly courageous.¹⁴ We make ourselves less magnetic, less engrossing and this constitutes and/or assists in the redirection of *eros*. The ultimate form of humility is acceptance of mortality. Metaphors apart, there *is* an unnecessary ambiguity here. Murdoch's formulations and metaphors, particularly the borrowing of the veil or cloud imagery from a certain well known work of English mysticism, strongly suggest that her target is the general one of *egocentricity* rather than the more limited problem of *selfishness* but she does not separate the two and this is a potential source of confusion. For the sake of clarity I will take it that Murdoch is primarily concerned with egocentricity, with the *fat relentless ego*.¹⁵ This can be seen in her directional metaphors and

¹⁰ SG, 82.

¹¹ Again, the unity of the virtues is Platonic, and associated particularly with the *Protagoras*.

¹² SG, 100.

¹³ FS, 83.

¹⁴ In the *Phaedo* and the *Laches* Socrates exemplifies true courage, In the *Laches* and *Protagoras* courage is knowledge. For problems in Murdoch's view of humility see the Afterward below.

¹⁵ For the difference between egocentricity and selfishness, see Chapter 2 above.

formulations. 'The direction of attention should properly be outward, away from the self';¹⁶ 'Love of Russian leads me away from myself';¹⁷ the task is to 'forget oneself'; 'The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self';¹⁸ what is needed is not the right kind of attention to self, but 'reorientation';¹⁹ 'The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself'.²⁰ Contemplation of Good is recommended as 'an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection'.²¹ The recurring image here is one of looking outwards towards what lies beyond or *outside* the cloud of egocentric unknowing. This is not just a matter of curtailing one particular form of egocentricity, that class of egocentric modes of attention that we might call selfish. It is about curtailing egocentricity as such.

Although drawing upon mystical and Neoplatonic traditions, Murdoch breaks decisively with a key mystical theme, that one must turn away from the world in order to create a void that is ready to receive God. (*Attachment* to what is worldly is to be broken before we will be able to connect up with the divine.) Consider John of the Cross, 'he who loves something else along with God undoubtedly makes something little of God for he weighs in the balance with God something that is far distant from God'.²² There is 'darkness' which is 'attachment' to things, and there is 'light', which is God, and these are contraries.²³ The mystical turn to God begins with a turn inwards to a knowledge of one's own 'parched' state.²⁴ Once the things of the world are removed from view, the void in one's life (Plato's ontological *endeia* or lack) can be seen more clearly or experienced more purely. Such a turn inwards, even if it is preliminary to something else -and even if this something else is Good and not God- is rejected by Murdoch. 'The withdrawal into self, which much mysticism evidently

¹⁶ GG, 58.

¹⁷ SG, 87.

¹⁸ SG, 89.

¹⁹ SG, 90.

²⁰ SG, 91.

²¹ SG, 99.

²² St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk.1, Ch.5. line 4.

²³ St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk.1, Ch.4. line 2.

²⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Bk.1, Ch.12, line 2.

involves, may be an ultimate deification of egoism.' Yet, in line with respect for the tradition, this is something that she qualifies, 'So must all "genuine" mystics return to the world, serve others, exhibit virtues? Not necessarily. Yet forgetting the world may be more spiritually dangerous than returning to it' [M.70]. Her point is not to deny that some mystics make it out of egocentricity, but rather to emphasise that their way out is not her way out. For Murdoch, it is precisely the just loving gaze directed towards the things and others of the world that is our escape route from our default, and at times intractable, preoccupation with self.

II. Two Kinds of Perfectionism

In spite of Murdoch's emphasis upon attention to what is other, Martha Nussbaum has levelled (rather than set out in detail) the charge that 'Murdoch is so preoccupied with the goings-on of the inner world that she seems almost to have forgotten about the difference that action can make; and the resulting obsession with one's own states looks strangely like egoism, in a world in which a forthright commitment to action can make the difference to people who are suffering, no matter whether the agents' intentions are pure.'²⁵ I will contend that a version of this charge is well-founded.²⁶

My argument here will be the following: (i) if a Murdochian ascent of *eros* involves us in a preoccupation with self then it is egocentric; and (ii) a Murdochian ascent of *eros* does involve us in such a preoccupation. I will focus upon the second of these claims, however there is a possible challenge to the first that needs briefly to be dealt with. Suppose we were to say that preoccupation with self as such is not a problem for Murdoch, that what matters is her promotion of the right kind of preoccupation with self or preoccupation with self as an initial step towards something else. (Something of a higher moral level.) My response to such a claim is that this is not the way in which Murdoch's metaphors are set up. They are always

²⁵ Nussbaum (2001). Martha Nussbaum habitually writes about Murdoch as a critic of *egocentricity* and not just *selfishness*. She advances the charge of evading vulnerability in both her substantial review of Peter Conradi's Murdoch biography and in Nussbaum (1996) 41-2.

²⁶ What I have in mind is a charge levelled by Vlastos (1973) against Plato but modified for Murdoch's Platonism, the charge that the primary erotic focus is not ultimately upon the other.

urging us to begin by directing our concern towards what is other, 'The direction of attention should properly be outward, away from the self'.²⁷

It might be replied that these are only metaphors, but here we need to take account of Murdoch's attitude towards metaphors. They are not mere ornamentation, they are (at least in some cases) to be treated as irreducible modes of understanding. If Murdoch is going to allow that there is a legitimate form of preoccupation with self then she is not entitled to use metaphors which point in an entirely different direction. An outward, worldly orientation is part of the distinctiveness of Murdoch's standpoint, not only when compared to self-attending viewpoints such as existentialism, but also when compared to her principle influences such as Plato and mysticism and related approaches towards morality. Unlike the mystics, she opposes an initial turn inwards; unlike Plato, she does not formulate courage as a way to protect the self from the harm of cowardice; unlike Weilian-influenced Wittgensteinians, such as Gaita and Dilman, she is deeply hostile towards guilt as a self-attending emotion; and unlike all of these traditions, she is reticent about any deliberate pursuit of self-knowledge. Murdoch continually urges us to reorient our attention outwards and I will take it that she means what she says.

We are to attend to what is other, and to do so with the aspiration of attaining perfect clarity of moral vision. To this end, Murdoch adopts art as an analogue (sometimes an instance) of morals. While she is interested in the artwork itself, particularly (but not exclusively) Renaissance art, and especially Titian's allegorical works, it is the *standpoint* of the artist and the viewer which provides her analogue of the struggle for exemplary moral vision: 'virtues as well as talents are required of the artist'.²⁸ What she has in mind is the patient, but emotionally engaged, loving, discernment of what is other, 'great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self...selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen'.²⁹ This is a Murdochian point which Martha Nussbaum endorses and has developed, perhaps more lucidly, in relation to the novel. The moral significance of the novel (archetypally of the 19th century realist novel) does not reduce down to the

²⁷GG, 58.

²⁸SG, 84.

²⁹GG, 64.

philosophical content of the narrative (the way that it deals with this or that moral issue e.g. the way that *Hard Times* deals with utilitarianism). What is morally exemplary is the way that the good author and the good reader take the time and make the effort to understand the characters. If we were to do the same in everyday life perhaps fewer people would get hurt.³⁰

Be that as it may, there is something missing here in all this emphasis upon what is other. I will try to set out just what is missing by drawing a distinction between two sorts of perfectionism both of which are operative in Murdoch's texts. Suppose that I am an artist. I try to paint a portrait in the realistic manner that Murdoch admires most (like Titian, Bronzino or even Gainsborough). I lay on the oil and scrape it away by turns. The result never seems quite right. I try and try to be faithful to what I see, even though I am aware of the limits of my talent and the seductive power of personal fantasy (the desire to be clever or fashionable, the temptation to produce a work that panders to the moral weakness of the client). I am aware of certain dangers but try not to focus on them and I may be successful enough for someone to remark that I am caught up in the art work and in its fidelity to the person being represented. Although falling short, I aim for a perfectly just representation of what I see.³¹ This is a perfectionism of sorts. I will call it **object-centred perfectionism** where the object in question is taken to be someone or something else. I have no problem with this kind of perfectionism. (Quite the contrary.)

Now consider what I am like when I merely want *to be a perfect artist*. Suppose I aim to fulfil my old teacher's instruction to reach my full potential and be the best of them all. I recall him looking over my shoulder and mumbling, 'be ye therefore perfect'. If I am an artist of this sort then my labours are spent in an effort to move closer to some ideal standard of artistry. (An ideal that may itself be understood vaguely or with some precision, for the present purpose it does not matter which.) What I produce along the way may be good or bad, it may be faithful to what there is

³⁰ Nussbaum (1990) and more generally her *Love's Knowledge* which is more ready to acknowledge the philosophical status of novels than Murdoch is. Nussbaum also adopts hostile stance towards situating the effort of attention within a context of fallenness and perfectionism. This is particularly evident in her approach towards Samuel Beckett.

³¹ I will set aside Murdoch's problematic treatment of this as the hallmark of the best sort of art even though there appear to be plausible counterexamples. Picasso did not, in any straightforward sense, look upon his women with a just and loving gaze.

or it may be self-indulgent. What matters is that my efforts are geared towards personal transformation. It is almost as if I am the true art work. Perhaps the world is better for having artists of this second sort in it. This may or may not be the case. Either way, I will call this **person-centred perfectionism** and remark that it has a redemptive emphasis. There is an obvious sense in which this second sort of perfectionism involves a preoccupation with self. I view this kind of perfectionism as problematic.

Which of these two perfectionisms is the more Murdochian? In one respect Murdoch is advancing the first sort: we are to attend and try to attain perfect vision of what is other. But what we are in danger of doing here is being misled into a decontextualisation of attention, a removal of individual episodic efforts to discern from the continuous, ongoing moral life of someone engaging in a project of unselfing.³² to see this, consider Murdoch's example of D and M. A mother-in-law M combats her petty desires for possession (her jealousy) by looking for the goodness in her daughter-in-law and finds that there is a great deal of it. If Murdoch's M is only an object-centred perfectionist then matters end there. If, on the other hand, she is trying to unself, she must keep up or repeat the effort in other contexts and as part of a larger process of redeeming her desires, shifting them steadily upwards from their normal, base starting point. While there is a strong component of object-centred perfectionism in the Murdochian account, it fits into a context that is set by the broader life-project of a person-centred perfectionism.

Insofar as a conscious process of unselfing is undertaken, we may say that M will have to cultivate, or make various efforts in line with, a second-order desire for an ideal, redeemed, configuration of her first-order desires. (Again, the understanding of what constitutes an ideal configuration may shift and improve as M makes progress.) Such a Murdochian pilgrim will have a clear preoccupation with their own moral rectitude. Raimond Gaita suggests that for Plato 'the form of the Good is not an object of pursuit but that in the light of which we and our pursuits are judged'.³³ By contrast, Murdoch is much more deeply rooted in the mystical tradition of seeking a unity of likenesses, i.e. of in some sense becoming *akin to* perfection. In Plotinus

³² Blum (1988) risks such a decontextualisation of Murdochian attention by classifying her moral exemplar as saintly, but more of a 'responder' than a pursuer of an 'ideal'. He stresses Murdoch's cognitive side at the expense of her emphasis on desire.

³³ Gaita (1991), 202.

and John of the Cross we look to God and his image is imprinted on our eye, (where *eros* is the eye of the desirer).³⁴ For Murdoch, as for the mystic, the Good is not only a perfect illumination, it is something that we (metaphorically) move closer to in the sense of becoming more like it or embodying it to a greater degree. According to Murdoch 'For all our frailty the command 'be perfect' has sense for us'.³⁵ That is to say, our lifelong project is one of person-centred perfectionism and it involves a second-order desire for an ideal configuration of our *eros*.

Here, it might be objected that a second-order desire for an ideal personal configuration creates no problems.³⁶ Perhaps we might hold that it is only first-order desires which are problematic when directed towards the self. This is a specialised version of the 'right kind of preoccupation with self' objection criticised above. Like the latter, it is a view which is difficult to associate with Murdoch or to read into her texts. Consider what proximity to perfection involves. Insofar as we have perfect clarity of vision the confusions, messy uncertainties, and moral ambiguities of ordinary human life will have been overcome. But it is precisely a desire for such a condition which Murdoch holds to be partly responsible for puritanism, for our attempted shortcuts out of everyday contingent messiness. The puritan mistakes both the difficulty of the task and character of the final condition. (Simone Weil, for a similar reason treated the past as epistemically privileged, our thought about the future is much less constrained by a sense of reality, 'To come out of the cave, to be detached, means to cease to make the future our objective.')³⁷ For an example of Murdoch's own awareness of the dangers of a desire for personal perfection we can look at her growing reservations about the clerical life. Her wise Abbess in *The Bell* (1958) was an unseen, somewhat hazy but eminent presence. By the time of *Henry and Cato* (1976), the advanced pilgrim who lived a clerical life was in danger of living a lie, in danger, that is, of a world-denying escapism. A blanket Murdochian absolution of second-order desire for personal perfection does not look at all likely.

³⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5, 2-3.

³⁵ *SG*, 90.

³⁶ Given the unity of the virtues, it may make more sense to speak of a single second-order desire rather than a cluster of them (one for each of the separate virtues and the configuration of desire that they involve).

³⁷ Weil (1963), 19; Cockburn (1997b), 328.

Alternatively, it might be objected that the existence of saints and heroes (good people but not perfect ones) shows that whatever the difficulties of a second-order desire for personal perfection, they are not insuperable. I certainly would not want to claim that there are no saints or heroes, that such people simply do not exist or that they must necessarily be at fault for a covert, difficult-to-detect smugness. 'The contingently existing saint who, if we were ever fortunate enough to *meet* him or her, might stand to us in the guise of a demonstration (to show it can be done), might be some quiet unpretentious worker, a schoolteacher or a mother, or better still an aunt. Mothers have many egoistic satisfactions and much power. In the activity of such workers egoism has disappeared *unobtrusively* into the service of others. The egoism of the good artist or craftsman is "burnt up" in the product' [M.429].

If there are such people then surely there is a way to become one of them. Perhaps so, but the existence of a way does not by itself establish that it has to be Murdoch's way. Moreover, the claim that such people exist is less problematic than the claim that there is any sort of *deliberate* way to become like them. What runs deep within Murdoch's position is this problematic assumption, that saintliness, if not the actual attainment of perfection, may be a workable project. What is problematic about this assumption is that some projects which take realisable conditions as their goals turn out to be self-defeating. The insomniac who tries to sleep without medication will be familiar with this; as will the dedicated pursuer of happiness (which often comes unsought if it comes at all); another example is the Buddhist who desires to extinguish all desire (a paradox which has helped to shape the Zen tradition).³⁸ An appeal to the existence of good people does not at all show us how they got there, it does not 'show it can be done' where *it* is Murdochian unselfing or indeed any sort of deliberate project. Perhaps unintentional sainthood is the only sort there is. This does not exclude the possibility of trying to become saintly and then getting caught up in something else (such as the problems of others) and in the process inadvertently achieving one's earlier goal. Indeed, I am inclined to think of this as a more plausible account of a real process, one where an initial preoccupation with self really is 'burned up' in a concern for others. However, this would not be a conscious Murdochian moral ascent but something quite different.

³⁸ For self-defeating desires see Elster (1985).

III. Personal Redemption and the Needs of the Other

A more problematic response can be framed along the lines of the claim that person-centred perfectionism is 'burned up' in or *cannot be prised apart from* successive episodes of concern for what is other. Against this, I want to stress the separability of the two and to do so by beginning with a scenario drawn from the Faust legend. What would be so very wrong with Faust selling his soul into damnation, not for personal adventure but to save his town from the plague? Why should he think that his virtue was more important than the needs of others? Perhaps he might hold back from such a deal but only because of a lingering doubt about the devil holding up his end of the bargain, and doing so in the manner intended. If the devil could be relied upon to play the part of a gentleman, an abandonment of Faust's soul might be a justifiable, even admirable, form of extreme self-sacrifice, a loving abandonment of self for the sake of others.

In such an extremely hypothetical case, the redemptive project of person-centred perfectionism appears to conflict with a concern for the needs of others. The extremity of the example may allow a Murdochian to point out that no such deal is ever really on offer, that life is not like that. Perhaps, in practice, person-centred perfectionism really is in some sense 'burned up' or 'swallowed up' in our care for the other. Murdoch seems to place a great deal of trust (or faith) in the availability of an unselfing that really is other-centred. Against this, I will set out two considerations which strongly suggest that her trust is misplaced: (1) an argument from self-knowledge to show that the pilgrim will require much more attention to self than Murdoch is prepared to admit; and (2) an attempt to attend to Murdoch's mystical commitment as an aspect of her writing which shows the separateness of person-centred perfectionism from any ulterior motive of concern with the other.

(1) The argument from self-knowledge. An ongoing, if gradual, *ascent of eros* will require a systematic (or at least ongoing) pursuit of self-knowledge of a sort that Murdoch rules out as inappropriately self-directed and liable to result in fantasy. Her reasons for adopting such a standpoint in relation to self-knowledge are partly historic. In her early controversy with Stuart Hampshire the latter advanced the view that some immediate choices are (just as Murdoch contended) void or predictable.

Focusing upon immediate, moment to moment, choices as the core of freedom was therefore quite wrong. But for Hampshire this did not point towards any general qualification of the rôle of choice. He remained committed to making sense of freedom in terms of choice and argued that such void instances meant that freedom required a second-order choice to put oneself into, or to avoid, situations where one was almost certainly bound to act in a predictable way. This in turn required self-knowledge about dispositions and tendencies. Murdoch could have opted to emphasise the element of continuity here with religious thought. There is a similarity to the theme of *avoiding the occasions of sin*. Or she might have pointed to the problematic nature of making sense of this avoidance as a higher-level choice rather than action in line with moral vision. Instead she opted to undermine Hampshire's account of freedom by fell swoop, by denying the self-knowledge that it required. Its religious precedent was set aside and its similarities to Freudian therapeutic introspection were highlighted.³⁹

Such Murdochian scepticism about self-knowledge simply will not do because Murdochian ascent is set against universalisability. The right thing to do in any situation will not be the same for everyone, not even if we take the right thing to do as whatever some idealised virtuous agent might do. Pursuing perfection does not mean that we should all go around trying to imitate Christ unless we are, in relevant respects Christ-like (and this may be taken as a rare condition). Along with other critiques of universalisability, Murdoch accepts that morality is, in the terms of Rush Rhees and Raimond Gaita, much more personal than that.⁴⁰ What she has not taken into account is that once this position has been adopted, deciding what to do ceases to be viewed as matter of impersonal discernment. The focus is no longer on *what is to be done*, but on *what am I to do* where answering the latter is a form of finding something out about oneself. It involves finding out what is permissible or best where this will depend upon what my moral level (character) is like and where my strengths and weaknesses lie. Murdoch's plausible and gradualist requirement that we do not

³⁹ Hampshire (1975); and for a direct confrontation between Murdoch and Hampshire see *PB*. The dispute is covered in Kekes (1995), 152-158 and Backus (1986), Chapter 5, and O'Connor (1996), Chapter 2.

⁴⁰ Rhees (1969), 95-6; Gaita (1991), 105-7.

try to leap suddenly (romantically) into goodness, but act at or close to our moral level, generates an unavoidable requirement for a good deal of self-knowledge.⁴¹

I will take this argument to be inconclusive but nevertheless useful in showing that the Murdochian pilgrim is required to engage in much more attention to self than she is prepared to admit. Murdochian pilgrimage or ascent cannot be exhausted by concern for what is other. It systematically generates a need for attention to where one's own weaknesses and strengths lie. And what is at stake here is not just unavoidable day-to-day care of the self that may be seen as a duty if we are to be of any use to others but rather what might be called *serious introspective concern*. The argument is inconclusive because it shows Murdoch to be inconsistent in a weak sense. It is weak because it may be resolved by abandoning her problematic opposition to a systematic, or at least continuous, pursuit of self-knowledge and this can be done without undue violence to the overall fabric of her approach. (It can be bracketed-off in precisely the way that her approach towards mortality cannot because the latter is bound up with humility and virtue.) Recognition that we stand in a unique relation to events is not tantamount to egocentricity in any sense that I would want to criticise. (It *is* about the self, but about the self *in relation to* others.)

Here, it does not matter to me whether we say *she did not really mean that* or provide some other rationalisation. Either way, a concession may be made and plausible grounds for the concession can be given. It can be pointed out that an approach towards self-knowledge can be set out precisely in terms of the Murdochian concept of attention: that what I attend to is what really matters to me. Suppose I claim to love my wife more than anything else in the world, yet I spend all my spare time at the betting shop trying to figure out the form of the horses. By recognising by pattern of attention I will recognise that my love is weaker than I have imagined and claimed. What is at issue here is not just the amount of attention but also its character. A parent who attends perhaps just as much to one child as to another may learn something important about themselves by considering *do I always look for promise in one child and fault in another?* We may learn something about what really matters to us, and how it matters, what we really desire hence what we are

⁴¹ Such self-knowledge is implied in Murdoch's case of D and M in the *Sovereignty* where part of M's reason for attending in order to improve her moral vision of D is awareness of her own jealousy. Winch (1972), 165, makes a similar point about the relation between rejecting universalizability and endorsing self-knowledge.

really like, by considering the direction and character of our attention.⁴² We may apply this to Murdoch herself to see that she is much more concerned about erotic redemption than public duty or axioms as component parts of the moral life.

(2) Attention to mystical commitment. Let us now direct our attention to Murdoch's mystical commitment. A selling point of Murdochian morality is its emphasis upon responsiveness to the other. We may be inclined (I am inclined) to think that this is an important part of what a workable morality must be like. It must involve a desire to respond to the other and to their needs. Moreover, it ought to do so in non-instrumental terms, i.e. it must involve something like a Kantian-type commitment to be moral without reward. We must be like Kant's shopkeeper in the *Groundwork*, someone who is honest, but not because of a calculation that it pays to be honest. By stressing that morality involves being good 'for nothing' Murdoch meets this requirement and thereby helps to ward off the charge of mere *acquisitiveness* or selfishness.⁴³ However, this Murdochian 'for nothingness' cuts both ways. Being good is not 'for self' but neither is it 'for the other'. Someone marooned on a remote island far from regular shipping lines might still engage in the Murdochian project, they might still try to think justly about the past and attempt to combat self-pity and dangerous fantasies of hostility towards the civilisation and the others from whom they are now cut off. For Murdoch, moral vision is not to be valued only in terms of the beneficial actions that it may lead to, nor is *eros* or desire to be conceived of as reducing down to various disposition to behave. The pursuit of an ideal, purified, redeemed configuration of one's desires (to which the pursuit of the Good largely reduces under conditions of demythologisation) is ultimately to be carried out *for its own sake*.

That is to say, the second-order desire which we are to cultivate, the desire for an improved (even ideal) configuration of our first-order desires, is to be unmotivated in the sense that it is not a desire that we have for some ulterior reason. To understand what such an unmotivated (purified) desire looks like we may fall back upon the example that Murdoch provides i.e. our love of beauty: 'Plato, who tells us

⁴² Bowden (1998) points towards such a use of attention in what she sees as a non-Murdochian manner, as a key to self-knowledge. She contends that this is more akin to Nussbaum's use of the concept. Blum (1991) also expresses reservations about Murdoch's attitude towards self-knowledge.

⁴³ Murdoch notes the version of the charge in Schopenhauer rather than Nygren, e.g. *M.67*.

that beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love immediately by nature, treats the beautiful as an introductory section of the good.⁴⁴ The crux of the matter is that the pilgrim's desire for the ideal 'purification' of his or her desires, is not to be lost in, exhausted by, or subordinated to a desire for anything else at all, not even something admirable or laudable. Murdochian morality is not premised upon an ultimate pay-off for anyone, it needs no basement full of silk stockings and spiritual goods that will see others right at the end of the day.

It is this mystical commitment to the 'for nothingness' of being good that leads Murdoch to return time and again to art as an analogue (and sometimes an instance) of morality. Just as in art, morality too is 'for nothing'. 'These arts, especially literature and painting, show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition. They show us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance; the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue. The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of human life itself.'⁴⁵ This pointlessness is structured into the *Metaphysics*. Rather than the normal mystical progression of awakening, purgation, illumination, void, and unitive life, Murdoch progresses towards a final substantive chapter on the void. There is no final rewarding resolution. 'There is nothing that cannot be broken or taken from us. Ultimately we are nothing' [M.501].

Morality is not for the sake of the other, any more than art is for the sake of the client (although in various cases it happens to serve their needs). 'A genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good. This is a mystery with several aspects. The indefinability of Good is connected with the unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue...A genuine sense of mortality enables us to see virtue as the only thing of worth.'⁴⁶ Whatever positive or practical effects it happens to have, we are to become personally virtuous for virtue's sake, good for goodness' sake. (Both formulations are sanctioned by Murdoch's shifting between 'virtue' and 'good' as that which is 'for nothing'.) The lifelong Murdochian moral project of person-centred perfectionism does not reduce down to, and is not swallowed-up, or burned up, in a concern for the other.

⁴⁴ *IP*, 40.

⁴⁵ *SG*, 84.

⁴⁶ *SG*, 96.

IV. The Consequences of Murdochian Perfectionism

As something of a rearguard defence a Murdochian might ask what does the 'for nothingness' of Murdochian morality matter if, in practice, the outcome of having and cultivating a second-order desire for personal perfection happens to be concern for others on lots of separate, particular occasions? It is not clear, to me at least, that a Murdochian will be entitled to make this move. It is too instrumentalist or consequentialist, or otherwise too much in the Wittgensteinian tradition of looking at the use or role of moral theory to decide what ultimately matters about it. However sympathetically we might look upon such a move, it would go against Murdoch's own rejection of a focus upon action and consequence as instances of a dangerous behaviouristic drift in moral theory. (Problematic though this claim is, it features centrally in 'The Idea of Perfection'.) For a Murdochian to say now that outcomes are what ultimately matters would seem rather disingenuous.

My concern here is not to reply to a legitimate Murdochian response, but to an assumption which may generate sympathy for one of the more problematic features of Murdoch's project. And Murdoch herself may invite this by calling as she does for a peculiarly practical mysticism, in the guise of 'unesoteric mysticism', 'true mysticism' and even 'natural mysticism' which may make it seem that a practical attitude is precisely what is on offer.⁴⁷ I am disinclined to charge her with any inconsistency over this emphasis upon the practical. Ascent towards an unmotivated desire for virtue (goodness) for its own sake may have to begin with a different sort of desire for something that we can more readily understand (such as the needs of others) before being led on to higher and better things. (In the same way that a child might learn chess for the sake of praise and the pleasure of crushing the opponent, but then come to love the game itself.) Furthermore, it is one thing to say that the Murdochian cannot ultimately appeal to the beneficial consequences or the public cash value of her morality, and quite another to deny that her approach can be consistently relied upon to have such consequences. (Perhaps they come consistently but unsought.)

⁴⁷ *SG*, 90; 99; *SW*, 242. This is the way Peter Conradi reads her mysticism in his preface to *E&M*, as close to utilitarianism. Against this, Murdoch frequently rejects the idea that she is presenting an 'as if' morality of fictions whose meaning is to be sought only in their usefulness.

Against such a rearguard attempt to show the other-centred cash value of Murdoch's person-centred perfectionism (in what I take to be distinctly non-Murdochian terms). I want to point out that the demands of redemption and those of care for the other are not the same. There are familiar and ordinary contexts in which they are at odds with each other, i.e. situations where a Faustian dilemma of the sort outlined above *is* operative. Here, I will look first to an extreme context and then to more everyday situations. Let us suppose that two individuals, C and N are unfortunate enough to be inmates of a concentration camp. C spends his time trying to see others justly. Even in these most extreme of circumstances he is still preoccupied with resisting his 'fat relentless ego'. By contrast, N is aware of all manner of personal flaws. He has perhaps read something like a Murdoch text and can see that a good point is being made yet he values others enough to sacrifice his personal virtue for their good. In order to help others, he assists in preparation for a breakout. To do this he must, at all costs, stay alive, even if his motives for doing so turn out to be mixed (who would not be tempted by thoughts of revenge or survival at the expense of others?) and even if it involves getting his hands dirty. He may have to become a Kapo and survive by making himself useful, participating in the sorting process, directing one person to the huts and another to the gas chambers, using blackmail and even pimping in return for favours. Security threats may have to be dealt with.

What I am writing about here is a circumstance that is not covered by Murdoch's idea of performing distasteful *duties* which go against the grain of character or which allow a role for directly utilitarian considerations which, unlike efforts of attention, do not really impinge upon character.⁴⁸ Quite apart from *not* being a public duty (we would not consider others at fault for failing to act in this way) it does not concern an area of moral importance that exists *alongside* the reconfiguration of character and the desires that in large measure constitute it. N not only has to act against various existing desires, he will also have to try and reshape his character, to attend single-mindedly in ways that involve, or are liable to promote, particular forms of moral blindness. He must allow himself to become hardened to the

⁴⁸ *Metaphysics* Chapter 10 and Chapter 17 cover the concept of duty. It requires occasional efforts of will rather than ongoing attention, primarily concerns the public sphere, and as such, it is *not* considered to conflict with the favoured direction of inner development.

humanity of others, both victims whose sufferings must not overwhelm him, and, more obviously, the guards whose lives he must not hesitate to take if and when the time comes. This process need not be romanticised, it may be seen as thoroughly unpleasant in the sense that it may make him unfit for life outside of the camps. Whereas C engages in a figurative death of the self and sacrifices everything but his moral virtue, N is prepared to sacrifice even this. Like the roguish and dishonest Oskar Schindler, he must have the right kind of character for the particular circumstances that he faces rather than timeless virtues which may be cultivated just anywhere. Someone with more abstract scruples will have less chance of saving lives.⁴⁹

Perhaps it might be charged that this scenario is too extreme, that it takes us out of everyday concerns (at the risk of blunting our sense of what is right and wrong). There is a passage in the *Metaphysics* which does seem to touch upon a dilemma which suggests something close to this. 'It has in this century been the fate of so many to be confronted with totally ruthless unshakeable evil and to have to choose between degrees of compromise and an absolute opposition which will tear mind and body to tatters, ruin the lives of friends and family, and perhaps never even be heard of or known to *be* an example to others' [M.120]. Here, if the implication is that the best course is not to make Faustian compromises, the charge of preoccupation with personal rectitude hits home. However, the exceptional nature of such circumstances seems to be presupposed. Instead, I want to stress the continuity between my example of C and N and everyday life. Extreme though the scenario is, it is a genuine kind of lived experience and is set in a context chosen by Murdoch precisely because of its characteristic (if extreme) features. It poses a dilemma that anyone with a concern for their own moral rectitude will face in less dramatic ways.

For example, I might hold that political involvement can bring worthwhile change and improve people's lives while also holding that successful political activism leads to a desire for political office and that this leads to personal corruption (which need not negate the public good that is done). Similar considerations apply to becoming a carer: a sacrifice of self that may predictably lead to frustration,

⁴⁹ Blum (1988) draws attention to the biographical Schindler as a moral hero whereas he sees Murdoch as more concerned with moral saints. This is true in a sense, but I would claim that Murdoch's commitment to courage as an aspect of humility shows that she is concerned, as she notes in passing, with 'hero-saints', M.120.

short-temper and feelings of deep hostility and resentment towards the other (and to their instrumental perception of oneself as there only for their sake). We might equally think of subjecting oneself to the stresses and strains of nursing or teaching without adequate resources or support, or about other familiar and emotionally-draining tasks that are sometimes perceptively referred to as 'soul-destroying'. We may also think here of tasks and sacrifices which go with parenting and keeping a family together through hard times.⁵⁰ Murdoch abandons unselfish mothers as moral exemplars on the grounds that they have 'many egoistic satisfactions' [M.429]. Perhaps so, but they become what they are in the (often soul-destroying) process of nurturing and caring for others. *What is above their moral level here, and often, is not carrying some project through, but doing so without moral harm to self.* One may lack the erotic resources, the time and energy, to take care of the other while also taking care of one's own character formation. And once the strictures against self-knowledge have been relaxed this will pose a conscious dilemma.

When faced with these everyday dilemmas, is it better to sacrifice (or at least risk) one's own character in pursuit of the good of others, or is this a sacrifice too far or in the wrong direction? If one desires to be virtuous and also to care for the other (and I am inclined to think that we ought to desire both) then this problem will not be occasional but continuously in play. Here, I am saying nothing that is altogether new. The monastic and mystical traditions in their cautionary attitude towards worldly *attachments*, have always been aware not just of occasional dramatic temptations but of a continuous (and for such traditions *insidious*) pressure which ordinary life exerts upon concern for personal spiritual well-being. There are ongoing and recurring situations where *focusing primarily* upon one's own personal erotic ascent as the greater part of the moral life will have to be at the expense of responding to the needs of the other. (This is perhaps more obvious in the case of immediate needs.) The preoccupation with self which is involved in person-centred perfectionism is neither 'swallowed up' in concern for the other nor can it be relied upon to consistently benefit the other. Any benefits to the other will be contingent upon what sort of

⁵⁰ With the exception of a couple of rather stereotyped bohemians in *Nuns and Soldiers*, the sort of friction with the world which involves financial hardship is absent from Murdoch's novels as well as her philosophical texts. Problems are always conceived of at a more spiritual level.

situation one happens to be in. Such preoccupation may be of consistent and reliable use to others only if subjected to some other constraint (perhaps of a utilitarian sort) which dictates when personal character transformation is to be given priority for the sake of long-term good, and when it is to be not just subordinated to but sacrificed in the interests of others and their needs. (Whether long-term or immediate.) However, such a constraint is in line with a very different moral approach from the mystical 'for nothing' project which Murdoch outlines.

Chapter 9: Modes of Suffering

Iris Murdoch is concerned about the dangers of suffering as a route back into egocentricity. Here, I will explore her view of these dangers in the light of her advocacy of an ascent of eros. What I want to highlight, initially, is the tension within her writings on suffering, the apparent conflict between their force and tone: a hostility towards suffering is combined with an invitation to punitive unselfing.¹ My contention is that this simultaneous embracing and castigation of suffering requires a differentiation to be made between modes of suffering such that we are invited only to embrace the *right kind*. This in turn requires a criterion to separate out the endorsed mode(s) from the bad ones. Murdoch's account of the significance of death, her thanatology, responds to this problem. It is not a morbid preoccupation, it has real work to do. In what follows, Section I will show that unselfing does indeed involve suffering; Section II reconstructs Murdoch's account of what is problematic about suffering; and Section III advances the contentions that (a) Murdoch's commitment to a form of suffering avoids Martha Nussbaum's charge that Platonism promotes invulnerability; and (b) her need for the above criterion places her orientation towards death at the heart of her outlook.

I. Unselfing Involves Suffering

Murdoch lacks any clear-cut commitment to personal contentment and certain forms of contentment, such as the ordinary 'bourgeois' sort, are definitely ruled out.² The 'quest for happiness and the promotion of happiness' do make a sudden appearance at the end of the *Metaphysics* [M.497]. And they are, perhaps, presupposed in the novels (Peter Conradi writes that they contain a 'pleasure principle') but she does not try to theorize about it directly, except as a desideratum pursued by the state.³ This makes it difficult to see where contentment fits into the life of the Murdochian pilgrim. Unlike Plato, she has no fundamental level of personal

¹ For the dangers of passing on suffering, M.104.

² See above, Chapter 3.

³ *Metaphysics*, Chapter 12. The suggestion in (Conradi, 2001a) 71, 79, 85, 88, 92-3 that a 'pleasure principle' is also present in the philosophical ethic is not given any textual support.

reward for being moral, and holds out no promise of morally-refined pleasures.⁴ Murdochian morality may also be similar to virtue ethics in focusing upon character formation but its *telos* is not the 'good life' but rather an impersonal 'Good' that cannot ultimately be attained.⁵ We are to be good 'for nothing'⁶ Contentment is not explicitly ruled out, but neither is it given any place or rôle.

Were Murdoch to hold that life can be separated into moral and strictly-personal portions (the sometime position of Bernard Williams) then happiness might be pursued privately in the non-moral sphere.⁷ But it is Murdoch's understanding of the significance of the blurring of the fact-value distinction that the domain of the moral is unbounded. (She is not alone in this, William James thought pretty much the same thing. Once the rigid dichotomy of facts and values is abandoned, ethics is not to be left 'in a small corner by itself' but concerns 'the general relations of the objective and the subjective in experience'.)⁸ If Murdoch is right about the *significance* of the collapse of this rigid dichotomy, then we are, in Cora Diamond's words 'perpetually moralists', less generously, she is described by Mark Platts as holding an 'empire-building' view of morality, one that knows no bounds.⁹ In her own words, 'The area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world'.¹⁰ Happiness cannot be legitimately pursued in a private, non-moral sphere because no such sphere exists.

The harshness of this position, the inescapability that disturbs Platts, can be mitigated in two ways. Firstly, Peter Conradi (independently of Williams but playing upon the same theme of limitation and bounding) claims that Murdoch's ethic *is not*

⁴ Annas (1999).

⁵ For the distinction between Murdochian and virtue ethics see Hall (1990) and McLean (2000).

⁶ For example, *GG*.69.

⁷ Williams (1981). This bipartite division is subsequently modified in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, where ethical sits alongside the private and the moral. For simplicity I use the earlier division.

⁸ Quoted in Putnam (2002), 135, 178.

⁹ Diamond (1996), Platts (1991), 148, and generally 146-8. For a comparison between Murdoch and Williams see Blum (1996). His primary concern is however with the contrast between Murdoch and Nagel.

¹⁰ *SG*, 95.

to be suddenly adopted. Her moral gradualism requires that we do not act *above* our moral level. Consequently, everyday egocentricity and its pleasures are only to be displaced slowly and with caution. Meanwhile, there are still to be cakes and ale. The exacting ethic is to be tempered by the life-affirming hedonism of the novels. Secondly, we are presumably required (as a public responsibility) to keep ourselves ticking over so that we can be of service to others. These two points support a purely instrumental rôle for care of the self that may extend to a degree of hedonism. What they do not do is make contentment into a goal of pilgrimage. Murdoch is indifferent to contentment *for its own sake*.

On a stronger note, I contend that her 'unselfing' involves suffering. Henry Jansen, who includes a chapter on Murdoch in his study of suffering and comedy, states that for Murdoch 'If any good emerges from suffering, it does so irrespective of the suffering and is not tied to it in any direct way'.¹¹ There is an important sense in which this overgeneralizes Murdoch's hostility towards suffering. There is a clear Aeschylean theme of wisdom bought by pain that runs through both sorts of texts. To support this claim, I will appeal to her imagery and exemplars. Her novelistic imagery leans upon the great allegorical and erotic paintings of Titian's maturity (and through these Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) so different from the regular Christian symbolism of madonnas, adorations, annunciations and passions. Yet Titian's allegorical works present scenes of transformation through suffering. Callista's pregnancy is exposed and she is cruelly cast out from Diana's entourage only to become a constellation; Actaeon stumbles across Diana and companions bathing, is transformed into a stag and is then brutally hunted down. Suffering and transformation go hand in hand. This influence upon Murdoch, and her general preference for a non-Christian symbolism of suffering, is most marked in her recurring novelistic image of Marsyas, the satyr who challenged Apollo to a musical contest, lost and was *flayed*. Marsyas wanted to compete with the gods, but instead his transformation into something purer (a stream) proceeded by a much harder path. He learns the hard way. Moral metamorphosis is likened to a *flaying* of the self. This is a tale that works its way into the *Symposium* (215b-e) where Socrates is likened to Marsyas without a musical instrument, equipped only with bewitching words. But it is later in the pages of Ovid that Marsyas utters the haunting cry *why do you tear me from myself?*¹² The would-be

¹¹ Jansen (2001), 71.

¹² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 385. Murdoch is particularly influenced by Edgar Wind's, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, (London, 1958), Ch XI for Marsyas. For some Ovidian influences on

pilgrims of Murdoch's novels are like Marsyas in the sense that they underestimate the rigours of moral transformation. Partly this is due to the tricksterish nature of *eros*, love directs us first to something attainable and only later do we realise the enormity of the task. That is why Murdoch's novelistic pilgrims so often come unstuck. The imagery of unselfing in the novels is *punitive* but such imagery is not ancillary to understanding, it is a fundamental mode of understanding.

In the philosophical texts, the project of unselfing is similarly placed within the context of pilgrimage and *ascesis*. The Aeschylean formulation that wisdom is bought by pain is given directly in the *Acastos* dialogue, *Art and Eros*.¹³ As Antonaccio points out, such *ascesis* need not be collapsed into Christian asceticism. (We might think that in the latter, suffering assumes too much of an autonomous significance.) It might, in any case be objected that figurative suffering need not betoken actual suffering.¹⁴ To back up my claim that it does, without assimilating unselfing to specifically-Christian asceticism, I will appeal to Murdoch's approximations to the good person in both the philosophical texts and the novels. To take this route, I must clear away an initial problem. The character of Murdoch's truly good person will partake of the ineffability of the good. For Margaret Scanlan, Murdoch's consequent 'failure to provide a positive model for behaviour' leaves her with a deeply ambiguous attitude towards the character of the good person and the presence of suffering in their life.¹⁵ This may be so, perhaps a truly good person would be neither representable nor suffering, but lesser mortals who still have to 'unself' *are* representable, *are* represented in Murdoch's texts, and *do* suffer.

Consider the novels. In *The Bell* and *Nuns and Soldiers* we have nuns and ex-nuns; in *Henry and Cato* we have a priest who leaves the Church; and in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, a Christ-figure (appropriately named Tallis). Here an uneasy association is maintained between the best available life and Christian asceticism with its inner suffering and dark night of the soul. These characters approximate to what

Murdoch see Dipple (1982) 108ff, and for a comparison between Murdochian pilgrimage and Ovidian metamorphosis Dipple (1996) 145-7.

¹³ Life is characterized as a pilgrimage in the opening paragraphs of *The Fire and the Sun*. The *pathei mathos*/wisdom taught through suffering that the chorus of the *Agamemnon* tell us of is recited in *Acastos*, 64.

¹⁴ Maria Antonaccio (1998), 69-70.

¹⁵ Scanlan (1977), 85.

Murdoch once called mystical heroes in contrast with existentialist ones.¹⁶ The heroic mystic is 'an anxious man trying to discipline or purge or diminish himself' and his 'chief temptation' is 'masochism'.¹⁷ The strictly secular counterparts of the philosophical texts take us beyond the imagery of Christian asceticism and include the good concentration camp inmate; the humble man who is somewhat akin to, perhaps most-likely-to-become, but still-not-actually, the good man; and 'inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families'.¹⁸ (A view that is later qualified in the *Metaphysics*: 'Mothers have many egoistic satisfactions and much power. The aunt may be the selfless unrewarded doer of good' [M.429].) The admirable characteristics of 'The contingently existing saint who, if ever we were fortunate enough to *meet* him or her, might stand to us in the guise of a demonstration' are to be systematically cultivated by the good pilgrim. They 'show it can be done' [M.429]. (Not the attainment of perfection but of progress.)

What this range of exemplars exemplify is a willingness to sacrifice self for others. However, this is to formulate the matter in terms of agency rather than vision. To maintain the primacy of vision, I will take it that the good person must be prepared to make sacrifices not just to help the other, but also to *see* them truthfully. The shift from mothers to maiden aunts involves a move toward individuals who will *see* children in less proprietorial terms. (They will be less prone to fantasize that their own frustrated ambitions may still be realized by proxy.) Such self sacrifice may, however, come in different forms. Urmson drew an interesting contrast between saints and heroes which turned largely upon the taking of risk by the latter.¹⁹ Blum has suggested a further strengthening of Urmson's formulation of this distinction by drawing two contrasts: firstly, in point of timescale, heroism may occupy only a portion of someone's life (like Oskar Schindler) whereas saintliness is less time-specific; secondly, saintliness involves general virtues that are not situation specific whereas the hero may have the right characteristics for only this situation (again Schindler was able to work his way around elite nazi circles because he was no

¹⁶ She does not draw any clear contrast of the sort that Urmson (1957) makes between heroes and saints, such that the former risk dangers that the latter need not.

¹⁷ *EM*, 227.

¹⁸ *GG*, 51-2.

¹⁹ Urmson (1957).

saint, he had the right character for the job). Blum plausibly suggests that Murdoch's good, humble people are closer to what is meant when we refer to saints rather than heroes.²⁰

Although she tends (in the *Metaphysics* if not in the earlier writings) to conform to this classification of the good person she does not draw any consistent distinction here. At one point she writes of 'a small number of hero-saints of our time' [M.120]. Her libretto, *The One Alone* is similarly about a hero who sacrifices their life 'for nothing', privately, without an audience (or at least without one internal to the plot, the reader provides an audience of sorts).²¹ The saints and heroes distinction is not one that Murdoch abides by but it does help in the formulation of a particular kind of possibility: that the Murdochian pilgrim might be willing to make sacrifices yet never actually be called upon to do so? Might they be more like the hero than the saint in facing *risk* rather than definite loss? I am inclined to think that the answer to this must be 'no'. If we view egocentricity as deeply entrenched. 'The exercise of overcoming one's self,' Murdoch writes, 'is indeed exhilarating. It is also, if we perform it properly which we hardly ever do, painful.'²² This is the lesson of Marsyas all over again, we underestimate the rigours of moral transformation. The self is not calmly set aside, it is flayed away.

The good person will accept suffering in order to truthfully perceive and aid others, and insofar as they are purposefully unselfing, they may resemble the religious ascetic in their gradualist progression through spiritual crisis, dark night of the soul, the experience of doubt, loss and void in the course of a discipline that subjects them to extreme emotional stress, tearing them away from consoling, self-protective imagery. In the terms set by Urmson and Blum, Murdoch's pilgrim is more saintly than heroic and their experience more akin to the mystic than to the man of action, a similarity that raises concerns about elitism that she tries to head-off. The experience of void, more often situated within the experiential range of the mystic, is opened up to everyone and not to be evaded. Void is, for the pilgrim, a necessary experience that involves "'clean' pain" [M.500]. There is a kind of affliction that is variously described by Murdoch as 'a purified suffering' [M.109]; 'Real *deathly* suffering'

²⁰ Blum (1988).

²¹ *The One Alone* was printed up in 1995 but broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1987.

²² *Sub.G*, 216.

[M.130]; 'deathly pain' [M.139]; and 'absolute (deathly) pain' which contrasts with 'the kind which can be managed, made part of a story, turned into art' [M.131]. I am trying to draw out the content of such suffering.

A final, if somewhat prefabricated objection to the necessity of such suffering may be anticipated. Although, even its somewhat frivolous tone already removes us from the realm of real affliction with which Murdoch is concerned. The objection goes as follows. Plato's ring of Gyges offered instant invisibility, what if we had a pill that offered instant unselfing? Let us imagine that we have a tablet called *Decreation*, which circumvents the suffering involved in regular unselfing. (It might even taste rather sweet.) We would then have the option of popping some 'Ds' and stepping through the door to clear moral perception. What such a picture requires is that the ultimate goal of *being good* has no necessary causal conditions. But this is precisely what Murdoch is *not* in a position to endorse if she is to remain a moral gradualist. Gradualism implies the necessity of a causal process that is not sudden. The use of *Decreation* tablets, even if they were not ruled out on other grounds (as an impossible flight of fancy) and even if they did provide transformation without tears, would *not* provide a specifically-Murdochian form of unselfing but something else instead. (What is perhaps more interesting here is the way in which the door imagery from Huxley and William Blake, the image of an immediate point of access, illustrates the way in which imagery *can* push us to think in this way or that.)

II. Murdoch's Critique of Sado-masochistic Suffering

At the same time as advocating unselfing, Murdoch develops a critique of 'our ubiquitous (romantic) sado-masochism' [M.121]. Even 'puritanism has its own strong magic, its own form of degeneration into a sexually charged romanticism' [129]. Protestantism and 'popular Romantic theology have made something of a cult of suffering' [M.132-3]. They have tapped into 'the system to which the technical name of sado-masochism has been given. It is the peculiar subtlety of this system that, while constantly leading attention and energy back into the self, it can produce, almost all the way as it were to the summit, plausible imitations of what is good'.²³ Sado-masochism provides a shadowy simulacrum of unselfing. It is unselfing

²³ GG. 66. For the concept of sado-masochism in Murdoch see especially *Metaphysics* Chapter 5.

romanticized. In spite of the importance of this claim, Murdoch is characteristically unsystematic in her development of this important concept, experimenting instead with various ideas from Freud and Sartre in the novels before downloading her results into the elliptical formulations of the philosophical texts. A brief contrast with their influential views may be useful.

According to Freud, children enter a latency phase of development during which, libido is sublimated into affection. Overt sexual desire then re-emerges with the onset of puberty. If such overt desire integrates successfully with continuing affection then the result is normal romantic love with its attendant delusions. Where affection and sexual desire fail to integrate, love objects become dangerously separated out into madonnas, with whom one is sexually impotent, and whores who sexually excite but degrade and are to be degraded.²⁴ This Freudian scenario, a treatment of the sacred/profane division of love objects whose pedigree stretches back through Titian and Plato, is the predicament into which the central character of Murdoch's *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* has fallen.²⁵ He is a psychoanalyst who finds that his discipline provides a story for his situation but no solution to it. (Psychoanalysis is impotent, hence part of the problem.) Sado-masochistic tendencies are, however, generally present in Murdoch's novels, that is to say, present in the absence of any such classic Freudian pathology. Notwithstanding her debt to his treatment of the sacred/profane division, 'Freud was not, I think, particularly perspicacious about sado-masochism, he was too much of an all-male grandee to appreciate this phenomenon' [M.133]. Freud treats sado-masochism as a special developmental failure, Murdoch treats it as the norm.

In this respect, she stands closer to the Sartrean view that "'normal" sexuality is commonly designated as "sado-masochistic".²⁶ The impossible but quite general human aspiration to be absolutely free yet reassuringly determinate is bound up with sado-masochism. In *Being and Nothingness* attitudes towards the Other are divided into indifference (a form of interpersonal blindness) and love or desire (which involve

²⁴ For this contrast of sacred and profane love in Freud and its relation to the speech of Pausanias in *The Symposium*, see Santas (1988).

²⁵ The title of 'Sacred and Profane Love' is a later addition to one of Titian's works depicting two women, *eros* and a flagellation scene. There is ambiguity about which of the two women (the naked or sumptuously clad) is profane or whether there are two different women here at all.

²⁶ Sartre, *EN*, 404.

us in a sado-masochistic cycle). Our sadism is traced to sexual desire for fusion with the Other under conditions of absolute dominance. We want to be master. Our desire is not just to absorb the Other but to dominate their freedom. This cannot be effected and so we opt for a reverse attempt at total identification: I don't absorb them, they absorb me. 'Masochism,' writes Sartre, 'is characterised as a species of vertigo, vertigo not before a precipice of rock and earth but before the abyss of the Other's subjectivity'.²⁷ However, Sartre is quite clear that while we bow down before the Other, masochistic fascination takes the self as its real object. It is ultimately a form of fascination with 'myself as object'.²⁸ (In this respect it is akin to the sublime.) 'Even the masochist who pays a woman to whip him is treating her as an instrument and by this very fact posits himself in transcendence in relation to her.'²⁹

These themes are prominent in Murdoch novels of the early-to-mid 1960s, which makes them contemporaneous with the earlier of the *Sovereignty* essays. The submission scene in *A Severed Head* (1961) follows the Sartrean (and Hegelian) dialectic of master and slave. Martin Lynch-Gibbon, unmanned by the submissive loss of his wife, prostrates himself before the dark, sword-wielding power figure Honor. She promptly loses interest and tells him to get up. Dominating a thing is uninteresting, dominating another subjectivity is what counts. This theme recurs. The sexually alluring Lesley Rimmer in *An Unofficial Rose* (1962) attaches conditions to her affections. It is not merely Randall's submission that she wants but his ruthlessness. Submission is demanded but it is power that excites. In *The Unicorn* (1963), a male servant ceremoniously (and not for the first time) kneels to place high-heeled shoes on the feet of his mistress. The shoes are otherwise unworn, they are not used for walking but only for this ceremony. The servant loves, but will never have his mistress. That privilege is reserved for a despised power-figure. Submission is demanded but power excites. The last figure of this overtly sadomasochistic type is Millie in Murdoch's much-criticized and rarely cited historical novel *The Red and the Green* (1965). She loves only where she is mistreated, she is attracted only by unconstrained ruthless freedom and she has a fondness for passing on her suffering.

²⁷ Sartre, *EN*, 378.

²⁸ Sartre *EN*, 378

²⁹ Sartre *EN*, 379.

Murdoch's subsequent novelistic fascination is with the daemonic and the Miltonesque but this continues to provide scope for sadomasochistic motifs that are reminiscent of the Sartrean account. There are slapping scenes in both *The Time of the Angels* (1966) and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970). However, the Sartrean emphasis upon choice and voluntary submission precludes any straightforward Murdochian appropriation.³⁰ (The impossible Murdochian aspiration for perfection and the morality of self-abnegation before the Good as love object also look suspiciously masochistic if we stick to strictly Sartrean terms.) Murdoch's sado-masochistic theme, even by the time of its early peak in *The Unicorn*, is already integrated not with choice but with vision and this is symbolized by the occurrence of submission and absorption scenes at a place called *Gaze Castle*. Three key points of contrast between Sartre and Murdoch are worthy of note. Firstly, Sartre separates sado-masochism out from the interpersonal blindness of indifference whereas a Murdochian account must understand it specifically in relation to such blindness. (To vision and not to choice.) Secondly, both are agreed that masochism is implicated in the direction of attention towards the self. This drama is played out within a single consciousness. Thirdly, both are in agreement that sado-masochism is normal, and not (as in Freud) a specialized form of deviance. Hence, it is not necessarily connected to any particular fetish, prohibition or taboo.

Although the influence of Sartre is there, Murdoch initially brings her ideas on sado-masochism together by relating them not to Sartre but to Simone Weil's appropriation of the Homeric concept of ἄτη. What ἄτη conveniently introduces is an association between evil, moral blindness, and cyclical suffering. In the *Iliad*, Achilles is in a state of ἄτη, blinded to the reality of others by his rage.³¹ Yet in passing on his suffering he ensures that it will return to him. (What goes around comes around.) He is in a condition of both entrapment and culpability, Achilles is complicit in his own destruction.³² This concept of ἄτη is deployed in *The Unicorn*

³⁰ Backus (1986) Chapter 8 sticks very close to Sartre in setting out Murdoch's 'sadomasochistic system' as it appears in *The Unicorn*.

³¹ When Murdoch read Weil, she was already well-versed in the concept, having attended Eduard Frankael's celebrated seminar on Aeschylus. The connection can be detected in one of her strongest poems 'Agamemnon Class 1939' with its line 'Frightened men kill by remote control', in *A Year of Birds*. Unlike Weil, Frankael's study of the *Agamemnon* places emphasis upon an element of choice in ἄτη.

³² For a classic account of ἄτη by another of Murdoch's lecturers at Oxford, see E.R.Dodds, *The*

by the Platonist Max, 'Até is the name of the almost automatic transfer of suffering from one being to another. Power is a form of Até. The victims of power, and any power has its victims, are themselves infected. They have to pass it on, to use the power on others. This is evil. Good is non-powerful. And it is in the Good that Até is finally quenched, when it encounters a pure being who only suffers and does not attempt to pass the suffering on'.³³

I am inclined to think that Max is used to express Simone Weil's view rather than Murdoch's. The formulation in terms of power is more reminiscent of Weil than it is of any preoccupation that can be found in Murdoch's philosophical texts. What is also more Weilian is that Max alludes to the Christ figure who quenches ἄτη, who 'suffers it in its completeness and destroys it' (Weil).³⁴ When both Weil and Max suggests that there is a (potentially) good mode of suffering (what Weil calls affliction) we cannot simply assume that Murdoch reproduces such a distinction. Shorn of commitment to this problematic Christian element, the basic structure of ἄτη is that of suffering (doom even) that involves or leads to occluded vision and thereby results in harm to others. This provides us with an account of the sadistic phase or moment of sado-masochism. *We hurt others because we don't see them correctly.* Our own fascinating suffering occludes our vision. Whether we then pass suffering on unintentionally or maliciously take pleasure in the misfortunes of others, need not affect the basic structure of this sadistic moment.³⁵

The masochistic moment, by contrast, may enter when we attempt to embrace a bearable suffering in place of an unbearable one. According to the *Metaphysics*, in bereavement, 'Suffering, mercifully, offers a route back into the ego' [M.130]. It becomes an ordeal, a way to refocus attention back upon the travails of the self. Metaphorically, bereavement is likened to being in 'another country' upon which we ultimately turn our backs. Another, related masochistic experience is guilt.³⁶ It is often involved in bereavement (*if only I had done or said x*) but is clearly not

Greeks and the Irrational, (Berkeley, 1951), esp. 7.

³³ *The Unicorn*, 116.

³⁴ Weil (1970), 153. See 'The Love of God and Affliction,' in Weil (1951).

³⁵ Scanlan (1977), 71, places greater emphasis than I do upon *schadenfreude*.

³⁶ M.39-40 and 500ff. For bereavement in the novels see Gertrude's passage from bereavement to life-affirming hedonism in *Nuns and Soldiers*.

reducible to it. Attempts to atone in the form of fascinating pain are treated by Murdoch as attempts to pay for egocentricity in its own coinage.³⁷

The sado-masochistic cycle may now be set out as follows. Fascinating suffering leads to *occluded vision* and (real or perceived) harm to others. In the second (masochistic) phase we attempt to cope with suffering (as guilt, etc.) in a manner which reproduces the problem by embracing it, placing ourselves at the centre of events (which is just where we want to be). This sado-masochistic cycle has a structural similarity to unselfing where *purgative unselfing* leads to *greater clarity of vision* and to the perceived need for even more *unselfing*. The dangers of this are further complicated because the commonplace sado-masochistic cycle works by occluding vision. The ability of the sado-masochistic sufferer to discern which of these cycles they are involved in may therefore be impaired. Egocentric suffering might, from the inside, look very much like unselfing, it can 'masquerade as a purification'.³⁸

III. Vulnerability and Tragedy

Murdoch's problem is that she cannot allow her critique of sadomasochistic suffering to be generalized into a critique of suffering *per se*. It has to be limited enough to allow for the punitive process of unselfing. We can begin to see how she creates enough scope for this by drawing out a further contrast, this time with Buddhism, an outlook which is genuinely hostile to suffering as such. We may even view it as a doctrine and set of practices geared towards the *noble truth* that there can be a comprehensive elimination of suffering.³⁹ From both standpoints, suffering is bound up with desire. But whereas the Buddhist approach is to get rid of the suffering by getting rid of the desire, Murdoch urges us to redirect desire and not to eliminate it. In the pursuit of the Good, vulnerability to suffering may be a price worth paying. The 'cloud' of egocentric fantasy is so powerful because it is 'designed to protect the psyche from pain'.⁴⁰ Its removal is the removal of a form of

³⁷ See above, the chapter on 'Fallenness and Guilt'.

³⁸ *GG*, 66.

³⁹ Peter Conradi is more closely aligned with Buddhism than Murdoch and is guarded in his parallels, (Conradi 2001a), xiv, 16-17, 86, 108; (Conradi 2001b), 544-6. Murdoch only takes an indirect stand on Buddhism, via her approach towards Schopenhauer in *Metaphysics* Chapter 3.

⁴⁰ *SG*, 77. Velleman's Murdochian-influenced account of love may go too far when he writes 'All

self-protection, an exposure suffering. This distance from Buddhism works its way into the detail of her outlook and particularly her views on justice as set out in the *Metaphysics*. It should be thought of 'primarily as retributive, making even' [M.493]. A 'weakening of the fabric of liberal political thinking occurs when, in relation to punishment, the concept of retributive justice is dropped or discredited in favour of (of course very important) utilitarian ideas of rehabilitation, of making the culprit "better"'.⁴¹ Murdoch is aware that this sets up a distance from Buddhism. In *The Green Knight* (written in parallel with the *Metaphysics*) the quasi-Buddhist Peter Mir inflicts a symbolic retributive wound upon the miscreant Lucas and recognizes this as a 'flaw' from his own Buddhist standpoint.⁴² Retribution is the core of Murdochian justice but this does compromise compassion and provides at least one positive rôle for suffering.

This comparison is not meant as an interesting aside. By placing the avoidance of suffering less centrally than Buddhism, Murdoch strengthens her position in the face of a charge that we have already encountered Martha Nussbaum levelling against Platonism.⁴³ For Nussbaum, the great lesson of the Greek tragedians was that the good life involves goods that are fragile in the sense of being vulnerable to loss. For example, Hecuba's domesticated contentment involves loving Priam and her children, it *depends upon* their survival and that of Troy as a whole. It is in the pursuit of the good life that we render ourselves liable to the greatest of misfortunes. Such misfortunes may even corrupt our character by removing us from the context of a supportive community life. In tragedy, as in Buddhism, there is a relation between aspiration and suffering. But whereas Buddhism solves the problem by a curtailment of desire, Nussbaum suggests that Plato solves it by retaining desires, but only those which are oriented towards invulnerable objects (the forms). In this way, moral luck is eliminated.⁴⁴ The problem with this insulation from harm is that it threatens to

that is essential to love, in my view, is that it disarms our emotional defences.' J.David Velleman, (1999), 365. But the love-vulnerability nexus *is there* in Murdoch. In *The Red and the Green* the republican revolutionary Pat Dumay views his love for his younger brother, Cathal, as his 'Achilles heel', a truly dangerous weakness. It is the only thing that comes close to holding him back from his romantic participation in the 1916 Rising (*The Red and the Green*, 117, 133, 205).

⁴¹ M. 359, see also 103-4, 131, 389, 493 for the primacy of retribution.

⁴² *The Green Knight*, 319.

⁴³ See above, Chapter 8.

⁴⁴ Nussbaum (1986) is deeply influenced by Williams' treatment of moral luck.

denude the good life of that which makes it good, encouraging instead a dangerous and even antisocial, self-sufficiency. (For an example of this we might cite *Republic* 387 on the good man: 'Far better than ordinary people can he do without others'.) Plato, on Nussbaum's account, strives for an insulated invulnerability.

Whereas Nussbaum has transferred her argument over to Murdoch only in a cursory manner, Michael Weston has tried to do so more systematically.⁴⁵ For Weston's Murdoch 'we are constituted as a desire for the good, which as transcendent can only be related to in giving up all projections of good upon the world.'⁴⁶ In this way, 'even the power of death is overcome'.⁴⁷ To support this reading, Weston appeals to *The Black Prince*, a novel in which Murdoch's mystical sympathies are conspicuously on display. By its close, the central character, Bradley Pearson has been falsely imprisoned for murder and rapturously released from attachment to finite, perishable goods. He tells the reader that the world is 'perhaps ultimately to be defined as a place of suffering' in response to which we should 'forswear the fruitless anxious pain which binds to present and future our miserable local arc of the great wheel of desire'.⁴⁸ For Weston, 'this train of thought implies a motivation by fear of suffering which would make the "willing for nothing" an illusion. It would be (what one may suspect Pearson's is) a willing for the sake of avoiding suffering'.⁴⁹

And so it would. But is this position Murdoch's, or is she depicting some other puritanism gone astray? Weston concedes that this is a real possibility.⁵⁰ *The Black Prince* casts doubt upon Pearson's reliability as a narrator. His wheel imagery is Buddhist (and Hindu derived) and his direct preoccupation with suffering is perhaps Schopenhauerian rather than Murdochian. This does not necessarily mean that Pearson is a faithful practitioner of Buddhist tenets (he probably is not) but it does mean that his pronouncements cannot be used in the way that Weston wants, as a

⁴⁵ Nussbaum's review article of Peter Conradi's Murdoch biography in *The New Republic* makes it clear that she *does* hold the vulnerability argument to be applicable to Murdoch (Nussbaum, 2001). A more detailed statement of this is given in Weston (2001), Chapters 5 and 6.

⁴⁶ Weston (2001), 76-77.

⁴⁷ Weston (2001), 84.

⁴⁸ cited in Weston (2001), 81-2.

⁴⁹ Weston (2001), 82.

⁵⁰ Weston (2001), 83,98.

guide to the more obscure arguments of Murdoch's *Metaphysics*.⁵¹ Notably, his suggestion that the power of death 'is overcome' lacks any obvious textual support and seems the opposite of Murdoch's treatment. Murdoch's pilgrim must embrace mortality as the ultimate form of vulnerability, the ultimate image of what, at one point, Murdoch calls 'purified suffering' [M.109]. By differentiating herself from Buddhism and endorsing a passionate, punitive moral discipline, Murdoch undercuts any direct appeal to Nussbaum's argument but she does so at the expense of vulnerability to the charge of promoting a peculiar kind of romanticized suffering (her own version of the sado-masochistic cycle). She can escape from this only if there is some criterion by which her favoured mode of suffering can be set apart from the bad sort. *It is this requirement* which ties her attitude towards death into the main body of her work so that it is not an attenuated morbid preoccupation.

Whatever criterion separates out such good and bad modes of suffering, it cannot merely be a distinction between technologies (inner anguish as opposed to public whips) since Murdoch does not reduce sado-masochism to a particular technology or fetish. She views it as a passionate corruption of vision. A Murdochian will therefore need a criterion that respects the primacy of vision and does more than simply positing a non-egocentric way of *viewing suffering* without telling us how such a view is at all possible. This is where her discussion of tragedy helps us out. 'Lear's pain is not romanticized nor is that of Oedipus. The classical Greeks seem to have been incapable of romanticism and *a fortiori* of sentimentality; they also, a related point, seem devoid of masochism' [M.499]. As the good person does not romanticize the suffering that they see (their own or that of others) and as the spectacle of certain tragedies is of an unromanticized sort, it follows that "a part of our understanding of 'the good man' may be thought in terms of a spectator of a tragedy" [M.110]. With the right spectator, romanticized suffering is neither built into the play nor projected onto it.

But what exactly does he *see* that most of us, most of the time, do not? Well, this depends upon what Murdoch views as necessary to a tragedy. She may spend a great deal of time trying to incorporate tragic insights into the novels (continuing the hazy conversation at the end of *The Symposium* on the fusion of genres) but the

⁵¹ Uncle Theo in *The Nice and the Good*, Cousin James in *The Sea, The Sea* and Peter Mir in *The Green Knight* all look like more convincing Buddhists.

doubt be said about time but unless we consider it in the moral context of lived experience, of how we experience others as valuable (i.e. how we are emotionally or erotically engaged), we will go astray. We cannot construct a value-free metaphysics of time and then use it to answer questions about morality. (As if metaphysics were a guide to morals in the sense of being *prior to* morals.) Instead, Murdoch insists that morality is deep, it goes all the way down. Having said this, it is characteristic of Murdoch's way of writing that she makes this observation about time and then passes on. She does not develop the insight in any detail and this may leave her account of emotions (such as guilt) which temporalise our experience, dangerously one-sided.

What the above amounts to is less than a demonstration that Murdoch meets some formal specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for moral depth but perhaps the very idea of such a specification is out of place. It is a more restricted case for saying that Murdoch has concerns that are *in some respects* similar to Gaita's and that she does not fall foul of Gaita's charge.⁹ This leaves me with the second task of providing an account of why I think that a critique is nevertheless still in order. The crux of my case depends upon the absence in Murdoch of a quite different sort of depth from the kind explored above, that is to say, depth in analytic detail. Here, I draw upon the sense in which we might say that someone explores a question 'in depth' or looks several moves deep, and considers all of the appropriate possibilities. Quite apart from the absence of contrived, puzzle-type exemplars, what one does not find in Murdoch is a standard call and response of argument-reply-rejoinder (possibly followed by consideration of objections number 1 to 5).

Instead, she often prioritises those aspects of rational persuasion which are not about formal argumentative structures, such as *getting someone to notice* what has been overlooked or *helping the reader to see things* in a different way.¹⁰ (The distinction here is not hard and fast. Drawing attention to the shortcomings of a particular background picture will affect the assumptions from which we proceed.)¹¹ Her philosophical style, and the content of her critique of puritanical tidiness, are

⁹ Gaita happens to hold that Murdoch falls foul of a quite different problem, not a lack of depth but ethical other-worldliness. Gaita (1991), Chapter 12, esp. 216 ff.

¹⁰ This is a feature of Murdoch's way of proceeding that Cora Diamond treats as related to her rejection of rejection of a rigid fact/value distinction, Diamond (1991), 373-80.

¹¹ John McDowell is a prominent example of someone who works with a grasp of philosophical problems as problems of moral vision that lead us to plug the wrong sorts of assumptions into our arguments.

stubbornness of one daughter and the downright treachery of the others.⁵³ He wants to rail against his own imitation tragedy, his trust, their ingratitude. But, as the play moves steadily onwards, towards the death-scene, Lear's attention shifts towards other people, to *their* sufferings and *their* misfortunes. Rescued from unhinged raillery against the elements, he unthinkingly gives precedence to the needs of a poor mad boy, gesturing for him to go first as they enter the shelter of a hovel. This is the turning point. By the end, he would gladly embrace the humblest of lives elsewhere if only the death of his dutiful (not just stubborn) daughter could be redeemed. This turnaround does not buy-off or redeem death (her death or his own). The mitigation of fault does not allow *Lear* to refuse the call of the ultimate necessity. He must go on his short journey into nothing.

What the truthful viewer of a tragedy cannot escape from, whether they are a participant-viewer like Lear, an audience member, or a reader, is the inevitability of death. For Murdoch, this is the great lesson of tragedy and the reason why it exemplifies a truthful vision of suffering. Orientation towards death is the criterion which separates out a truthful approach from a sado-masochistic one. Our punitive unselfing must be undergone in the light of an adequate, non-arbitrary orientation towards death. What remains for us to question is whether Murdoch has such an orientation.

⁵³ M.116 ff.

Chapter 10: The Rôle of Death

I. Acceptance of Figurative and Real Death

There is a depth about meditation on the significance of death in Murdoch's novels which goes beyond the routine and conventional killing off of characters. They attempt to capture those insights which we find in tragedy. *Bruno's Dream* (1969) reworks Tolstoy's *Ivan Illych*, incomprehension, regret and resigned acceptance in the face of mortality; *Henry and Cato* (1976) solemnly tells the reader that death is 'the great teacher'; *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) opens with the protracted detachment and move into incomprehensibility of the head of a courtly group of friends, now in the final stages of his terminal illness. The death of characters figures prominently in all but two of Murdoch's 26 novels, the exceptions being the first and the last, and both of these still manage to end with meditations on the same theme. The penultimate paragraph of her final, problematic, novel has a suitably haunting quality, ruminating on 'Death, its closeness...At the end of what is necessary, I have come to a place where there is no road'. Mortality has caught up with the character in question, but it has never been far away.

As is usual with Murdoch, novelistic preoccupations are not merely capricious. They are prefigured by and go on to influence concerns which emerge in the philosophical texts. The *Sovereignty of Good* closes with an appeal to the importance of placing mortality at the centre of our approach towards morals, 'Simone Weil tells us that the exposure of the soul to God condemns the selfish part of it not to suffering but to death. The humble man perceives the distance between suffering and death. And although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good'.¹ The selfish part of the soul is condemned to death. This sort of claim, familiar from religious contexts, and featuring prominently in monastic and mystical literature, introduces the notion of what I will call *figurative* death. It concerns death as a symbol for the best kind of life. One kills off the old self, or the base self, in order to make room for something better. Murdoch's version of figurative death takes its lead from the *Phaedo* where the best sort of life involves a

¹ SG, 101.

'purification of the soul', a 'practice of dying'. The term 'unselfing' seems an appropriate one to use for this figurative and punitive process.

As in the *Phaedo*, Murdoch's practice of unselfing is to take place against the backdrop of the shadow of real death (the event which happens prior to a funeral or cremation). I have argued above, that it is precisely this which gives Murdoch a way of separating out her own preferred form of suffering ('unselfing') from the ubiquitous 'romantic' or 'sodomasochistic' suffering that we are drawn towards and which Murdoch sees as egocentric.² Figurative death is informed by an acceptance of real death and it contrasts with modes of suffering which are implicated in an evasion of mortality. 'False love moves to false good. False love embraces false death.'³ Oddly enough, given the way that Plato links *anamnesis* with reincarnation, the charge is not applied to Plato. Christianity and Romanticism, although both are nominally concerned with death, do not get off so lightly. They are complicit in 'our tendency to conceal death and chance by the invention of forms. Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete'.⁴ Here, there is continuity with Plato. His position in the *Phaedo* is that we should not believe in the afterlife as a matter of consolation but as a matter of truth, an accomplishment that Simone Weil suspected might be beyond us.⁵ Murdoch is more Weilian than Platonic here, in treating non-acceptance of finitude as morally corrupting.

As well as the contrast between real and figurative death, I want to suggest that there is a second contrast in Murdoch, with its own Platonic precedent. What I am referring to is a contrast between *real* and *faked-up* acceptance of death (of either sort). We find this, for example in Murdoch's treatment of bereavement, of our attitude towards the death of the other. At first we attend to the deceased and experience the void that their absence has left in our life (perhaps a far greater void than we might have anticipated) but gradually we become more fascinated with our own suffering predicament. We fill the void up with a concern which is about ourselves. We cannot hold on, it is too hard. I am not suggesting that she is the first

² See above, Chapter 9.

³ SG, 100.

⁴ SG, 85.

⁵ For the former, see Dilman (1992), Chapter 1; for the latter see Cockburn (1997a).

to make such a diagnosis but merely indicating the way in which Murdoch views suffering as a mechanism for the occlusion of death. It helps us to evade real death, real mortality, and by doing so it ensures that our suffering is only of the sadomasochistic or romantic sort. As such, it contrasts with unselfing, which must be informed by real death.⁶ 'Indeed the central image of Christianity lends itself [to] just this illegitimate transformation. The *Imitatio Christi* in the later work of Kierkegaard is a distinguished instance of romantic self-indulgence on this theme'. Similarly, 'romanticism tended to transform the idea of death into the idea of suffering. To do this is of course an age-old human temptation.' The romantic image of freedom that Murdoch associates with Kant went with 'a taming and beautifying of the idea of death, a cult of pseudo-death and pseudo-transience. Death becomes *Liebestod*, painful and exhilarating, or at worst charming and sweetly tearful...When the neo-Kantian Lucifer gets a glimpse of real death and real chance he takes refuge in sublime emotions and veils with an image of tortured freedom that which has been rightly said to be the proper study of philosophers.'⁷

This evasion or concealment is premised upon the idea that 'It is not easy to portray death, real death, not fake prettified death'.⁸ That is to say, Murdoch agrees with a view that is closely associated with Heidegger, the view that there is some difficulty involved in encountering our own mortality. According to Heidegger, even at the end, our way of thinking about things is still projective, forward looking. Even then we cannot, with ease, come to grips with death's finality. For a more Wittgensteinian formulation of the same problem we might look to Raimond Gaita's treatment of the last moments of Eichmann, his final rhetorical flourish under the gallows: *I do not believe in God and the afterlife...long live Germany, long live Austria, long live Argentina, I will not forget them.* At the last Eichmann slipped into the established grooves of funerary prose and seemed to lose sight of the fact that it was *his* funeral, and that for a godless man, such talk of remembering was absurd.⁹

In the versions of the problem given by Heidegger and Murdoch, this kind of blinkered non-acceptance is not just a banal, exceptional failure. (Something an

⁶ *Metaphysics*, Chapter 18.

⁷ All quotes from *SG*, 80-1.

⁸ *SG*, 85.

⁹ For a discussion of Hannah Arendt's account of Eichmann's death see Gaita (1991), 305-311.

Eichmann would do but we would not.) Instead, it is seen as our ordinary, everyday condition. For Murdoch it is not everybody, both willful and meek, who is able to see beyond suffering and grapple with real mortality. Consider again her comment at the end of the *Sovereignty*, 'The humble man perceives the distance between suffering and death. And although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good.'¹⁰ Genuine acceptance of real death is the exception rather than the rule and it is a life-guiding exception. Figurative death is to be practiced in the light of real death.

Murdoch's early novel *The Bell* provides a nice example of evasion not by uncharacteristically flawed individuals, but by otherwise decent people. It describes a cemetery within the enclosed grounds of Imber Abbey where previous generations of nuns lie interred, their graves tended by future inhabitants. The enclosed nuns' vow of stability is matched by an attitude towards, and normalization of death that attempts to defy the transitoriness of spiritual attachment. In the end divine love goes like everything else. This is, of course, a deeply counterintuitive way of looking at matters from within the confines of the religious life. Even in death, the nuns will remain part of the order. Nobody gets out of the Abbey, not even feet-first.

To try and make sense of what it is that gives support to the claim that such forms of evasion characterise our normal, default, human condition, we may draw a further distinction: a distinction between what we might call *the problem of acceptance* (a moral-psychological problem) and *the conceptual problem* that lies behind it. Evasion of acceptance is made all the easier because of our uncertainty about death, the difficulty of imagining nothingness, our tendency to think of what it would be like *for us* to be dead, to forget that death is not an event in life, not even the last one.¹¹ Murdoch holds that our attempts to think about and to represent death are generally flawed but not just as the result of some evasive subterfuge, there is no bad faith here. That would imply that genuine recognition was the default condition from which we fly, and not an accomplishment. The task is genuinely daunting.

¹⁰ SG, 101.

¹¹ This paraphrases Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.4311. Familiar Epicurean and Lucretian puzzles emerge from the nothingness of being death. Epicurus, 'Letter to Menocceus' in *Letters, principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 55. In an odd way Sartre's rejection of a Heideggerian orientation towards death is a variation of the same *distraction* theme, e.g. Sartre (1992), 33-8.

Success is partial and most readily found in some (mystical) forms of religious thought and in tragedy. *King Lear* is particularly favoured because death is not present by convention, or as the result of indecision in the face of choice, but by necessity. It is made inescapable by the plot. Hence the way that Murdoch's novels try to capture both mystical and tragic insights. She may be implying that there is a conceptual problem which precludes starting off from an understanding of mortality, but I will take it that what primarily concerns her is our failure to carry out the attentive work required for acceptance.

For Murdoch as for Heidegger, concern with acceptance is not a dangerous distraction from life, but a requirement for a truthful or authentic orientation towards it. However, there are significant differences. Heidegger does not consider death to be a suitable image for the best sort of life. Authenticity involves acceptance of death, not a living death of any sort (figurative or otherwise). By adopting the position that moral progress lies in the direction of a figurative death of the self, Murdoch triggers a charge of inappropriateness. Imagery of this sort seems to neglect the particular circumstances of those for whom figurative death would be corrosive of the liberal moral standards that Murdoch is concerned to defend. I have in mind those who are, in some sense victims i.e. the oppressed and downtrodden, the abused and in general those who already have low self-esteem of a sort which may facilitate further mistreatment. The idea that their primary moral task is one of killing off their own baseness is open to a charge of complicity with oppression and mistreatment.

I am not sure that there is any defensible response to this charge, although even this would not, by itself render Murdoch's account philosophically uninteresting or rule out 'unselfing' for everyone. The closest that she comes to an anticipation and response is by allowing that there are faked up imitations of both real and figurative death, hence there are modes of self-abnegation and suffering that are clearly to be avoided. I will assume that these include '*lacking a will of one's own*' or otherwise abandoning one's own desires in favour of those of another irrespective of the merits of the desires in question.

Further differences between Murdoch and Heidegger are instructive. Heidegger is sceptical about how much we can learn from consideration of either near-death experiences or the death of others (e.g. bereavement). He does not fetishize the final moments as a special sort of limiting experience. Murdoch is less reserved. She

identifies these as moments when a deeper understanding of death is (briefly) open to us. However (at least in the novels) she has a foot in both camps. The insight fades and is lost if it is not deepened and consolidated (which it rarely is). Bereavement brings us close to the truth but we recover from both our sense of void and from truthfulness. Be that as it may, coming to grips with the reality of death is subject to a standard Murdochian commitment to the gradualism of personal change. The work cannot all be done for us by a sudden revelatory experience. For Heidegger, preoccupation with near-death experience and with the death of others may distract us from the mortality which is constantly part of our being, the being-towards-death and towards a death that is *eigentlich* (ownmost). Although Murdoch agrees that the fact of death stretches the length of life, I can find no indication that she shares the *possessive* aspect of Heidegger's preoccupation with mortality. Death is not an unusual form of personal real estate, something that may be taken up and owned.¹² Finally, because death in Heidegger is *eigentlich* (ownmost) it directs our attention towards ourselves. This is diametrically opposed to Murdoch's approach. She holds that death orientation should undermine our concern with self and direct our attention towards others.

II. Mortality and the Unimportance of Self

For Murdoch, real death is the great teacher and what it teaches is the unimportance of self. 'The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves'.¹³ Sometimes this transference of concern is supposed to take place via the concept of the Good and through the pursuit of virtue, 'A genuine sense of mortality enables us to see virtue as the only thing of worth'.¹⁴ The same position of personal redemption surfaces in the novels and is best known through the near death experience of the central character of *The Unicorn* (1963). 'Effingham had never confronted death. The confrontation brought with it a new quietness and a new terror. The dark bog seemed

¹² This way of speaking is, however, attributed by Murdoch to the demonic figure of Julius in her 1970 novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. He insists that Tallis' father, who has not been informed of his cancer, ought to *own* his death just as he has *owned* his life. Julius always has a point, but his way of putting it is characteristically astray.

¹³ *SG*, 100.

¹⁴ *SG*, 96.

empty now, utterly empty, as if, because of the great mystery which was about to be enacted, the little wicked gods had withdrawn...Why had Effingham never realised that this [death] was the only fact that mattered, perhaps the only fact there was. If one realized this one could have lived one's life in the light...And indeed he could have known this for the fact of death stretches the length of life. Since he was mortal he was nothing and since he was nothing all that was not himself was filled to the brim with being.¹⁵

Again, in *Bruno's Dream* (1969), published after the last of the *Sovereignty* essays, the same view of death orientation is set out. Poor old Bruno reflects with regret and remorse at his end. 'One sees now how pointless it all was, all the things one chased after, all the things one wanted. And if there is something that matters now at the end it must be the only thing that matters...Was it only in the presence of death that one could see so clearly what love ought to be like? If only the knowledge which he had now, this absolute nothing-else-matters, could somehow go backwards and purify the selfish loves and straighten out the muddles. But it could not.'¹⁶ There is a danger here that Murdoch might collapse into a secularised orison, a flight of fancy in which the death experience becomes a personal last judgement. A Heideggerian charge of granting disproportionate significance to the final moments of life might kick in. (As if these moments outweighed all others, as if it would be worthwhile to live miserably in order to die well.)

This limiting-experience view of death is something to which Murdochian sources such as Simone Weil and Julian of Norwich sometimes do succumb. We might think of Weil's comment that 'I always believed that the instant of death is the centre and object of life. I used to think that, for those who live as they should, it is the instant when, for an infinitesimal fraction of time, pure truth, naked, certain and eternal enters the soul. I may say that I never desired any other good for myself'.¹⁷ This in turn echoes Dame Julian who prayed for and was granted an affliction that would take her to the point of death (but not of course beyond). This arbitrary fetishization of the final moments as revelatory is something that is not obviously Murdochian. Murdoch is using near death experience to illuminate life and our failure

¹⁵ *The Unicorn*, 166-7.

¹⁶ *Bruno's Dream*, 187-8.

¹⁷ Weil (1951), 16.

to value others in appropriate ways. She is not granting such experiences an autonomous significance as something apart from the mortality that is always with us. Her point seems to be just what the *Sovereignty* asserts, that a truthful acceptance of mortality involves an acceptance of our own nothingness, i.e. some form of radical devaluation of self and that this sense of the pilgrim's personal unimportance is a spur to their concern with others.

There are, however, two obvious problems here. The first concerns the idea that mortality in any way ought to erode our sense of our lives as important. That it does is an idea with a long pedigree. Forgetfulness of mortality is the second and overlooked gift that Aeschylus allows Prometheus to give to mankind, so that the struggles of mere *brotoi*, mere creatures of a day, might seem important. However, there is nothing about longevity as such that implies importance. Even a strict utilitarian might find difficulty with the suggestion that (all other things being equal) the life of someone who lives to be 90 is three times as important as that of someone who only lives to be 30. Although life expectancy is factored into some clinical decisions about suitability for organ transplants (where we are desperately looking for any criterion to help us decide) it is not factored into judicial decisions about the gravity of murder. We are no less culpable for killing those whose existence might otherwise have been brief. (Debate about at least some instances of euthanasia would otherwise be trivial.) Durability is not the hallmark of moral worth. Even infinite durability would fail in this regard. It seems rather irrelevant to attributions of value.¹⁸

To make sense of why Murdoch thinks that a grasp of finitude, an aspect of what she calls the 'contingency' of the self, *will* impact upon the attribution of value, we need to grasp a broader feature of her moral psychology. It is nominally Platonic but *de facto* much more Freudian and libidinal. She suggests that we should think of *desire* (for which we may read *care, concern, love* of whatever sort) in terms of a personal economy. There is a limited amount of it to go around. Self-directed concern exists at the expense of concern for the other. This is our default condition and it is one which is characterised by a sense of our own importance or indispensability. The realisation that we are merely contingent, accidentally and temporarily present is a shock to the system. By undermining our egocentric sense of our own indispensability, death frees up our erotic resources and opens us up to concern for

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.4312.

the other. This sort of account may be unappealing to anyone who holds that the hydraulic metaphor of *eros* is deeply misleading in all contexts or at least disturbingly mechanical. In Murdoch's defence I will suggest that whatever the flaws and limits of the metaphor, it does seem to be what we draw upon when we think of the real and undertheorized phenomenon of displacement.

I am comfortable with this concession to Murdoch's use of the metaphor because there is a more fundamental problem in her account. Even if we were to allow that something like displacement of concern from self to other can occur, a second problem now kicks in. If my mortality devalues me, then your mortality ought to devalue you. Murdoch's self/other asymmetry cannot plausibly be underpinned by appeal to a common mortality, something that is shared rather than unevenly distributed. The very idea that mortality devalues others not only runs against the whole tone of Murdoch's thought, it is also radically at odds with our experience of the loss of others. In bereavement we have that *you don't know what you've got till it's gone* experience of the loss of that which was sometimes or often taken for granted. We do not ordinarily regret having wasted our time in concern for someone whose mortality has now been realised. Bereavement is a mode of valuing, an experience of real loss, one that is often surprising in its depth. Indeed, insofar as we are to follow Murdoch and bring tragedy into the picture, a great deal of the plot of works such as *Lear* turn on just this ability to see what matters when it is too late to do anything about it. The real deathly suffering of *Lear*, the suffering that he cannot move beyond, comes not on the heath amid the wind and the rain but when he loses his dutiful daughter and tries to see movement in the stilled lips he had previously cursed. If our experience of the mortality of others, that shocking upheaval of our thoughts in the midst of loss, makes us more sensitive to their value then why should our own personal mortality make us feel any less important? As far as mortality is concerned, we seem to be down on all fours with each other.

What follows will be an examination of ways in which a Murdochian might make a stand against this problem. I will look firstly (and briefly) at the option of bracketing-off her position on the significance of mortality and then (in more detail) at the various possible ways in which it might be defended. My claim will be that none of these defences is successful, that Murdoch's position is an arbitrary imposition of significance on our mortality. Rather than figurative death being distinguished from

other forms of suffering by virtue of the way it is informed and shaped by the encounter with real death, the direction of fit is quite the opposite. Murdoch's idea of figurative death is dictating the significance that the pilgrim must overlay on top of the encounter with the real thing.

III. Bracketing-off Murdoch's Thanatology

It is noteworthy that with occasional exceptions (such as Elizabeth Dipple's study *Work for the Spirit* and an article by Pamela Hall drawing a contrast with virtue ethics) Murdoch's preoccupation with mortality and death raises hardly a stir in the secondary literature. Maria Antonaccio is characteristic in this respect. Her study of Murdoch, *Picturing the Human*, may have considerable strengths but its treatment of 'unselfing' as a figurative death (or 'extinction') of the self is brief in the extreme. The preoccupation with death is effectively bracketed-out of consideration.¹⁹ In line with this approach, we may be inclined to think of Murdoch's concern with death as (perhaps excessive) imagery for personal transformation, i.e. not about real death at all.

Against this, I want to point out two things. Firstly, the demandingness of the Good requires us to see personal transformation not as rewarding but 'for nothing' and as involving an abandonment of much that we currently desire. 'The absolute demand remains. As Simone Weil puts it, exposure to God condemns the evil in ourselves not to suffering but to death: a saying worth reflecting upon in relation to a psychology which explores the pleasures of suffering' [M.506-7]. The deeply unconsoling image of death seems not excessive, but a singularly appropriate one for a demanding process. (Murdoch is forever condemning anything that consoles, in a way that is vaguely reminiscent of F.R. Leavis' view that all sentimentality is sinful.) Secondly, Murdoch makes it quite clear that figurative death is not all that she is concerned with. She attends also to the significance of 'Real death' [M.118] and the way in which it can inform the figurative death of personal redemptive transformation. Again, this is part of the reason why she views tragedy as so insightful. (The largest single chapter in the *Metaphysics* is on this topic.) She privileges tragedy as an art form precisely because it succeeds where other imagery

¹⁹ Antonaccio (2000), 141.

fails. It is mortality-disclosing, 'human life is chancy and incomplete. It is the role of tragedy, and also of comedy, and of painting to show us suffering without a thrill and death without a consolation. Or if there is any consolation it is the austere consolation of a beauty which teaches that nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous...All is vanity. The only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all clearly and respond to it justly'.²⁰

These are dark and austere thoughts, but they are Murdoch's thoughts and not any misappropriation of a cheerful, upbeat approach towards morality. I am inclined to take it that this disturbing focus upon the significance of our mortality is one of Murdoch's great strengths and not at all a weakness. Along with Heidegger, a cluster of Wittgensteinians and Simone Weil, Murdoch has consistently advocated an (at times unpopular) position that I am more than ready to accept: an account of the human condition must follow the tradition of tragedy in placing mortality at its core. We are mortal beings in a sense that is even more fundamental than that in which we are rational beings. There is a sense in which we may lose rationality but not mortality. An absence of such an emphasis may weaken a moral philosophy. For example, virtue ethics, has a number of similarities to Murdoch's approach but it lacks her emphasis upon the relation between mortality and virtue. For Murdoch, humility in the face of the former is bound up with courage of the best sort.

Alternatively, this emphasis on mortality may be put down to a particularly bleak turn of mind that emerges perhaps under the influence of too much Christianity and Titian.²¹ But if we felt inclined to go along with this negative assessment and view Murdoch's preoccupation with mortality as a quirk, an intractable problem remains: Murdoch's thanatology plays a definite rôle within her account of morality. It provides a criterion by which different modes of suffering may be separated out. The punitive pilgrimage of 'unselfing' is carried out in the light of an acceptance of real mortality; faked up imitations of moral progress, romantic or sadomasochistic modes of suffering are such, in part, because they cover over the reality of death, they pursue what Murdoch at one point calls 'fake death' [M.121] and by virtue of doing so they

²⁰ *SG*, 85.

²¹ Hannah Arendt and more recently, Grace Jantzen imply something of this sort, suggesting that we should look to creative freedom, natality and not mortality as a fundamental guide.

are able to sustain our fascination with ourselves, even in hardship and in the extremity of suffering.²²

For Murdoch, it is precisely the realisation of our unimportance (our nothingness) that goes with acceptance of mortality which breaks egocentric preoccupation and prevents suffering from turning into personal romantic drama. A consistent Murdochian could not bracket-off her thanatology without reassigning its rôle elsewhere. And to do this would require rewriting Murdoch in conformity with the kind of evasion of death that is precisely what she warns us against. It would not be a matter of setting aside some of her views, but of going diametrically against them.

IV. Embracing Murdoch's Thanatology

If we accept the indispensability of Murdoch's thanatology then its central problem emerges: if the pilgrim is to see themselves as unimportant *by virtue of* their mortality, then all other things being equal the mortality of others should make the pilgrim see them in just the same way. Here, I will consider the options which are available to defuse this problem. Firstly, a defender of Murdoch might assert that, contrary to appearances, that she is not advocating an arbitrary valuational asymmetry. Secondly, a defender of Murdoch might accept that there is, and hold that there ought to be, such a valuational asymmetry.

(a) Denial of valuational asymmetry

Let us suppose that, in line with her long-standing liberal commitment to the individual, Murdoch holds that the pilgrim, having good moral vision, should see that all humans are of value, including themselves. Perhaps Murdoch only neglects the pilgrim's own moral standing rather than abandoning it. Perhaps the failure to attend to it in her own texts need not lead us to take the 'nothingness' of the pilgrim at face value. (This is a reading which Lawrence Blum in fact seems to adopt, albeit he does so without dealing directly with her comments on humility in the face of death.)²³

²² In *Henry and Cato*, 337, Murdoch's mystical hero Brendan Craddock remarks that 'Christ cheated death by suffering instead', a view that is at least consistent with her assessment in the philosophical texts and with her simultaneous repulsion and attraction to Christianity.)

²³ Blum (1986), 29 makes a version of this claim.

This approach would make a great deal of sense. Surely the pilgrim must see various hostile actions against themselves as transgressions not only from the other's point of view but from their own? A pilgrim in a concentration camp would, I will take it, see their own treatment as a moral failure on the part of the guards. In line with this, the pilgrim must, in the face of their own mortality, see their own importance (value) not as annihilated, but as, at most, diminished. I can accept this without any great difficulty and accept that a certain routine attention to self would be due, in line with this. However, unless there remains a valuational asymmetry of some sort, the reason for the comparatively comprehensive redirection of attention to the other will be removed. They must still see that value lies primarily with the other and not with self. An asymmetry of love and attention requires an asymmetry in the perception of value.

Against this, it might be suggested that no valuational asymmetry is required because no humans are of value (neither self nor the other).²⁴ As in the former case, one might, just about, find the odd quote that could support this position, for example, 'Ultimately we are nothing. A reminder of our mortality, a recognition of contingency, must at least make us humble. Are we not closer to the deep mystery of being human?' [M.501] Set against this, there is Murdoch's liberal commitment, and the comments it inspires such as 'The central concept of morality is "the individual" thought of as knowable by love'.²⁵ It has been a basic assumption of this thesis that Murdoch's work emerges out of a liberal tradition of seeing if not persons, then at least the other as unique and valuable. If neither the pilgrim nor the other is seen in this way then why should the pilgrim love and attend to anyone? Perhaps they might, instead, become preoccupied with Good as the locus of all value. (A position which seems to imply a strong *separation* of Good from persons, something which Murdoch does not obviously defend.)

Given that, for Murdoch we are (in some sense) to love the other, the suggestion that neither self nor the other are of value would require us to hold that a dualism of loving and valuing is present in Murdoch, such that our love of the other is independent of the discernment of any value that they might happen to embody or have. Loving would be one thing and valuing something else. Oddly enough, while

²⁴ Suggested as a possible objection by David Cockburn.

²⁵ *IP*, 29.

others are clearly to be loved and attended to in Murdoch, there is a lack of bald statements to the effect that (irrespective of their particular merits) others possess something called value, or that they have some property that has value. That is to say, strange though I find this suggestion, there is nothing obvious to rule it out on direct textual grounds. A reading which relied upon some such dualism of loving and valuing might even be given support by reflecting upon the strong *agapaic* component of Murdoch's account of love. (I am also committed to accepting this possibility because I have defended a compatibilist reading of Murdochian love such that it contains both *eros* and *agape*.)²⁶ In the classic account of *agape* given by Nygren, *agape* is taken to be a love of what lacks any value. In this way, God's *agapaic* love for mankind can be seen as entirely gratuitous and not as a constrained response, owed because of what we are. Perhaps the *agapaic* component of Murdochian love is like that, a love directed towards what lacks value.

What gets lost in such a suggestion is how and why we are to love the individual on the Christian-derived *agapaic* model. It is basic to such an approach that we ought to model our love on God's love for us. (Hence love is, among other things, desexualized. We do not have anything that a perfect being could lack and desire.) But the point is not just that we should love *in the same manner* because that is the best way to love. It is also that *we should love what God loves*. Rather in the way that if David falls in love with Jane, but is kept far from her, he may find himself wanting to read the same books and watch the same films as a way of loving her. That is to say, God's love of his creation confers a proxy value upon what is otherwise valueless. And this is why *agapaic* love of the other is taken to be an indirect form of the love of God. We love what he loves and has created. *Agapaic* love ultimately *is* a love of what is imperfect but it is not groundless. It remains grounded in an account of what is of ultimate value. Hence an *agapaic* component in Murdochian love provides no automatic reason for suspecting that loving and valuing fall apart in the way suggested. And since Murdoch holds that there is no God to confer a proxy value, this will strip away the normal grounds for *agapaic* love unless we are to concede that others stand in no need of a proxy value because although they may be imperfect, they are still to be seen as (intrinsically) of value.

²⁶ See above, Chapter 6.

Of course, one might say that a dualism of loving and valuing in Murdoch might have nothing to do with the way that the *agapaic* component of Murdochian love operates. Against such an objection I want to make three points. Firstly, Murdoch does not exactly say that others have intrinsic value or that they are the bearers of some property that has value, but this may be read as part of her attempt to avoid giving the impression that moral realism requires us to posit strange properties rather than to think of truthful vision as value-laden. (And the latter terminology is one that she is not shy about using.) Secondly, making sense of her texts in this way is more obviously consistent with her liberal commitment. Thirdly, to read Murdoch as denuding all humans of value is to adopt an illiberal reading with no obvious pay off in relation to the current problem. Once loving and valuing are separated, the pilgrim's discernment of their own lack of value will no longer impede self-love. The pilgrim who sees themselves as 'nothing' would not find their self-love undercut if loving does not involve valuing.

That other humans *are* to be valued is, I would suggest, the overriding impression that is given by Murdoch's texts and by the liberal commitment which is basic to them. What is far less clear is just *what* it is about these or any humans that is to be valued. Here, I want to point out that while my remarks on this may, if accepted, strengthen the paradoxical nature of Murdoch's position, no part of my argument actually depends upon the comments that follow. One of the problems involved in pinning down just what she values in other humans is that Murdoch does not, after the manner of Kant, explicitly identify some feature, part or particular characteristic as the locus of value. Maria Antonaccio leans towards a reading that is in line with the Kantian approach by emphasising our human capacity for freedom and there is something to be said for this suggestion. Murdoch does have a discourse of positive freedom even if she is more concerned with humility than dignity.²⁷ Another possibility would be to look in a straight Kantian manner towards our status as rational beings. Although Murdoch is hostile to the Kantian view of humans as agents and rational choosers, she is more ambiguous about the emphasis upon rationality as such.²⁸

²⁷ This is one of the principal themes of Antonaccio (2000).

²⁸ For example, SG.80 notes the emphasis on the rational in Kant, which might be read as connecting up with earlier comments at the start of the *Sovereignty* to treat the focus on the rational individual as somewhat misplaced.

Nevertheless it is not obvious to me that either of these are what Murdoch ultimately finds valuable in humans. If I am right about this, it is a strength and not a weakness of her approach. Were she to value humans *qua* rational beings or free beings she would walk into a number of standard problems associated with the absence of the relevant feature in newborns, foeti, individuals with impaired mental abilities and corpses i.e. cases in which rationality and/or freedom are absent, limited or otherwise impaired. Some biological humans do not obviously have what Kantians treat as valuable and worthy of respect. Corpses certainly do not, yet we do not eat the dead (not even strangers) and this is part of the everyday moral standpoint of caring for (loving, valuing) others that Murdoch is keen to develop.²⁹ There is something callous about the abandonment of those who lose their faculties even though we can make sense of an element of truth in the claim that they are no longer *in every sense* the same person. There is something about Kantian approaches which are seriously out of step with the way in which we actually (and *ought to*) respond to the reality of others.

Here, I am inclined to think that the most that I can do is to offer some general considerations that might make a particular understanding of Murdoch plausible. To this end, I will suggest that we consider what attitude a Murdochian would adopt towards a computer if they believed (mistakenly) that it really could think, but only about mathematics. We might also allow them to believe that it is capable of doing so more efficiently or less efficiently i.e. that something like freedom and effort might be ascribed. I suggest that we think here of a computer rather than a human with limited mental competences because in the latter case the Murdochian's attitude might be influenced (coloured) by the thought that *something has gone wrong*. With a computer we encounter something that was never intended or destined for anything else. I am inclined to think that a Murdochian who held that such a machine could think would still not seriously consider valuing it in the way that they would value a human.

What would be conspicuously absent in the case of the thinking computer would be a passionate engagement with life, deep emotional tensions of the sort that are bound up with suffering and with mortal existence. (The kinds of problem with which tragedy deals so movingly.) Ascription of this kind of personal depth seems to

²⁹ Diamond (1991) 319 ff.

me to be basic to our sense of what is to be valued and that it is in just this way that Murdoch thinks of other humans. My argument at this point is doubly inconclusive because it is open to the objection that a Murdochian might never allow that a computer could think, and someone who made this point might well be right. (There seems something odd about speaking of the localised ability to think through mathematical problems *in the way that we do* outside of anything like a human form of life.)

Be that as it may, my concern here is only to make room for valuing in a way that depends upon something other than an appeal to the intrinsic worth of freedom or rationality. I am suggesting that Murdochian awareness of others is what we might call, at the expense of a little awkwardness of terminology, 'passionate awareness'.³⁰ Others are passionate mortals and not just rational or free agents and the significance that we attach to them before and after they are capable of rational responses is bound up with the narrative that is to be told about them *qua* passionate mortal beings. Although, as Gaita points out in defence of much the same standpoint, freedom and rationality are prerequisites for having this kind of passionate human life, it is a leap to say that it is *by virtue of* these special characteristics that humans are ordinarily valued.³¹ (Similarly, there is a sense in which it is by virtue of having blood in their veins that humans are able to live as they do, but it is not the blood itself that is ultimately important.) This would provide a way to vindicate one of her key philosophical intuitions: that an account of morality must place mortality in a central position, even if her claim about what mortality shows the pilgrim is not itself defensible.

(b) Acceptance of valuational asymmetry

Let us consider, now, what happens if it is accepted that Murdoch does indeed advance a valuational asymmetry of the sort that her comments on death seem to imply, especially those at the end of the *Sovereignty* and in a number of closely

³⁰ For an example of this we might think of Weil's account of the Achilles-Priam confrontation at the end of her *Illiad* essay [Weil (1987)]. Achilles encounters Priam as resolutely mortal, like his own father even, and is (for once) moved by the sorrows of one who is completely other. This episode may help to make some sense of Weil's curious instruction to think always of others as if they were dead, as more than a way of epistemically privileging our thought about the past. For the latter see Cockburn (1997b), 324 ff.

³¹ Gaita (1991), Chapter 3.

associated novelistic encounters with death. Here, the paradoxical nature of such an asymmetry is strengthened if one accepts the above considerations about how, and as what, we value others. If a human is not seen as devalued when seen as a suffering mortal, then it becomes a mystery as to why a Murdochian pilgrim would or should think that their own mortality makes them nothing. Why are they not also to be *valued as mortal*? Again, our common mortality seems to be the wrong kind of characteristic to set up a self/other asymmetry. What it may, nevertheless, do is to shatter certain illusions that the pilgrim is liable to have about themselves but lack about others. In which case, the effect of reflection on mortality will be levelling, the pilgrim will be led into a sense of their own *ordinariness*, and this is humility of a quite different sort.

Against this, it might be feared that by resisting Murdoch's self/other asymmetry I am in some way trying to return to an endorsement of universalisability in our reactions, and this surely would be wrong. I have accepted that here has to be something very personal in our moral responses. (And that this is bound up with the way that moral problems, unlike technical problems, cannot be passed over to others.) But here, I am not at all suggesting that the right response to mortality is some uniform standard of correct deportment, as if it were best to slot into the fixed channels of good precedent and to try and die with decorum, like Hume, Seneca or (better still) Socrates. There is something disturbing about the idea that the right way to face death is to in any sense mimetic. (This may plausibly be called inauthentic, allowing one's being to collapse into a preassigned role.) An undertaker who has a certain routine for funeral preparations ought not to lapse into the routine when he prepares for his own funeral. A man facing execution cannot be entirely truthful if he gives a speech like Eichmann beneath the scaffold, one which sounds like a funerary oration for someone else. But if we are not to respond in some uniform manner in the face of death then why not opt for an asymmetry of the sort that Murdoch proposes?

Here, I want to say that Murdoch's approach may well be a rejection of universalisability, but it is not the only way of rejecting it. We might alternatively do so by emphasising the importance of facing up to the personal significance of mortality and by pointing out that this need not be based upon the idea that we are more or less valuable than others. It might just as easily be based upon an awareness

that there is a sense in which nobody else (irrespective of their value) can perform this task for us.

Against this it might be argued that, yes, the Murdochian way is not the only way in which we can reject universalisability, but it is the best way given that it is in line with some feature of our everyday psychology. I will take it that if this were true, it would be an important defence. There is a great deal to be said for Murdoch's position that morality has to be gradualist in the sense of abiding by the constraints of everyday psychology rather than pursuing *a priori* principles which take no account of what humans are like. We cannot leap out of our everyday humanity and ought not to give the impression that we can. There is however, an interesting ordinary asymmetry set out by David Cockburn (and drawing upon Wittgenstein's account of pain) which might conceivably be drawn upon to support Murdoch.³² What I want to argue is that while a real asymmetry is identified, it does not give Murdoch's position any support.

Suppose that I stand at the door of my cabin and see a little girl in a red hood, with her back to me being attacked quite brutally by a wolf in the woods. I am convinced that she is my granddaughter and my concern about her pain is shaped and influenced by this belief. But when she turns around I see that she is some other, and quite different little girl. I will still be concerned, but the character of my concern will alter and perhaps diminish. (I may even feel guilty about having a sense of relief.) Our concern about the pain suffered by others is affected by the unique story that is to be told about who they are. Similarly with our concern about their mortality. If the girl dies my concern will depend upon whether or not I believe that she really is my granddaughter. If she lies there on the ground swaddled in her cloak, I may be assailed by doubts, perhaps I was right about her in the first place. By contrast, thought about my own pain and death are not indexed to a unique individual in the same way. If I return to my cabin and in my state of distraction I burn my hand on the stove, I will be just as concerned about the pain that is *here*, just as eager to get rid of it, even if I happen to have some major rethink about who I really am. Similarly with death. I am in the habit of avoiding juggernauts and articulated lorries that advance towards me at speed, and would probably still do so even if, standing in front of one, I suddenly realised that I am an amnesiac with a quite different identity from the one I

³² Cockburn (1990), 164 ff.

assumed this morning. By contrast, my willingness to leap in front of any such vehicle to save another would depend heavily upon just who that other happened to be. In at least some contexts, my attitude towards my own pain and mortality is not like my attitude towards the pains and mortality of others.

The example here is of a particular 'puzzling' sort whose legitimacy might be challenged on the grounds of leading us to think about life circumstances by appeal to circumstances that we are never in. And perhaps there are better ways of setting out the intuition concerned, but I want to say that the example at least draws out an intuition rather than covering intuitions over. The intuition in question is moreover drawn out as a possible support for Murdoch's position. It can also be seen in other, more realistic contexts. (Below I will cite a concentration camp case that is perhaps more in keeping with Murdoch's philosophical style.)

Cockburn sees the asymmetry as a bad thing involving a form of self-blindness. His suggestion is that our (third-person) attitude towards the mortality of others is a better model for a truthful orientation to death than our default (first-person) attitude towards our own mortality.³³ It might, however, be argued that Murdoch's approach could be rooted in just this asymmetry, as an extension of this ordinary (for Cockburn problematic) way of thinking. I will accept that this is a real asymmetry in our way of thinking, subject to a qualification: the forgetting of self is not absolutely the case, but a matter of degree and varies from context to context. Some pains are quite different from others in the way that they promote a concern with, or fear for, our own identity. Napoleon no doubt suffered greatly in defeat, but a public thrashing with a belt would have struck at his sense of his own dignity. Some pains and ways of suffering matter to us in the way that they do because they strike at our view of who we are and how others ought to behave towards us. Similarly with the case of death. If I believe that I am the last of the mohicans then my death will assume a significance that I am tempted to call tragic. (Although not in Murdoch's narrower, specialised sense.) If I find out that there is a thriving community of mohawks just over the hill, my attitude towards my own death will be altered.

Having said this, my point is not at all to deny the asymmetry highlighted by Cockburn but simply to qualify it and having done so to suggest that it will not do the right sort of work for a Murdochian. My reasons for making this claim are as follows.

³³ This yields an interesting contrast between Cockburn's Wittgensteinian approach and Heidegger.

The forgetting of self, the self-blindness which Cockburn identifies draws just as easily from thought about our own pains as it does from our thought about death and this is a distinctly unMurdochian approach because (i) it makes thought about the latter dispensable rather than the fundamental form of self-forgetting; and (ii) Murdoch's critique of suffering as bound up a *default* human sadomasochism, is precisely concerned with the way in which it (normally) tends not to produce self-blindness but to direct our attention to self. Our default approach is *not* that of self forgetting. Forgetfulness of self requires a great deal of work.

Of course, here it might be objected that the right kind of suffering, what Murdoch at one point calls 'absolute (deathly) pain' although exceptional rather than the norm, might escape these problems [M.131]. But even if we were to accept this, it is not in every sense that our thought in such situations of experiencing pain and encountering death is forgetful of self. It is a form of self-blindness in the limited sense that when I suffer pain in certain contexts, and in a certain way, I am not concerned with myself *qua* individual with a unique history (such that my concern might vanish or radically alter if I became aware that I am not who I believed myself to be). But I am still concerned with myself even if concerned in a way that fails to do justice to my uniqueness. And such concern with self is precisely what Murdoch is suspicious about in the case of our suffering.) Concern is kept *here* and not displaced towards the other. Hence, in this everyday feature of our psychology, self is not forgotten in any sense that would support a Murdochian position.

As an extension of this theme it may be pointed out that the asymmetry Cockburn highlights shows the way in which an awareness of others is bound up not with self-forgetting, but with our awareness of self. Take the following case from Viktor Frankl's memoir on life in a concentration camp. Frankl details those (few) occasions on which his training as a psychotherapist may have been of help to others. On two separate but similar occasions he encountered prisoner who were contemplating suicide, but was able to talk them around by drawing out some of those considerations which, in the midst of their suffering, they had lost sight of, 'for the one it was his child whom he adored and who was waiting for him in a foreign country. For the other it was a thing, not a person. This man was a scientist and had written a series of books which still needed to be finished. His work could not be done by anyone else, any more than another person could ever take the place of the

father in his child's affections'. This looks plausibly like grasping the personal nature of the encounter with mortality. 'When the impossibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude.'³⁴ What is important here is not, of course, the accuracy of Frankl's account but rather a certain kind of reflection upon it whereby we affirm that *yes, this is a good and truthful way of looking at matters*. What is striking about the example, at least in the case of the father, is the way in which he overcomes the temptation of suicide by thinking of another, very much in line with Murdoch's insight about how the problems of others can break our dark cyclical thoughts. However, what is involved is not just a direction of attention away from self, but rather a more relational way of thinking of himself, as rooted in a shared past, as *bound up with* others who are cherished and who may be harmed by his own death. What is involved is also not *ownmost* in the private property sense of being something that may be cast away without consideration to others.

V. Murdochian Commitment

Where this leaves us is in the following position. Murdoch needs her account of the significance of mortality to hold together in order to separate out romantic suffering from her own, favoured mode of suffering ('unselfing'). The latter is to be conducted in the light of an awareness and acceptance of mortality. Murdoch's approach towards the significance of mortality cannot therefore be bracketed off. But it also cannot be successfully defended against the charge that it is an arbitrary (and counterintuitive) imposition of the ideal of figurative death upon real death rather than a conducting of the former in the light of the latter. Here, we might still be inclined to say one of two things. Firstly, that arbitrariness in this sense can be tolerated by Murdoch. That, in spite of criticising others for imposing their own significant form on the reality of death, she is perhaps criticising them only for imposing the wrong sort of significant form. I have assumed that Murdoch's account cannot be so arbitrary but perhaps this is an assumption too far. I do, however, want

³⁴ Frankl (1964), 79-80. Frankl is very much in the tradition of emphasising the projective, forward looking character of our being, but also treats such projection as a way of taking up the individual's historicity.

to suggest that an acceptance of such arbitrariness must alter our understanding of Murdoch's philosophical significance.

Perhaps, behind all the circumlocution, she is offering us her own deeply counterintuitive *just so* story. In this context it should be noted that although even the most counterintuitive tale might have morally usefully consequences, Murdoch has always rejected a reading of her texts in an instrumental or 'as if' manner. She has always defended the view that she is trying to be truthful, and not providing a story which is not itself true but useful in the generation of other truths. Commenting on the status of the *Sovereignty of Good* she remarks that 'This is not a sort of pragmatism or a philosophy of "as if"'.³⁵ If there are cognitive gains to be made through moral commitment, they will only be available through genuine commitment to the truth of a morality in its own right. In line with this, Murdochian death orientation cannot be merely an *as if* standpoint. Understood not just in terms of some instrumental value, but as (in itself) truthful Murdoch's attitude towards mortality may be regarded as a form of mystical commitment. There is a sense in which it falls off the edge of rational discourse. I use the term 'mystical' in this context, not by way of dismissive criticism, but by way of classifying Murdoch in terms that she, from time to time, endorses, although stressing its practical value.³⁶ I am suggesting that we treat her claims to be presenting a form of practical mysticism with absolute seriousness and as more than an 'as if' tale. This would help to explain a good deal about her willingness to bypass problems without giving them any detailed treatment. Mysticism involves a commitment to the view that because ultimate truth is both ineffable and pertains to what is most real, no matter what problems there are in one's way of making sense of the world, as long as they are encountered on the right path, they can, in principle, be resolved at some future stage of progress, even where such progress happens to be *de facto* blocked. What one needs to do is to *hold on* and continue along the same lines, endure and tolerate the difficulties, persevere in spite of them.

To suggest that Murdoch is a mystic of sorts goes further than pointing out the various mystical influences upon her work such as Neoplatonism of the sort

³⁵ GG, 73.

³⁶ Murdoch's appeals to 'mysticism'. It would be no great charge to suggest that Murdoch is the latest, perhaps the last of the great English mystics. ('English' being used broadly here given Murdoch's birth in Dublin.)

associated with pseudo-Dionysius and with St John of the Cross. These are influences which any plausible moral psychology might draw upon without itself being mystical. For example, there is something to be said for the view that radical personal change is not won without its moment of crisis, its dark night of the soul. My suggestion is that Murdoch goes further. She begins by trying to secularise a religious idea of morality (to vindicate Good in the place of God) but, over time, she drifts into something that is itself more religious or (a term she is more comfortable with) 'spiritual' [M.495]. Towards the end of the *Metaphysics* she remarks that 'in the continuity which (as I see it) exists between morality and religion, we might feel that we had crossed the border' [M.506]. I will agree, with the proviso that Murdoch sees mysticism as constituting the core, the essential truth of religion. 'Mystics differ in style and doctrinal content, yet seem to have much in common. Here one is inclined to say (I am inclined to say) that the fundamental nature of religion is mystical' [M.69-70]. Similarly, 'There is a "moral unconscious". This is how morality leads naturally into mysticism and has a natural bond with religion. (By religion I mean a religious attitude and form of life, not a literalistic adherence to a particular dogma.)' [M.301]. The mystic succeeds in getting beyond the iconography of creed and sect and makes a deeper sense of it all. 'I would say (persuasive definition) that a mystic is a good person whose knowledge of the divine and practice of the selfless life has transcended the level of idols and images' [M.73].

What Murdoch sets out is not, ultimately, to be defended in strictly philosophical terms. At some point, a different and altogether more mystical commitment enters her work. While she would no doubt disagree with a great deal that I have argued (disputing matters of emphasis, suggesting that I treat as unavoidable what are only moral dangers or temptations, and so on) it is less clear that she would disagree on this point. Murdoch (the whole Murdoch and not a pruned-back simulacrum) can only be seen as defensible by someone who shares her mystical commitment and is willing to disregard the problems as secondary. I need hardly point out that I do not share this commitment and if it is seen as a precondition for holding that Murdoch is consistent then it seems to me that the price is just too high.

Alternatively, and secondly, we might be inclined to defend the apparent arbitrariness of the way that Murdoch imposes a special significance on the reality of

death by saying that there must be *something more* to her position, something that the above approach of breaking down the options in a broadly (but not too) analytic manner just does not grasp. (Perhaps the very *form* of this type of enquiry occludes something.)³⁷ And here I am perfectly willing to concede that there is not only something more, but much more to her position. There is, for example, the insightful realisation that an account of morality has to place mortality at its heart, and there are insights that may be (ought to be) gleaned from her understanding of bereavement and the experience of loss or void.³⁸ However, asserting that there must be something more does not, by itself, show that this extra deep something does anything to resolve the problem in hand. It is every bit as plausible to claim that the *something more* to be found in Murdoch is not a deeper level at which inconsistencies are resolved and arbitrariness removed, but a level at which Murdoch relies upon a mystical commitment to viewing the world in a particular, problematic and austere way.

³⁷ See Chapter 1 for Murdoch's reservations of this sort.

³⁸ For example, there is an important difference between the gradual refocusing of attention towards one's own suffering in genuine bereavement (and which Murdoch describes as a filling up of the void), and the shallow or false emotion involved in great outpourings of public grief and where the deceased celebrity has never been the true focus of attention, but rather the desire is to be part of the emotional throng. (Here we may think of the cases of Princess Diana and, perhaps, John Paul II.)

Afterward

The bulk of this thesis has been devoted to a critical examination of Murdochian morality with a view to providing grounds for the charge that Murdoch falls foul of what she criticises. The reading of Murdoch which has been developed is an inclusive one. Troublesome commitments have not been pared away, particularly those associated with her religiosity and admiration for the mystics (although I have appealed to the latter cautiously, and in the case of her approach towards mortality, only when other options have failed). The end result is not intended to show that Murdoch may be debunked and set aside. It may, instead, be treated as a propaedeutic to the appropriation of a great deal that is of value in her writings, without the much more problematic expectation that what is of value can be appropriated in a consistently Murdochian manner. On the whole, my position has been that although it is instructive and illuminating, Murdoch's approach towards morality does not hold together.

To close, I will set aside my scepticism about her consistency in order to end on a different sort of problem concerning the status of her approach as a *practical* guide to morals. This is a different sort of problem that flows from the kind of reading of Murdoch that I have set out. Given that her predilection for the imagery of the quasi-religious and mystical pilgrim is not mere ornamentation, I am inclined to wonder about just how available it could possibly be beyond the narrow confines of some moral elite. Similar considerations follow from the way in which ordinary contentment is downgraded in the course of the moral pilgrim's progress.¹ Partly to avoid any sense of final closure in my treatment of Murdoch, I will keep this question of availability open and try only to draw out a tension that it helps to generate, a tension which involves her combinations of moral hierarchy with anti-elitism, and moral vision with humility.

Part of what motivates the death theme in Murdoch is a very traditional concern to deflate all sorts of human pretensions.² As such it is part of her rejection of elitism, the same preoccupation that is at work when she opens the *Sovereignty* by describing it as a 'movement of return' towards 'the consideration of simple and

¹ See above, Chapter 3.

² This traditional levelling role of death imagery is detailed in Bakhtin (1984).

obvious facts'.³ It is concerned with saving the kind of belief that the practice of morality may need, and that in our everyday lives we cannot get away from, the belief that some things really are bad, and that others are good. 'The virtuous peasant knows, and I believe he will go on knowing, in spite of the removal or modification of the theological apparatus, although what he knows he might be at a loss to say.'⁴ For Murdoch, what we find difficult to explain is a goodness that 'is perhaps most convincingly met with in simple people - inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families'.⁵ Elsewhere, the emphasis shifts to (presumably maiden) aunts. The exemplar changes but the point remains much the same. There is an appeal here to everyday human decency lived at our common level of humanity. (An appeal which generates a similarity, but perhaps nothing more, between Murdoch and the sort of intuitionism which appeals to strange moral properties rather than appealing to the continuous value-ladenness of consciousness.)⁶

Others, and here the list of malefactors is topped by existentialists and structuralists, are charged with threatening to corrupt our idea of morality. In their texts, 'The atmosphere is invigorating and tends to produce self-satisfaction in the reader, who feels himself to be a member of the elite.'⁷ Against such elitist delusions Murdoch appeals to death as the great teacher, it is the final guarantor of the unimportance of elitist pretensions. 'Ultimately we are nothing. A reminder of our mortality, a recognition of contingency, must at least make us humble. Are we not then closer to the deep mystery of being human?' [M.501] What jars here is not simply the problems that her attitude towards mortality generate, it is also the very idea of joining this deflationary or anti-elitist strand of her thought together with a Platonic discourse of moral ascent which (Murdoch accepts) presupposes a hierarchical system of standards. 'In effect Kant's moral view is optimistic and democratic. Plato's is pessimistic and aristocratic, in the sense that he offers a vision of what is highest, but also of the distance which separates us from it. Kant's view is

³ *IP*, 1.

⁴ *GG*, 72.

⁵ *GG*, 52.

⁶ For an attempt to classify Murdoch as an intuitionist, see Feargus Kerr (1997). For differences between Murdoch and Moore, see Antonaccio (2000), 116-123.

⁷ *GG*, 49.

horizontal, Plato's is vertical. Kant's man plods along a level road, alternately failing and succeeding, continually nagged by conscience. We easily identify with this individual. Plato has no similar figure. When goodness is so difficult, there seems less point in saying that every man is potentially good, though the Cave myth may imply it.' [M.178].

Murdoch may soft-pedal a little on the subject of Plato's views on slavery, treating it as an image of moral guidance, but even when she does so it is through an acceptance of the hierarchical element in Plato's thought [M.386-9]. 'Plato is less democratic than Anselm, who thought that anyone could conceive of God' [M.400]. Similarly, 'In general Plato was an austere moral thinker. Few could rise high. The "gravity" of sin compels us' [M.402]. Finally, she appeals to Plato's 'hierarchy of subjects' wherein 'each subject *has the object he deserves*' [M.454; 167; and to strengthen the overtones of culpability *Acastos* 89 and 99]. In Murdoch, culpability for our being, even for its default back-of-the-Cave condition, is endorsed. But she makes sense of culpability against the background assumption that we could be otherwise and better. Culpability for being in Murdoch has a normative point, it directs us towards the possibility of, and need for, improvement. This allows us to make sense of Murdoch's comment about that a moral egalitarianism is implied by the Cave myth in spite of its strong hierarchical overtones. (It is the enlightened few who return to the Cave in order to guide others.)

The point, I take it, is that Murdoch is rejecting the idea that her approach towards morals is a special *way*, something restricted to the enlightened few or the moral elite. But she is doing so at the same time as endorsing moral hierarchy, 'if morality is essentially connected with change and progress, we cannot be as democratic about it as some philosophers would like to think'.⁸ Sometimes she appeals to unselfish mothers or aunts, and at others to 'Christ, Socrates, certain saints'.⁹ (Exemplars which do not look at all similar.) Here, I will follow Murdoch in assuming that it makes sense to speak of hierarchy without elitism. For Murdoch, the latter seems to imply not only hierarchy but rigidity or exclusivity, a lack of opportunity for moral mobility.¹⁰ In so far as her position is democratic or egalitarian,

⁸ *IP*, 28.

⁹ *GG*, 51.

¹⁰ 'As for the *élite* of mystics, I would say no to the term "*élite*",' *GG*.72.

it presupposes not equality of condition but something closer to equality of opportunity. (With due allowances made for the fortuitous particularity of circumstance.)

What I want to suggest is that, even given this distinction between elitism and hierarchy, there is still a tension between Murdoch's Platonic moral hierarchy and the real (general) availability of unselfing. What we are being asked to accept is that the ordinary, unexceptional moral being is to be guided by (and presumably taught, or brought up, to live in line with) a morality that is not only quasi-religious, but contains some ultimate level of mystical commitment. If this were at all plausible (and I am by no means certain that it is, at least in the kind of world where we happen to live) I still want to suggest that it will generate a problem when it comes to making sense of what occurs higher up the moral ladder, at the level of the advanced pilgrim, the 'mystical hero' whose virtue is 'humility', or one of those 'hero-saints' she mentions in the *Metaphysics*.¹¹ Insofar as we make the customary distinction between the hero (a risk-taker with situation-specific virtues) and the saint (a more patient endurer with general virtue), the Murdochian ideal is perhaps more saintly than heroic, but given that courage is involved I will take it that her pilgrim combines an element of both, i.e. her own reference to 'hero-saints' is not misleading. Indeed the saintly person should probably see when heroic risk or sacrifice is called for and when it is an attempt at personal exultation.

Let us now situate such an admirably humble figure within a Platonic hierarchy. Like all good Platonists, Murdoch holds to the view that we are drawn towards the Good and that love (of some sort) shows us the way. We learn to love what is good. Less mystically, *we steadily develop moral competence*. We may, for juridical purposes, start out from an assumption that we are all on a common moral level, however, this is a rule of thumb and does not presuppose actual equivalence. (John Kekes rather nicely suggests that the presumption of equivalent moral competence is akin to the presumption of innocence until shown otherwise.)¹² Here, it might be objected that the hierarchical element is not all that great, given that Murdoch presupposes only *differing* moral competences. We might accordingly imagine that there is some great heap of competences or virtues of different sorts and that they are

¹¹ *EM*, 227; *Metaphysics*, 120.

¹² Kekes (1995), Chapter 4.

distributed in such a way that I have one bundle of competences and you have another bundle, and that some components of our bundles might be the same while others might differ or conflict. (A view that is close to Blum's position.)¹³

The problem with this approach is that Murdoch endorses the Platonic view of the unity of the virtues, they are not modular and discrete (certainly not conflicting). To have one is to have others. This is a plausible enough view to take. We would not want to speak of Adolf Eichmann's 'diligence' and 'industry' except, perhaps, in some ironic contexts. And we would not want to do so because his was not a virtuous life with admirable goals. Virtues improve us but the personal characteristics in question made Eichmann a worse person. In the absence of any morally worthwhile goal or activity we might say that he was 'systematic', or 'efficient' but not 'industrious' or 'diligent'. The point is that virtues presuppose each other. Because she adheres to this view, Murdoch's position is not just that I have some competences and that you have other and different ones, but that some people have far more moral competence than others. It is in the recognition of this that we cannot be as democratic as we would like. This is also not a position that I am inclined to dispute, it may strike some readers as far too undemocratic but it may strike others as the sheerest common sense.

Our problem now is that the humble, advanced pilgrim will love an ideal that happens to be best realised in themselves. To get around the danger that the humility of such a person might be a form of false humility, involving a desire to have (or to be seen to have) all these accomplishments *and humility too*, Murdoch is pushed into the suggestion that he must go beyond even Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith whose moral exemplariness is invisible only to others. 'A saint described is a saint romanticised. Nor must a saint romanticise himself. So saints must be invisible both to others and to themselves.' [M.126]. This is not a new position, Luther once remarked that true humility never knows that it is humble. However, it takes us far beyond her previously stated strictures against the pursuit of self-knowledge, and, in general, to anything like therapeutic introspection. Self-knowledge is no longer gained only incidentally, in passing, now seems to be positively avoided. But if the advanced

¹³ Blum (1991), Section IV claims that we are not sensitive to particulars *per se*, moral vision is not a unified capacity. This goes beyond Murdoch's rejection of anything like a specialised faculty of the classic intuitionist sort (a moral sense) and goes against the claim that the various perceptual sensitivities involved in the virtues form any sort of close-knit unity.

pilgrim is stipulated to be blind to themselves in order to see others as more loveable, two things follow. Firstly, they will be subject to an illusion that cuts across the discernment of actual differences in moral level. Secondly, the connection between moral progress and the improvement of moral vision is severed, or at least comes under strain. Only if humility were equated (as it might plausibly be) with the just discernment of one's moral level and limits, would the close connection between moral vision and moral progress remain intact. But in such a case, the good pilgrim would have a sense of their own accomplishments as well as their limits. (And, I would suggest, a commensurately strong sense of self worth.)¹⁴

There is an important sense in which our attributions of humility ordinarily presuppose accomplishment. When someone who is a murderer, thief and cheat remarks '*I am a murder, thief and cheat*' their free acceptance of failings seems to betoken either remorse or a lack of resistance to being flawed. If they said these things remorsefully we might, at best, call them penitent. It is only in the context of moral accomplishments that an attribution of humility becomes appropriate. In other words, humility is a complex moral achievement, a virtue that presupposes other virtues. Indeed, it is Murdoch's own view that it is precisely the advanced pilgrim who is humble. When a moral pilgrim, who has such accomplishments, confronts their mortality and nevertheless feels that others with fewer accomplishments are far more worthy of love than they, this looks suspiciously like a misplaced sense of worthlessness, either a case of false humility or poor moral vision. (A confusion about real moral standing.)

Here, it might be objected that there really are those who are humble and yet saintly, and this is not something that I am at all inclined to dispute. I suggest only that it is difficult to make sense of them in Murdochian terms. Moral saints and heroes *see* that what they are obliged to do is not at all something that applies to others. They have a special sense of moral necessity, obligation (or duty) where others would not be inclined to say that any such requirement obligation (or duty) exists.¹⁵ The imperfection with which their tasks are fulfilled may generate a humbling

¹⁴ A position, perhaps closer to Aristotle, *NE*, Book 4 and to the account of humility in the *Summa Theologiae*.

¹⁵ Urmson (1957), 202–4. Urmson's point is that there are entirely familiar moral reasons for action which go beyond our shared public sense of duty, a view that Murdoch is in sympathy with. Urmson's approach (minus his utilitarianism) is extended in Blum (1988) but in relation to more

sense of failure but it is not failure where others have also failed. Others are not culpable *in the same way* because they are not confronted with the same tasks. While others praised him, Saint Francis reproached himself for having previously failed to preach to the birds, he did not reproach others for this same fault. On the more heroic than saintly side, Oskar Schindler is plausibly represented as having reproached himself for not saving more people, yet he tried to excuse others for their complicity. There may well be a certain kind of elitism in this way of seeing matters, in the heroic or saint's-eye view of a moral project which differs significantly from that of the generality. But it does at least leave room for a humility that does not also devalue the efforts of others. It leaves this room precisely because the task of the saint or hero is not something that others are failing at to an even greater degree. (The baker who is diligent and does not adulterate the bread is performing his allotted task, and so too is the labourer whose plough is sped if not by God at least by appropriate effort, yet those who have some higher calling may fail *in their allotted role*, hence humility may be *more* appropriate in their case.)

Murdoch's manner of opposing elitism allows her no room to make such allowances for a moral division of labour, 'the "machinery of salvation" (if it exists) is essentially the same for all.'¹⁶ It might, however, be objected that it leaves room for different moral levels within the same overall project, and that the humility of the advanced pilgrim may be made sense of in this manner, as relying only upon a rejection of universalisability rather than requiring any separation of the advanced pilgrims moral project from that of the generality. An analogy can be drawn with the situation of having two climbers ascending the same mountain and even by the same route, but by using different sorts of techniques. Humility might involve awareness of a moral level that is unattained and which others simply do not see or perhaps it might involve a failure to live up to one's own (comparatively high) moral level. Both of these seem (to me at least) plausible grounds for an advanced pilgrim to feel humble in ways that might not be appropriate for ordinary pilgrims. But each case will require a built-in awareness of accomplishment which seems to cut across Murdoch's conception of humility. The latter seems too strong, if not exactly 'monkish' then at least dependent upon humility as conceived in the rule of enclosed religious orders

mundane examples of moral action.

¹⁶ GG, 72.

whose conception of themselves was not at all that of ordinary pilgrims. If such awareness of accomplishment is ruled out then not only is moral vision seriously compromised, but it is not obvious that the special sort of humility required of the advanced pilgrim gets off the ground. (What we run up against here is perhaps another example of something that Blum was the first to note. The Murdochian pilgrim needs far more self-knowledge than she is prepared to allow.¹⁷)

My overall point here is only to draw out a tension. Murdoch's Platonism pulls her towards a hierarchical viewpoint which her opposition to elitism then pushes her to qualify by appealing to humility as a key virtue and by generalising the project of unselfing so that it is the appropriate moral project for all. But in doing so the connection between moral progress and the improvement of moral vision is placed under considerable strain because of the self-blindness that the advanced, saintly, pilgrim must have about their own comparative accomplishments and merits. This tension might, like others, be resolved by a mystical appeal to the view that the advanced pilgrim cannot see their own merits, or cannot do so in any way which would promote a sense of self-worth, but nonetheless their vision remains not a flawed vision in the service of other truths, but already truthful in some deeper (and perhaps ineffable) manner. While not denying that this is an option, I am inclined to think it an unattractive one. It runs the danger of making mystical appeals do too much of the work, (and thereby restricting the sense in which Murdoch is philosophically interesting). It also reinforces the Murdochian dependence upon an argument that is never made, an argument for the general availability of a quasi-mystical conception of morality. (Rather than one which is prepared only to incorporate insights from the mystics.) Murdochian morality aspires to be not only liveable for some but available to all and the more it falls back upon its own appeal to the mystical, the less plausible this claim will be.

¹⁷ Blum (1991) gives an account of moral perception which fuses themes from Murdoch and Nussbaum (1990) but may be seen as more influenced by the latter, particularly on the importance of self-knowledge.

Bibliography

Novels by Murdoch (Listed by publication date)

Title		Edition Used
<i>Under the Net</i> (1954)	-	(Vintage, 2002)
<i>The Flight from the Enchanter</i> (1956)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1956)
<i>The Sandcastle</i> (1957)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1957)
<i>The Bell</i> (1958)	-	(Penguin, 1962)
<i>A Severed Head</i> (1961)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1961)
<i>An Unofficial Rose</i> (1962)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1962)
<i>The Unicorn</i> (1963)	-	(Vintage, 2000)
<i>The Italian Girl</i> (1964)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1964)
<i>The Red and the Green</i> (1965)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1965)
<i>The Time of the Angels</i> (1966)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1966)
<i>The Nice and the Good</i> (1968)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1968)
<i>Bruno's Dream</i> (1969)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1969)
<i>A Fairly Honourable Defeat</i> (1970)	-	(Vintage, 2001)
<i>An Accidental Man</i> (1971)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1971)
<i>The Sacred and Profane Love Machine</i> (1974)	-	(Vintage, 2003)
<i>The Black Prince</i> (1973)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1973)
<i>A Word Child</i> (1975)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1975)
<i>Henry and Cato</i> (1976)	-	(Vintage, 2002)
<i>The Sea, The Sea</i> (1978)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1978)
<i>Nuns and Soldiers</i> (1980)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1980)
<i>The Good Apprentice</i> (1985)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1985)
<i>The Philosopher's Pupil</i> (1983)	-	(Vintage, 2000)
<i>The Book and the Brotherhood</i> (1987)	-	(Penguin, 1987)
<i>The Message to the Planet</i> (1989)	-	(Vintage, 2000)
<i>The Green Knight</i> (1993)	-	(Chatto & Windus, 1993)
<i>Jackson's Dilemma</i> (1995)	-	(Penguin, 1996)

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