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Iris Murdoch Novel's: Moral Reality and Moral Realism

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Abstract: Murdoch's (and through her, Weil's) view of (loving) attention as the core moral capacity influenced the development of care ethics, especially in its early (and continuing) form as a type of feminist ethical outlook (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Grimshaw 1986; Ruddick 1989; Walker 1989; Bowden 1997). Care ethics emphasizes attentiveness and concern for the other person in her particularity, informed by knowledge of the specific needs, desires, and situation of that other person, in contrast to emphasizing a universal category such as "person" or "human being" as the appropriate target of attention and care. Murdoch's emphasis on the reality of the particular other as the target of loving attention was drawn on to develop this form of ethical theory. In addition both care ethics and Murdoch tend to see personal relationships as the primary domain of morality. Murdoch's focus on personal fantasy as a prime obstacle to grasping the other's reality suggests that she is envisioning persons with whom we have a personal relationship. But her language sometimes suggests a broader scope, perhaps to persons known to oneself but with whom one does not have a personal relationship, or even the broader category of persons one encounters in a fleeting way (e.g., fellow riders on the subway). She seldom suggests that it means needy or suffering persons distant from oneself, or members of a general category (e.g., victims of Covid). Something like that idea surfaces only in *Metaphysics*, where Murdoch associates it with utilitarianism.
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Introduction:

Murdoch's critique of the existentialist/analytic conception of the self and the will mirrors her critique of both the Sartrean and Harean rejection of a moral reality outside the individual self. She believes in that reality, that it can be known by human persons, and that that reality, or the apprehension of it, motivates us to act morally. She is thus a "moral realist", "moral objectivist" and "moral cognitivist".

There are three distinct strands within Murdoch's conception of moral reality—"other persons", "the Good", and "metaphysics". Murdoch does not pull the three together into an overall systematic view of moral reality.

Varieties of care ethics arose to encompass less personal forms of relationship, and some also expanded this focus to take account of institutions and structures in which care relationships do, or should, take place (Tronto 1993; Bowden 1997; Norlock 2019). Murdoch never goes in this institutional direction. At the same time, the centrality of the visual metaphor in Murdoch—attention, seeing, looking, vision—does not sit comfortably with the emphasis in much care ethics, especially in its feminist form, on the sustaining of ongoing personal relationships involving mutuality and reciprocity, and more generally on the fundamentally relational character of the self. The attentive self is not portrayed by Murdoch as actively engaging with the attended-to other in a reciprocal relationship. In *Metaphysics*, she actively defends the standing-apart of the moral subject against the engaged relationality present in the Jewish theologian Martin Buber's views (MGM 1992, ch 15: 361–380. See Cordner 2019 discussion). (Murdoch's overall relationship to feminism is complex. For extended treatments, see Lovibond 2011; Bolton forthcoming).

Moral reality as other persons

A central strand in Murdoch's view is that moral reality is other persons. Murdoch is not thinking of "other persons" as an aggregate, nor primarily as instances of a category. Rather a given moral agent's moral reality consists in the individual reality of each other person, one at a time.

In this strand, Murdoch emphasizes the complexity and difficulty of apprehending the moral reality in question. She says that we are prone to fantasy and egoism (the "fat, relentless ego" [OGG: 52/342]) that block us from being able to see other persons clearly; from appreciating that they are as real as oneself (SBL 1959/EM: 215); from a lived recognition of their separateness and differentness (OGG: 66/353); and from grasping their true individual character (OGG: 59/348). Our ego must in a way be silenced—a process she refers to as "unselfing" (a concept she draws from Simone Weil's "décreation")—in order for us to fully grasp reality in this sense.[3] ("We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else". OGG: 59/349) Murdoch's novels frequently portray characters lost in their own world who see others primarily through their own fantasies of them. But Murdoch also emphasizes a more general contingency and idiosyncrasy of persons, resulting in a general opaqueness of persons to each other, a point apparently independent of the one about fantasy and egoism, though complementing it.

Murdoch thinks grasping the reality of the other comes in degrees, that extend to a "perfect" understanding of another, a state that can be aimed at but not actually attained. She often speaks of levels of understanding—of persons, concepts, ideas—an idea she increasingly comes to associate with Plato, and that she connects with a "perfectionism" that holds out the perfect understanding as a (moral) standard (IP: 29/322; OGG: 61/350). The moral challenge of knowing the other differs for each individual agent because each agent encounters different people, but also because the task and challenge of knowing differs for each agent in relation to each other person.

Sometimes Murdoch expresses the "other persons" strand in more general terms—not only individual persons but "individual realities" outside the (agent's) self. This can include natural objects such as a tree or an individual animal, but also non-animate and conceptual objects such as a language or a subject matter, and also situations. She sometimes, and increasingly so in *Metaphysics*, sees an appreciation of all of reality in its manifold detail as a crucial form of moral aspiration, and there is evidence in her novels of a special appreciation of natural objects, not only living beings, and not only as beautiful (White 2020). But more frequently Murdoch regards other persons specifically as the content of moral reality.

Moral reality as Platonic good

A second, and increasingly prominent, strand in Murdoch's view of moral reality is that it is "The Good", understood in a Platonic sense. One element in Murdoch's Platonism is that something like the form of the Good constitutes what is known when we have moral knowledge, and is also what is sought and loved. We achieve that understanding through knowing and loving the good in good particular things (including persons but also art, nature and ideas), then ascending to an understanding of Good itself. (Murdoch frequently employs Plato's "ascending" metaphor [e.g., SGC: 94/377].) Murdoch also says, attributing it to Plato, that the Good is like a light that enables us to see goodness in particular things (SGC: 93/376).

Murdoch explicitly rejects two philosophically familiar ways to understand "good"—a functional use ("good knife"; SGC: 93/376) and good as "the most general adjective of commendation" (SGC: 98/381). These do not give us a clue to the concept. "A genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good" (SGC: 99/381).

While the Good is an object of both knowledge and love for Murdoch (and she links those two notions ("to love, that is, to see" [OGG: 66/354]; "attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love" [OGG: 67/354]), she does not subscribe to the aspect of Plato's view that regards the forms as more real than individual objects and persons who partake of them in the world of experience, nor as inhabiting a transcendent world beyond our world of experience (Hämäläinen 2019: 267). And she rejects this as a proper interpretation of Plato (SGC: 96/378f; Robjant provides a detailed defense of her interpretation of Plato [Robjant 2012].)).

The Good and other persons are distinct strands in Murdoch's view of moral reality. But they reinforce each other. Hopwood interprets Murdoch as saying that "we love particular individuals in light of the Good, and we love the Good through particular individuals" (Hopwood 2018: 486). Murdoch's view is not analogous to Kant's idea that respecting the other person involves directing that respect to the moral law or rational will within them, or to their best self. (Velleman defends a form of Kant's view as Murdochian, understanding rational will to be the capacity for valuing [Velleman 1999 (2006: 100)]. Hopwood criticizes this view [Hopwood 2018: 482].) For Murdoch loving and knowing other persons is also not the same as knowing what is distinctly good in them or about them. Susan Wolf rejects the idea that loving attention as Murdoch (and she) understand it affirms the moral goodness, or overall goodness, of its object. One can love, and direct loving attention to, another whose deficiencies and faults she fully recognizes (Wolf 2014). Both Cordner and Wolf emphasize that it is the person as a whole that is the proper object of loving attention (Cordner 2016; Wolf

2014). Murdoch agrees, in giving a criticism of Kant: "Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals" (M&E 1957/EM: 215).

Other connections between the Platonic and the other persons strands, not necessarily incompatible with the ones mentioned, have been proposed. Clarke suggests that the Good is a perfectionist principle in Murdoch, so that seeing other persons in light of the Good is just an expression of her perfectionism, pushing the agent to achieve a more and more just, loving, and complete perception of that person (Clarke 2012). Dorothy Emmet, an older contemporary and friend of Murdoch presses a similar view, that the Good should be thought of as a "regulative ideal" in the Kantian sense, "an indefinable standard towards which we can turn in appreciation of" what is Good (or Beautiful). But Emmet differs from Clarke in denying that this is a moral principle (Emmet 1994 [this book was dedicated to Murdoch]: 65–66; see also 1979 for one of the first scholarly engagements with Murdoch). Emmet likely also influenced Murdoch's resistance to British philosophy's jettisoning of metaphysics in its analytic and linguistic modalities in the 1950s, through Emmet's defense of metaphysics in her 1945 *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking*; which Murdoch read, and in her and Murdoch's attempts starting in the 1950s (and in all of Murdoch's subsequent writings) to bring religion and philosophy closer together. Murdoch acknowledges that the Christian conception of God influences her understanding of the Good. "I shall suggest that God was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention" and that we should retain a non-theistic concept [i.e., Good] with those characteristics (OGG: 55/344). This semi-religious dimension relates to the idea Murdoch occasionally expresses, and more so in *Metaphysics*, that the Good is a source of energy that is not found within our "natural psychology" (OGG: 71/358).

Murdoch, Sidgwick, Plato and the self/other moral framework

Though "the Good" is a distinctly Platonic strand in Murdoch's view of moral reality, the "other persons" strand is un-Platonic in two important ways. One is that it involves a sharp separation between self and other, and identifies morality with attention to, love of, or concern for the other and not the self. Henry Sidgwick articulated a standard view in Anglo-American moral philosophy on this matter when he said that the field of ethics made an important step beyond the ancients when it articulated self-interest as a distinct rational principle of action that is separate from a principle of the good of others, understood impersonally. (He attributed this discovery to Bishop Butler.) (Sidgwick 1874 [1907: 404]; Sidgwick 1886 [1902: 197–8]; Brewer 2009: 193). Neither Plato nor Aristotle have this exclusively other-focused conception of virtue, common to both Murdoch and the tradition Sidgwick identifies and praises. Murdoch agrees with Sidgwick's self/other distinction as one of great moral significance, though she does not regard cognizing or caring for the other in terms either of rationality or principle.

A second difference from Plato (and Aristotle) is Murdoch's rejection of the Greeks' sense that virtue and virtuous action are good for their agent as well as for their own sake (but the former "good for" is not understood by Plato or Aristotle prudentially and is not separable from virtue being good for its own sake [Brewer 2009: 202]). For Murdoch it is indeed good to act virtuously, and doing so helps to constitute the agent as morally good. But she does not understand this virtuousness as intrinsically *good for* the agent. Virtue is pointless, as Murdoch often says (OGG: 71/358; SGC: 78/364), and this is tied up with the view, which she sees as historically produced from Kant to Existentialism, that there is no inherent purpose in human life. "We are simply here" with no larger purpose or *telos* (SGC: 79/364). But in the face of this purposelessness, being and becoming a morally good person through a suppression or transcendence of self is the best aspiration we can have.

Despite aligning with Sidgwick regarding the identification of morality solely with an appropriate focus on the other and the other's welfare, not that of the self, Murdoch's view differs from Sidgwick's, as well as from much of the English empiricist tradition in ethics (Hutcheson, Hume, Mill), in three crucial respects. First, she pays very little attention to *self-interest* as an egoistic obstacle to morality through our unduly privileging our own interests over those of others. For Murdoch the prime self-oriented obstacle to morality is fantasy, which gets in the way of our seeing the other person as a distinct, separate, other being with their own reality. Sometimes the personal fantasy idea is bound up with *self-absorption*, which keeps us from being more than barely aware of others at all. More frequently it is our investment in false ideas of the (particular) other expressed in the fantasy idea. Neither of these, however, is self-interest as an overall motive or principle as Sidgwick envisages. All three (fantasy, self-absorption, self-interest) are egoistic but in distinct ways.

A second difference from Sidgwick (and from Butler, Hume, and Hutcheson, and the empiricist temper of British philosophy more generally) is Murdoch's understanding of moral realism. She is

viewing morality not only as calling for a greater focus on the well-being of others rather than the self, but saying that doing so involves being in touch with, being responsive to, reality itself, while egoism involves living in falsehood, being out of touch with reality. "The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion" (SGC: 93/376). "The authority of morality is the authority of truth, that is, of reality" (SGC: 90f/374).

Diamond and Brewer both note that Murdoch shares with both Plato and Aristotle the view that reality is irreducibly evaluative (Diamond 2010, 59f; Brewer 2009: 152). The identification of the Real with the Good is a deep part of Murdoch's view (Brewer 2009: 152). Murdoch recognizes that the view of reality as evaluatively inert (in addition to human life having no *telos*) is an historical product, tied up with the rise of natural science, with Kant playing a particularly important role in solidifying it within the Western philosophic tradition (MGM 1992: 40). She views Kant as trying to rescue value and morality in the face of this scientistic view of reality (MGM 1992: 50), but she entirely rejects that (unPlatonic) view of reality. Diamond argues that in doing so she also rejects the related Kantian distinction between the theoretical domain and the practical domain (Diamond 2010: 73).

A third difference between Murdoch and the British tradition in ethics is that the latter largely fails to recognize the difficulty and psychic complexity, so central to Murdoch's view, of knowing the (individual) other, and thus also often of knowing how to act toward them so as to bring about their well-being. The notion of "benevolence" as employed in that tradition is taken to imply that being motivated to help others is sufficient to bring about what is good for the other. Murdoch strongly rejects this view, since the benevolent sentiment and motive does not guarantee an understanding of the other's reality and well-being.

Moral realism, fact and value, practical reason

Murdoch's form of moral realism has spurred important and influential secondary literature that is more engaged than Murdoch herself with meta-ethical questions in the Anglo American tradition. Hilary Putnam credits Murdoch with the critique he develops of the fact/value dichotomy, focusing on what Murdoch calls "secondary moral words" (IP: 22/317) and "normative-descriptive words" (IP: 31/325; Putnam 2002: 34–35). (Bernard Williams later influentially referred to these as "thick" moral or evaluative concepts, such as cruel, rude, brave, courageous, generous, elegant [Williams 1985]). These terms possess descriptive content but are also evaluative, and often motivational, contrasting with the more abstract moral terms "good", "right", and "ought" that had dominated British moral philosophy through the 1950s, and that almost entirely lack the descriptive element. For Putnam there are evaluative facts ("Jane's act was courageous") that have no less standing as describing reality than a presumptively non-evaluative fact. Nor, he argues, can the reality reflected in the characterization be factored into two unrelated components joined together—an allegedly "purely descriptive" component, and an evaluation of the content in that component (point 1 on the Hare list). The two dimensions are inextricably "entangled", Putnam argues (2002).

This view thus rejects a common moral non-cognitivist (but shared by some cognitivists) claim that moral properties always "supervene" on (that is, apply in virtue of) already-existing non-moral properties. Panizza and Setiya defend this implication of the existence of secondary moral terms (Panizza 2020; Setiya 2013). Panizza connects the rejection of supervenience with Murdoch's view that our direct perception of moral properties is bound up with the ways that perception is deeply conceptual (Panizza 2020: 284–5; see also Setiya 2013).

Others have focused more distinctly on Murdoch's view's implications for practical reason. John McDowell developed a Murdochian-influenced moral realist view, in an influential 1979 paper "Virtue and Reason", often also regarded as a founding essay in the contemporary virtue ethics tradition (and indeed McDowell sees his view [developed in other papers as well] as both Aristotelian and Murdochian) (McDowell 1979, 1998). (More on Murdoch and virtue below.)

McDowell says that to possess a virtue, such as kindness, is to possess "a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behavior". Its

deliverances…are cases of knowledge… [A] kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity. (McDowell 1979 [1997: 142])

McDowell adds that the reasons for action in particular situations that moral perception cognizes cannot be derived from general principles but retain a particularistic dimension, also emphasized by Murdoch. (See "particularity" below.)

Setiya agrees with McDowell that for Murdoch reality as accurately cognized supplies agents with motivating reasons, including moral

reasons, for action; this view thus constitutes a form of "moral internalism". "Rationality belongs to full cognition of the facts" (Setiya 2013: 13). Setiya responds to the objection that a moral agent could apply a moral concept competently to a situation but be unmoved by the moral force of the thus-characterized situation. He notes that Murdoch speaks of two senses of "knowing what a word means", one connected with ordinary language and the other very much less so. (IP: 29/322)

The second sense is the deeper understanding on which her moral realism relies. And the deeper understanding can be both of a concept and of an individual person in the situation to which the concept is being applied (Setiya 2013: 9). Murdoch connects these points to an aspect of her perfectionism, implying the ideal of perfect understanding of both individuals and concepts.

But Setiya disagrees with McDowell's view that the moral reality cognized by the moral agent must take the form of moral requirements and indeed, more broadly, with action-guiding features of situations (Setiya 2013: 11). Mylonaki criticizes McDowell on similar grounds and both she and Setiya take the "other persons" view of the moral reality Murdoch is concerned with (Mylonaki 2019; Setiya 2013: 11a). Mylonaki emphasizes, however, that cognizing that reality can give rise to reasons for action.

Moral reality as metaphysics

A final thread in Murdoch's view of reality is that it is what metaphysics describes. She understands metaphysics as an all-encompassing view of a transcendent reality, of the universe, that the individual must then attempt to come to understand in order to work out her place in it (M&E 1957/EM: 70). In "Metaphysics and Ethics" she mentions Thomism, Hegelianism, and Marxism as examples. These metaphysical systems and pictures are deeply ethical and evaluative, but, she implies, also provide a broader conception of reality. In her 1950s essays, she defends metaphysical thinking not so much as true, as capturing reality, but as a coherent way of thinking about the moral endeavor of life that is excluded by the linguistic turn in philosophical ethics, and which thereby refutes (Hare's) universal prescriptivism's claim to be the sole moral theory consistent with "the language of morals". She is sympathetic to some moral, political, and philosophical/analytic criticisms of metaphysical systems (especially that they can lose a sense of the value of the individual [M&E 1957/EM: 70; Antonaccio 1996: 115f], and an acknowledgment of ultimate contingency [MGM 1992: 490]). Nevertheless, her evolving moral views always leave room for some kind of transcendent structure beyond the individual that retains ethical authority over the moral agent. The title of her final summative work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, expresses this continuing role for metaphysics in her thinking about morality and reality. As Diamond argues, she is not thinking of "metaphysics" as a non-morally-informed enterprise, as it is sometimes understood. In that form, Diamond says, Murdoch would not think it positioned to dictate what possibilities are open to moral philosophy (Diamond 2010). A metaphysics of actual reality cannot avoid being morally informed.

The Platonic strand of moral reality can of course be seen as exemplifying the metaphysics strand, but the latter remains a more general idea within Murdoch's complex overall view of moral reality. The "other persons" strand seems less metaphysical and thus contrary to the final strand. But Murdoch often speaks of the reality of other people in "transcendental" terms—transcending the individual ego—and this framing thereby retains an element important to her complex and shifting understanding of metaphysics. All three strands play a role in Murdoch's thinking about (moral) reality, but the other persons and the Good are distinctly more prominent.

Metaphor

In addition to but interwoven with the differences mentioned, other persons, the Good, and metaphysics (or a particular metaphysical system or concept) also embody distinct metaphors for understanding moral reality. Murdoch often emphasizes the importance of metaphor in thinking, especially in philosophy where, in the analytic tradition, there is an often tacit assumption that any metaphorical use of language can be given a purely literal rendering. Murdoch entirely rejects this way of thinking about language and understanding and often talks of exploring metaphors.

Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition. (SGC: 77/363, and elsewhere 93f/377)

The "other persons" strand involves an image of a struggle of each moral agent to grasp the other person(s) in their particular world as distinct persons, as equally real as themselves. The metaphor of Good involves a reaching to an abstract and implied-to-be "higher" entity. The metaphor of "metaphysics" generally evokes an elaborated system within which the individual agent is placed. The metaphorical dimension (with the differences among the three) is integral to our understanding of each strand.

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