



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

Research Commons

<http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/>

## Research Commons at the University of Waikato

### Copyright Statement:

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

The thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of the thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from the thesis.

**Morality, Art, and Moral Education in the Philosophy of**

**Iris Murdoch**

A thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

**Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy**

at

**The University of Waikato**

by

**Donya Keyhani**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

2018

## **Abstract**

In this research, the main focus is the educational role of art in the individual's moral life. I begin by offering an account of Murdoch's moral theory and discuss the concepts central to this theory. I argue that Murdoch's moral theory is a form of virtue ethics, to demonstrate why moral education is important in her philosophy. I will then discuss the unique elements of Murdoch's moral philosophy, especially her discussion of the concepts of imagination and fantasy, which is directly related to her theory of art and the role art plays in moral education.

Drawing on my discussion of imagination and fantasy, I will go on to discuss Murdoch's theory of art, focusing on her discussion of unity and disunity in art. I critically examine this view and discuss its drawbacks and show how, with a bit of modification, her view can be applied to most art forms. Finally, I draw on Murdoch's moral view and her theory of art to develop a Murdochian view of the morally educational role of art, drawing on the few comments or suggestions that are found scattered throughout her work. I argue that both the artist and the recipient of art play important roles in making an artwork morally educational.

## **Acknowledgement**

First and foremost I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors Dr. Liezl van Zyl, Dr. Tracy Bowell, and Prof. Simon Keller. They taught me in many ways throughout this process. Their invaluable guidance and insightful comments, and above all, their patience and encouragement through the different phases of writing the thesis made the difficult experience highly educative and even enjoyable. I express my appreciation to Mostafa Malekian for always having been a great mentor and advisor and for introducing me to Iris Murdoch and her incredible philosophy.

I am deeply grateful to my wonderful parents Mohammad and Soheyla, and my brother and sister-in-law Karen and Bahareh for their support and sacrifices, without which I could never have found the courage to go through this process. Their endless love and care have been the greatest inspiration that always kept me moving forward in life.

I would like to thank my friends Mamadou Bah, Banafsheh Ostad, Melanie Jones, and Sadeq Bigdeli for putting up with me and helping me in so many ways. They never left my side in the hardest times when I needed them the most.

The last but not the least I would like to thank my husband Ravindra Naidu who suffered and rejoiced with me through ups and downs of this journey. His loving friendship and his compassionate nature made the study of virtue more tangible.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgement</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Murdoch’s Moral Realism and ‘the Good’</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Introduction .....	1
Section One Murdoch on the Good: Kantian and Platonic Influences .....	2
Allegory of the Cave .....	2
Good as the Condition of Experience .....	8
Section Two The Dissolution of the Fact-Value Distinction and Moral Realism .....	12
The Dissolution of the Fact-Value Dichotomy .....	12
Murdochian Moral Realism .....	15
Conclusion.....	21
<b>Chapter 2 Attention and Inner Life</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Introduction .....	22
Section One Inner Life: Murdoch’s Thought Experiment .....	23
Deliberation over Self and Others.....	24
Inner Life.....	29
Section Two Attention, Love, and the Recognition of Reality .....	35
Murdochian Vision .....	36
Murdochian Attention .....	38
Murdochian Love .....	40
Conclusion.....	42

<b>Chapter 3 Murdochian Virtue Ethics .....</b>	<b>43</b>
Introduction .....	43
Section One Inner Life of Moral agent and the continuity of Moral Life.....	44
Section Two Virtue .....	50
Section Three Eudaimonia .....	56
Section Four Practical Wisdom.....	63
Conclusion.....	69
<b>Chapter 4 Imagination and Fantasy.....</b>	<b>71</b>
Introduction .....	71
Section One Kant and Imagination .....	72
Section Two Plato and the Destruction of Images .....	79
Section Three Imagination and Fantasy .....	85
Conclusion.....	94
<b>Chapter 5 The Paradox of Art .....</b>	<b>97</b>
Introduction .....	97
Unity versus Disunity .....	98
Conclusion.....	109
<b>Chapter 6 Good Art: Murdoch's Moral Evaluation of Art .....</b>	<b>111</b>
Introduction .....	111
Art, Morality, and an Objection to Murdoch's Theory of Good Art .....	112
Conclusion.....	127
<b>Chapter 7 Murdoch and the Morally Educational Role of Art .....</b>	<b>129</b>
Introduction .....	129
Section One Attention to Art without Seizing or Using it .....	130
Section Two Attention to Beauty as an Analogy of the Good.....	134
Section Three Attention to Art to Develop a Stronger Imagination .....	144

Conclusion.....	154
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>160</b>

## Preface

As a young child, I had a secret place where I would sometimes hide. It was a closet filled with spare mattresses and bedding. I would hide myself in the closet and press my face against the mattresses so that no one could hear me weeping. It was wartime and we had fled to another city as my hometown was constantly being bombarded by Iraqi missiles. My father had to stay behind to work and make a life for us. Whenever the radio announced which areas of my hometown had been bombarded that day, I could hear my heart pounding in my chest, so hard that I could hardly hear my mum singing out loud in order to distract us from the terrifying news. When I grew a bit older and the war finally ended, we were left with nothing but a sad grey city and thousands of martyrs and devastated families.

I grew up and got busy with the usual day-to-day engagements and problems of a young girl. One day, to my great surprise, I found myself reading a newspaper article about wars and horrific crimes committed against small children, women, and men, but after moving to the next page, I noticed that I felt nothing. However, when I picked up *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky I was moved to tears. There is a particular passage that moves me, a conversation between two brothers. They discuss human suffering and, in particular, the value of human suffering for the greater good. Ivan cries about the pain of a small child, arguing that nothing can justify the tears of one, not even the purchase of truth:

This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by [her] cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty—shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn't ask to be taken up at night ... they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child's groans! Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and

weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? ... Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'! I say nothing of the sufferings of grown-up people, they have eaten the apple, damn them, and the devil take them all! But these little ones! I am making you suffer, Alyosha, you are not yourself....<sup>1</sup>

Reading this passage, I could see and feel the pain of the child. It enabled me to connect my childhood pain to the suffering of the child. I could not be indifferent anymore. The brothers' discussion changed something in me. It fostered empathy and led me to appreciate the power of art in making visible some aspects of reality that were invisible to me due to my being too absorbed in my own day-to-day concerns. It connected me to the experiences of other people and enabled me to experience what they were going through in my imagination. I could imagine the 'secret closet' of the other child in Dostoyevsky's novel, the place where she would go to hide from her pain. I realised that if it was not for my appreciation of art, I would not be able to put myself in other people's shoes and *feel* their pain the way I did.

Over time, this idea became so fascinating to me that I began to explore different philosophies examining art and how it helps us see other individuals and to be more compassionate towards them. In my exploration of these ideas, I discovered the work of Iris Murdoch. It was through Murdoch's work that I learned how art in general, and literature in particular, provide places where the individual can be *seen*. Through the appreciation of art, the individual and their selfish desires become absent and other aspects of life presented in that art become visible and real. The nature of attention involved in genuinely appreciating art is similar to what is involved in paying careful attention to other people, or as Murdoch would term it, in carefully attending to other people. This is nicely illustrated in Murdoch's description of the experiences of Effingham, a character in her novel *The Unicorn*:

---

<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "The Brothers Karamazov," (New York: The Project Gutenberg,

Something had been withdrawn, had slipped away from him in the moment of his attention and that something was simply himself.... What was left was everything else, all that was not himself, the object which he had never before seen and upon which he now gazed with the passion of a lover.... This then was love, to look and look until one exists no more, this was the love which was the same as death. He looked, and knew with a clarity which was one with the increasing light, that with the death of the self the world becomes quite automatically the object of a perfect love.<sup>2</sup>

Murdoch demonstrates how attention to art provides an opportunity for its audience to be more present. It teaches one to be more attentive and to experience morally relevant situations by diverting the focus of attention away from the self and its egoistic desires. It is where one recognises the existence of other people, identifies their challenges, their vulnerability, their familiarity and obscurity. By attending to a work of art, one does not suspend one's judgment, but rather aligns oneself to the artist's vision of the world. By using one's imagination, one sees things differently, ideally more lovingly and empathetically. So art provides one with a kind of vision and imagination by which one can *see* the chancy and contingent realities of life. If the individual develops the required imagination to picture the reality of other people and what they go through in situations like war, and to develop the sensitivity to be able to feel their suffering and pain, the individual cannot be indifferent to them. This is the inevitable 'love' that is 'to look and look until one exists no more'. It is this Murdochian love – a just and careful attention to the reality of others and acceptance of them in their otherness – that is worthy of careful consideration.

In my exploration of Murdoch's ideas, I found that until recently, her philosophical work, in particular her ethical views and her theory of art, has not received the critical attention and acclaim that it deserves.<sup>3</sup> There are a number of

---

<sup>2</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963). 161.

<sup>3</sup> Even Murdoch's private life and her personal relationships have attracted more attention than her intellectual work. Marije Altorf explains this point and argues that biographies written on Murdoch mostly highlight her sexual life and her Alzheimer's disease rather than her literary and

reasons for this. Murdoch's moral theory, which is at the centre of her philosophical discussion, is sometimes vague and obscure, and does not easily fit into the categories recognised in modern moral philosophy. But it should be acknowledged that Murdoch herself is not very keen to categorise her view as a moral theory. Besides, her success as a novelist has, for a long time, overshadowed her philosophical work.<sup>4</sup> Though undoubtedly that philosophical work, which includes *The Sovereignty of Good*, *The Fire & the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, *Acastos: Two Platonic dialogues*, *Metaphysics as a guide to Morals*, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*,<sup>5</sup> occupies a remarkable place in contemporary philosophy, especially moral philosophy. So I decided to explore Murdoch's philosophical work to discover the ways in which a work of art can contribute to one's moral development.

---

philosophical work. Altorf argues that this is mainly due to the unacknowledged gender-bias in and outside the academic world. See Marije Altorf, "After Cursing the Library: Iris Murdoch and the (in) Visibility of Women in Philosophy," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011). 384-402.

<sup>4</sup> See Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: A Work for the Spirit* (London: Methuen, 1982). Hilda D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, Modern Novelists (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). Antonia Susan Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965). Harold Bloom, ed. *Iris Murdoch*, Modern Critical Views (New York: Chelsea House, 1986). Barbara Stevens Heusel, *Patterned Aimlessness: Iris Murdoch's Novels of the 1970s and 1980s* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1995). Donna Lorine Gerstenberger, *Iris Murdoch*, The Irish Writers Series (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975). David J. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995). Richard C. Kane, *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles: Didactic Demons in Modern Fiction* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988). Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, Key Women Writers (Brighton: Harvester, 1987). Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction* (New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 1999). Barbara Stevens Heusel, *Iris Murdoch's Paradoxical Novels: Thirty Years of Critical Reception* (Rochester: Camden House, 2001). Afaf Jamil Khogeer, *The Integration of the Self: Women in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch and Margaret Drabble* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006). Lisa M. Fiander, *Fairy Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, and A.S. Byatt*, Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). Richard Todd, *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearian Interest* (London: Vision, 1979). Cheryl Browning Bove, *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). Miles Leeson, *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (London: Continuum, 2010). Frank Baldanza, *Iris Murdoch*, Twayne's English Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974); Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe, *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life*, Literary Lives (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Peter Wolfe, *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels* (Columbia.: University of Missouri Press, 1966). Guy Backus, *Iris Murdoch: The Novelist as Philosopher, the Philosopher as Novelist : 'The Unicorn' as a Philosophical Novel*, European University Studies (Berne: P. Lang, 1986). Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> This book is a collection of some of Murdoch's philosophical essays, edited by Peter Conradi.

## Introduction

The significance of Murdoch's philosophy lies in her distinctive account of the self and human consciousness, and in the inherently evaluative function that she assigns to this consciousness. Her account of consciousness is intertwined with another philosophical theme that recurs throughout her work, namely the uniqueness of every person's experiences and the contingency and pointlessness of their life seen against the background of a universal Good. Murdoch's revival of the Platonic concept of 'the Good' is aimed at demonstrating that moral values are real and that all people have an *a priori* conception of them – moral judgments are objective. The reason why some people can make better moral judgments and moral decisions is that they make a successful effort to attend to other individuals more closely and more justly. They use their imaginations to picture different possibilities in every situation and pick a picture that seems to be closer to reality. They avoid quick judgments, which are likely to be influenced by their biases and preconceptions. This effort leads to the expansion of the individual's moral vision and helps them to have a more realistic and, ideally, more sympathetic approach to others. In her moral philosophy, Murdoch challenges those anti-metaphysical approaches to ethics according to which the focus of moral philosophy is the individual's observable actions rather than the state of their consciousness. While the individual's external behaviour is not insignificant for Murdoch, she believes that moral philosophy should engage itself with the background (the individual's vision, thought processes, emotions, intentions, motives, and so on) for these behaviours. Morality does not only reside in the action, but also in the internal processes and struggles that lead to that action.

Murdoch's moral realism leads her to discussions of art throughout her philosophical work and to regard art as a truth-seeking activity. To Murdoch, art and morals are "two aspects of a single struggle".<sup>6</sup> Both these activities reflect the individual's effort to explore the complexities of human life and to develop a better vision of reality, especially the reality of other people. It is the concern for truth that unites art and philosophy. In Murdoch's words: "Good art 'explains'

---

<sup>6</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2002). 39-40.

truth itself, by manifesting deep conceptual connections”.<sup>7</sup> While marrying moral philosophy and art, at the same time, Murdoch recognises a clear division between the two: the former deals with universal theories and concepts and the latter with what is particular and what is contingent and ordinary. In other words, philosophy extrapolates general principles from particular instances, whereas art deals with real people in their particularity.<sup>8</sup> Art’s ability to present contingent and particular realities of human life, and to provide individuals with an opportunity to experience these realities in their imagination, gives it a distinctive role in human life. That is why for Murdoch, art is “the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*”.<sup>9</sup> Art contributes to the individual’s moral growth in different ways, for example by making the reality of human life more accessible and visible to them, or by strengthening their imagination. An artwork such as *The Brothers Karamazov* is capable of attracting the full attention of the reader. Attention to the details of the novel is an unselfish sort of attention, which impartially absorbs the reality presented in it. The ability of Dostoyevsky’s novel to call for this form of unselfish and loving attention, and for the reader’s submission to the beauty of the novel and the reality depicted in it, makes the novel an effective tool for moral education. It allows the reader to experience things in their imagination they would not otherwise experience – at least not with this level of intensity. This helps the reader to become more conscious of the suffering of others and more sensitive towards them.

Murdoch’s fascination with nineteenth-century realist literature (primarily prose and novels, and not poetry and drama) and her low regard for most contemporary literature is rooted in her conviction that realist literature is the best way to illustrate the randomness and chanciness of life and the lived realities of people’s lives.<sup>10</sup> In Murdoch’s view, engaging with the different characters facing

---

<sup>7</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992). 321.

<sup>8</sup> Murdoch prefers to approach the issue of ethics through aesthetics, rather than the familiar categories of moral philosophy. Yet she does not downplay the significance of moral philosophy. See for example Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Murdoch admires the works of nineteenth-century novelists, such as Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen, George Eliot and Tolstoy. She also greatly praises Greek tragedies and works of

different circumstances in these literary works can enhance the reader's understanding of morality. For her, most novels fail to portray a realistic image of the individual. She does not spare the philosophy of her day from the accusation. She thinks most of these philosophies (in particular, moral philosophies) fail to present a realistic picture of human being. The human individual depicted in these philosophies is "thin as a needle, [and] appears in the quick flash of the choosing will".<sup>11</sup> Murdoch opposes the view that the human will is sovereign over moral values. In Murdoch's view, moral values are not decided by the act of choice by the human will, but rather by something God-like, something higher than human will, namely 'the Good'. That is why in her moral philosophy and her theory of art, Murdoch argues that if the individual practices obedience to reality and to the authority of the Good (and beauty in art), they will be able to develop the vision required for acquiring moral virtues.

My intention in this thesis is to offer something that existing critical studies of Murdoch's philosophical and literary works have not examined. By drawing on Murdoch's moral theory, I construct an account of her theory of art and of the importance of art in the individual's moral development. Some of Murdoch's critics have tried to explain the relation between art, especially literature, and philosophy in her work. However, most of these critics lean more towards an analytical, linguistic approach when discussing this relationship, and usually only in passing. As Floora Ruokonen states, "... when it comes to exploring the exact relationship between philosophy and literature in Murdoch's philosophy ... most commentators ... [seem] to employ a strategy of avoidance".<sup>12</sup> According to Ruokonen, focusing too much on the status of language, as Maria Antonaccio does, or avoiding Murdoch's philosophical discussions of literature altogether, as she claims Patricia O'Connor does, overlooks an important aspect

---

Shakespeare. See Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter J. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999); "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter J. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999); "Existentialists and Mystics."

<sup>11</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Floora Ruokonen, "Iris Murdoch and the Extraordinary Ambiguity of Art," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2008): 78.

of her philosophy.<sup>13</sup> These commentators avoid discussing the true status of literature in her work and the ambiguity of this view.

In this thesis, the main focus is on the educational role of art in the individual's moral life. I begin by offering an account of Murdoch's moral theory. Doing so is especially important when discussing her philosophical views, as she is not always very clear or systematic in presenting them and is prone to very different, and occasionally opposing, ways of expressing her ideas. Developing my reading of Murdoch's moral views lays the groundwork for the elaboration of her theory of art (especially good art) and the role good art can play in the individual's moral life. Moreover, Murdoch's theory of art is so intertwined with her moral theory that it cannot be properly understood in isolation from her moral views.

I argue that Murdoch's moral theory is a form of virtue ethics. Through highlighting the virtue ethical elements of her view, I demonstrate why moral education becomes important in Murdoch's philosophy. However, I argue that the unique elements of Murdoch's moral theory, especially her discussion of the concepts of imagination and fantasy, have a great deal to offer to mainstream virtue ethical philosophies. Her discussion of imagination and fantasy is also

---

<sup>13</sup> Ruokonen is referring to Antonaccio's earlier volume on Iris Murdoch [Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).] In her recent work *A Philosophy to Live By*, Antonaccio takes a similar linguistic approach, arguing that the reason some thinkers turn to literature is the rise of antitheory. Criticising the assumptions of antitheorists, she defends what she calls Murdochian 'reflexivity'. This reflexive approach to literature and ethics shifts the focus to language as a medium of moral reflection: "The relation of the individual to language is the place where aesthetics and ethics meet". *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 97. Anil Gomes takes a similar but more analytical, linguistic approach. He draws on Murdoch's *Sovereignty of Good* to demonstrate the role of joint or communal attention to a work of art in coming to understand the ethical framework of another person. According to him, the beliefs and values that structure one's aesthetic concepts overlap the beliefs and values that structure one's ethical concepts. He argues that understanding an aesthetic concept requires the individual to understand the evaluative framework of its application. So if an individual is able to grasp an aesthetic conceptual scheme, they can partially grasp the evaluative point of view through which ethical qualities are recognised. He suggests that Murdoch's tendency towards unity applies to values and virtues across both ethical and aesthetic domains. Anil Gomes, "Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53, no. 3 (2013): 321-37. By contrast, Patricia O'Connor distinguishes between Murdoch's (moral) philosophy, and her literary theory, implying that Murdoch's discussions about literature are not philosophical as such. She maintains, though, that Murdoch does in some places "enhance her literary theory via a substantial philosophical discussion of aesthetics". Patricia J. O'Connor, *To Love the Good: The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*, American University Studies Series V, Philosophy (New York: P. Lang, 1996), 156.

directly related to her theory of art and the role it plays in moral development. As I argue, in Murdoch's view, only good art, which is the kind of art that is the product of imagination rather than of fantasy, and thus, in touch with reality, can contribute to moral education. I go on to critically examine Murdoch's view of art and the drawbacks of this view, and how, with some modification, her view can be applied to most art forms. I then draw on Murdoch's moral views and her theory of art to show that art is one of the most effective human products for making a significant contribution to an individual's moral development. I develop a Murdochian view of the morally educational role of art, drawing on some of the comments and suggestions that are scattered throughout her work. I argue that both the artist, in creating art, and the audience, in receiving art, play important roles in making an artwork morally educational.<sup>14</sup> My discussion is structured across seven chapters as follows:

In Chapter 1, I explain that Murdoch's concept of the Good has a key place in her moral theory. I argue that in spite of how this concept is commonly understood, the Good is located in the individual's mind and is the very condition for the possibility of moral experience. I argue that this reading of Murdoch's concept of the Good explains two important aspects of Murdoch's view: 1) the dissolution of the fact-value distinction and the claim that all experience of the facts is value-laden, and 2) Murdoch's moral realism, according to which the Good is an objective condition of everyone's moral experiences.

In Chapter 2, I explain why the main focus of Murdoch's moral theory is the individual and their moral improvement. I argue that Murdoch focuses on the transformation of the individual's consciousness or vision by suggesting that if the individual seeks to attain an impartial and unbiased grasp of other individuals,

---

<sup>14</sup> I do not intend to discuss Murdoch's novels. But in my discussions of her theory of art, I use Murdoch's novels as examples of good artworks. While Murdoch's theory of art, despite her intention, seems to be too narrow in that it only incorporates narrative arts, and even in the case of narrative arts, it excludes most contemporary novels, I intend to draw on a variety of artworks to show implicitly how this view is applicable to other art forms as well.

they should make an effort to go beyond their selfish tendencies and truly attend to them. Developing this habit is the prerequisite to being loving and compassionate towards other people.

Drawing on the Aristotelian concepts of virtue, *eudaimonia*, and practical wisdom, in Chapter 3, I argue that Murdoch's moral theory is a form of virtue ethics, which despite its unique features, shares some of the main characteristics of the Aristotelian account of virtue ethics. I explain that appreciating Murdoch's virtue ethics is crucial for understanding and developing a Murdochian account of moral education.

In Chapter 4, I discuss Murdoch's account of imagination and fantasy and the Platonic and Kantian aspects of these two concepts. I argue that Murdoch's account of the role of imagination in the individual's moral life is a unique aspect of Murdoch's virtue ethics. Through recognising and foregrounding the role of imagination, Murdoch demonstrates that moral understanding, or a realistic understanding of other people, is a creative process. That is why art, as the product of the creative faculty of consciousness, is closely related to morality and moral progress.

In Chapter 5, I offer an account of Murdoch's theory of art, by discussing the two contradictory concepts of unity and disunity that appears in various places in her work. As I develop a Murdochian theory of art, I argue that an artwork should present the disunified and messy aspects of life, and do so within the unity imposed by an art form. While experiencing the disunity and chanciness of life can be traumatic, the unity of form makes the experience of the recipient of art an uplifting one.

In Chapter 6, drawing upon Murdoch's theory of art, I argue that on Murdoch's view, it is only a 'good artwork', that is an artwork with good moral character, that can contribute to the individual's moral development. I offer an objection to Murdoch's account of good art and argue that some works of art that have a bad moral character can still be considered good in the sense that they can contribute to moral development.

In Chapter 7, drawing upon my account of good art as a kind of art that can contribute to one's moral development, regardless of its moral character, I explore the ways in which good art can contribute to one's moral education. I consider Murdoch's concept of attention and the role it plays in the individual's moral life to argue that attention to art is a form of disinterested attention that can help the individual practice selflessness and love. It strengthens and enlarges their imagination, enabling them to picture different possibilities in every situation. This allows the individual to see the reality of other people more justly and accurately, put themselves in other people's shoes, and, empathise with them provided that they deserve such empathy.

So I conclude by arguing that for Murdoch, the beauty of art can engage us intellectually with all aspects of reality, even with what we might find appalling in real life. Our full attention to an artwork and our obedience and submission to the authority of reality depicted in that work leads to a deep and lasting change in our vision of the world, or as Murdoch puts it, in our 'fabric of being'.<sup>15</sup> By appreciating beauty in good art, we begin to develop an appreciation of what is good. Engaging with the imagination of the artist through their work helps our own imagination to grow. This enables us to see other people in their otherness. It helps us to be more attentive and more sensitive towards others, because we are able to picture what others may be going through, and thus, to empathise with them.

---

<sup>15</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 21.

# Chapter 1

## Murdoch's Moral Realism and 'the Good'

### *Introduction*

The research literature on moral education includes various approaches to the issue of moral development. Iris Murdoch's views are not often discussed in connection with this issue, but I argue that her moral philosophy, in particular her views on moral development as a continuous effort to improve one's state of consciousness, makes an important contribution to the current debate on moral education. In order to tease out a coherent Murdochian theory of moral education and ultimately to consider the role art can play in the individual's moral development, I begin this research by exploring a key concept of her moral view, namely, 'the Good'. Obtaining a coherent understanding of this concept enables us to understand other concepts central to Murdoch's moral theory: attention, vision, imagination and love, which are in turn essential for understanding Murdoch's view of moral development and moral education.

I will explain that the Good in Murdoch's view, like the Sun in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, guides the individual in their moral development. As Peter Conradi puts it: "Plato's 'great Allegory' of the Cave and the Sun... becomes in Iris's handling of it an account of how the lonely human soul struggles towards enlightenment".<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, I am going to argue that unlike Plato's Sun, Murdoch's concept of the Good is located in the individual's mind and is the very condition for the possibility of moral experience. I will show that this is a Kantian understanding of the Good, which leads to two important aspects of Murdoch's view: 1) Murdoch's attempt to dissolve the fact-value distinction by claiming that almost all experiences of the facts are value-laden. 2) Her moral realism, according to which the Good is an objective condition of almost all of our moral experiences. I will discuss each of these points in turn.

---

<sup>16</sup> Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 493.

## *Section One*

### *Murdoch on the Good: Kantian and Platonic Influences*

In this section I discuss the Platonic and Kantian features of Murdoch's concept of the Good. Murdoch's account of the Good forms the foundation of her moral realism, according to which every perception or cognition of the world is value-laden. The individual's moral judgment is true insofar as their perception of the world is true. As I will discuss later, from this, Murdoch concludes that in order to gain good moral vision and become a better person, one needs to develop a more 'objective' understanding of the world.

#### *Allegory of the Cave*

In his *Allegory of the Cave* Plato describes an image of a cave in which people have been bound by chains since childhood, seeing only that which is in front of them. There is a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a track along which some people are carrying a variety of objects. The prisoners, however, can only see the shadows of these objects projected on the wall in front of them. Plato describes a man who, once released, is compelled to walk and look into the light of the fire. The man is dazzled, feeling pain in his eyes. But then he turns and sees the objects causing the shadows. He is dragged outside the cave and faces the Sun. Initially, he feels annoyed by being dragged into the severe light of the Sun. But after a while he gets accustomed to the light and is finally able to look at the Sun.<sup>17</sup>

The real objects in the Allegory stand for what Plato speaks of as the Forms. Forms are unchanging universals that participate in particulars and give them their reality. For Plato, the Sun is a metaphor of the Form of the Good.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 514a-16b.

<sup>18</sup> Plato writes: "The realm revealed through sight should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the sun's power. And if you think of the upward journey and the seeing of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you won't mistake my intention – since it is what you wanted to hear about.... But this is how these phenomena seem to me: in the knowable realm, the last thing to be seen is the form of the good, and it is seen only with toil and trouble. Once one has seen it, however, one must infer that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything". Ibid., 517b-17c.

That is to say, the Sun in the material world functions analogously to the way that the Good functions in the intelligible world.<sup>19</sup> The Good is light itself, the light which is very difficult to look upon, which sheds light on other ideas and makes them visible to human beings.

Murdoch derives three important points from this Allegory. These points form the foundations of her moral theory: Firstly, the idea of the Good makes the virtues, (and reality in general) visible, while it itself is invisible. Secondly, the Good is an ideal or a perfection, which can be appreciated through experiencing the hierarchy of values. Thirdly, the Good provides us with a sense of direction in the process of our moral development. I explore each of these points here.

Referring to this Allegory in *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch states:

We see the world in the light of the Good, but what is the Good itself? The source of vision is not in the ordinary sense seen .... Asking what Good is is not like asking what Truth is or what Courage is, since in explaining the latter the idea of Good must enter in, it is that in the light of which the explanation must proceed.<sup>20</sup>

According to Murdoch, the Good is that in the light of which other virtues can be seen. Whenever the individual wonders about the meaning of a virtue, such as courage, ‘the idea of Good must enter in’. One needs to have a conception of the Good in order to recognise certain traits as virtues. Moreover, to acquire a virtue like courage, one needs a conception of the Good, as courage involves overcoming fear for the sake of a worthy or good end. In order for the individual to appreciate courage as a desirable character trait and become motivated to acquire this virtue, they need to have the Good in their sights to guide them along the path of moral development. Imagine a passer-by who sees that a dog is trapped in a house on fire and there is no one else around to help. He knows that

---

<sup>19</sup> The material or sensible world is the world we perceive through our senses and is constantly changing. In Plato’s view, Forms inhabit the intelligible world, which is unchanging and transcendent.

<sup>20</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 95.

the fire fighters are on their way but also that if he waits for them, chances are the dog will not survive the heat and smoke. He assesses the situation and runs in the house and manages to save the dog. Murdoch would say that the passer-by in this example has a grasp of what is good. He knows that saving the dog (assuming the passer-by is not putting his own life at risk) is the right thing to do.

Once the individual has a vision of the Good, it helps them to distinguish gradations of good and bad, virtues and vices. In this sense the Good is like the Sun that makes all virtues, and in fact all reality, visible. However, it is difficult to see the Good itself. While the Good makes the virtues visible, “it cannot be experienced or represented or defined”.<sup>21</sup> It is impossible for the individual to apprehend the Good in its absolute form. Although the Good is the source of light through which individuals experience the world and identify certain traits as virtues, the Good itself is not an object they can independently experience. In Murdoch’s view, the reason why individuals can never experience the Good in its absolute form is that looking at the Good or the Sun “is not like looking at other things .... it is easier to look at the converging edges than to look at the centre itself. We do not and probably cannot know, conceptualize, what it is like in the centre”.<sup>22</sup> After all, “Good is just not a particular, it is not a thing among others”.<sup>23</sup>

What Murdoch is suggesting here is that individuals are unable to experience the Good directly in its absolute form, but that they can obtain an understanding of it through experiencing the hierarchy and ubiquity of values in the world. They see that some things are better and some things are worse; they understand that some activities are more pleasant than others and some people are more courageous, or respectful or polite. For example, an individual can sense that carrying the shopping bags of an old lady, who is struggling to do so, is a better thing to do than speeding up and walking past her. Although the Good itself is not a particular thing or ‘a thing among others’, the individual has a faint understanding of it through experiencing all these particular good things. It is

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>23</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 405.

through the Good that they intuitively differentiate between values. Any experience of particular values points at the perfect Good. Murdoch writes:

A deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect. Increasing understanding of human conduct operates in a similar way. We come to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously we were prepared to 'let by'.<sup>24</sup>

A characteristic of human activity for Murdoch is that it is never perfect, but aims at perfection.<sup>25</sup> According to her, when we reflect upon the nature of values and examine their relations to each other, we notice a hierarchy and an order. In our experience of 'degrees of excellence' the Good as a perfection is always present. So "[t]he proper and serious use of the term [the Good] refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know ... and which carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence".<sup>26</sup> The Good is a perfection that guides the individual through their evaluations and helps them to see the order of values. It also helps them to stay on the right track.

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Murdoch uses a version of the Ontological proof to argue for the existence of the idea of the Good as perfection (or highest value). This argument demonstrates that the attributes of 'perfection' and 'necessary existence' are so closely connected that we might say they are actually the same. Ibid. Murdoch explains the Ontological proof as originally established by Anselm of Canterbury as follows: God is a being than which nothing more perfect can be imagined. If such a being does not exist it fails to be the most perfect being, as if God exists in reality external to the mind, this entity is endowed with a quality additional to the entity existing only in the mind. In other words, if God exists only in the mind, it will not be the being than which nothing more perfect can be imagined. Therefore, if we can understand God as the most perfect concept, we also can understand that God exists. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 392-93. In response to his critic Gaunilo, Anselm says that the difference between God's existence and anything else's existence is that God, by definition, has a unique, necessary existence. It is possible to imagine a being whose existence is impossible; but about God alone "it is impossible to conceive of His non-existence". Ibid., 394. So according to the Ontological proof, God does not only exist, but His existence is also necessary. Ibid., 395. The point Murdoch tries to make through Anselm's argument is that of all the attributes of God, it is only the attribute of goodness that actually matters and that we can identify in our everyday experience. Other attributes of God are not important, as they just lead to "useless confusion". Murdoch claims that we can do away with God and avoid all of the resulting complex metaphysical implications, but we cannot do without the Good. In fact, the proof supports the existence of the Good rather than God. Ibid., 419.

<sup>26</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 90-91.

This leads to the last point Murdoch makes in connection to the Allegory of the Cave, namely, the idea of perfection as a *direction*. In Murdoch's view, in our ordinary experiences we "are not usually in doubt about the direction in which Good lies".<sup>27</sup> She argues that we "see differences, we sense directions, and we know that the Good is still somewhere beyond".<sup>28</sup> Murdoch suggests that the Good in its perfect or absolute form feels distant, yet it gives us a sense of direction and occasionally the desire to move in that direction. Just like the prisoner in Plato's Allegory who finds his way out of the cave and moves towards the Sun, as it is the perfect source of light, we must attempt to shift our attention away from ourselves and instead direct it towards the Good. The Good then provides us with a "continuous *sense of orientation*".<sup>29</sup>

In many situations, we experience degrees of value and apply the idea of excellence. We measure and compare things, and we decide some things, some people or some states of affairs are better than others. For example, when we look at flowers in a garden, we may find that we are attracted to some of them more than others. Our perception of the flowers is somehow inevitably accompanied by seeing some as more beautiful than others. Or if someone steals money from another person, they might think it is good that their financial problems are lessened. But they are also likely to sense that their action is nowhere near the Good *qua* perfection. So, for Murdoch, just through scrutinising our own thoughts and experiences we realise that our world is hierarchical and some of our activities, attitudes, and experiences are better (directed towards the Good) or more appealing than others.

It might be objected that Murdoch has overlooked the fact that some people seem never to know what it is good to do, and so it seems that the Good as perfection does not give a sense of direction to *everyone* in their moral experiences. Let's examine this objection through an example. Imagine a person (Jill) who has been brought up in an isolated area where her only role models are

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>29</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 260.

her parents. The parents happen to be of a rebellious nature in that they are inclined to disagree with the values of society, and instead consider to be valuable what are commonly regarded as moral evils. Through this upbringing Jill learns that all morally bad character traits or actions are good. When she encounters other people performing right actions, she instinctively judges them as bad people. Therefore, it seems that Murdoch's idea of the Good as an ideal does not lead Jill in the right direction.

Murdoch can respond to this objection by saying that through the standard of perfection Jill still has an idea of the Good and an understanding of the hierarchy of values. She evaluates every situation and redefines her approach to it. She is able to decide that some traits or some actions are *better* than others. What she fails to do, however, is to identify the right instances of the Good (particular good things) in her moral life. On Murdoch's account, the reason why Jill cannot see right from wrong in life is that she lacks the 'vision' required to see the world truly and to live virtuously. Still, people like Jill are capable of assessing their own actions. The idea of perfection plays its role of giving them a sense of evaluation, even if the evaluation is not commonly acceptable. Yet due to the lack of right moral vision, their moral assessments differ from the assessments made by virtuous people. The solution to their problem lies in developing the moral vision required for recognising the right direction of the Good. This point will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

So far, I have discussed the way in which Murdoch advocates a Platonic conception of the Good as the Sun that sheds light on particular good things and virtues, and makes them visible while itself being invisible. Nevertheless, while being invisible, the Good can be appreciated through experiencing the hierarchy of values in everyday life. The Good as an idea of perfection gives the individual a sense of direction that guides them in their moral evaluations and their moral development.

In the next section I argue that there is a Kantian aspect to Murdoch's concept of the Good, according to which the Good is located in the mind of the moral agent as the condition for the possibility of moral experience.

### *Good as the Condition of Experience*

As explained earlier, in Plato's Allegory the man who is dragged out of the cave is finally able to look at the Sun. To Murdoch, looking directly at the Good is not possible. The Good is not an object of one's experience because it is not an ordinary thing but a "transcendent object".<sup>30</sup> Here I argue that Murdoch only tentatively refers to the Good as 'transcendent' and that this has led to confusion among her critics. As I will show, what she actually means is 'transcendental' in the Kantian sense of the word. 'Transcendent' refers to an ontological mode of objects. 'Transcendental', on the other hand, refers to an epistemological stance of a subject. The transcendental concepts are the ones that constitute the ultimate basis for human knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Following Plato, Murdoch emphasises that the Good is "... a transcendent source of light. Good is above being, non-personal, non-contingent, not a particular thing among other things".<sup>32</sup> However, unlike for Plato, 'transcendence' in the context of Murdoch's work does not mean other-worldly. The Good does not exist in another realm as does Plato's Form of the Good. She states:

If someone says, 'Do you then believe that the Idea of the Good exists?' I reply, 'No, not as people used to think that God existed. All one can do is to appeal to certain areas of experience pointing out certain features, and using suitable metaphors and inventing suitable concepts where necessary to make these features visible.'<sup>33</sup>

To Murdoch, the Good is non-existent as it is not an independent entity that exists in the external world. It is a *conceptual* reality as opposed to an external reality.<sup>34</sup> It does not have a spatiotemporal location. Our minds carry the concept of the Good and this concept enables us to make sense of the world, by

---

<sup>30</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A299/B368.

<sup>32</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> By 'conceptual reality', I am referring to the reality that is present in all our consciousnesses.

enabling us to give a structure to our various and varied experiences of particular objects. In this sense the Good is a ‘transcendental’ concept of the mind that is present in our experiences of the world. We only perceive this concept through experiencing particular good things or acts. The Good is a condition of grasping the world. In other words, the Good itself is not the object of our knowledge but a *necessary condition* for the possibility of knowledge and experience. So while it is present in almost all our moral experiences, it does not exist externally to our consciousness. This transcendental status of the Good is what I take to be the Kantian influence on Murdoch’s concept of the Good.

In Kant’s philosophy, the forms of intuition (space and time) and categories of understanding (such as unity and plurality, cause and effect, and so on) are conditions for the individual’s experience of the world. Kant argues that space and time (for instance) are pure forms of the individual’s intuition and are conditions by which objects can be experienced. These conditions do not exist independently of individuals, and individuals only perceive them through experiencing external objects and their relations both with other external objects and with the perceiver. Whenever an individual experiences an object in the world, they experience the object as being located in a particular place. There is no way for them to experience a real object without its having a location. That is also the case with the categories of understanding, such as causality. To give an example, when someone sees a child throwing a stone at a cat and then that cat running away, they simultaneously experience the throwing of the stone *and* the apprehension that it was the ‘cause’ of the cat’s running away. The concept of causality is grounded in the individual’s perception of the sequence of the two events, namely the throwing of the stone, and the cat running away. Causality as such is not an external thing for one to experience. It is rather how one’s experience is constituted through perception.<sup>35</sup>

In the same way, the concept of the Good in Murdoch’s theory is the condition for the individual’s moral experience (or any experience that demands some sort of evaluation). When the individual experiences an object in the world,

---

<sup>35</sup> See Kant, chap. 1.

they also experience the value they attach to that object. In this sense, the Good is not an ordinary thing to be perceived in an ordinary manner. It is a transcendental concept of mind through which one experiences the world. In Murdoch's own words "... what is transcendental is not derived from human experience, but is a condition of it".<sup>36</sup> The Good is a transcendental concept of the mind that makes evaluative experience – for Murdoch almost all experiences – possible. In the above example of the courageous passer-by who runs into the fire to save a dog, it is the *a priori* understanding of the transcendental concept of the Good that leads the person to know what is the right thing to do in that situation. The Good works as a lens through which one sees the world evaluatively. Murdoch says:

In many familiar ways *various* values pervade and *colour* what we take to be the reality of our world; wherein we constantly evaluate our own values and those of others .... That is, our activity of moral discrimination cannot be explained as merely one natural instinct among others .... The possession of a moral sense is uniquely human.<sup>37</sup>

So the individual's cognitive perception is coloured with values. This 'moral colour' is inherent in almost all individuals' perceptions of the world.<sup>38</sup> The implication of this understanding of the Good is that the individual's moral experiences are objective in the Kantian sense of the word. In Kant's philosophy, the objectivity of an experience is not in tension with the experience being a representation in the individual's mind. The mind actively generates the representational content of the subject's experience. The representations generated by the activity of the mind genuinely deserve to be called cognition, because they are the product of the discursive mind which retains its objectivity, rather than contingent psychological features of the individual.<sup>39</sup> So to Kant the possibility that a concept can be situated in the mind does not necessarily lead to

---

<sup>36</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> A. B. Dickerson, *Kant on Representation and Objectivity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). 1-3.

subjectivism. On Murdoch's account, the Good as an objective condition of our experience plays the same role as Kant's forms of intuition and categories of understanding. The individual's moral experience may seem subjective, as they do not exist independently of the individual's perception of them. However, they are objective because the concept of the Good is shared by all individuals and, as a result, the moral experience or the experience of values are shared by all, independently of each individual's particular personal stance. The Good is present in the individual's experiences just as a sense of time and space is present in their experience of the world on Kant's account. So the Good, just as the categories of understanding, is not the property of things in themselves, independent of the individual's mind, but rather the structure that their mind imposes on their experiences. Thus for Murdoch, the transcendental Good establishes the objectivity of moral experiences, which means the idea of the Good provides the individual with an objective standard for morality, an ideal that is independent of their self-concerned understanding of the world and is shared by all individuals. With this presentation of the Good Murdoch avoids the charge of subjectivism, even though she locates the Good in the individual's mind.<sup>40</sup>

In summary, in Murdoch's view, the Good is a value concept that is both distant and perfect. It gives the individual a continuous sense of direction and moral orientation. I argued that this concept is located in the individual's mind and is the condition for their experiences. All individuals share this objective and evaluative standpoint, and thus, on Murdoch's view, moral values are objective values.

In what follows, I will discuss two implications of Murdoch's account of the Good.

---

<sup>40</sup> Murdoch's endeavour to present the Good as a condition of experience and as an objective standard for morality is intended to provide an alternative to the voluntarism of modern ethics, such as Sartre's ethics, and the idea that humanity is the creator of its own values.

## ***Section Two***

### ***The Dissolution of the Fact-Value Distinction and Moral Realism***

In the previous section, I explored the Platonic and the Kantian features of Murdoch's concept of the Good. I discussed the way in which Murdoch locates the concept of the Good (moral value) in human consciousness and considers moral concepts to be the moral structure of the world. In this section, I explain two important implications of this approach to moral value in Murdoch's moral theory: 1) the dissolution of the fact-value distinction, and 2) Murdochian moral realism.

#### ***The Dissolution of the Fact-Value Dichotomy***

In order to offer a realistic presentation of values and to avoid the charge of subjectivism, Murdoch rejects the fact-value dichotomy in moral philosophy. This aspect of Murdoch's theory has become so significant that as Cora Diamond puts it: "If analytical philosophy no longer accepts as unquestionable the idea of a gap between fact and value, this has much to do with Iris Murdoch's earlier writings. *The Sovereignty of Good*, especially, is often treated as ground-breaking in this regard".<sup>41</sup>

The fact-value distinction emerges most clearly after David Hume's famous argument that prescriptive *ought* statements do not follow from descriptive *is* statements. In other words, it is impossible to deduce moral statements from factual ones.<sup>42</sup> In the Nineteenth Century, the fact-value distinction tended to be neglected, particularly due to the belief in the autonomy of morality after Kant.<sup>43</sup> G. E. Moore argues that it is a 'Naturalistic fallacy' to

---

<sup>41</sup> As an instance of this point, Diamond cites Hilary Putnam's *Realism with a Human Face*. Cora Diamond, "'We Are Perpetually Moralists': Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 104.

<sup>42</sup> See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, (Kitchener: Batoche, 1999). 3.1.1.

<sup>43</sup> See Charles R. Pigden, "Introduction," in *Hume on Is and Ought*, ed. Charles R. Pigden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 13.

attempt to define moral concepts in terms of non-moral ones.<sup>44</sup> Since then, the fact-value distinction has been a focus of attention for moral philosophers.

Murdoch, however, rejects the distinction and argues that the ‘anti-naturalistic argument’, according to which it is not possible to derive values from facts, or *ought* from *is*, is the most effective argument in modern moral philosophy, but still problematic.<sup>45</sup> She regards her objection to this idea not as ‘logical’ or ‘philosophical’, but as purely ‘moral’, because to her, “certain bad results follow in practice from thinking about morality in a certain way”.<sup>46</sup> In her view it is only through considering morality and values as part of a larger framework of facts that the agent becomes morally responsive to the world. If we do not attach morality to “the substance of the world”, we may be in danger of making our morality into a dogma, taking our values for granted, and being intolerant of others.<sup>47</sup> For Murdoch, what has led philosophers to consider that there is a gap between fact and value is a misunderstanding of the cognitive function of human consciousness. As Murdoch states: “This originally well-intentioned segregation [of fact and value] ... ignores an obvious and important aspect of human existence, the way in which almost all our concepts and activities involve evaluation”.<sup>48</sup> And again:

It is certainly often worth saying: Look at the facts! This is a way, *a* way, of directing attention. But what we look at, and attempt to clarify and know, are matters in which value already inheres .... Value goes right down to the bottom of the cognitive situation.<sup>49</sup>

To dismiss the fact-value distinction, Murdoch employs her transcendental account of the Good that is located in human consciousness and the metaphysical implications of that account. Therefore as explained in the previous section, on

---

<sup>44</sup> See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58-93.

<sup>45</sup> Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 64.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

Murdoch's view, the Good is the condition for almost all our experiences of the world. The implication of this view is that almost all of our perceptions are value-laden. We hardly face facts that are completely devoid of our evaluations, for values 'colour' our perception of the world.<sup>50</sup> Our cognitive approach to our surroundings almost never lacks evaluation. There are certainly experiences, such as hearing my phone ringing, that might not be accompanied by any sort of value judgment. However, in Murdoch's view, at least in most cases, cognition and evaluation happen at the same time. For example, when we see a person screaming and running away from a little puppy, we (most likely) simultaneously see him as cowardly. When we watch our children running around at the playground, we are not just looking at them factually, but rather see them as smart and energetic, or maybe even smarter and more agile than the other children. Even our perception of the weather is accompanied by an evaluation, such as when we find some kinds of weather more pleasant than others.

This is what Murdoch means when she says: "if moral concepts are regarded as deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn round separable factual areas, then there will be no facts 'behind them' for them to be erroneously defined in terms of".<sup>51</sup> She concludes that if we change our view concerning the role of concepts from evaluating the areas that are genuinely neutral to those which "determine a vision of the world", the fact-value distinction loses its point.<sup>52</sup> If we regard moral concepts as constituting our moral world (due to the Good being the condition of the individual's grasp of the world), we do away with the problem of defining facts in terms of values. There is ultimately no fact-value distinction, as the individual's reading of the world is almost always value-laden. Moral values are visions and inspirations that stem from a transcendental source (the concept of the Good), and not only modes of publicly visible activities.<sup>53</sup> It is not that we confront the neutral facts and then try to attach

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>51</sup> "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter J. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 95.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

some moral concepts to them. Rather, our experience of reality includes values as part of the very configuration of the world.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Murdochian Moral Realism***

In “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” Murdoch states that “... morality, goodness, is a form of realism”.<sup>55</sup> The concept of the Good is “indefinable and non-representable”.<sup>56</sup> And “*Good ... is transcendent*”.<sup>57</sup> Murdoch’s apparently conflicting depictions of the Good – the Good is a part of reality, but not a thing among other things, and that it is a part of reality, yet also transcendent and non-representable – has led her critics to offer different interpretations of the ontological status of the Good, and thus different interpretations of her moral realism. In particular, Murdoch’s description of the Good as a “transcendent reality” which is “somewhere beyond” has caused the most confusion.<sup>58</sup> The notion of ‘transcendence’ or ‘beyond’ has led critics to interpret Murdoch’s moral realism in two different ways. Some contend that in Murdoch’s view the Good is a real aspect of the world, independent of the being and the mind of the individual.<sup>59</sup> Whereas other critics argue that for Murdoch, the concept of the

---

<sup>54</sup> Richard Moran tries to show the association of Murdoch’s dissolution of the fact-value distinction with an existentialist view. Moran contends that Murdoch presents a distorted view of existentialism, and then tries to distance her theory from this view. As an example, he refers to the fact-value distinction and argues that unlike what Murdoch claims, the abolishment of the fact-value distinction has its roots in existentialist ideas. Thinkers, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre argue that the facts we experience are coloured by our concerns, and this is the individual’s inescapable orientation in the world. Richard Moran, “Iris Murdoch and Existentialism,” in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 181-88. This is certainly not what Murdoch claims. On Murdoch’s account, values are objective. The facts are not ‘coloured by our concerns’ and our individual conditionings, but rather by the concept of the Good that is transcendently conceived.

<sup>55</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 57.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>59</sup> Roger Crisp and Margaret Holland, for example, are reluctant to interpret Murdoch’s Good as not being in this world. Holland holds that for the Good to be ‘beyond’ may sound esoteric but can be understood in a more mundane way by looking at examples such as learning music or a new language. She says: “Effort is directed to closing the gap between one’s current understanding and a more or less remote standard which transcends one’s present level of accomplishment. The standard is intuited as ‘beyond’ and serves to focus and discipline one’s energies. This is similar to the magnetic attraction of perfection to which Murdoch refers”. Margaret Holland, “Social Convention and Neurosis as Obstacles to Moral Freedom,” in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 271. Also see

Good is not independent of the individual's thought.<sup>60</sup> Here I discuss some readings of Murdoch's concept of the Good and moral realism to argue in favour of my presentation of Murdoch's moral realism, which is based on my understanding of the Good as a transcendental concept. This interpretation I believe to be more consistent with other aspects of Murdoch's moral theory.

Maria Antonaccio characterises Murdoch's realism as a 'reflexive realism', in which the Good is a concept that does not have any referent but itself. According to Antonaccio, the starting point of the reflexive realism is to affirm that the truth-status of moral claims is internal to consciousness. Although the medium for evaluating moral claims is consciousness, the standard is objective.<sup>61</sup> Antonaccio suggests that although Murdoch is critical of the linguistic method of contemporary moral philosophers, she takes 'moral language' to mediate the relation between reality and the evaluative understanding of reality.<sup>62</sup> She says: "Moral language is the instrument of an individual's unique cognitive and

---

Roger Crisp, "Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value," in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 289. Furthermore, Patricia O'Connor takes the 'transcendence of the Good' literally and holds that the Good in Murdoch's view exercises its authority from somewhere beyond the sensible world. O'Connor, 137-44.

<sup>60</sup> Among this group of critics, we can point to Maria Antonaccio and Heather Widdows. Widdows acknowledges the difficulty in understanding Murdoch's concept of the Good. She argues that the obstacle to Murdoch's realism is that of understanding the reality of the Good without establishing it as an *object*. Murdoch's Ontological proof, for Widdows, establishes the Good as something more than simply an idea or metaphor. By that argument, Murdoch intends to assign an ontological status to the Good. However, Widdows suggests that the use of the Ontological proof, as the proof of the reality of the Good, is confusing in that Murdoch also uses the argument to deny the possibility of the Good as an object. Widdows compares this idea to a mystical approach in Christianity, according to which God is *not* an object, but does exist. She notes that even though Murdoch regards God as an object, many critics believe that she has simply replaced God with the Good. On the other hand, the Good, to Murdoch, is impersonal. Since it has no personal characteristics (unlike God), it does not prescribe any specific behaviour to individuals. Heather Widdows, "Iris Murdoch's 'Good': A Critical Analysis of Its Nature and Relevance," *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 960 (2001): 66-70. Widdows suggests that it is best to disregard Murdoch's Ontological proof, in order to avoid the impression that the Good is an ontological object. So Murdoch's Good, she argues, "is non-personal, and though it inspires and informs the moral life, the good is indifferent to human striving". *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 81. Also see Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, eds., *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 115-23.

<sup>61</sup> Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, 118-19.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 121. Antonaccio calls this account 'reflexive realism'. Reflexive in that the Good is in the mind, but points to a reality beyond the mind.

evaluative grasp of reality”.<sup>63</sup> Moral perception is a process of “conceptual formation and translation *between* fact and value”.<sup>64</sup> So any experience of the empirical world must filter through the consciousness and its *language-using* function. It is the inevitable mediation of moral concepts that leads to the individual’s distinctive appreciation of the facts. Due to the centrality Antonaccio assigns to moral concepts, she considers Murdoch’s philosophical method “deeply ‘linguistic’”.<sup>65</sup>

David Robjant criticises Antonaccio’s interpretation of Murdoch, contending that it is not possible to regard Murdoch’s theory as a reflexive realism. He argues that in following Plato, Murdoch’s approach is empirical, in that for her “the Good is a *reality* that our *concept* of the Good is stretching towards”.<sup>66</sup> According to Robjant, in Murdoch’s theory moral values indicate something about the world, however, in Antonaccio’s reading Murdoch’s Good is nothing more than a *concept*. He thus denies the label of realism to Antonaccio’s understanding of Murdoch’s Good, for in that reading, the Good is *not* part of the objective world; it is rather in a reflexive space between the mind and the world. Robjant expresses his surprise at Antonaccio’s assumption that reality in the reflexive space is as real as reality needs to be.<sup>67</sup>

My reading of the concept of the Good in Murdoch’s work differs from the interpretations given by Antonaccio and Robjant, and, I believe, is more consistent with other aspects of Murdoch’s view.<sup>68</sup> To begin with, I think Robjant overlooks clear indications of Murdoch’s conviction that the Good *does not* exist in a conventional sense – “Good is not a *particular*, it is not a *thing* among

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 121-22.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>66</sup> David Robjant, "As a Buddhist Christian; the Misappropriation of Iris Murdoch," *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 6 (2011): 997. Elizabeth Burns also suggests that for the Good to be transcendent, it must be independent of the individual’s mind. Elizabeth Burns, "Iris Murdoch and the Nature of Good," *Religious Studies* 33, no. 3 (1997): 311.

<sup>67</sup> Robjant, 996-1000.

<sup>68</sup> This will also enable me to explore Murdoch’s concepts of imagination and fantasy in the context of her realism. These concepts will be discussed in Chapter 4.

others”.<sup>69</sup> Or as she says (and I quoted above) elsewhere, “If someone says, ‘Do you then believe that the Idea of the Good exists?’ I reply, ‘No, not as people used to think that God existed’”.<sup>70</sup> Murdoch denies the ‘existence’ of the Good. However, with the intricate role she assigns to the Good in the individual’s moral life, it can be inferred that what she is denying is the external existence of the Good as opposed to its conceptual existence. When Murdoch states that the Good is not ‘a thing among other things’ she is rejecting the external existence of the Good. While to her the Good cannot be “purely subjective” either, she wants to avoid “any heavy material connotation of the misleading word ‘exist’”.<sup>71</sup> Robjant emphasises the evidence of the reality of the Good in our lives, as something that exists and is not merely a construction of the philosopher’s mind. Yet, he fails to explain how we experience the Good in our lives and what he means by the ‘earthly’ existence of this reality and how it is evident in our lives.<sup>72</sup>

Murdoch does mention the ‘reality’ of the Good. It is real in that it influences the individual’s perception of the world. But in its absolute and perfect form, it cannot be found anywhere in the external world. What is to be found in the world is particular instances of good things, the ‘goodness’ of which is assigned to them by the distinctive function of the individual’s mind. So Robjant’s reading of Murdoch’s work fails to clarify the ontological status of the Good in a way that is consistent with other aspects of Murdoch’s moral view. Thus, his criticism of Antonaccio’s view does not apply.

In this regard, Antonaccio’s reading of Murdoch’s view is more plausible. However, other aspects of her reading are less so. While I agree with Antonaccio that Murdoch brings the locus of the Good (value) back to the mind of the individual and that this reading helps us better explain other aspects of Murdoch’s

---

<sup>69</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 405. (My italics).

<sup>70</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 73.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>72</sup> See David Robjant, "The Earthy Realism of Plato's Metaphysics, Or: What Shall We Do with Iris Murdoch?," *Philosophical Investigations* 35, no. 1 (2012): 43-67. See also "As a Buddhist Christian; the Misappropriation of Iris Murdoch," 996-1000. And "Symposium on Iris Murdoch: How Miserable We Are, How Wicked; into the 'Void' with Murdoch, Mulhall, and Antonaccio," *Heythrop Journal - Quarterly Review of Philosophy and Theology* 54, no. 6 (2013): 999-1006.

thought, I do not agree with her that the Good or moral value is only a linguistic function. On my interpretation of Murdoch's view, her emphasis on inventing new concepts and descriptions in moral philosophy (on which Antonaccio bases her argument) does not account for the mediating role of moral concepts as linguistic phenomena, but rather the mediating role of the concept of the Good as a transcendental phenomenon.<sup>73</sup> Antonaccio's reading of Murdoch is a better interpretation than any given by those who interpret the Good as an external object. I also believe that we should avoid any other-worldly reading of Murdoch's consideration of the Good as a 'transcendent reality'. Nevertheless, in my view we need to take into account the fact that for Murdoch the Good is still 'beyond', which in this context means beyond perceptions and concepts of mind, yet nevertheless unifying them. As Murdoch says, the Good is a concept with a "unifying power" that has "a peculiar relation to other concepts".<sup>74</sup> It is the perfection of other values. Murdoch contends that "...we introduce order into our conceptions of the world through our apprehension of Good".<sup>75</sup> So while it is a concept, the Good is a transcendental one. It is the condition of an individual's experience, and enables them to experience the hierarchy and ubiquity of the values in the world with a sense of unity.

So offering a linguistic account of the role and position of the concept of the Good disregards Murdoch's Platonic influence, according to which the Good is the ultimate truth, shedding light on the path of the truth-seeking moral agent; an existence different from and above all other existence. Murdoch states: "The mind which has ascended to the vision of the Good can subsequently see the concepts through which it has ascended (art, work, nature, people, ideas, institutions, situations, etc., etc.) in their true nature and in their proper

---

<sup>73</sup> At times Antonaccio's interpretation of what she calls Murdoch's 'transcendental argument' comes very close to my understanding of Murdoch's concept of the Good as a transcendental concept. She refers to the Good as the transcendental Good which is the background condition for our evaluations. However, her account of reflexive realism and the emphasis on the linguistic aspect of values separates her reading of Murdoch's work from mine. See, for example, Maria Antonaccio, "The Virtues of Metaphysics: A Review of Murdoch's Philosophical Writings," in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 173-74.

<sup>74</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 92.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* (My italics).

relationships to each other”.<sup>76</sup> So the Good as a concept beyond other concepts enables us to experience particular good things as good, with the unifying sense of value.

Now I return to Murdoch’s statement that, “... morality, goodness, is a form of realism”.<sup>77</sup> She continues: “The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable .... [H]e must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims”.<sup>78</sup> According to my reading of Murdoch’s concept of the Good, for morality to be a form of realism, moral experience must be inseparable from the cognition of reality. The moral cognition of Murdoch’s good man cannot be his purely personal understanding of the world affected by his psychological status.<sup>79</sup> Moral cognition should be an objective understanding of one’s surroundings, and the transcendental concept of the Good is the very objective condition of one’s moral experience. As I showed previously, while the Good is a concept of the individual’s mind, it is a permanent condition for their experiences, regardless of their particular responses to particular situations. It is shared amongst all individuals and is the objective background condition for their perceptions or cognitions of the world.

By Murdoch’s lights, morality cannot be divorced from reality and moral knowledge is knowledge of reality. This is because almost all perceptions of facts are ‘coloured’ by values. The more one endeavours to see reality as it really is, the better the quality of one’s moral experience, as one acquires a better insight of values. In other words, since every understanding of reality is evaluative, a true cognition of the world means a true moral understanding of the world with the values in it. Moral value is real as all individuals are equally able to experience it.<sup>80</sup> Since moral judgments can be shared by all individuals, moral value is the

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> That is why, as we will see later in the thesis, Murdoch emphasizes that the individual needs to suppress their egoistic desires so that their confrontations with the world be unaffected by them.

<sup>80</sup> As I argued earlier, in Murdoch’s moral theory, moral values are real in the same way that causality, space and time are real in Kant’s transcendental idealism.

objective condition of almost all individuals' experiences.<sup>81</sup> Evaluative judgments may be true or false depending on how truly or factually the individual understands the world. Every claim of objectivity is an evaluative understanding of the world. Thus a proper moral (evaluative) understanding of one's surrounding is a factual understanding, as facts are almost always accompanied by values. So an evaluative understanding of the world aims to manifest the world in some way. If it fails to manifest the world the way it really is, it is not a true evaluative understanding of the world.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter I explored 'the Good' as a concept that is located at the centre of Murdoch's moral theory, and as will become more clear in the chapters that follow, plays a crucial role in her view of moral education and moral development. I argued that Murdoch considers the Good to be the perfection and the source of unity of all moral values. On Murdoch's view the Good is the very condition of the individual's experience of the world, which means that almost all perceptions are value-laden. In other words, almost all human perception is in a way moral perception. That is why, for Murdoch, the problem of the fact-value distinction which has been extensively discussed among moral philosophers, does not make sense. In light of this view of the Good as the condition of cognition or perception, Murdoch advocates a form of moral realism according to which moral values are real, objective, and independent of the individual's personal and psychological condition in any particular occasion. While values do not exist externally to human consciousness, they form the necessary condition of almost all our experiences of the world. In this sense, they are real and objective, because they are independent of any particular individual's conditionings.

In the next Chapter, I will discuss Murdoch's account of the concepts of 'inner life' as the central focus in the process of moral growth, and 'love', as the highest virtue.

---

<sup>81</sup> See the previous sub-section. Murdoch points out that for individuals to be able to acquire a realistic view of their surroundings, they are required to develop a special vision or attitude towards the world. The reason why individuals do not seem to share the same moral understanding is due to the different quality of their moral vision. I will discuss this point in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2

### Attention and Inner Life

#### *Introduction*

As discussed in the previous chapter, Murdoch reclaims human consciousness as the main locus of morality. I argued that ‘the Good’ as the condition of the individual’s perception of the world makes for Murdoch’s moral realism, according to which moral value is real as all individuals are equally able to experience it. Moral cognition should be an objective understanding of reality.

To consider the implications of Murdoch’s philosophy for the role of art in moral development, it is important to obtain first an understanding of her view of moral development. Some philosophers think moral development is a matter of learning how to behave better, to obey moral rules, or to become more concerned about the happiness of others. By contrast, Murdoch insightfully explains that what leads some individuals to become morally better people and make better moral judgements is the quality of their *inner life* (their beliefs, emotions, motives, and intentions). The education and improvement of one’s inner life becomes so important to Murdoch that it can be said that her moral philosophy is an attempt to answer the question: ‘How can we become morally better people?’ The focus of Murdoch’s theory is principally the ‘moral development’ of the individual, the process of improving one’s moral vision – an important aspect of inner life – in order to see other people more truly and more lovingly. My aim is to establish that on Murdoch’s view, moral education needs to be focused on one’s inner life and moral vision, which, as I argue later in the thesis, can be accomplished through attention to art.

In this Chapter, I begin with Murdoch’s famous thought experiment involving the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law to show how Murdoch explains the process of moral improvement. As I will show, given that moral progress is a process occurring in time within the consciousness of the moral agent, the starting point for their moral change is their contemplation of their inner thoughts and motives. Obtaining a clearer vision of these thoughts and motives, in the context

of Murdoch's philosophy, makes the ideal of 'the Good' clearer in the agent's mind. At this point the agent becomes more conscious of people and things around them. They become able "... to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is".<sup>82</sup> This is what Murdoch calls 'love', which is a truthful and sympathetic way of seeing and understanding other people, and is the goal of moral development.

## ***Section One***

### ***Inner Life: Murdoch's Thought Experiment***

In an era when universal concepts, such as reason and God, and universal institutions, such as religion, have lost their authority and legitimacy, Murdoch argues that the concept of the human being has become "thin as a needle".<sup>83</sup> We have been reduced to an empty will and the idea of a human personality has become too shallow and flimsy. In Murdoch's view, moral philosophy should not only focus on external actions, but also on private voluntary actions (that is, what we do in relation to ourselves or to nature around us) and inner action (that is, what occurs in the privacy of our consciousness). She discusses this point through her famous example of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in her essay "The Idea of Perfection".<sup>84</sup>

In this example, there is a mother-in-law (M) who finds her daughter-in-law (D) "unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement", "... insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, [and] always tiresomely juvenile".<sup>85</sup> Although M believes that "her son has married beneath him" she never lets her real opinion show.<sup>86</sup> As time passes, M, being capable of self-criticism, begins to pay close attention to D and to deliberately reflect upon her evaluation of her. M suspects that it might be the case that her own jealousy and

---

<sup>82</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 91.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>84</sup> Having claimed that metaphysics is a form of 'picturing', Murdoch herself puts forward 'pictures of humans' in her moral philosophy, the best instance of which is this thought experiment. See Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*, 83-84.

<sup>85</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 16-17.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

narrow-mindedness led her initially to see D the way she did. M makes a great effort to contemplate this image fairly, and this leads her to slowly change her opinion of D. It is a *process* of changing that occurs in M's vision. Her vision is infinitely perfectible. Murdoch says:

... the change is not in D's behaviour but in M's mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. As I say, *ex hypothesi*, M's behaviour, beautiful from the start, in no way alters.<sup>87</sup>

M has never treated D badly, so in this process her actions do not change. What transforms in M is her state of consciousness and the way she sees D. As Murdoch points out, this shift in M's vision is not out of self-delusion, but out of love and justice.

This example illustrates three key elements of Murdoch's moral theory: First, moral change involves a continuous struggle and deliberation over oneself and others. The moral agent should constantly strive to recognize their prejudices and conventional attitudes in order to see others justly and compassionately. Second, proper moral change is a change of vision that occurs in consciousness and vision, or in what Murdoch calls *inner life*. And third, a virtuous person is one who has acquired the capacity to love, which enables them to see the reality of other individuals and to sympathize with them. I will discuss these points throughout this chapter.

### ***Deliberation over Self and Others***

The first important point implicit in Murdoch's example is that in order truthfully to see and judge others around them, the moral agent must first be capable of acknowledging the weaknesses of their own character. The turning point in the way that M in the above example looks at D is the moment when she realizes that "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me *look again*.”<sup>88</sup> If M does not look back at herself critically and identify her character flaws, the likelihood that she would see D differently without such introspection is very low. After looking back at herself, M realizes that the bias and jealousy she has towards D has clouded her judgment. This realization is what she needs to become motivated to change her vision and attitude.

So the decisive factor in M’s change of attitude towards D is her capacity for self-criticism and self-knowledge. Murdoch denounces our egoistic tendencies throughout her work, as she believes such egoism is the main factor in preventing or retarding our moral progress.<sup>89</sup> To Murdoch, we are naturally selfish, and to improve morally we have to try to become less selfish. So identifying one’s selfish tendencies can be an important step forward on the path of moral development. Murdoch does not expand on this point further. But there seems to be an inconsistency on this point in Murdoch’s work. While M’s ability to develop self-knowledge helps her improve her attitude, for Murdoch such a deep self-knowledge is usually not possible. Murdoch says:

‘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. Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object.<sup>90</sup>

In this passage Murdoch claims that self-knowledge is only possible at the most superficial level. Just like everything else, ‘self’ is likely to be looked at and judged through our egocentric impulses. The self is a deceiver. It is not possible – at least for most people – to see one’s self justly, as one will likely be deceived by it. The self is more susceptible to prejudice, and focusing on it only feeds one’s

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. (My italics)

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 66.

selfish motives. In our moral quests, we need to completely disregard or defeat our ego, as it is the enemy of the moral life.<sup>91</sup>

If it is neither possible nor desirable to gain self-knowledge, then this raises the question of how we can recognize the egoistic tendencies of our ‘selves’, as M did, and then overcome them. It therefore seems that Murdoch must accept that we can attain a certain degree of self-knowledge, as she herself suggests in the example of the mother-in-law. Before trying to improve oneself, one needs the ability to look disinterestedly at one’s *self* and identify all of its negative aspects. The identification of the problem, namely one’s egocentrism, seems to be a good motive for resolving it. While it is true that ‘the self is hard to see justly’ and that ‘self-knowledge is usually a delusion’, the moral agent still needs to make an effort to see beyond the selfish desires of their ego. So, instead of ignoring the self, as Murdoch suggests, one needs to find a way to assess it without bias. Similarly, Samantha Vice argues that it is hard to reconcile Murdoch’s insistence that we must turn away from the self, as it is selfish and deluded, with the view that a degree of self-knowledge or self-directed attention is required for moral progress. Self-concern is a necessary constituent of one’s moral journey. According to Vice, throughout her work, Murdoch emphasises the threat posed by the self, yet the self is not only the fantasy-ridden ego. The part of the self that can recognise its own pitfalls and can be attracted to perfection is open to self-improvement. So instead of ignoring this self as Murdoch suggests, we should educate it. Vice suggests that Murdoch needs a richer concept of the self to explain moral progress. For Vice, this complex self is part of the ethical reality that need to be attended to.<sup>92</sup>

Let’s return to the example again and assume, for the sake of argument, that M is actually capable of self-knowledge and overcoming her ill judgments and feelings towards D. When M identifies her own unfairness, she makes an effort to see D more accurately. As Murdoch states: “What M is *ex hypothesi*

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>92</sup> Samantha Vice, "The Ethics of Self-Concern," in *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, ed. Anne Rowe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 60-71. For another approach to this objection see Christopher Mole, "Attention, Self and *the Sovereignty of Good*," *ibid.*, 72-84.

attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly”.<sup>93</sup> M’s approach to D improves in two ways: she sees D more accurately, the way she actually is; and she sees her more justly and sympathetically or lovingly. As Sabina Lovibond points out, there is a question to be asked here: “What if seeing D ‘lovingly’ is in fact at variance with seeing her justly?”<sup>94</sup> M’s attention to D changes her view of D from negative to positive. According to Lovibond, Murdoch does not suggest that all negative moral attributes are empty, in that they do not have any instances in reality. So M’s new completely positive picture of D is thought to be more accurate either due to the fact that D is actually faultless, or because it is a kinder attitude towards D. Lovibond suggests that the second option is closer to the spirit of Murdoch’s thought, but that there are some practical difficulties with this conclusion. First, one cannot aim at improving oneself if one is incapable of seeing faults in others. Second, and which seems to be the more important difficulty, is that the prevention of wrongdoing and the enforcement of justice are dependent on recognising wrongdoings. It is the only way the innocent can be defended against the unjust.<sup>95</sup>

Lovibond’s concern is valid. While I agree with her that Murdoch’s example of M and D can be misleading in demonstrating her view of morality as a realistic understanding of other people, I tend to disagree with Lovibond’s argument. It is true that M’s judgment of D transforms into a wholly positive account of D’s attributes and this in turn may seem quite counter-intuitive. Nonetheless, we do not have a third person in this scenario whose conception of D can be compared to M’s revised conception of her. That could help us to decide whether M’s new understanding or judgment of D is realistic or not. So we must rely on Murdoch’s own judgment as the third person when she clearly says: “When M is just and loving she sees D *as she really is*”.<sup>96</sup> As David Robjant points out, Murdoch’s point is not that D is free from any defect, but rather “she

---

<sup>93</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 22.

<sup>94</sup> Sabina Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 25.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>96</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 36. (My italics).

does not have any of the faults which M's jealousy projects onto her".<sup>97</sup> This means that M's new judgment of D is not tainted by her egoistic motives. Murdoch herself seems to be conscious of this potential objection when she says:

I used above words such as 'just' and 'intelligent' which implied a favourable value judgment on M's activity: and I want in fact to imagine a case where one would feel approval of M's change of view. But of course in real life, and this is of interest, it might be very hard to decide whether what M was doing was proper or not, and opinions might differ.... Some people might say 'she deludes herself' while others would say she was moved by love or justice. I am picturing a case where I would find the latter description appropriate.<sup>98</sup>

While it is possible that M is in fact deluding herself, Murdoch's assumption is that M is actually an intelligent person and that her second thoughts about D are moved by justice, in that they are more in line with the reality of who D is. So while the example can be confusing, Murdoch clearly states that M's second judgment is a better judgment (yet still not perfect) in the sense that it is not only more just and loving, but also more accurate (assuming M does not have any evidence of D's really being rude and undignified, and so on). Murdoch's message is clear here. Not every moral effort leads to the knowledge of one's self and others, but this is the best one can hope for when aiming at moral improvement. A moral agent's attempt to see other people more accurately may turn out to be unsuccessful, but they have no better choice than to keep trying.

---

<sup>97</sup> David Robjant, "Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist? Some Trouble with Sabine Lovibond, the Mother in Law, and Gender," *Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 6 (2011): 1023. I also agree with Robjant when he criticizes Marije Altorf for not having understood Murdoch's point here either when she says: "Murdoch does not explain whether D is really 'vulgar' or 'refreshingly simple...etc.'" As discussed above Murdoch's assumption is that M's new understanding of D is more just and closer to reality. See *ibid.* And see Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, Continuum Studies in British Philosophy (London: Continuum, 2008), 70.

<sup>98</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17-18.

## *Inner Life*

Murdoch wishes to establish an emphasis on the ‘inner life’ of the moral agent, rather than their publicly observable actions, as an essential aspect of moral philosophy. When M decides to re-examine her judgement of D and starts to look at her more justly, her opinion and emotions towards D gradually alter. Her external behaviour towards D has been gracious since the beginning, and her change of vision does not alter the outer actions of either woman. Murdoch highlights this point by saying: “If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D’s behaviour but in M’s mind”.<sup>99</sup> M’s inward feeling and thoughts remain hidden from other people throughout. Murdoch writes:

At any rate the idea which we are trying to make sense of is that M has in the interim been *active*, she has been *doing* something, something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself. M has been morally active in the interim: this is what we want to say and to be philosophically permitted to say.<sup>100</sup>

On Murdoch’s view, ‘moral activity’ does not merely consist of outward behaviours and actions, but also inward reflections, which have a progressive character. Much of the individual’s moral character and moral growth are not manifested in public, and so if a moral theory does not consider the private aspect of moral activity, it misses an important dimension of morality. Murdoch argues that when we assess the moral behaviour of other people we should not simply consider their specifiable behaviour. We need to make the extra effort to look at them closely as well as more ‘justly and lovingly’, and try to find out “their total vision of life”, or “the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation”.<sup>101</sup> However, while it seems true that in judging people morally we should care about their motives and thoughts, it seems almost

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>101</sup> "Vision and Choice in Morality," 80-81.

impossible to be certain about or even understand other people's inner activities. Murdoch maintains that:

We constantly reflect upon the inner life of others, we are *driven* to do this. The concept is forced upon us. Such coercion may be a source of enlightenment or of despair. To say that I can know what other people are thinking but not (in the same sense) what I am thinking, makes a *philosophical* point.<sup>102</sup>

We often try to discover others' inner reflections and intentions. But we actually have no direct access to anyone's thoughts and emotions. At best, we can make an educated guess. Undoubtedly, our judgments of the inner life of others are to a large extent dependent on their observable behaviours. So the outer behaviour and action of the moral agent is the only evidence we have upon which to judge them. However, according to Murdoch, an action is not right because it brings about good consequences or corresponds to any specific moral rule; rather, the action is right in so far as it is rooted in just intentions and truthful contemplations. Yet, again, the question arises as to how we can know about other individuals' inner states. After all, in cases such as the example mentioned above, M's actions towards D do not change from the beginning, but her inner thoughts and feelings change through her moral effort. So if D was to judge M, she would say that M is a loving person who always treats her beautifully. The change in M's thoughts would not affect D's judgment of M. Therefore, the actions of other people can mislead us when morally judging them. Murdoch can respond to this in two ways. First, she can say that her emphasis on the inner life is primarily an emphasis on the individual's moral growth and moral development. She assigns great importance to the individual's inner life to show that morality is not only about their observable actions, but also their inner thoughts and motives.<sup>103</sup> What actually matters here is how we can become morally better people by working on the way we 'see' the people around us. To Murdoch, these are the important

---

<sup>102</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 294.

<sup>103</sup> As I will explain, she does not overlook the importance of moral actions either.

questions that moral philosophy must be engaged with.<sup>104</sup> It is crucial for philosophers to be able to acknowledge and speak of the individual's inner life and their moral progress as an important aspect of moral activity.

The second way that Murdoch can respond is as follows. While through the example of M Murdoch tries to highlight that moral philosophy should take inner moral behaviour more seriously, she also implies that improved moral vision does in practice result in better (meaning more accurate as well as more just and loving) moral judgements. M examines her view of D over and over again. As her view of D becomes less and less influenced by her own selfish desires, and she begins to see D in the way she truly is, M becomes more kind and sympathetic towards her. M's judgement of D becomes more accurate as well as more sympathetic as she starts to contemplate her own inner motives. The way M sees D influences how she judges her. Gaining a deeper moral vision may also enable the moral agent to refuse to judge others by attending to only a few of their actions, and postpone their judgment to a moment of some sort of certainty. To Murdoch, in moral life what each individual has primarily to worry about is trying to see others more clearly and lovingly, and thereby improve their moral vision. This will allow them to judge others more truly and more justly. Murdoch's second response to our objection could be that we are not completely oblivious of other people's thoughts and feelings after all. Murdoch states:

We see, and suffer or benefit from, people's actions; their states of mind are often secret and felt to be inaccessible. Yet what is inaccessible? We can *seek* for truth, we can imagine the past and *test* our imaginings, and we can do the same about other minds, and about our own.<sup>105</sup>

By observing a person's external behaviour and using their own imagination, the moral agent can, to some extent, get to know the motives and attitudes of that person. Murdoch's concept of imagination finds an important role in the individual's moral life. I will discuss this point in Chapter 4.

---

<sup>104</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51.

<sup>105</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 265.

Murdoch's emphasis on the sphere of inner life in ethics has led some of her critics to object to her theory of inner life. Martha Nussbaum objects to Murdoch's 'over-emphasis' on the inner life, and says 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".<sup>106</sup> Nussbaum criticises the resulting egoism of Murdoch's theory, which is precisely what that theory commands us to avoid. However, the point that has been neglected in Nussbaum's criticism is that even though Murdoch emphasises the inner life of the moral agent, she does *not* overlook the importance of their overt actions. Murdoch's primary intention is to draw our attention to the importance of the inner life to offer an alternative picture of human consciousness in moral philosophy. To her it is simply obvious that publicly observable actions are important in themselves, because they are the exterior manifestation of inner happenings.<sup>107</sup> They can confirm the background – namely, what happens inside the individual's consciousness – from which they issue.<sup>108</sup> Murdoch admits that other people's actions can affect us positively or negatively. Her main concern is individual moral development, including the way we see our surroundings, as this has been neglected by modern moral philosophers. She doesn't find it necessary to include an in-depth analysis of observable actions. There is nothing much we can say about observable actions as such, that is, without looking at them as manifestations of the inner life.<sup>109</sup>

Besides, on Murdoch's view there is a direct relationship between inner life (vision) and action. According to her, "... we can only move properly in a world that we can *see*, and what must be sought for is vision".<sup>110</sup> She takes this

---

<sup>106</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "When She Was Good, Review of *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, by Peter J. Conradi," *New Republic*, May 2001, 32.

<sup>107</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 42.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>109</sup> I am not going to discuss Murdoch's criticism of what she calls the behaviourist view here. For a comprehensive discussion of Murdoch's rejection of behaviouristic philosophy, see Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*. O'Connor. Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*.

<sup>110</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 303. (My italics).

further by claiming that “[t]ruthful vision prompts right action”.<sup>111</sup> Right action is the immediate product of clear vision. While individuals approach specific situations in different ways, moral vision provides them with sufficient reason to perform a right action. Truthful vision with the Good as its background provides the individual with only one choice, which is equal to “a standpoint of choice from which all choosers agree on what should happen”.<sup>112</sup> While individuals may differ in their moral approaches to each specific situation, there is a sense of direction toward the ideal Good which makes each individual recognise the right course of action. This can be different for each individual. The concept of the Good provides the individual with an objective outlook, and if the individual is determined to refine their vision, they can apprehend the right direction of the Good and the right deed.

Nussbaum makes another objection to Murdoch’s concept of inner life. According to Nussbaum, Murdoch strongly emphasises the inner life and moral vision of individuals without considering the social and political factors determinative of their inner prejudices and decisions. For Nussbaum, it is one of the major gaps in Murdoch’s philosophical view that it lacks any interest in the political and social factors shaping an individual’s moral vision.<sup>113</sup> In the same vein, Lawrence Blum criticises Murdoch’s focus on moral psychology and her lack of appreciation of the role played by socio-cultural factors in shaping or blocking an individual’s vision of the world. According to Blum, some social prejudices and stereotypes can be amenable to correction (an example of which is M’s stereotyping of D) but some are deeply rooted in the dominant culture of a society and it is very difficult to identify and modify them.<sup>114</sup> As Nussbaum and Blum point out, there are many social, political, and educational factors that shape an individual’s vision of the world and leads them to act or react in certain ways, and it would be simplistic to overlook all these to psychological factors in

---

<sup>111</sup> This is similar to Aristotle’s view. *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>112</sup> Lawrence A. Blum, "Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 50, no. 3 (1986): 348.

<sup>113</sup> Nussbaum, 31-32.

<sup>114</sup> Lawrence A. Blum, "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 315-19.

explaining human behaviour. Nonetheless, while Murdoch does not specifically refer to the variety of social and cultural factors determining one's approach to a moral situation, she does not deny the importance of them. It is true that Murdoch highlights the ego as a powerful psychological factor that distorts one's view of other people. However, she admits and even emphasizes "the invincible variety, contingency and scarcely communicable frightfulness of life".<sup>115</sup> On Murdoch's view there is no single explanation for things that happen and decisions that are made in one's life, as there are many factors at play in each and every particular situation. She says: "Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete".<sup>116</sup> Murdoch's emphasis on the chanciness and the contingency of an individual's life is her way of referring to innumerable external factors (social, political, and so on) that form one's inner life and one's attitude towards the world. It is a form of consolation to cut these innumerable factors down to a few key ones. It shows how little the individual has control over the various aspects of their life. But to Murdoch this does not mean that one should *not* make an effort to see the world more justly. It is this aspect of moral life she is trying to stress, namely how, against all odds one can become less focused on one's self and more on the reality of other people. As Blum acknowledges, "Murdoch's idea of... the egoistic system of energy that makes it so hard for us to see individual other persons is a vital contribution to the way that philosophy can appropriate a psychological idiom to begin to answer the question how we can morally improve".<sup>117</sup>

To sum up, in developing her own idea that moral philosophy must attempt to portray an accurate picture of humanity, Murdoch explains some key elements of her moral theory of inner life through the example of the mother-in-law. Despite an apparent lack of consistency at some points, the important point for our purposes is that for Murdoch moral activity not only includes the agent's

---

<sup>115</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 96.

<sup>116</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 85. This point will be further discussed in my discussion of art in Chapter 5.

<sup>117</sup> Blum, "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy," 319.

publicly observable behaviours, but also everything that happens in the privacy of their inner life. For her, there is no way to assess thoroughly the moral agent's actions without taking their inner motives, feelings, and contemplations into consideration. Moral activity is not limited only to the moment of action. It is an ongoing process of contemplating one's self (as hard as that is) and others. In the next section, I will argue that Murdoch stresses that the change of vision, or moral progress, takes place by giving just and careful attention to other people and developing a form of universal love.

## ***Section Two***

### ***Attention, Love, and the Recognition of Reality***

As discussed in Chapter 1, according to Murdoch, our grasp of the Good as perfection gives us a sense of direction. It is a guidance or standard in relation to which we morally judge ourselves or our surroundings. Murdoch says: "A good quality of consciousness involves a continual discrimination between truth and falsehood".<sup>118</sup> The Good is "a transcendent magnetic centre" around which the individual's moral life revolves.<sup>119</sup> Morality involves making a continuous effort to get closer to this perfection to which the individual is drawn. In other words, for Murdoch, morality is primarily about self-improvement. As we saw in the example of the mother-in-law, moral improvement takes place as a result of changes in a person's inner life.

In what follows I will explain that what is changing in this process according to Murdoch is what she refers to as 'moral vision' – an aspect of inner life that is afforded a crucial role in her moral theory. The individual's moral vision is infinitely perfectible. With a change of vision, the moral agent is, then, gradually and progressively changing to acquire a deeper and more truthful understanding of the world. I next explain how Murdoch brings the idea of 'attention' back into philosophical discourse as a way of acquiring the right vision. Murdoch borrows this concept from Simone Weil, and acknowledges this debt to

---

<sup>118</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 250.

<sup>119</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 73.

her.<sup>120</sup> I discuss the ways in which Murdoch's explanation of an individual's moral development promotes the practice of attention, which leads to a particular form of 'love' for other individuals.

### *Murdochian Vision*

Discussing her example of the mother-in-law, Murdoch uses a metaphor to emphasise and shed light on the significance of the individual's process of moral development.<sup>121</sup> She says: "... M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her *vision* of D alters".<sup>122</sup> The metaphor of vision in Murdoch's account refers to the deepest attitudes of the individual towards the world. It is "the configurations of their thought" which are reconfigured gradually over time through effort and meditative reflection.<sup>123</sup> People with the right vision see the world and the other people in it in a more insightful and truthful way. Vision is the individual's understanding of reality, which is greatly influenced by reality.<sup>124</sup> It is the result of the constant interplay between the individual and the world. The individual's moral vision not only influences the way they grasp the world, but it also changes through their meditation on the world. Vision influences one's perception – the clearer the vision, the more realistic the individual's apprehension of their surroundings and of other individuals. In Murdoch's

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 33. Murdoch also writes a short review on Simon Weil's *Notebooks*. See "Knowing the Void." 157-60. In Weil's view, attention is a "Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns". Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 174. Weil says: "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object...". *Waiting on God*, Fontana Books (London: Collins, 1959), 72. It is the activity of *waiting*. It is a kind of suspension of the way of seeing things people are used to, and this leads a person to put the values of their personal ego aside and to consent to their self-diminishment, because the highest form of attention is the suspension of attention to the self and turning our attention toward God. To Weil, attention is the substance of prayer and love of God. Ibid., 66. She says: "There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish, only the destruction of the 'I' ". *Gravity and Grace*, 71. When an individual overcomes their ego, they can see other individuals as they are. It is the negative effort of being disinterested, namely, to be open and receptive toward things. Weil says: "Attention alone, that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears, is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn onto that which cannot be conceived". Ibid., 171.

<sup>121</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 2-5.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 17. (My italics). In Chapter 3, I will explain the similarity between Murdoch's concept of 'vision' and Aristotle's 'practical wisdom', thus clarifying this concept further.

<sup>123</sup> "Vision and Choice in Morality," 81.

<sup>124</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

example, “‘M’s vision of D has altered *means* that if M were to speak her mind about D now she would say different things from the things she would have said three years ago’”.<sup>125</sup> M makes an effort to see the reality of D, and as a result the reality of D changes M’s vision. M does not see and describe D the way she did initially, and this is due to her change of vision. D has not changed, but M sees her differently. She sees different aspects of both D and her perceptions of D. These changed perceptions are more truthful and accurate than her previous ones.

On Murdoch’s view, it is only through cultivating a realistic vision that one can get closer to the Good.<sup>126</sup> In other words, as the individual’s vision becomes more refined through their continuous contemplation of the world, their evaluations become more accurate, which is what Murdoch means by proximity to the Good. Let’s return to the example I gave in Chapter 1 of Jill, the girl who was raised by parents who taught her that everything that is commonly deemed morally right is in fact wrong. As I explained in the example, being human, Jill also has an *a priori* understanding of the transcendental concept of the Good that leads her to constantly evaluate her surroundings. Although her ability to evaluate and discriminate is made possible by her conception of the Good, she is incapable of ‘seeing’ the reality of others and correctly distinguishing between right and wrong. In Murdoch’s view, what Jill needs is a change of vision, which comes with really looking and trying. After acknowledging that her judgments of other people can be unfair and faulty (for example, by comparing her own moral judgments to the judgments of people who are commonly known to be good or virtuous people, and by realizing that her moral judgments or decisions are often quite different from the judgements and decisions of those people), Jill needs to strive to see the reality of other people, how they really feel and think, and why they do what they do. If she consciously works on herself and the way she sees other people, over time she may be able to develop a vision that enables her to see others the way they truly are, and, as a result, to be more sensitive to their feelings and views. She may be able to put herself in their shoes before judging them, instead of simply applying the moral principles she learned from her parents. For

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 89.

Murdoch, this kind of sensitivity and vision makes the Good clearer for Jill and leads her to approach other people more sympathetically and objectively.

### *Murdochian Attention*

So by vision, Murdoch refers to a form of moral awareness that comes through the act of attending carefully to the world around us. In every situation, what Jill has to do is ‘to attend to’ or ‘to look’ more closely. Just as M in Murdoch’s example “*looks* at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention”.<sup>127</sup> Terms such as ‘looking at’, ‘attending to’, or ‘focusing attention on’ are the terms Murdoch uses to develop her account of the concept of vision.<sup>128</sup> Murdoch says:

The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial. I would like on the whole to use the word ‘attention’ as a good word and use some more general term like ‘looking’ as the neutral word. Of course psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world.... Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.<sup>129</sup>

If we look closely into the concept of ‘attention’ (or ‘looking at’ fully) in the context of Murdoch’s work, we find that it is a counterpart of the metaphor of vision, both being aspects of Murdoch’s visual metaphor.<sup>130</sup> In other words, the metaphor of ‘seeing’ on Murdoch’s view has two dimensions – external and internal. Attention, meaning a “just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality”, is a form of visual perception associated with the external dimension of

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 36. The term “looking” is morally neutral, in that it refers to the act of perceiving, even though the moral reality might not be grasped. “Attention”, as a “good term” in Murdoch’s text, refers to a deliberate effort in grasping the reality which is morally successful. See Blum, “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” 309-12.

<sup>130</sup> I borrow the term ‘visual metaphor’ from Lawrence Blum. See “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” 307-23.

this metaphor, as opposed to vision, which is the in-depth conceptual attitudes and views of the moral agent.<sup>131</sup> In her example of the mother-in-law, Murdoch illustrates M's moral effort to attend to D carefully, which leads to her change of vision. In this process "M is engaged in an internal struggle" to overcome her selfish ego.<sup>132</sup>

Thus attention involves an internal struggle. This struggle is to look at the objects of attention and to see them objectively – the way they really are. The struggle is also to defeat one's selfish desires and to try and see others selflessly. This step is important as for Murdoch, "[i]n the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego".<sup>133</sup> Attention is not only a careful and selfless gaze but also a just and loving gaze. It means that right attention also involves seeing the other individual more lovingly and sympathetically. That is why, as discussed earlier, in developing her example Murdoch's states that M is not just seeing D "accurately but [also]... justly or *lovingly*".<sup>134</sup> It is through this quality of attention that the individual's moral vision is likely to change. If the individual persists in attending to the world in this way, over time their attention becomes more refined and objective. In other words, the internal struggle against the ego which leads to a change of vision results in a more "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention".<sup>135</sup> In this sense, attention is both the means (an effort to attend the world) and the outcome (a more objective attention) of this moral process. Moral growth and progress occur through a genuine and sustained effort to attend to reality, and an unselfish and loving attention is the result of moral effort in overpowering the selfish ego.

So the term 'attention' refers to a gaze directed inwards, to suppress the ego, and outwards, to see others more accurately and lovingly. As discussed in Section One of this chapter, Murdoch denies any sustainable knowledge of the

---

<sup>131</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 33. It should be pointed out that the term 'attention', while being a form of visual perception, actually stands for any form of perception, which involves moving beyond one's selfish desires to obtain a more realistic understanding of others.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. (My italics).

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

self and so the inward-directed attention is not to acknowledge the self but to deny it. That is why to her the “direction of attention” is ultimately “outward, away from self”, in order to lead to an alteration of vision.<sup>136</sup> The moral agent must break away from the egoistic self, to become able to attend to other individuals more truly and truthfully. However, Murdoch contends that other individuals are not the ultimate objects of attention. By defeating the ego and attending to other people, one essentially aims at ‘the Good’ as the real object and the final destination of attention. Murdoch says: “Good is the focus of attention when an intent to be virtuous coexists (as perhaps it almost always does) with some unclarity of vision.... The Good itself is not visible”.<sup>137</sup> To Murdoch, attention to the Good “is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of *new* and quite undreamt-of virtue”.<sup>138</sup> The Good is invisible and unachievable and it is only through attending to objects outside the self that the moral agent can approach the Good. Since the Good is perfection, then attention to the Good essentially means acquiring the desire to become a better person. The individual can never achieve perfection, but can continue to improve. So while attention to the Good is the main focus of attention, it is not fully achievable. All one can do is attend to other individuals in various situations sincerely and accurately in order to acquire an incomplete vision of the Good, and perhaps become a better person.

### *Murdochian Love*

For Murdoch, attention has different levels of value: “There are good modes of attention and good objects of attention”.<sup>139</sup> Attention to other people, attention to the beauty in nature and art, and attention to intellectual disciplines, are the most valuable sorts of attention. All these kinds of attention take one

---

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 65. But as I discuss in Section One of this Chapter, Murdoch has to allow a level of self-knowledge.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 99. Murdoch calls this “a true mysticism” and “a kind of undogmatic prayer”. We can see here the influence of Weil’s idea of attention on her view.

<sup>139</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 301.

further from the ego and closer to the Good.<sup>140</sup> Murdoch maintains that ‘love’ is the ability to direct attention away from the self and towards others.<sup>141</sup> I mentioned earlier in this chapter that the practice of the right mode of attention might result in a more detached, unselfish, and objective attention. It seems that love, on Murdoch’s view, refers to this objective attention, which is the outcome of sustained attention. The concept of love becomes so important for Murdoch that she considers it to be the main subject of her philosophy.<sup>142</sup> Murdoch writes:

Art and morals are... one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extreme realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.... Love is the imaginative *recognition of*, that is *respect for*, this otherness.<sup>143</sup>

As we can see, for Murdoch, love is acknowledging the reality of other people, and respecting this reality. Murdoch’s concept of love has two closely related meanings: First, love is cognition or knowledge of reality; it is the ability to see other individuals the way they really are.<sup>144</sup> Second, love is compassion; it is the ability to respect other individuals and to see them with a kinder and a more sympathetic gaze.<sup>145</sup> Murdoch says: “The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation....”<sup>146</sup> Love is the cognition of reality, which is the result of careful attention. In Murdoch’s cognitivist account of love, the cognition of the reality of others brings one closer to the idea of the Good as

---

<sup>140</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 82-93. Murdoch’s discussion of the attention to beauty will be explored in Chapter 7.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>142</sup> W. K. Rose, "Iris Murdoch, Informally," in *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>143</sup> Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 215-16. (My italics)

<sup>144</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 37. Murdoch maintains that love has a paradoxical nature. It is normally too possessive and mechanical to be a source of vision. This type of attachment is capable of being the source of our greatest errors.

<sup>145</sup> This echoes the point made in connection with M and D: it is M’s seeing D both more accurately and more kindly or sympathetically.

<sup>146</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.

perfection, hence the sympathy one feels towards others. Murdoch says: “Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves”.<sup>147</sup> The idea of perfection moves and changes individuals because it inspires love in them.<sup>148</sup> This is how Murdoch draws a close conceptual connection between the concepts “‘Good’: ‘Real’: ‘Love’”.<sup>149</sup> To perceive the reality of individuals is to love them, and this is the purpose of ethical practice.

### ***Conclusion***

Having laid out the meaning and the function of the concept of the Good and its implications in Murdoch’s moral theory in Chapter 1, I moved on to offer an account of certain key aspects of Murdoch’s moral theory. I showed how Murdoch’s theory focuses on individual moral development and what it means for an individual to become a better person. I drew upon Murdoch’s account of the inner life and explained that in their dealings with other individuals, the moral agent must constantly deliberate over themselves and others. They must assess their intentions and ensure that their attitudes towards others are unbiased and objective. If the moral agent succeeds in this process, they develop the vision and sensitivity required for perceiving others more accurately and compassionately. A person with this kind of vision is more inclined to attend to the world justly and lovingly. On Murdoch cognitivist view, this loving attention is the ability to see the others the way they really are and to put oneself in their shoes. This form of love or selfless attention to other individuals does not mean to blindly sympathise with everyone, as the requirement of this form of love, or the very meaning of it, is the ability to perceive and acknowledge the reality of other individuals.

Considering the central elements of Murdoch’s moral theory, in the next chapter I argue that Murdoch’s theory is a form of virtue ethics. Through this argument I intend to highlight the aspects of Murdoch’s theory that are particularly important for the purpose of moral education.

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 41.

## Chapter 3

### Murdochian Virtue Ethics

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I argue that Murdoch's moral theory is best described as a form of virtue ethics. Murdoch emphasizes the importance of vision rather than moral rules or principles in moral decision-making, and highlights the virtue of love at the centre of her moral theory. The Platonic aspect of Murdoch's moral view and her emphasis on the concept of the Good, which is the ultimate value that motivates the moral agent, has led most of her critics to overlook the close affinity between the elements of her ethics and some common elements of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Yet showing this affinity demonstrates that Murdoch does not only have some interesting moral insights to offer, but also a fully developed moral theory that can contribute to the current approaches to virtue ethics. My aim here is to accentuate the virtue ethical elements of Murdoch's view that are especially significant for the purpose of moral education. However, as I will discuss, Murdoch's theory has some distinctive elements that play an important part in her view of art as a means to moral education.

I begin this chapter by arguing that Murdoch's moral theory displays the three features that Nussbaum identifies as common to all forms of virtue ethics, namely, the centrality of the moral agent, the concern with their inner life and an emphasis on the role of motives and passions in their choices, and the focus on the whole course of their moral life.<sup>150</sup> Following that I examine three concepts that are frequently discussed in Aristotelian virtue ethics, namely, virtue, *eudaimonia*, and practical wisdom.<sup>151</sup> I will argue that although there are clear similarities

---

<sup>150</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?," *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 170. Elsewhere, Nussbaum offers this definition for virtue ethics: "an ethics concerned not just with action and rules of duty, but with the attempt to perfect one's inner world, removing egoism and seeking clear vision of others". "Faint with Secret Knowledge": Love and Vision in Murdoch's the Black Prince," in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137.

<sup>151</sup> I will especially focus on the works of Rosalind Hursthouse and Julia Annas as two significant proponents of this theory. As Hursthouse explains, "neo-Aristotelian" ethicists are those who are inspired by Aristotle's moral theory, while not submitting to some aspects of his

between the views of Murdoch and the proponents of virtue ethics, Murdoch's view differs in important ways. As I go on to explain in more detail in the following chapter, in Murdoch's view clear vision requires moral imagination. Her emphasis on the role of imagination and defeating distorted egoistic images in the process of moral development and moral decision-making is an important contribution to the discourse on virtue and moral education.

### ***Section One***

#### ***Inner Life of Moral agent and the continuity of Moral Life***

Although Murdoch never calls herself a virtue ethicist, her volume, *The Sovereignty of Good*, is considered to be one of the most influential books in the reestablishment of virtue ethics in the last fifty years.<sup>152</sup> Roger Crisp and Michael Slote include Murdoch's "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts" in their volume entitled *Virtue Ethics*.<sup>153</sup> Pamela Hall is another philosopher who regards Murdoch as a virtue ethicist, and expresses her surprise that Stephen M. Gardiner has not included Murdoch in his list of the "most powerful recent philosophers of the virtues", in the introduction of his edited volume.<sup>154</sup>

Virtue ethics is typically presented as a normative theory that takes a stance against two other major theories, namely, utilitarianism (or more generally consequentialism), and Kantianism (or more generally deontology). All these

---

theory such as elitism and sexism, and his defence of slavery. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8-9.

<sup>152</sup> Maria Antonaccio, "Reconsidering Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy and Theology," in *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, ed. Anne Rowe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 15. See also Nussbaum, Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?," 175. Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*. 8. Bridget Clarke, "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception," in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 227-28. Michael Schwartz, "Moral Vision: Iris Murdoch and Alasdair Macintyre," *Journal of Business Ethics* 90, no. 3 (2009): 315. It should be pointed out that whether or not Murdoch is a virtue ethicist has not been a matter of much debate. Only a few of her interpreters have shown some interest in this subject matter.

<sup>153</sup> Roger Crisp and Michael A. Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 99-117. See Also *ibid.* 9-12. Also in his entry on "Virtue Ethics" Roger Crisp presents Murdoch as a virtue ethicist. Roger Crisp, "Virtue Ethics," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 622-26.

<sup>154</sup> Pamela M. Hall, "Review of Virtue Ethics Old and New, by Stephen M. Gardiner," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 2 (2008): 332.

normative theories have evolved significantly and taken many different forms. That is why philosophers often find it difficult to make a clear distinction between these views, or between different versions of them. This is the case for virtue ethics as well. It is not easy to identify common features that are inclusive of all forms of virtue ethics and exclusive of other moral theories.

Nonetheless, Martha Nussbaum puts forward three common grounds among the defenders of virtue ethics: First of all, in virtue ethics the central focus is on the moral agent along with their choice and action.<sup>155</sup> Second, virtue ethics is concerned with the agent's inner moral life, and with settled patterns of motives and intentions, emotions, and desires. And third, virtue ethics concerns itself with the whole course of the agent's moral life and not only their discrete actions and decisions.<sup>156</sup> She suggests that Kantians and utilitarians have tended to neglect questions about the moral agent and their inner life, and virtue ethics emerged, in part, as an attempt to correct this.<sup>157</sup> Nussbaum insightfully argues that the rise of virtue ethics in the Anglo-American world is a reaction to the neglect of human character and its inner complexities in mid-twentieth century philosophy. In reaction to this neglect, virtue ethicists brought these issues back to the centre of discussion and made them the fundamental concerns of their moral theories.

Murdoch's work is best situated as part of a more general critique of the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill as well as the deontological ethics of Kant, with their emphasis on the neutrality and universality of moral reasons, the will, and observable actions. Her criticism of Kant's belief in the moral agent's absolute freedom and the autonomy of their will forms an important part of her criticism of modern voluntarist and behaviouristic ethics. I will now go on to briefly present Murdoch's objection to the Kantian view of the moral agent, which serves to show that she shares the common concerns of virtue ethicists.

---

<sup>155</sup> Even if we object that virtue ethics is not committed to the centrality of character, there is no doubt that character is of a considerable importance to it. See Christine Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 315-38.

<sup>156</sup> Nussbaum contends that these three claims are in tune with the views of Kant and utilitarians such as Sidgwick and Mill. Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?," 170.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

Throughout her philosophical work, Murdoch criticises the reductionist account of ethics that identifies the will as the main aspect of moral life and therefore overlooks the questions: “What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better?”<sup>158</sup> For her, these are the main questions a moral philosopher should endeavour to answer. She argues that the idea of freedom, or will, does not seem complex enough to display what we really are. In the Kantian picture of freedom, as an obvious instance of the ethics of will, people are autonomous and non-historical rational beings. Reason, which is the origin of the moral law, is a universal faculty, and is therefore the same for all people. In Kant’s view, morality must be in accordance with the principle of universalisability. Murdoch calls the structure of reason described by Kant an “empty consciousness”.<sup>159</sup> This emptiness is noticeable in Kant’s emphasis on “rationality, universality, consistency”, and his dismissal of individuality and personality.<sup>160</sup> By seeking out foundational principles on which all our moral judgments are based, Murdoch thinks Kant neglects the individual’s personal vision and attitudes in moral judgments:

Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts. ... He would like, as it were, by morality to crystallise out of the historical process a simple society living strictly by

---

<sup>158</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51. Murdoch intends to reject “the relaxed empirical ethics of the British tradition (a cheerful amalgam of Hume, Kant and Mill), and ... the more formal existentialist systems, and ... wish[es] to replace these with something which would have to be called a metaphysical theory”. *Ibid.*, 49. So Murdoch comes close to more prominent modern virtue ethicists in her critiques of modern moral theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism and their contemporary manifestations in forms of behaviourism and voluntarism. In order to offer an objective, comprehensive, and neutral moral theory, utilitarians, for example, adopt a reductionist approach and “theorise away” human particularity and the complexity of individuals’ lives. Murdochian thought, however, suggests the opposite direction. By emphasising the individual’s particular inner features and their attention to other individuals in their own right, moral agents can no longer be impartial. They aim at attending to other people. This involves their understanding of and caring for other individuals’ particular needs and desires, and the particular internal and external conditions of their behaviours. According to Murdoch, “philosophical doctrines which profess neutrality, whether they are professedly analytic ... or scientific ... cannot help ... making moral judgments”. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 297.

<sup>159</sup> “The Existentialist Political Myth,” 134.

<sup>160</sup> “A House of Theory,” 177.

extremely general rules ('Always tell the truth,' etc.), with no place for the morally complicated or eccentric.<sup>161</sup>

As we see in this statement, Murdoch criticises Kant for setting aside the complicated historical individual in their particularity, and as a substitute, holding up universal reason. For her, Kant is fearful of the particular and history.<sup>162</sup> In Kant's view, reasons and rules of right action are public, in the sense that everybody can share them and use them to judge other individuals. They represent a kind of 'impersonal tyranny' over actions. With respect to personal will, which relates to the moment of action, the individual is totally free, but in their moral choices they have to follow a practical rationality, which has sovereignty over personal emotions and desires. Murdoch says that in the Kantian theory,

[m]orality resides at the point of action. What I am 'objectively' is not under my control; logic and observers decide that. What I am 'subjectively' is a foot-loose, solitary, substanceless will. Personality dwindles to a point of pure will.<sup>163</sup>

Kant's desire to offer a scientific explanation of moral activity leaves out the sphere of the agent's inner life, which cannot be publicly assessed. His emphasis on the rational recognition of duty and the exercise of freedom by the rational will does not do justice to the complexity of the agent's inner emotions, thoughts, and motives, which is the background of their moral choice.<sup>164</sup>

In reaction to this neglect, Murdoch shifts the locus of importance from the universal rational will to the individual person and their inner contemplations, motives, and emotions, which may manifest themselves in actions. This aspect of Murdoch's view is in line with the first and second common concern of virtue ethicists as posed by Nussbaum. In Murdoch's view, the background of the individual's choice and action is "a just mode of vision and a good quality of

---

<sup>161</sup> "The Sublime and the Good," 215.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>163</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 15-16.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

consciousness".<sup>165</sup> She argues that with the absence of the inner in ethics, "something vital is missing".<sup>166</sup> What matters here is the individual person and their effort to change what happens in their vision or inner life, or as it were, in their whole attitude and personality. She says: "Here there is an activity but no observer".<sup>167</sup> This activity that happens only in the privacy of one's inner life is actually the key form of moral activity. Inner activity is an essential part of moral life and the value of the outward (moral) activity is dependent on the inner life.

The concept of love at the core of Murdoch's ethics, along with its cognitive dimension, highlights the importance of our inner contemplations and the change of our moral vision.<sup>168</sup> In Murdoch's view, love involves destroying the false images created by one's selfish ego and realizing the existence of others, and acknowledging the fact that they are different from one and respecting this difference.<sup>169</sup> We are morally better (or virtuous) people if we manage to develop this sort of love and vision that enables us *to see* the reality of other people and evaluate their conditions before judging them or making any moral decisions. Regardless of the difficulty of the situation, a virtuous person keeps on trying and keeps on attending to others justly and compassionately. Due to their genuine love and respect for others in their otherness, the virtuous person's observable activities tend to be morally right too. They are morally right because they stem from the right inner background that is love or the recognition of the particularity of other people. In Kant's theory, however, "the presence of others is felt, if at all, simply as the presence of rational critics".<sup>170</sup> The Kantian moral agent as a free rational will is alone, because "[he] is not confronted with real dissimilar others".<sup>171</sup> Kant abandons any idea of "discrete units of experience", and turns

---

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>169</sup> This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

<sup>170</sup> Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 268.

<sup>171</sup> "Against Dryness," 288.

morality to “the actualization of rational systems in the sphere of human action”, and moral agency to “the activity of the (rational and real) will”.<sup>172</sup>

In Murdoch’s view, then, the moral agent is continually and patiently active, attending to their surroundings closely and lovingly. Morality is an on-going effort. A person’s vision changes progressively throughout their life. It is a continuous struggle to attend to every situation carefully and compassionately and to form a clearer vision. Referring to the ethics of will as an inept approach to morality, Murdoch says:

The [behaviouristic] analysis pictures [the individual] as defined ‘from the outside in’: [Her] individuality lies in her will, understood as her ‘movements’. The analysis makes no sense of [the individual] as continually active, as making progress, or of her inner acts as belonging to her or forming part of a continuous fabric of being ...<sup>173</sup>

Murdoch uses the phrase ‘a continuous fabric of being’ to show that moral changes are changes that happen internally as well as continuously. Individuals are inevitably imperfect and strive to achieve love and knowledge, which is a perfectible task. Murdoch says: “A good quality of consciousness involves a continual discrimination between truth and falsehood”.<sup>174</sup> This is in tune with the third criterion discussed by Nussbaum. To Murdoch, morality is not limited to the moments of choice, but is a *continuous* struggle to progressively change one’s way of seeing the world. Moral growth or acquiring virtue involves “the formation of habit, the background of virtuous action”.<sup>175</sup> This means that morality is a mode of being and a way of living. It involves all of one’s emotions,

---

<sup>172</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 221-22. Charles Taylor explains that in Kant’s philosophy, like in other forms of humanistic ethics, the locus of the good is displaced onto human beings as beings with a rational agency and an intrinsic dignity. Taylor believes this dignity given to the rational will sets an ideal for our actions, and also explains why other individuals are respected when they are objects of our actions., Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>173</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 21.

<sup>174</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 250.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

desires, thoughts, and motives. It is about the whole course of one's moral life, and "[m]oral tasks are characteristically endless".<sup>176</sup>

Drawing upon the criteria put forward by Nussbaum, thus far I have discussed the fact that some of the themes in Murdoch's work, such as her criticism of dominant ethical theories and her emphasis on the individual's character and their inner life, are present in the work of other virtue ethicists. In what follows, I will show that along with sharing the general concerns of virtue ethicists, Murdoch emphasises some of the same concepts highlighted by Aristotelian virtue ethicists in particular, namely, virtue, the good life, and practical wisdom.

## ***Section Two***

### ***Virtue***

Although most normative theories include an account of virtue, it plays the central role in virtue ethics. According to virtue ethicists, virtue involves more than simply doing the right thing, or even the tendency or disposition to act in a certain way. Virtue is a character trait, "a *lasting* feature of a person" that is consistently demonstrated in different situations.<sup>177</sup> The first aspect of virtue that most virtue ethicists agree upon is that it is observed in *attitudes* as well as *emotions*. A virtuous person has the right desires, emotions, and attitudes.<sup>178</sup> Their emotions involve thoughts or perceptions of good and evil. As Julia Annas puts it, virtues are:

... dispositions not only to act, but to feel emotions, as *reactions* as well as impulses to action ... In the person with virtues, these emotions will be felt on the *right* occasions, towards the *right* people or objects, for the *right* reasons, where 'right' means 'correct' ...<sup>179</sup>

---

<sup>176</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 27-28.

<sup>177</sup> Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8. (My italics.)

<sup>178</sup> Hursthouse, 11-12.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

In order for an action to be considered truly virtuous, the agent must perform that action willingly and enthusiastically, rather than reluctantly or with a sense of pain and regret. This only happens when one's emotions are supported by one's reason. We intuitively find those people who take pleasure in doing the right action, and whose emotions lead them to act in the right manner, more virtuous than those who have to battle with their conflicting feelings when it comes to doing the right thing.

The second aspect of virtue is that it does not only involve feeling in a certain way, but also *reasoning* in a certain way. A virtuous person acts for the right reason. They are also able to provide others with a rational explanation for their action. The virtuous person knows what they are doing, and accordingly, is able to explain the reasons for their actions. As Rosalind Hursthouse states, “[T]he *virtuous*, in choosing a V action [i.e. virtuous action] for an X reason, *is* choosing it *qua* virtuous and as an instance of doing well and for the sake of *to kalon*, because *she* is acting from virtue”.<sup>180</sup> The moral agent is not acting virtuously *per se*, if their apparently right action is done unintentionally or by chance.<sup>181</sup> Someone who intends to lie but accidentally tells the truth – due to her ignorance, for example – is not acting virtuously.<sup>182</sup>

The third claim that virtue ethicists make about virtue is that a change in one's character usually happens slowly and profoundly.<sup>183</sup> The formation of virtue, like a skill, comes only with practice and persistence, initially by copying and following a virtuous role model. This is the process of habituation, where an intention to act in a certain way becomes a routine.<sup>184</sup> However, the process of acquiring virtue does not stop at this point. The individual will eventually come to understand what they have learned, and actively and consciously engage this practical mastery in all their activities, but always striving to improve.<sup>185</sup> When a

---

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>182</sup> I will discuss this later in greater detail.

<sup>183</sup> Hursthouse, 12.

<sup>184</sup> Annas, 12-13.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 16-19.

morally desirable habit (such as honesty) becomes a characteristic or deep feature of a person, it attains the status of a virtue. As Hursthouse puts it, a “change in character has to be profound, to go all the way down, and part of what is meant by saying that it is profound is that it is not transitory”.<sup>186</sup>

This brings me to the fourth feature of virtue, which is that it becomes part of one’s identity. It is “... a disposition central to the person, to whom he or she is, a way we standardly think of character”.<sup>187</sup> The virtuous person’s reason for telling the truth, for example, will not be that they are following a certain moral rule, or that they are afraid of being revealed and ridiculed as a liar. Rather, their reason for telling the truth is that it is the right or honest thing to do. The virtuous person finds it natural to be and to do what is honest, and they find it painful to act dishonestly. That is why no matter how difficult and challenging a situation may be, the virtuous person resists acting viciously. The persisting aspect of virtues makes them reliable dispositions. Individual virtues, as fixed features of a virtuous person’s character, allow others to predict that person’s behaviours and reactions.<sup>188</sup> An honest person, that is, a person who tells the truth for the right reasons, at the right time, and with the right feelings and motivations, can be relied upon to act in an honest and trustworthy way in other situations as well.

The final feature which is an important aspect of Aristotelian virtue ethics, is about what makes the cultivation of virtue worthwhile. To answer the question of why one ought to live a virtuous life, Aristotelian virtue ethicists like Hursthouse and Annas adopt the concept of *eudaimonia* (happiness, flourishing) from Aristotle’s ethics.<sup>189</sup> The idea is that acquiring virtues contributes to the agent’s overall flourishing. On Annas’ view, the concept of *eudaimonia* should not be thought of as being independent of virtue. For her, “a life lived in

---

<sup>186</sup> Hursthouse, 159.

<sup>187</sup> Annas, 9.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Annas finds “flourishing” the least unsatisfactory equivalent for the Greek term *eudaimonia*, as “Happiness” has been influenced by utilitarian ideas, as well as the everyday idea of having a good time, or being prosperous. “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 520.

accordance with the virtues is the *best specification* of what flourishing is".<sup>190</sup> I will elaborate this last point further in the next section.

Murdoch's moral philosophy emphasises many of the same points that Aristotelians make. Yet what makes her theory of virtue unique is her account of virtue as a perceptual capacity, which targets the absolute Good, as well as her account of love as the highest virtue. Virtue, for Murdoch, involves a kind of perceptual capacity, which is basically concerned with "apprehending that other people exist", attaining knowledge of the Good, and recognising the goodness in others.<sup>191</sup> To Murdoch, "the central concept of morality is 'the individual' thought of as knowable by love".<sup>192</sup> Seeing others or attending to them truthfully helps the moral agent practice and acquire the virtue of love, which is the highest virtue.<sup>193</sup> Love is a character trait, which involves seeing and feeling more justly and compassionately. It is a matter of overcoming one's selfish desires for the sake of something worthwhile or good. So love requires an understanding of what is good. A loving attention to reality helps individuals to acquire and to develop other moral virtues, and this provides them with the necessary perceptual background to ensure their judgments and actions are morally sound.

The virtue of love, in the context of Murdoch's philosophy, has both an emotional and an intellectual aspect, and is similar to the Aristotelian view of virtue in this regard. Through cultivating love one learns to overcome the naturally selfish force of ego, which is, for Murdoch, the main obstacle to seeing the reality of others. Love involves the ability to see others in their own right. The virtue of love involves not only understanding that other individuals are different from us, but also respecting them and feeling compassion towards them. These are the intellectual and the emotional aspects of the virtue of love.

---

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 521.

<sup>191</sup> Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 284.

<sup>192</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 29.

<sup>193</sup> See Chapter 2, Section Two.

Murdoch does not think that morality “can be satisfactorily characterized by an enumeration of varying ‘goods’ and virtues”.<sup>194</sup> She suggests that by reflecting upon virtues, we find some sort of unity in the moral world. The human intellect, while identifying the hierarchical order of virtues, naturally seeks unity in them. When contemplating the nature of a particular virtue, such as courage, we are bound to resort to other virtues, such as steadfastness and temperance.<sup>195</sup> According to Murdoch, the concept that unites all the other virtues is the Good.<sup>196</sup> In explaining the relationship between the concept of the Good and love, Murdoch writes:

Of course Good is sovereign over Love, as it is sovereign over other concepts, because Love can name something bad. ... I think that Good and Love should not be identified, and not only because human love is usually self-assertive. The concepts, even when the idea of love is purified, still play different roles. ... Good is the magnetic force towards which love naturally moves.<sup>197</sup>

For love to be the highest virtue, or as Murdoch calls it, ‘a single supreme principle’ (by ‘principle’ here she means virtue) does not mean that it fills a higher position than *the Good* in the moral world. The transcendental concept of the Good and the virtue of love, along with the other virtues, play different parts in the sphere of morality. They are not only ontologically different, but also have different functions. All human beings, as human beings, have a conception of the Good. It is a necessary condition for developing and habituating the virtues, and above all, the virtue of love. Love involves attention to the Good.<sup>198</sup> The Good is the highest moral value. It is what a virtuous person focuses their attention on, as

---

<sup>194</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 492.

<sup>195</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 56.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56. Murdoch here uses the term ‘principle’ for love. At other times she calls the Good a principle. She obviously uses the term loosely. See, for example, *ibid.* 92 and 73.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

<sup>198</sup> In Bridget Clarke’s understanding of Murdoch’s Good, “the Good is a second-order principle which prompts one to seek a perfect perception of the objects one encounters; to attend is to approach such a perception”. Clarke, 236. Murdoch’s emphasis on the concept of the Good makes her discussion of virtues seem secondary.

developing the virtues requires an understanding of the Good. It is the notion of the Good that relates all the virtues to each other by being their perfection.<sup>199</sup>

As discussed earlier, in the Aristotelian view, the virtues are acquired through habituation and acting in certain ways. In Murdoch's view, the essential condition for such habituation and action is the individual's effort to attend to others carefully and persistently.<sup>200</sup> Acquiring virtue is "a process of deepening or complicating, a process of learning, a progress...."<sup>201</sup> Like Aristotelian virtue ethicists, Murdoch believes in the slow and profound process of change in one's character, which goes 'all the way down' and gets imprinted in one's disposition. Taking inspiration from Plato, Murdoch compares the habituation of virtue to the acquisition of an intellectual skill, such as learning a foreign language. They both require determination and practice. However, acquiring virtue is a more complicated process than mastering a language (because of the individual's selfish attachment) and involves more effort and more practice.<sup>202</sup> The task is difficult and the target is distant, but through the practice of careful attention to reality, one's vision is gradually enlarged.<sup>203</sup> One slowly learns to judge others more

---

<sup>199</sup> Murdoch's understanding of the Good is inspired by Plato's idea that knowledge of the Good allows one to see the goodness in particular instances. See, for example, Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 511e-12b. Referring to this aspect of Murdoch's view, Mark McLean opposes the idea that Murdoch's theory is a form of virtue ethics (by which he means Aristotelian virtue ethics) and holds that in her article "On 'God' and 'Good'", Murdoch places the concept of 'love' rather than 'virtue' at the centre of her discussion. Love is attention to the Good which is the central concept of Murdoch's view. Mark McLean, "Discussion- on Muffling Murdoch," *Ratio (New Series)* 13, no. 2 (2000): 193-94. However, as I said earlier, Murdoch highlights love as the central element of her theory and this certainly represents a debt to Plato. In *The Symposium*, Plato explores the relation between love, knowledge, and beauty. Socrates, narrating Diotima's account of love, explains that love is neither knowledge nor ignorance; it is rather a "correct belief" (202a). We can "say without qualification that people love the good". (206a). Through love one partakes in immortality, such as maintaining knowledge by putting back what is lost in the memory. (208b), See Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. M. C. Howatson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Nonetheless, Murdoch takes up the language of virtue to introduce love as the highest in a progressively perfecting hierarchy of virtues. She focuses on love as a virtue the cultivation of which helps to refine increasingly the conception of other virtues that are obstructed by selfish inclinations.

<sup>200</sup> For Murdoch action readily follows from the right mode of consciousness. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.

<sup>201</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 30.

<sup>202</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 87-89.

<sup>203</sup> Annas uses a similar analogy between acquiring virtue and learning a foreign language. She says that learning Italian can initially be painful and difficult. But once the individual becomes

impartially and more justly. One learns to put oneself in other people's shoes and sympathise with them in all circumstances (provided that they deserve sympathy).

To sum up, Murdoch's conception of the virtue of love, which is a character trait involving seeing more others realistically and feeling more compassionately, indicates not only the intellectual aspect, but also the emotional aspect of virtue, both of which are central in virtue ethics (especially in the Aristotelian approach). In order to see other individuals truly, which is the precondition of being a virtuous person, the individual needs to cultivate love, and this leads them to be in direct contact with the real world. Murdoch shares with virtue ethicists the view that the virtues are acquired slowly and profoundly. It requires a lot of practice. This is what Aristotelians call the on-going process of learning and habituation. This slow but profound process leads to changes in one's character and disposition.

Another important concept in Aristotelian virtue ethics is the concept of *eudaimonia*, which will be the focus of the following section. Showing the presence of this element in the context of Murdoch's philosophy will highlight another way in which Murdoch's theory is similar to Aristotelian virtue ethics.

### ***Section Three***

#### ***Eudaimonia***

Aristotelian virtue ethicists believe that human life has a *telos* (purpose or goal), which is *eudaimonia* (flourishing or happiness), and that virtues are those traits that allow one to achieve *eudaimonia*. In this section, I briefly discuss the Aristotelian account of *eudaimonia*, and then contrast it to Murdoch's view that life, in particular moral life, has no final goal. What distinguishes Murdoch's view is her claim that virtue is pointless in the same way that beauty in art, and even life itself, are pointless. I intend to demonstrate that in spite of Murdoch's emphasis on the idea that moral life has no meaningful purpose or *telos*, her

---

familiar with the language and does not have to consciously look for the words, they come to enjoy mastering the language. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 69-70.

ethical approach is very similar to the teleological approach supported by contemporary eudaimonists, provided we understand ‘teleological’ in the same way that Aristotelians do.

Aristotelian virtue ethicists do not try to identify the rules of right action. Instead, they consider the more general questions: ‘How should I live?’ or ‘What is a good life for a human being?’ In the Aristotelian view, all actions are directed at an end or goal. Hence, when we are asked why we pursue a certain goal, we make reference to some broader concern. For example, we may ask ourselves why we want to work hard. To make money. Then why we want to make money? To buy a nice house. Why do we want a nice house? To be more comfortable and not to have to worry about paying rent. As we see, each of these goals is instrumental, in that each of them is for the sake of another. We might eventually come up with the question: ‘Does our life as a whole have a final end?’ The answer to this question, in the Aristotelian view, is positive – the intrinsic *telos* or final end of life is *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing).<sup>204</sup> It is the ultimate aim of every human being, and what makes life worth living. Further, Aristotelian virtue ethicists argue that we can achieve *eudaimonia* by living virtuously. That is, virtue is the most reliable way to achieve it.

There seems to be two concerns: 1. Even if we accept that *eudaimonia* is the final end that everyone seeks, it is a fairly indeterminate notion, and so it isn’t useful in guiding us in our daily lives. 2. It seems unlikely that everyone seeks or should seek the same final end, given that people commonly disagree about what happiness consists in. Virtue ethicists argue that the idea that there is only one final end and that end is *eudaimonia* does not mean that there is one single grand end around which all the other activities of life are organised. People live for all sorts of things and they contemplate their activities and pursue them on their own terms. One does not follow a career or raise children or travel around the world or even donate part of their income to charity for the sake of some single grand end. Yet, achieving those ends is part of being happy. Happiness is the sort of final end

---

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 122-24.

that we seek only by coming to have those other ends.<sup>205</sup> Virtue ethics does not try to offer any specification of flourishing or happiness. Happiness is not a matter of what individuals have, rather a matter of how they live their lives, more especially, whether they live virtuously. These theorists reject a conception of flourishing that makes no reference to virtue. Living virtuously is “the only reliable bet” in attaining happiness.<sup>206</sup> Nevertheless, the virtues do not guarantee happiness. Rather, they are necessary but not sufficient for happiness, or as Hursthouse puts it, they are the most reliable means to this end.<sup>207</sup>

At first glance, Murdoch’s view of the *telos* of moral life appears to be very different from the Aristotelian view. She writes:

... human life has no external point or *τελος* ... I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained. There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search.<sup>208</sup>

To illustrate her view that human life has no *external point*, Murdoch draws an analogy between beauty and the Good. She notes that we naturally and immediately enjoy looking at flowers and animals, as we love beauty instinctively. We not only enjoy beauty in nature, but also in art.<sup>209</sup> Beauty in art invigorates us with a pure delight in something totally different from our selfish inclinations. In Murdoch’s view, “the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue”.<sup>210</sup> Art is the juxtaposition of pointlessness and value. We love beauty in art and enjoy a

---

<sup>205</sup> Daniel C. Russell, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, Cambridge Companions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9-10.

<sup>206</sup> Hursthouse, 172.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>208</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 77. Murdoch criticises the ancient philosophers “with the exception of Plato” as well as some modern philosophers down to Kant in their attempt to identify virtue with happiness or make these two dependent on each other. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 65.

<sup>209</sup> Here, by art Murdoch means good or great art. I will discuss this point in detail in Chapter 6. See *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83-85.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

work of art without having any material gain from it. In that sense the enjoyment of art is completely pointless. The pointlessness of art reflects the aimlessness of the universe and of human life itself. In fact, for Murdoch, beauty in art teaches us that “nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous”.<sup>211</sup> In Murdoch’s view, art – especially literature and painting – shows us how virtue is incorporated into human life, without any particular purpose. While being virtuous is important, it is pointless. It is because the concept of the Good as the perfection, which inspires and guides us in our endeavour to become virtuous, is absolutely for-nothing. Since all human life is subject to chance and necessity and lacks any finality, being good is being good ‘for nothing’.<sup>212</sup>

In our moral development we seek an austere love of the Good and that is, for Murdoch, true morality.<sup>213</sup> Morality requires us to see reality and its necessity and chanciness, to experience suffering and affliction and to make spiritual use of them – namely, by developing humility. She warns that ethics must not fall into the same trap that much art and religious myths have fallen into, that of ignoring the absolute contingency of life and the reality of death.<sup>214</sup> If the contingency and pointlessness of life is fully perceived, “[s]uffering remains but accompanied by a kind of passion, a high Eros, or purified joy, which is the vision of good itself...”.<sup>215</sup> Suffering is not an end in itself.<sup>216</sup> Murdoch writes: “The human scene is one of moral failure combined with the remarkable continued return to an idea of Goodness as unique and absolute”.<sup>217</sup> Referring to Plato, Murdoch explains that our natural attraction to the Good is because it is real, but unlike other aspects of reality and life, it does not exist contingently.<sup>218</sup> The Good is an idea that inspires love. The Good exerts a magnetism or attraction, the response to

---

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>213</sup> This is the Platonic aspect of Murdoch’s theory, where she compares the moral pilgrimage to the long quest of prisoners to see the Sun in Plato’s cave. I have explained this point in Chapter One. See *ibid.*, 90.

<sup>214</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 139.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>216</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 67.

<sup>217</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 427.

<sup>218</sup> See Chapter 1.

which is love.<sup>219</sup> The existence of the Good is the demonstration of the fact that human beings are spiritual creatures that are capable of cultivating love and understanding virtue through the acceptance of “real death and real chance and real transience”.<sup>220</sup> Virtue is loved for its own sake.<sup>221</sup>

Murdoch, then, advocates an acceptance of the fact that life is aimless and virtue pointless. She thinks it is a mistake to think of happiness as a reward for a moral life because suffering and affliction are inevitable parts of life. Human existence is too contingent and uncertain to have any end or *telos*. If we eliminate the consoling narratives offered by some religions and art, we find that death is the true end point to a life of suffering and pain.

In comparing the Aristotelian and Murdochian view of the relation between virtue and *eudaimonia*, the first thing to be noticed is the issue of a *telos* or final end of life, which strikes one as an important point of dissimilarity between these two views. Whereas virtue ethicists believe that virtue plays a crucial role in one’s flourishing or happiness, which is to them the final end of life, Murdoch claims life is contingent and chancy and there is no meaningful end for it. The same thing is true of morality and our aspiration to develop the virtues. In Murdoch’s view, in spite of the fact that there is no rewarding end to one’s moral actions, some people still choose to follow the path of goodness and progressively strive to become virtuous. In Murdoch’s view it is because we have a natural attraction to the Good that is similar to the attraction we have to beauty. We are spiritual beings that are capable of seeking perfection through experiencing imperfect things. That perfection, or the Good which is the inspiration for the virtuous life, is appealing by itself without the assurance of another end. Following the Good and therefore developing the virtues can be quite agonising, as it demands a truthful grasp of reality. Nonetheless, obtaining truthful vision is something to be loved *for its own sake*. Seeing reality is the only reward for being virtuous. Human beings love the Good, and this manifests itself in their love of

---

<sup>219</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 342-43.

<sup>220</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 100.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

truth. They do not love the Good because it leads to another end, such as flourishing, happiness, or the like. They do not look for a reward other than ‘being virtuous’ itself. As Murdoch states, “[t]ruth and progress (or some truth and some progress) are the reward of some exercise of virtue, courage, humility, patience”.<sup>222</sup> In other words, *being* virtuous, which is essentially the ability to see the crude reality of life and being compassionate towards others, is the reward for being virtuous.

However, if we look more closely at Aristotelian virtue ethics we will see that it is not all that different from Murdoch’s view. Three claims about the final end deserve mention here. Firstly, as Annas argues, the final end must be complete, in that everything we do is for its sake and it does not lead to any other ends. Secondly, the final end cannot consist of passive feelings such as pleasure. Rather we *actively* live our lives in a certain way.<sup>223</sup> And thirdly (this is closely related to the second claim), happiness is not ‘a reward’ for virtuous behaviour, and the virtuous person is not motivated by the thought. If we consider Murdoch’s notion of love and the part it plays in one’s moral life, we can see that it has both of these features of the final end. The love of the Good, which is the love of the truth, is the only valuable end to one’s moral endeavour. The Good has its magnetic force. Nonetheless, cultivating love requires that we actively live our lives in a certain way. It demands an unceasing effort to see the world truthfully, and this is part of the meaning of love itself. When Murdoch states that life has no final end, she implies that one’s moral life has no final end other than the love of the Good for its own sake. She notes that “... nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous”.<sup>224</sup> So Murdoch’s moral theory is in fact teleological in the narrow sense in which some virtue ethicists, such as Annas and Daniel C. Russell, depict the concept of a human *telos*.

This leads us to an important question: given that for Murdoch developing the virtues –especially the highest virtue, love – is the final end to one’s moral

---

<sup>222</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 400.

<sup>223</sup> Annas, "Virtue Ethics," 521.

<sup>224</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 85.

efforts, how can this be compared to the Aristotelian final end, namely, *eudaimonia*? Opponents of eudaimonism have questioned the plausibility of making a connection between virtue and *eudaimonia* or happiness, for they claim that virtue is neither sufficient nor necessary for happiness.<sup>225</sup> Virtue is not sufficient for happiness, because many virtuous people are unhappy through no fault of their own. It is not necessary for happiness either, for many vicious people appear to be happy. In response, some Aristotelians point out that this objection is grounded in a mistaken understanding of ‘happiness’. As Annas puts it, “[l]iving happily is not feeling good, getting what you want, or feeling satisfied with your life”.<sup>226</sup> The virtues do not make us happy in the same manner as achieving a pre-determined goal would. Rather, they form part of our character, and hence of our very identity. How we live our life is mostly due to our character, and the virtues are those traits that allow us to be happy in the sense of living well or living a good or worthwhile human life. Happiness, in this view, is not a passing feeling or state but rather a way of living our lives overall. More precisely, as explained earlier, happiness is the way we actively live our life, rather than a passive state of feeling good or satisfied.<sup>227</sup> For eudaimonistic virtue ethicists, “a life lived in accordance with the virtues is the *best specification* of what flourishing is”.<sup>228</sup> So, living virtuously is necessary for happiness, where ‘happiness’ is used in this narrow sense.

Similarly, in our brief examination of Murdoch’s analogy between art and morality, we saw that in her view beauty in art has a natural attraction for humans and this is not due to some sort of benefit it might bring about for them. It is because beauty has a kind of intrinsic value. The Good has the same status in morality. The virtues require an appreciation and understanding of the Good as an end in itself, in the same way that appreciating and understanding beauty is an end in itself. We actively endeavour to become morally better and over time, the virtues, and in particular the virtue of love, become part of our ‘fabric of being’.

---

<sup>225</sup> Hursthouse, 172.

<sup>226</sup> Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 149.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-52.

<sup>228</sup> "Virtue Ethics," 521.

That is the perfection of the virtuous person's life. To repeat Murdoch's own words: "Suffering remains but accompanied by a kind of passion, ... which is the vision of good itself".<sup>229</sup> So, although Murdoch does not promise any 'final' reward for following the path of goodness, she thinks that how we choose to live our life is its own reward. Our endeavour to develop the virtue of love is accompanied by a sort of joy, while the pain of knowing that there is no meaningful end still remains.

To sum up, Murdoch emphatically denies that human life has any meaningful end. Accordingly, in her view the individual's moral effort does not lead to a final end or reward. As she goes on to illustrate her view in greater detail, we see that her view is in fact very similar to the view of some Aristotelian eudaimonists on the question of whether there is some kind of reward to our moral life. Although the latter view adopts the term *eudaimonia*, meaning happiness or flourishing, they do not overlook the suffering that a life of virtue can bring about. This leads them to give a particular account of *eudaimonia*. Murdoch's account of the Good and the love of virtue, which is desirable in and of itself regardless of the momentary feelings of pleasure or pain it might bring about, can be understood as an alternative way of depicting the same idea.

In the next section I examine the concept of practical wisdom as another point of similarity between Murdoch's view and Aristotelian virtue ethics.

## ***Section Four***

### ***Practical Wisdom***

In the previous section I explained that according to eudaimonist virtue ethicists *eudaimonia*, a good life for human beings, is a virtuous life. Now the question arises as to how to achieve *eudaimonia* or, how to live a virtuous life. To answer this question, Aristotelian virtue ethicists embrace the concept of *phronēsis*, or practical wisdom, which is "the ability to reason correctly about

---

<sup>229</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 109. Art and the pleasure one takes from it will be articulated in Chapter 5.

practical matters”.<sup>230</sup> Roger Crisp introduces practical wisdom as an important aspect of virtue ethics and states that “for Aristotle, the virtuous man possesses *phronēsis*, ‘practical wisdom’, a sensitivity to the morally salient features of particular situations which goes beyond an ability to apply explicit rules.”<sup>231</sup>

In this section, I will first briefly explain the concept of practical wisdom. I will not consider the account of practical wisdom, provided by John McDowell, which considers it to be identical with virtue. Instead, I will explore the more moderate account given by Rosalind Hursthouse and others who consider it to be a necessary and sufficient condition for virtue.<sup>232</sup> Then I will draw an analogy between this concept and the notion of vision in the context of Murdoch’s philosophy in order to demonstrate that there is a close affinity between these two concepts.

As noted earlier, Aristotelian virtue ethicists claim virtue is a disposition that requires emotional sensitivity. If one’s actions are not motivated by the appropriate concerns and accompanied by the appropriate emotions, then one is not acting virtuously. One can give the appearance of being a virtuous person, even act in ways that appear virtuous, but not have the appropriate emotions and attitudes, and thus, not be truly virtuous. According to these philosophers, the emotions of a moral agent are expressions of their character that can give rise to their actions.<sup>233</sup> However, being virtuous involves more than feeling in a particular way. The moral reasoning behind an action, or the intellectual aspect of a moral decision or judgment, is also greatly emphasised by Aristotelian virtue ethicists. In their view, virtues are dispositions to feel emotions, where these

---

<sup>230</sup> Hursthouse, 12.

<sup>231</sup> Crisp, "Virtue Ethics," 625. Crisp introduces Iris Murdoch and John McDowell as among the philosophers who have revived this view in modern virtue ethics. Elsewhere, again, Crisp points out that “[Murdoch’s] view of moral perception has its roots in Aristotle’s account of the practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) of the virtuous man, who sees matters as they are, and responds appropriately”, Crisp and Slote, 11.

<sup>232</sup> See John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979). See also Hursthouse.

<sup>233</sup> As Van Hooft puts it, an emotion is a link between behaviour and action. Stan van Hooft, *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, Understanding Movements in Modern Thought (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), 23.

emotions are felt on the right occasions and in response to *right reasons*.<sup>234</sup> A virtuous person's emotions are not impulsive and irrational responses to certain situations, rather, they are stable and persisting attitudes rooted in that person's virtuous disposition and they are responsive to the demands of reason. So, feeling the right emotions in any given situation requires the influence of reason. As Hursthouse puts it, "the claim that full virtue involves feeling emotions correctly makes it clear that this would not be possible (in general) without the influence of reason".<sup>235</sup>

Practical wisdom is a necessary condition for both the acquisition and the exercise of virtue. It is not an abstract or theoretical way of thinking, but rather a unifying way of thinking about life and how one should structure it.<sup>236</sup> Practical wisdom is the intellectual virtue that makes it possible for the agent to act well, that is, for the right reasons and with the right emotions. This is a faculty of reason from which the virtuous action springs. As Annas puts it, the right action *immediately* follows practical reasoning.<sup>237</sup>

Acquiring practical reason is a continuous and progressive process that starts in childhood. The child is first trained to follow some rules – prescriptions generated by virtues, or prohibitions generated by vices. These virtue rules, such as 'do what is honest or just', and vice rules, such as 'don't do what is cruel', might initially seem quite difficult to learn and follow, because understanding such concepts as 'honest' or 'just' could be quite difficult for a child.<sup>238</sup> That is why virtue ethicists do not oppose the idea of teaching children deontological rules such as 'do not lie', as these rules may be easier to follow for someone with an underdeveloped faculty of practical reasoning.<sup>239</sup> However, virtue ethicists still

---

<sup>234</sup> Hursthouse, 108.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>236</sup> Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 123.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>238</sup> These concepts are what some virtue ethicists call thick concepts. Thick concepts, such as 'generous' and 'courageous', are both evaluative and descriptive. See Hursthouse, 27-28.

<sup>239</sup> Over time the child develops the practical wisdom required to understand the rules, and to decide which ones to choose, and where to appropriately apply them. It should be noted that deontological theories, such as Kantian theories, begin with the premise that 'an action is morally right only if it is in accordance with some moral rule or principle'. For them, it is this conformity

hold that learning the rule ‘do not lie’, for example, is not enough for a child to learn the virtue of honesty, as for that they actually need to learn to love the truth. Nonetheless, learning the rules can be quite useful for making the child ready for that purpose.<sup>240</sup> In this process, one needs to rely on the wisdom of a virtuous person and strive to do what they would do in different circumstances, for “[p]hronesis – excellence in practical reasoning, moral knowledge – can be acquired only by habitually engaging in virtuous action, not, for example, just by learning a written code of conduct”.<sup>241</sup>

What is important here is that the development of practical wisdom is a slow and gradual process. Practical wisdom develops progressively throughout the moral agent’s life, through them experiencing different challenges in different situations. In the process of moral development, the moral agent gradually learns to think for themselves and to choose the proper action in different situations. Another important point is that practical wisdom develops in a holistic way. It is unified over the person’s life, and likewise, it unifies various virtues. Some situations may require the exercise of a combination of different virtues, and it is the role of practical wisdom to discern which virtues to exercise in those situations.<sup>242</sup>

Although she does not use the term ‘practical wisdom’, Murdoch’s account of the kind of intelligence involved in the moral life is similar to the Aristotelian view. In Murdoch’s view, our consciousness experiences the world as being morally structured, and “[m]oral good is certainly established as cognitive”.<sup>243</sup> Through envisioning the concept of the Good as an inseparable idea of consciousness, we almost always experience a value-laden perception of the

---

with moral principles that makes an action right. For Aristotelian virtue ethicists, on the other hand, an action is right if it is one that a virtuous person would characteristically do in the same circumstances. See *ibid.*, 25-39.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-40.

<sup>241</sup> "What Does the Aristotelian Phronimos Know?," in *Perfecting Virtue: New Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics*, ed. Lawrence J. Jost and Julian Wuerth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 49-50.

<sup>242</sup> Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 86-91.

<sup>243</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 439.

world.<sup>244</sup> In her account of consciousness, Murdoch presents a way out of a long assumed gap between fact and value. For her, our perceptions are almost never impartial or untainted with evaluation. We constantly evaluate the way we see the world and we see other individuals. We persistently seek new facts that modify our understanding of the surroundings. Since any new perception of facts attained through careful attention to reality is exposed to evaluation, moral activity is the attempt to see the world more truly and thereby to cultivate moral virtues progressively and continually. The unchanging transcendental notion of the Good in consciousness retains a dynamic quality for the moral life. In order to explicate this point, Murdoch resorts to the metaphor of vision, which as I will show, has a close affinity to the virtue ethicists' concept of practical wisdom.

The idea of vision goes hand in hand with the idea of truth, and by truth Murdoch does not mean "some sort of mechanical accuracy", but rather "a larger idea, which can contain, turning toward the individual, the idea of 'truthfulness' and 'wisdom'".<sup>245</sup> For Murdoch, moral activity, which consists of outward actions as well as inward deliberations, presupposes moral vision, the main function of which is offering a precise and truthful description of the reality of other individuals. The moral agent would be unable to make a true moral judgment or a good moral decision if they are not educated to cultivate the vision to see the world as it is. Just as in the Aristotelian view one's action is not virtuous unless it is grounded in the right reasons, in Murdoch's view, one's action cannot be considered virtuous without this vision, however virtuous it may appear. Murdoch's example of the ill-judging mother-in-law who initially forms a harsh opinion of her daughter-in-law, illustrates this point perfectly.<sup>246</sup> What makes the mother-in-law become a better person is the change in her vision, rather than her action, as her outward actions and behaviour do not change.

However, as explained in a previous chapter, Murdoch does appreciate the importance of action – "Overt actions are perfectly obviously important in

---

<sup>244</sup> For a more detailed account of Murdoch's idea of consciousness and its relation to the fact-value distinction see Chapter 1, Section Two.

<sup>245</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 183.

<sup>246</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 16-19. See also Chapter 2, Section One of this thesis.

themselves, and important too because they are the indispensable pivot and spur of the inner scene. The inner, in *this* sense, cannot do without the outer”.<sup>247</sup> One’s moral activity begins at the level of attending to the reality that surrounds one, acquiring moral vision, and cultivating the virtues; but moral action is where these virtues are manifested. In Murdoch’s view, as for Aristotle, when the right vision is obtained the right action inevitably follows – “truthful vision prompts right action”.<sup>248</sup>

Murdoch’s moral agent cultivates moral vision through practice and effort – an effort to attend to the reality of other individuals and to see them in their own right. Only through this constant effort can the right moral vision be achieved. By the use of right moral vision then, the individual can develop the virtues and, above all others, the virtue of love. The process of forming moral vision as depicted by Murdoch also starts from an early age. She writes:

Love may carry us on, natural generosity, instinctive compassion ... But the concept of duty as moral rules of a certain degree of generality should stay in place. Do not lie, do not steal, be helpful, be kind. Fortunate children imbibe such ideas in a scene which promotes honesty and kindness and mutual love. Truth is taught in an atmosphere of truthfulness. Primary duties may seem to find their places in a general development of moral texture, while remaining on call as discrete individual commands.<sup>249</sup>

Murdoch explains that early in life, moral education should be accompanied by teaching certain moral rules. In her view, we should not rely totally on the idea of duty and moral rules, but neither should we reject them entirely. In due course, through practicing moral duties and learning to truly attend to the world, one develops moral vision and moral virtue.<sup>250</sup> In this process,

---

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>248</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 295.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>250</sup> Murdoch says: “‘The absolute’ may be thought of as a distant moral goal, like a temple at the end of a pilgrimage, a condition of perfection glimpsed but never reached”. Ibid. 304. For more detailed account of this concept see Chapter 2, Section Two.

time and again the individual may be placed in situations where “moral instinct and habit fail”.<sup>251</sup> In those situations moral rules can be helpful. Right vision, when achieved, helps the moral agent to obtain a better understanding and offer a better description of reality, and to base their moral decisions on that understanding. The more developed the vision, the more accurate and truthful the perception of reality and, as a result, the more reliable the judgment of the situation. Murdoch says: “A totally good being would not experience the call of duty, might be said to lack or not need the concept, since all acts and decisions emerge from virtuous insight and its orderly process”.<sup>252</sup>

To sum up, I explored the Aristotelian claim that in order to cultivate practical wisdom, the individual needs to engage in virtuous activities by initially following some moral rules, as well as trying to do what a virtuous person would characteristically do in a similar situation. In due course, the individual develops practical wisdom, which is a necessary condition for the attainment of full virtue. I suggested that there are similarities between this account of practical wisdom and the Murdochian account of vision. Murdoch’s main emphasis in her ethical theory is on one’s effort to see the reality of other individuals prior to acting. In order to acquire this ability, the moral agent has to cultivate moral vision, which is attained through training and practice. Through this vision the individual develops other virtues and above all, the virtue of love. As for Murdoch sharing the views of virtue ethicists, although moral action is not the central focus of her theory, she does not deny its importance in the moral life.

### ***Conclusion***

I argued that Murdoch can rightfully be situated among virtue ethicists. I discussed three key concepts of Aristotelian virtue ethics, namely, virtue, *eudaimonia*, and practical wisdom. I argued that despite her genuinely distinctive position, Murdoch’s shares all these concepts with virtue ethicists and they form the central themes of her moral theory. In Murdoch’s view, the virtues are

---

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

character traits that develop slowly but deeply. Acquiring virtues, and above all the virtue of love, requires a great deal of practice until the individual becomes able to react in an appropriate emotional and intellectual manner in every situation. In Murdoch's view, following the Good and developing the virtue of love are desirable in themselves. In other words, living the life of virtue is its own *telos*. Her view is structurally similar to the virtue ethicist's account of *eudaimonia* as the purpose of living a life of virtue. Finally, I discussed the concept of practical wisdom. I argued that just like Murdoch's moral vision, practical wisdom is developed through different stages of practicing, following rules, and using virtuous people as exemplars. It is attained over time and with great effort.

Aside from subtle differences between Murdoch's view and that of the Aristotelian virtue ethicist, what makes Murdoch's view an original one, and one that has something to offer the literature on virtue ethics, is her account of 'imagination' and the role it plays in our moral development and moral life. For her, developing morally and making appropriate moral judgments requires us to be able to imagine different aspects of every situation and to be able to distinguish false images from true ones. To fully appreciate the role of imagination in moral judgment it is necessary to examine Murdoch's account of imagination, and in particular the distinction she makes between imagination and fantasy. This will be my aim in the next chapter. A better understanding of the role of imagination will also allow us to see why engagement with art is important in Murdoch's view of moral education, which I will discuss in the chapters that follow.

## Chapter 4

### Imagination and Fantasy

#### *Introduction*

As discussed in the previous chapter, love for Murdoch is the highest virtue, and involves the pursuit of the knowledge of reality. The background condition for love is a truthful vision. The effort to acquire the right vision of reality is the individual's main quest in their moral life. However, Murdoch also claims that "... clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort".<sup>253</sup> Murdoch's view that imagination and its creative function play a key role in morality distinguishes it from Aristotelian virtue ethics. My aim in this chapter is to examine why Murdoch thinks imagination and its counterpart, fantasy, play important parts, one positively and one negatively, in the moral life and development of the individual. This will ultimately reveal the link between morality and art in Murdoch's view: both involve creativity and being in touch with reality. As I will argue later in the thesis, through the fortification of imagination in art, the individual obtains the moral sensitivity and vision required for developing love and compassion for other people. This becomes one important way in which art plays a key role in the individual's moral development.

In the first two sections I will argue Murdoch's position with regards to imagination, together with the distinction she makes between imagination and fantasy, is an intricate synthesis of Plato's and Kant's views. Understanding this influence, which is not explicitly mentioned in Murdoch's work, helps us to understand better Murdoch's account of imagination and fantasy. Imagination, in Murdoch's view, is an important medium through which we achieve a clear moral vision, whereas fantasy is destructive and misleading. In giving a central position to imagination as a creative faculty, Murdoch commits herself to the view that knowledge of reality is "a creative task".<sup>254</sup> To see the reality of other people, the individual needs to apply their imagination to picture different possibilities in any

---

<sup>253</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 36. (My italics)

<sup>254</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 215.

given situation. They should try to put themselves in other people's shoes and be sensitive to their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. This sort of love created by means of the imagination forms the core of Murdoch's moral philosophy. In the final section, I provide a critical analysis of the concepts of imagination and fantasy in Murdoch's account of morality. I will argue that Murdoch succeeds in conforming her moral realism to the view that morality is a creative task taken up by the individual's imagination.

## ***Section One***

### ***Kant and Imagination***

In her discussion of the concept of imagination, Murdoch critically examines Kant's account of this concept.<sup>255</sup> She provides little detail of Kant's view, but enough for her to provide grounds for putting forth her own view of this matter. Here, I do not intend to consider the accuracy of Murdoch's reading of Kant. Instead, I analyse her account of Kant's concept of imagination to demonstrate the Kantian aspects of her exegetical account of this concept. Even though she does not explicitly discuss its impact, I will show how, by critically reacting to Kant's view, Murdoch's account is influenced by it.<sup>256</sup> I begin this section by briefly explaining Murdoch's presentation of Kant's notions of transcendental imagination, as a spontaneous mediator, and of aesthetic imagination, as a creative faculty. I then move on to discuss Murdoch's criticism

---

<sup>255</sup> Murdoch's most focused discussion of imagination is published as a chapter called "Imagination" in *ibid.*, 308-48., which is one of her Gifford lectures initially published as "Ethics and the Imagination," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 52, no. 1-2 (1986): 81-95. Murdoch's discussion of imagination is scattered throughout her other works, such as "The Sublime and the Good," 205-20. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 261-86. "Against Dryness," 287-95. "Art Is the Imitation of Nature," 243-57.

<sup>256</sup> Marije Altorf takes a similar approach in her work *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*. However, Altorf offers a different reading of Murdoch's Platonic and Kantian influences. As we will see in this chapter, my reading of Murdoch's 'Good' as the very condition of the individual's experience leads me to argue that Kant's transcendental imagination plays the role of the mediator between the concept of the Good and the individual's perception in Murdoch's theory, whereas for Altorf, this aspect of Kant's concept of imagination is what Murdoch calls fantasy. Moreover, Altorf's discussion of the Platonic influence mostly revolves around her view of art. In my discussion, I focus on the concept of imagination and the deep impact of Plato's view in forming Murdoch's own view. I also wish to show the significance of the role of imagination in the context of Murdoch's ethics. See Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, 67-87.

of Kant and how she combines these two forms of imagination found in Kant to develop her own view.

Murdoch begins the chapter titled “Imagination” in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* by briefly discussing Kant’s ‘transcendental imagination’ as a faculty the role of which is to make empirical knowledge possible. As Murdoch explains it, this imagination “is a spontaneous intuitive capacity to put together what is presented to us so as to form a coherent spatio-temporal experience which is intellectually ordered and sensuously based”.<sup>257</sup> Kant’s transcendental imagination, which is discussed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, is the element which joins unchanging concepts or categories of mind with possible objects of experience. For Kant, transcendental imagination is necessary for conceptual understanding. It enables the mind to grasp empirical objects through joining the categories of mind with sense data. It is a ‘spontaneous’ process and the individual is not conscious of it.

In contrast to transcendental imagination, Kant’s ‘aesthetic imagination’ is a creative faculty of mind that works freely outside the boundaries of the concepts of mind. Murdoch says:

We *look* at clouds and stoves, we *construct* pictures in our minds. In our experience of beauty in art or nature imagination is free to discern conceptless forms, it plays or frolics with the understanding without being governed by empirical concepts. It is out at the edge of things. The experience of beauty is often ineffable, the creation of art inexplicable.<sup>258</sup>

Aesthetic imagination, unlike transcendental imagination, does not have to work within the limits of *a priori* concepts or categories of mind.<sup>259</sup> Rather, it is free to create and shape images in different ways. It is an irrational capacity of

---

<sup>257</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 308. While Kant calls this imagination transcendental, Murdoch just describes its function without naming it. See also Kant, 93-124.

<sup>258</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 310-11.

<sup>259</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 75-89.

mind with “an exceptional and godlike power”.<sup>260</sup> In Kant’s view, aesthetic imagination is a faculty of mind that is at work in creating beauty in art or appreciating beauty in nature. Due to the close connection Kant draws between these concepts, when discussing aesthetic imagination Murdoch explores the concepts of ‘the beautiful’, ‘the sublime’, and ‘the genius’, which I will briefly discuss here.

Murdoch states that aesthetic imagination “... is a more independently speculative faculty, and may be so because what it does, in its discernment of the beautiful, in a sense does not matter”.<sup>261</sup> The reason why aesthetic imagination, being a speculative faculty (unlike reason), deals with discerning and creating ‘the beautiful’ in nature and art, is that for Kant the beautiful, while being an experienced sensuous entity, is totally devoid of purpose.<sup>262</sup> Murdoch notes that according to Kant,

What is truly beautiful is independent of any interest, it is not tainted either by the good, or by any pleasure extraneous to the act of representing to ourselves the object itself. It has no concern with charm or with emotion. What is beautiful exhibits ‘purposiveness without a purpose’; it is composed as if with a purpose, and yet it has no purpose which we can name.<sup>263</sup>

Murdoch explains that in Kant’s view, the beautiful is not concerned with emotions. What is related to emotions is ‘the sublime’, which is distinct from the beautiful. The feeling of sublimity is occasioned when imagination cannot encompass what it encounters, but nevertheless, at the same time it feels exhilarated by the way in which the object of experience goes beyond mere sensible imaginings.<sup>264</sup> In Murdoch’s words, this feeling of sublimity is the realisation of “[w]hat is vast and formless in nature, or vast and powerful and

---

<sup>260</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 310.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 311-13.

<sup>263</sup> "The Sublime and the Good," 207.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

terrifying ...”.<sup>265</sup> The sublime has nothing to do with art.<sup>266</sup> Art can only manifest the beautiful, not the sublime. Artworks have forms. They also have their own rules that are established by the imagination of ‘the genius’. Although art objects must follow rules, these rules are not universal and differ in every individual work of art. It is the genius that invents these rules and its own methods of verification.<sup>267</sup> For the genius the imagination is free, but only within the scope of fine art.

Murdoch allows the free creative faculty of imagination to break the restrictions Kant assumes for it, and while being inspired by Kant’s notion of imagination, she distances herself from him. In Murdoch’s view, imagination has two main specifications. First, it is a ‘spontaneous’ activity of mind (like Kant’s transcendental imagination). Second, it is a powerful faculty of creation (like Kant’s aesthetic imagination). This creative faculty, for Murdoch, does not only operate freely and creatively in the area of art, but in every aspect of life, and especially moral life. In what follows, I explain these points in greater detail.

As explained earlier, for Kant the transcendental imagination operates as a connector between universal concepts of mind and intuition, and perceptions. This imagination works spontaneously, making empirical knowledge possible. All our empirical experiences are dependent upon this connection. Influenced by Kant, Murdoch ascribes to imagination the ‘spontaneity’ Kant ascribes to transcendental imagination in the individual’s empirical experiences. However, for Murdoch, imagination spontaneously makes a connection between the general concept of the Good (perfection or the highest value) and the individual’s experiences.<sup>268</sup> Murdoch says: “The world which we confront is not just a world of ‘facts’ but a world upon which our imagination has, at any given moment, already worked”.<sup>269</sup> As explained in Chapter 1, to Murdoch the concept of the Good is the very

---

<sup>265</sup> Ibid. 208. See also *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 310-11.

<sup>266</sup> "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 263.

<sup>267</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 313-14.

<sup>268</sup> Murdoch does not mention this point herself, but it can be derived from parallel discussions inside her work.

<sup>269</sup> Murdoch, "The Darkness of Practical Reason," 199. See also *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 314.

condition of the individual's confrontation with the world, and so almost all perceptions are evaluations: "Our deepest imaginings which structure the world in which 'moral judgments' occur are already evaluations".<sup>270</sup> Whereas Kant says that "[t]houghts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind".<sup>271</sup> Murdoch's theory about the relation between the *a priori* concept of the Good and particular moral events can be summarised as follows: the concept of the Good is empty and inaccessible unless through particular experiences, which are respectively blind and senseless if the individual's mind does not have the distinctive function of infusing them with values. And it is the role of the individual's imagination to make this connection possible. Imagination works as a facilitator that in every situation makes the evaluation possible. The soundness of the individual's judgment depends on the strength of their imagination and the clarity of their vision.

Murdoch's concept of imagination not only acts spontaneously like Kant's transcendental imagination, but also creatively like Kant's aesthetic imagination. Murdoch attributes the freedom and creativity Kant ascribes only to the genius of the artist to *all* imagination. In Kant's view, it is only in its aesthetic form that imagination works as a creative and free faculty. In Murdoch's view, the creative faculty of mind is not just restricted to aesthetic activities and our dealings with 'the beautiful'. Imagination is always free and creative even when it mediates between value concepts of the mind and particular perceptions. The kind of freedom Kant allows for the imagination of the genius is the freedom that Murdoch thinks is at work in the imagination of every individual. She argues that not only the genius but everyone is constantly refashioning the world around them. Not only fine art, but also any perception of the world, is recreated by imagination. By using their imagination, individuals can picture different possibilities in every given situation and form a better understanding and better evaluation of the people and situations they encounter in life. This function of imagination can more clearly be seen in morally challenging situations. In these situations, by imagining

---

<sup>270</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 314-15.

<sup>271</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75.

different possibilities individuals are better capable of putting themselves in other people's shoes and understanding them before (morally) judging them.<sup>272</sup>

Murdoch argues that Kant cannot affirm this account, as for him imagination "... is too double-sided a concept, too much like a kind of feeling, to be allowed ... near to the essence of morality".<sup>273</sup> It is a "mixed matter" between mind and sense: "an intelligent sensibility".<sup>274</sup> Kant refrains from introducing imagination into morality, because in his view morality is strictly based on reason. Against this, Murdoch argues that

... the world around us is constantly being modified or 'presented' (made or made up) by a spontaneous creative *free* faculty which is not that of 'reason' thought of as 'beaming in' upon purely empirical situations not otherwise evaluated. Imagination, if the concept is in question at all, can scarcely be thought of as morally neutral.<sup>275</sup>

For Murdoch, we cannot help but to use our imagination in every situation. She says: "[Even when] we settle down to be 'thoroughly rational' about a situation, we have already, reflectively or unreflectively, imagined it in a certain way".<sup>276</sup> However, Kant assigns moral goodness only to reason. Only the beautiful, which, for Kant, does not have any meaningful purpose, can be a product of imagination.<sup>277</sup> As Murdoch puts it, to Kant "[t]he good is compulsory, the beautiful is not".<sup>278</sup> Whereas any concern with moral goodness is vital, the same is not true of the beautiful. That is why the creative and playful imagination is in charge of the beautiful but not goodness and morality.

---

<sup>272</sup> I will expand on this in Section Three.

<sup>273</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 310.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 314-15.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-13.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

Murdoch argues that the real reason Kant avoids relating imagination to morality is the fact that he does not wish to enter the realm of *the particular* and of history. For Kant, Murdoch maintains, "... the act of moral judgment [is] an instantiating of a timeless form of rational activity".<sup>279</sup> The concept of 'respect' as a central concept of Kant's ethics is respect for universal reason, not the particular individual. For the individual to recognise their moral freedom, is for them to rise above history. Murdoch disagrees with Kant on this point and argues that the essence of art and morals is the same.<sup>280</sup> Both morality and art deal with particular individuals and particular events. Morality is about individuals in particular situations, and rational judgment requires the ability to imagine different possibilities and situations. For example, in making a decision about returning a large sum of money we have found on the pavement, the imagination helps us picture the distress and anxiety the owner of the money might be going through and also to imagine how we would feel if we were to lose the money. So imagination plays a vital role in the individual's particular decisions and evaluations.

In summary, Murdoch's concept of imagination is a fusion of Kant's transcendental and aesthetic imagination. She criticises Kant's notion of transcendental imagination as a mechanical force with some boundaries that limit its freedom. However, the necessary role Kant assigns to this imagination becomes an inspiration for Murdoch. Resembling Kant's transcendental imagination that links the concepts of mind to the forms of intuition, imagination to Murdoch links the concept of the Good to some particular events and individuals within the scope of morality, which is why, for her, our experience of the world is not just factual, but also evaluative (at least most of the time). Furthermore, Murdoch takes an interest in Kant's aesthetic imagination as a free creative faculty. Nevertheless, she takes issue with the confined sphere Kant allocates to the application of imagination, which is the sphere of fine arts. To Murdoch, the essence of arts and morals is the same, and in every moral judgment and moral encounter with the world, imagination is actively working. Picturing

---

<sup>279</sup> "The Sublime and the Good," 215.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid. This will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

different possibilities in different circumstances enables us to make better judgments in morally challenging situations.

Murdoch's conception of imagination is also greatly influenced by Plato's depiction of this concept. I will continue this chapter by explaining Murdoch's presentation of Plato's view, which will enable me to offer Murdoch's own view as a synthesis between Kant's and Plato's views.

## ***Section Two***

### ***Plato and the Destruction of Images***

In the previous section, I discussed Kant's influence on Murdoch's account of imagination. Here, I turn to several points of convergence between Murdoch's and Plato's accounts of the concept, and argue that in her discussion of Plato, Murdoch introduces the notion of fantasy – our imaginings that are under the influence of our egoistic tendencies.<sup>281</sup> There are three main points to be derived from Murdoch's depiction of Plato's conception of imagination and that form the basis of her own theory.<sup>282</sup>

First, imagination plays a role in the creation of new images and metaphors. To Plato, the highest realities, such as the Idea of the Good, are imageless.<sup>283</sup> That is why the imagination has to create images of those realities to enable the individual to better comprehend them. In Murdoch's view, metaphysicians like Plato show us that in order to deal with fundamental truths, we cannot avoid picturing them through metaphors and myths.<sup>284</sup>

In the context of Murdoch's work, metaphors are words that stand for and refer to phenomena that are difficult, or occasionally impossible, to express by the

---

<sup>281</sup> Murdoch introduces her own view while she is discussing Plato's. As a result, these two theories are so intertwined in her text that at times it becomes difficult for the reader to disentangle them. In this section I present what I take to be Murdoch's own view.

<sup>282</sup> I have derived these points mainly from Murdoch's "Imagination" in Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 308-48.

<sup>283</sup> See Chapter 1, Section One.

<sup>284</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 55.

use of literal language.<sup>285</sup> Following Plato, Murdoch argues that given their complexity, some features of reality cannot be expressed in literal terms. That is why Murdoch herself uses various metaphors to illustrate central concepts in her moral theory. For example, when she describes the process of moral change, she uses the metaphor of the ‘fabric of being’ to emphasize that moral development involves a changes in a person’s *whole* way of thinking, judging, feeling, and being in the world. It is not only their decisions or actions in one particular circumstance that changes, but also their attitude and mind-set in general. Murdoch’s appeal to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is another example of the application of metaphors or myths through which she presents her account of the Good. As explained in Chapter 1, Murdoch uses Plato’s image of the Sun in the Allegory to show the remoteness yet visibility of the Good. The Sun “... gives light and energy and enables us to know truth. In its light we see the things of the world in their true relationships. Looking at it itself is supremely difficult and is unlike looking at things in its light. It is a different kind of thing from what it illuminates”.<sup>286</sup> Even ‘the Good’ itself becomes a metaphor in Murdoch’s theory, “... a very important metaphor and one which is not just a property of philosophy and not just a model”.<sup>287</sup>

---

<sup>285</sup> As Nora Hämäläinen points out, Murdoch uses the term ‘metaphor’ quite loosely, where it can refer to an allegory, a parable, an image, or a myth. Nora Hämäläinen, "What Is a Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist?—Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics and Metaphor," *Philosophical Papers* 43, no. 2 (2014): 219.

<sup>286</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 90.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 91. Considering the Sun to be a metaphor for ‘the Good’, it may sound odd for the Good to be a metaphor as well. Murdoch’s critics, such as David Tracy, Nora Hämäläinen and Marije Altorf refer to Murdoch’s work and regard the Good as another metaphor in her theory. Altorf criticizes Murdoch and argues that it is not clear why the Good should be understood as a metaphor and image rather than as a concept. Sabina Lovibond criticizes Altorf’s reading of Murdoch and her referring to the Good as a metaphor. According to Lovibond, Plato uses the Sun as a symbol of the Good, but the Good itself is not a metaphor. I agree with Lovibond that Plato (and so Murdoch) use the Sun as a symbol of the Good, but I don’t think that it means the Good itself cannot be a metaphor, as Lovibond suggests. As I discussed above, in the context of Murdoch’s work metaphors refer to the phenomena which are difficult or impossible to be expressed through the literal application of words, due to their complex or changeable nature. If we agree with this, we have to agree that Murdoch’s Good is a metaphor in Murdoch’s broad sense of the word. The Good is a metaphor, the referent of which is an indefinable, unrepresentable notion. Through experiencing particular good and bad things, the individual experiences they develop an understanding of the Good (which Murdoch often writes with capital ‘G’). That is why to Murdoch the Good is a metaphor, namely, a concept clearer than what it is referring to, in this case the absolute indefinable notion which is the form of the Good, to put it in Platonic terms. While we can never fully grasp the concept of the Good (the absolute value) and its perfection, we can

However, Murdoch distances herself from Plato by arguing that the image-making function of imagination is not limited to the use of metaphors and to the understanding of higher realities. Rather, it functions in our ordinary day-to-day life. The importance she assigns to the particular and to the world of contingency makes her view at variance with that of Plato. While for Plato, knowledge of reality is limited to knowledge of universals, for Murdoch the particular and contingent are as important and as real, if not more important. In Murdoch's view, the imagination of the individual continually creates images of their surroundings in the course of their everyday experience and activities. For example, a student might try to picture herself as seen by her favourite teacher and identify with that picture; or when choosing her field of study, she might try to picture herself working in different fields and compare those pictures in her imagination. In these cases, imagination deals with everyday experiences that are contingent and particular. Here, the role of imagination is to envision different aspects of a particular reality, whether in the present, past, or future. While some images created by our imagination are closer to reality, all images are imperfect. There is no ultimate image: all images can potentially become better and more accurate. Murdoch states:

Image-making or image-apprehending is always an imperfect activity, some images are higher than others, that is nearer to reality. Images should not be resting places, but pointers toward higher truth. The implication is that the highest activities of the mind, as in mathematics and mysticism, are imageless.... [T]he mythical and metaphorical imagery of [Plato's] central dialogues could be regarded, by those able to understand them, as ladders to be thrown away after use.<sup>288</sup>

---

experience it in our moral life through experiencing contingent good things. See David Tracy, "Iris Murdoch and the Many Faces of Platonism," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 56-57. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, 27-30. Hämäläinen, 214-22. Sabina Lovibond, "Review of Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining, by Marije Altorf," *Religious Studies* 45, no. 3 (2009): 369.

<sup>288</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 317-18.

While in everyday experiences, the individual often envisions images that help them make sense of their experiences, they must never consider an image as a final, but always be prepared to move on to a more accurate image of reality. For example, an employer who has formed a negative image of an employee who has previously made a big mistake must be prepared to change this image by confronting new facts. By regularly checking or attending to the activities of the employee, the employer ought to be amenable to revising his initial image in the light of new facts.

This brings me to the second Platonic aspect of Murdoch's theory of imagination, which is the idea that creating new images demands identifying and destroying false ones. Murdoch says:

For Plato the lower level, which for Kant is necessary automatic synthesis, is seen in human terms as the production of base illusions, or perhaps simply of the ordinary unimaginative egoistic screen of our conceptualising. Plato, teaching by images and myths, also acknowledges high imagination as creative stirring spirit ....<sup>289</sup>

Murdoch explains that on Plato's account, there are two levels of imagination that display entirely opposite functions: 'egoistic illusion or fantasy' at the one end, and 'creative imagination' at the other.<sup>290</sup> Plato uses the words *eikasia* or *phantasia* for what Murdoch calls illusion or *fantasy*, which is "... the most benighted human state, the lowest condition in the Cave".<sup>291</sup> For Murdoch, Plato is well aware of the egoistic tendencies that lead to fantasy, or an unrealistic

---

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>290</sup> In Plato's simile of the divided line, we are asked to visualize a straight line divided into two sections and four subsections. The two sections represent the intelligible realm and the realm of senses. Different parts of the line possess different degrees of reality of truth. The entities in the realm of senses (shadows, images, physical objects, etc.) have less reality than those of the intelligible realm (mathematical figures, Forms, etc.). Plato uses this metaphor to explain the gradual ascent of the soul from the lowest stage (*eikasia*) to the highest stage (*noesis*) of understanding. See Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 509d-11e.

<sup>291</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 317.

perception of the world.<sup>292</sup> Murdoch explains that Plato's lower imagination is engaged with the production of illusions that are rooted in an "unimaginative egoistic screen of our conceptualising".<sup>293</sup> In view of that, one of the most important tasks of 'higher' imagination (creative and truthful imagination) is to identify and destroy these images. For Plato, moral improvement or moral progress requires "a progressive destruction of false images" created by the individual's fantasising ego and irrational passions.<sup>294</sup>

False images exist alongside true ones, and arguments using such false propositions can be logically valid. That is why it is not always easy to distinguish between truth-seeking images and false ones, as they are "made into a single interwoven fabric".<sup>295</sup> Murdoch repeatedly warns us against creating false images, "... as in the layman 'imagining' physics, or in certain moral and religious situations".<sup>296</sup> However, there is a continuous urge to move beyond false images.<sup>297</sup> The destruction of those images is especially important to Murdoch because they affect one's attitude and one's approach to other people. The discontentment with an employee that results from an image created on the basis of a single mistake and in spite of all the good work they have done, the hatred towards an entire nation due to the biased images created by the media, the lack of compassion for a disabled neighbour on welfare, due to the false image that his unemployment is the result of him being reckless and idle; these are all examples of false images that inform the individual's vision and beliefs. So the second role of imagination, which especially affects one's moral progress, is destroying some of the images it creates.

We can explain these aspects of imagination better by returning to the example of the mother-in-law discussed in Chapter 2, and recount it in light of

---

<sup>292</sup> Plato's pessimistic view of arts such as literature and painting is a good instance of an area where to him, imagination misleads by creating false images. As Murdoch states, Plato considers the "mere uninspired reproductive art ... at the bottom of the scale [of imagination]". Ibid. 317.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 124.

this Platonic view. When confronting D, M's imagination spontaneously evaluates different aspects of D's behaviour and personality, making use of the concept of the Good. What motivates M to see D as "unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement", is her own egocentric motives in the form of prejudice, narrow-mindedness, snobbishness, and jealousy.<sup>298</sup> However, M's attitude towards D changes gradually by her effort to see D in the way she 'truly' is. While trying to attend to her and to see her more truthfully, M uses her imagination to see other possible ways D could be pictured and described. She also tries to imagine the possible reasons for the negative opinion she holds towards D, such as her prejudice about young people or the deep love she has for her son. As difficult as it may be, she makes an effort to imagine what it is like to be so young and inexperienced. Imagination enables her to put herself in D's shoes and to see the world through her eyes, and as a result, to get over her prejudiced images of D. It influences the quality of her vision. However, while M's conception of D has improved, she cannot say this is the only way the reality of D can be seen or described. She should not consider her image of D as the only possible image and should be prepared to imagine other aspects of the reality of D.

Attentiveness to see the reality of other people more justly and lovingly is at the core of Murdoch's account of morality, which brings me to the third influence of Plato's theory of imagination on Murdoch's view. Murdoch claims that morality is an "... imaginative cognitive activity"<sup>299</sup> and that "[k]nowledge (language) is essentially related to morality by the idea of truth".<sup>300</sup> Creative imagination is at work in the individual's cognitive effort to see reality. To approach reality the individual creates images, destroys them, and then *goes beyond them*.<sup>301</sup> 'To go beyond' is a synthesis of the first two functions of imagination (creating images and destroying them) that Murdoch borrows from Plato. The individual gets closer to reality by acknowledging and eliminating images that are wrong and 'fantastic' and by creating more realistic ones, all the

---

<sup>298</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 16-17.

<sup>299</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 341. For more detail see Chapter 1.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>301</sup> See *ibid.*, 498.

while targeting a reality that still lies beyond. They must be mindful that there is no final true image. They can only try to obtain an improved vision and imagination that create more realistic, but still imperfect, images. It requires a disciplined effort to see the reality of every person and every situation and to be constantly "... moving beyond our images...".<sup>302</sup> According to Murdoch, for Plato, this constant destruction of false images is accompanied by "...a continuous breeding of imagery in the consciousness which is, for better or worse, a function of moral change".<sup>303</sup>

To recapitulate, after discussing the importance of metaphors and myths in Plato's view and the divergence of Murdoch's conception of imagination from Plato's, I argued that Plato introduces a lower imagination, the role of which is to create false images. Murdoch follows Plato in claiming that in our quest to be moral, we must be alert to these false images and constantly attempt to destroy them. It is only through dismissing false images that one can come to a clearer understanding of reality. But this is not enough. Our imagination must always be prepared to create new images and abolish and modify false ones. That is why the moral life is a perfecting process, in which imagination creates images, destroys the false ones and creates new ones in their place (while not assuming any of these images to be final). The cognitive process of moral improvement is a continuous, never-ending process.

### ***Section Three***

#### ***Imagination and Fantasy***

In the first chapter I explained that for Murdoch "... morality, goodness, is a form of realism".<sup>304</sup> Her realist approach to morality manifests itself in her attempt to establish a moral absolute, which is the concept of the Good. Murdoch

---

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 329. This leads to love, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, is the sympathetic recognition of the reality of other individuals, and improved and more compassionate vision of other individuals but not the ultimate one.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid. To Murdoch, Plato himself is a demythologiser who repeatedly moves beyond the metaphorical imagery of his older dialogues, and this movement is a necessary condition of an image-making process. Ibid., 318.

<sup>304</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 57.

introduces the virtue of love and assigns a cognitive role to it, which is for her, the ability to see the reality of the other person. Murdoch uses the metaphor of vision to explain that seeing reality is an ever-improving ability that requires considerable effort. So by assigning absoluteness to the Good as a shared *a priori* concept of every individual's mind, and by assigning a cognitive role to love, one of the most significant concerns of Murdoch's moral philosophy becomes the individual's recognition of the reality of others, and as a result, of the Good.<sup>305</sup> Yet, Murdoch says:

The world is not given to us 'on a plate', it is given to us as a creative task. It is impossible to banish morality from this picture. We *work*, using or failing to use our honesty, our courage, our truthful imagination, at the interpretation of what is present to us, as we of necessity shape it and 'make something of it'. We help it to be.<sup>306</sup>

Given Murdoch's realistic approach to the Good and her cognitivist account of ethics, an important question arises: is Murdoch's realism consistent with her view that the individual's confrontation with the world is a creative task? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine Murdoch's distinction between imagination and fantasy, while drawing on my discussion of moral realism in Chapter 1. This will also prepare the ground for the discussion of the ways in which art can serve as a means of improving imagination, thereby allowing moral development.

As explained earlier, Murdoch says: "The world which we confront is not just a world of 'facts' but a world upon which our imagination has, at any given moment, already worked".<sup>307</sup> To improve our moral vision, we are required to try to identify the reality of other people in different circumstances. However, Murdoch says that we do not have access to pure facts. In every experience, our

---

<sup>305</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, to Murdoch values exists objectively, namely for *all* rational being, but not apart from them. There are other subjective values that are derived and determined by objective ones. Murdoch's Good is the objective value individuals discover in their mind.

<sup>306</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 215.

<sup>307</sup> "The Darkness of Practical Reason," 199.

perceptions are manipulated by our imagination. If values are part of the fabric of the world and if Murdoch thinks it is possible for us to have the knowledge of these values, then how can morality also be a creative task?<sup>308</sup> The answer to this question lies in the Kantian aspect of Murdoch's imagination, namely, her view of imagination as a creative mediator. While the individual perceives their surroundings, the imagination acts as a mediator that facilitates the process of evaluation. In Murdoch's view, there is no escape from this evaluation. It happens spontaneously in every experience. Although the mediation of imagination is inevitable, the individual can still deliberately shape and direct their imagination. Murdoch says: "...if we admit active imagination as an important faculty it is difficult not to see this as an exercise of will. Imagining is *doing*, it is a sort of personal exploring".<sup>309</sup> This shows the direct relation between imagination and the will. The individual *chooses* to imagine some other aspects of a situation and to see beyond appearances. It does not just happen by itself. Rather, it comes with moral effort. In the formulation of our beliefs about other people, our imagination and will (or wilful imagination) are both at work. This is the creative aspect of imagination. When we see a scene of a car crash on the side of the road, we can see the driver as careless and irresponsible or we can choose to imagine other possibilities, such as the existence of a pothole in the middle of the road or an unforeseen problem with the car. It is up to the individual to choose to rely on the spontaneous activity of imagination or to actively create images of their own.

Nonetheless, Murdoch points out that the individual's effort to imagine different aspects of reality is not always successful. In plenty of cases the individual regards a distorted image of a situation as representing reality. This is what Murdoch calls 'fantasy'. Fantasy or 'egoistic fantasy' is the counterpart of constructive imagination. It corresponds to Plato's lower imagination, which is the result of the egoistic forces in human beings.<sup>310</sup> Murdoch repeatedly refers to

---

<sup>308</sup> Some like J. E. G. Jordan take moral realism to include moral cognitivism, moral success theory, and moral objectivism. When I discuss Murdoch's moral realism, I imply her cognitivist approach as well. See Jessie E. G. Jordan, "Reconsidering Iris Murdoch's Moral Realism," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 48, no. 3 (2014): 371-85.

<sup>309</sup> Murdoch, "The Darkness of Practical Reason," 199.

<sup>310</sup> See *ibid.*, 198-99. See also *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 19 and 86.

these forces and argues that human beings are naturally selfish. She says: “In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego”.<sup>311</sup> Our ego or selfish energy powerfully strives to delude us. So fantasy refers to the creative faculty of mind that, instead of bringing one closer to reality, drives one further away. Murdoch writes:

Each of us lives and chooses within a partly private, partly fabricated world, and although any particular belief might be shown to be ‘merely fantastic’ it is false to suggest that we could, even in principle, ‘purge’ the world we confront of these personal elements. Nor is there any reason why we should. To be a human being is to know more than one can prove, to conceive of a reality which goes ‘beyond the facts’ in these familiar and natural ways.<sup>312</sup>

As we see in the above statement, in Murdoch’s view we cannot ‘purge’ our imaginings of personal preconceptions or prejudices. In reality, a great deal of our beliefs are purely egoistic fantasies. She claims that in most circumstances we are not imagining but ‘fantasising’, which is “[t]he chief enemy of excellence in morality...”.<sup>313</sup> Murdoch views the egoistic fantasy as the prevailing force in the human psyche, which is the tragic aspect of fantasy. She asserts that “... fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings”.<sup>314</sup> Fantasy is “...the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, ... [it] is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often

---

<sup>311</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51. She refers to Freud several times in her work while noting that she is not a Freudian, but that she finds his pessimistic view of human nature relevant to her theory. She says: “What seems to me...true and important in Freudian theory is as follows. Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only a deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings”. *Ibid.*, 50. Drawing on Freudian theory, Murdoch contends that human beings are essentially egotistic and selfish. She argues that this aspect of Freud’s theory is not new in the history of thought and we can find philosophical aspects of Freud’s quasi-scientific view about human psyche and its egocentric energy back in Plato’s thoughts. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 24.

<sup>312</sup> “The Darkness of Practical Reason,” 199.

<sup>313</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 57.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

called ‘will’ or ‘willing’ belongs to this system”.<sup>315</sup> In fantasy, the direction of this system of energy shifts away from the outer reality towards the self, the ego. That is why it can prevent us from seeing the reality of other people. She writes:

The human mind is naturally and largely given to fantasy. Vanity (a prime human motive) is composed of fantasy. Neurotic or vengeful fantasies, erotic fantasies, delusions of grandeur, dreams of power, can imprison the mind, impeding new understanding, new interests and affections, possibilities of fruitful and virtuous action. If we consider the narrow dreariness of this fantasy life to which we are so addicted the term ‘unimaginative’ seems appropriate.<sup>316</sup>

For Murdoch, what prevents the fantasising or ‘unimaginative’ individual from attending to reality is the egoistic force to seek *consolation* and comfort in the face of torments. By resisting the vision of reality, we seek consolation in false images of reality created by fantasy.<sup>317</sup> Fantasy is the psyche’s way of protecting itself from the pain of facing unpleasant realities.<sup>318</sup> In a world full of suffering and misery, we use mediums, such as religious concepts, that are products of human fantasising, in order to survive emotionally.<sup>319</sup> That is why Murdoch writes: “Fantasy operates either with shapeless day-dreams ... or with small myths, toys, crystals. Each in his own way produces a sort of ‘dream necessity’. Neither grapples with reality”.<sup>320</sup> One of the best examples of a character who is driven by fantasy is Charles, the male protagonist in Murdoch’s Novel *The Sea, the Sea*. Charles is a retired playwright whose selfish tendencies are manifested in the form of an obsessive pursuit of an old flame. His pride and ego lead him to create a completely fantasy-ridden picture of reality in which he is madly in love with his former girlfriend, Hartley, who is in turn still in love with him and fascinated by

---

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>316</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 322.

<sup>317</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 62-63.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>319</sup> As an example of a commonly held false consoling belief, Murdoch refers to the idea that suffering would purify the soul. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 130. See also *The Sovereignty of Good*, 66.

<sup>320</sup> "Against Dryness," 292.

his fame. Charles loved Hartley when they were very young. The experience was so intense and so innocent that he never got over the fact that Hartley left him. He needs to adhere to the consoling picture in which Harley loved him and he was the only person that could make her happy. In Charles' fantasy, Hartley needs him to rescue her from her abusive husband. Due to his egoism, this picture becomes so large and so strong that he completely loses touch with reality. This leads Charles to kidnap Hartley, which leads to embarrassment and eventually the catastrophic death of Hartley's son.<sup>321</sup> The novel demonstrates how a false image that is the product of one's distortion of reality through selfishness can lead to wrong judgements of a situation and wrong decisions.

Charles' mistake is choosing to regard an image as fixed and final and taking comfort in that. Following Plato, Murdoch warns us that while there is no escape from fantasizing, our task in the process of image-making is to avoid setting one image as final. No image can be final and it is selfish and egoistic to view it as such. Becoming moral is a progressive task. We should constantly try to get closer to reality by abolishing our old images, creating new ones, and moving to those that are closer to the reality of other people, and thus to the Good. This is the role of imagination.

As opposed to fantasy, "[w]e use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it" and to see it the way it truly is.<sup>322</sup> In Murdoch's view, "[i]magination reveals. It explains".<sup>323</sup> Imagination is the only means through which we can go beyond the consolations of fantasy. It is only through creating truthful images of reality and surpassing fantasy that we develop the "...capacity for compassion [and] for identifying with other people...".<sup>324</sup> This move to compassion and love, for Murdoch, is the essence of morality. Only through accurate and compassionate attention to other people is moral vision attained. So compassion and sympathy towards other people is the result of our imagination confronting the world along with the suppression of our ego, and achieving moral

---

<sup>321</sup> *The Sea, the Sea* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978).

<sup>322</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 88.

<sup>323</sup> "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," 18.

<sup>324</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 53.

vision is dependent on developing such compassion and love, which is the ultimate goal in Murdoch's cognitivist account of morality. That is how imagination plays a vital part in our moral progress.

For Murdoch, "[w]e are fantasising imaginative animals".<sup>325</sup> These two functions of human consciousness, namely, imagining and fantasising, are constantly at work, and the images they create are often very similar. She says: "... creative imagination and obsessive fantasy may be very close almost indistinguishable forces in the mind of the writer".<sup>326</sup> This leads to an important difficulty for Murdoch, which is to explain how we can know whether our ideas are the result of constructive imagination or misleading and destructive fantasy. The similarity between imagination and fantasy rests upon the fact that in both of them, the mind entertains more than empirically verifiable reality, and the notion of 'unreality' becomes prominent. In other words, both imagination and fantasy have an unreal structure, and their common characteristic is the augmentation of empirical reality. Through imagination, for instance, we can envision the Good, which is real but cannot be grasped by means of our sense perception.<sup>327</sup> In the case of imagination, the augmented reality created by consciousness is the only way to achieve a more truthful vision, but in the case of fantasy the augmented reality created by consciousness prevents us from discovering the truth. So there seems to be no objective and clear demarcation between these two notions. And if there are no certain criteria by which to recognise which state of consciousness we are in, we might infer that any attempt to distinguish between imagination and fantasy would be totally subjective.

As Murdoch describes it, being a fantasising agent is equivalent to being blinded by "... the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams...".<sup>328</sup> This means being trapped, even somehow subconsciously, in those consoling images we create for ourselves. It is implausible to think that someone

---

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>326</sup> "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," 11.

<sup>327</sup> Edith Brugmans, "Murdoch on the Impossibility of Moral Scepticism," in *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, ed. Anne Rowe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 50.

<sup>328</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 57.

would consciously construct and hold on to false consoling images, such as God, all the while being aware that these images are with no instance in reality.<sup>329</sup> After all, if this had been the case, these images would have lost their consoling power, as the consolation comes with the conviction that these images bear a trace of reality. For the faithful, for instance, God is not just created by the human psyche to protect itself, but is something *real*. To illustrate this point it is useful to consider Malcolm Muggeridge's description of Simone Weil's experience of God. We can see there is as much certainty in Weil's belief in the reality of God as Murdoch's conviction of the reality of the Good:

In one of her letter to Fr Perrin she describes how, in the Easter week of 1938 ... Christ came down and took possession of her. Thenceforth, He was the centre of her existence, the focus of her mind, the point of reference for all her questing and questioning. As T. S. Elliot has pointed out, this personal devotion to our Lord and love for Him saved her from pitfalls into which a certain pedantry and intellectual arrogance in her temperament might well have led her.<sup>330</sup>

Weil describes her direct experience of Christ as a real experience that was a turning point in her intellectual life. As the above quote claims, Weil's devotion to Christ saved her from pitfalls that her existing intellectual arrogance might have led her. Hence, Elliot appears to believe that Weil's devotion to Christ acts as a corrective to her vice of intellectual arrogance (analogous to my spectacles acting as a corrective to my existing myopia). This example, along with the instances of other mystics and philosophers, such as Blaise Pascal and Meister Eckhart, who have personally undergone spiritual awakenings demonstrate how these personal experiences feel so real for those who experience them.<sup>331</sup> As we can see, it is not

---

<sup>329</sup> Murdoch introduces God as a consoling image that demythologizing theologians should relinquish. To her, the idea of God should be replaced with the idea of the Good. See *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 80-82 and 431-60. Also see *The Sovereignty of Good*, 45-75.

<sup>330</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, "Forword," in *Waiting on God, by Simone Weil* (Routledge, 2009), xii.

<sup>331</sup> See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. H. F. Stewart (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), 363. See also Albert Karl, "Epilogue: Meister Eckhart – between Mysticism and Philosophy," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 699-709.

quite clear how it is possible for the individual to determine whether their images are in fact false images.

Murdoch can answer the question posed above by saying that the problem does not lie in the image the mind creates, but in our *attachment* to that image. We should note that there is no *final* image. We keep creating images that bring us closer to reality, but we must constantly abandon them and move beyond them. As Murdoch says, “[i]mages should not be resting places, but pointers toward higher truth”.<sup>332</sup> Fantasy is at work when we create an image and *hold on to it*. The problem arises when our fabricated images become our final images as they are a source of comfort to us, and it is this sense of comfort, which stops us from struggling and moving beyond them. We cling to an image like God and it gives us consolation and comfort as it makes us believe that we are eternal souls and our life has a meaningful purpose. Therefore, instead of abolishing that image and moving beyond it (maybe like Murdoch who moved to the image of the Good) we cling to it and it forms the pivotal part of our belief system.

That said, it should be noted that Murdoch’s central point is that the *moral consequences* of imagination and fantasy are different. As Roger Crisp points out, “Murdoch’s ideal is one of selflessness”, which is equivalent to love and compassion.<sup>333</sup> One way to distinguish between imagination and fantasy is to look at the role each plays in social relations. When facing a tragic dilemma, the moral agent (exercising their imagination) puts themselves in the other person’s shoes. They try to see the other person in their own right, not only in relation to themselves. Through imagination, they are not only carefully attending to, but also feeling for the other person.<sup>334</sup> This, as explained earlier, is the compassion felt through imagination. As Murdoch describes it, “[I]ove is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real”.<sup>335</sup> This kind of love, which is a form of knowledge, comes with

---

<sup>332</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 318.

<sup>333</sup> Crisp, "Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value," 284.

<sup>334</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, in Murdoch’s virtue ethics, morality is not only thinking a certain way, but also feeling a certain manner.

<sup>335</sup> Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 215.

the exercising of compassion towards others. This is what fantasy lacks (given its egoistic tendencies). On Murdoch's account, feeling compassion towards others is very rare, but not impossible. The degree to which one is able to sympathise with others, to feel their happiness and distress is the degree to which one's imagination is developed. So Murdoch could say that we are on the level of imagination when we are, in every situation, able to see other individuals in their own right, and sympathise with them. Thus, our sensitivity to the pain and suffering of other people is a sign of a developed imagination, which is a necessary condition for becoming a better person.

To recapitulate, Murdoch assumes that moral agent has a cognitive task – the task of constantly making an effort to see and come to know the reality of the world and other individuals. On the other hand, she emphasises the role of imagination as a creative faculty that is the necessary condition for obtaining a realistic grasp of our surroundings. She argues that the reality an individual experiences is not completely given, but 'partly fabricated' by their imagination. These mind pictures and images are the only means of truly seeing the world. However, individuals must be aware that they cannot retain any of these images as a final image and must endeavour to make new images and obtain a more truthful vision. They should constantly try to put themselves in other people's shoes and sympathize with them. Imagination can enable the individual to develop the sensitivity necessary to sympathise with other people in different situations.

### ***Conclusion***

In the previous chapters, I discussed the concept of the Good from Murdoch's point of view and her central idea that morality is an act of *knowing* the reality of our surroundings. I showed that Murdoch is a kind of virtue ethicist, in the modern Aristotelian sense. However, as I discussed in this chapter, Murdoch's discussions of imagination and fantasy has something to offer to virtue ethics – that is an account of morality as a creative task of imagination. In this chapter, I showed that, for Murdoch, the cultivation of imagination is necessary for an individual's moral progress. Since imagination is associated with creation and innovation, the question arose as to how Murdoch's Platonic moral realism,

which implies that morality involves knowledge, coheres with the view that morality is a creative task. Through examining Murdoch's understanding of the concept of imagination, and its counterpart, fantasy, I argued that while for Murdoch morality is about the knowledge of the reality of other people, it is a creative process of picturing different aspects of every situation and contemplating them; it is about trying to put oneself in other people's shoes. A stronger imagination helps the individual to develop a better moral understanding and assessment of every situation. As we will see in the next few chapters, this understanding of morality leads Murdoch to draw a close connection between morality and art, with both being products of the creative function of the human mind.

In order to show how morality is a creative task carried out by the individual's imagination, I first examined Murdoch's understanding of these two concepts, drawing upon her Platonic and Kantian influences. The first Kantian aspect of Murdoch's account of imagination is the link she makes between the universal concept of the Good and particular events. This aspect is equivalent to Kant's transcendental imagination. However, this is where Murdoch's account differs from Plato's, for Plato does not give weight to the perception of particulars. The second Kantian aspect of Murdoch's account of imagination is her definition of imagination as a spontaneous creative faculty. Nevertheless, as she acknowledges, Kant's creative imagination is only at work in the sphere of fine arts (aesthetic imagination), whereas Murdoch extends it to the sphere of morality as to her, the essence of art and morality is the same.

Murdoch admires Plato for identifying that the imagination can become corrupted, turning into what Murdoch calls fantasy. Murdoch is not influenced as much by Plato's theory as by his own example of using images and metaphors to explain, or show, the highest realities. Following Plato, Murdoch argues that in the process of moral improvement, we must constantly create images, destroy them, and move beyond them. This is a never-ending task. This is how, for Murdoch, morality is a creative task. There is never a final image with which we can be satisfied. Since every image includes some aspect of reality, but never all of it, we should make a continuous effort to move on to new images.

In this process, we might get deluded into regarding some of these images as the ultimate ones. This is where, by forcing in illusions generated by fantasy, the negative force of the ego stops us from seeing reality, which for Murdoch is essential for morality. I argued that Murdoch's realist and cognitivist approach nevertheless prevents her from considering reality as 'partly fabricated' by the individual's imagination. This raises the question as to how we can decide whether it is a legitimate 'fabrication', the work of imagination, or an illegitimate one, the work of fantasy. I argued that what might help us distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate fabrications is to consider the role each plays in social relations and the feelings moral agents have towards each other. Using our imagination allows us to put ourselves in other people's shoes, to feel what they feel, and to empathize with them: a loving approach to others that is not achievable by our egoistic fantasies. Ultimately, Murdoch's main point is that humility requires us to resist egoism and arrogance. That is why she emphasises that we should never settle on any image and consider them as final. We should always be ready to move on to new, and hopefully improved, images of reality.

In the next Chapter, I will discuss Murdoch's theory of art, which will show a close affinity between her views of art, reality, and morality. Then considering the concept of imagination together with concepts central to Murdoch's moral theory I will discuss the ways in which art can be morally educational.

## Chapter 5

### The Paradox of Art

#### *Introduction*

In the previous chapters I argued that virtue, specifically the virtue of love, plays a central role in Murdoch's moral theory. She sees morality as a creative project, and emphasizes the importance of imagination in cultivating virtue. As I will explain in the following chapters, Murdoch thinks that art, but only great art, has the potential to educate and to contribute to the development of the character of the individual. Before considering this view, it is necessary to examine Murdoch's theory of art, in particular her view of what makes a work of art good or great.

I will draw on my discussion of the concepts of imagination and fantasy in Chapter 4 to highlight a tension between the concepts of unity and disunity in Murdoch's theory of art. She claims that artists should present disunity in their artwork, which involves portraying the messiness, unintelligibility, and contingency of reality. However, she also claims that unity (form) is a necessary and unavoidable component of an artwork. In light of my discussion of the distinction between imagination and fantasy I will argue that in Murdoch's view, the kind of unity manifested in an artwork should not just be a consoling unity, which is the product of fantasy, but the necessary unity of an artistic form, which is the product of imagination. What makes an artwork great, then, is its 'realism', that is, its ability to portray the chancy and transient reality within the boundaries of an artwork. In this view, it is only an artwork created by imagination that can be great and hence, that can be morally educational.

Murdoch does not explicitly discuss this tension between unity and disunity in her work and neither do her commentators. However, focusing on this tension is useful in allowing us to construct a Murdochian theory of art from the discussions on the topic scattered throughout her work. More importantly, it prepares the ground for the discussion, in the following chapters, of the ways in which art can contribute to moral education.

## *Unity versus Disunity*

Murdoch's main concern in her discussion of art is that art should avoid losing touch with reality. For Murdoch, in the enjoyment of great art, "... an essential ingredient is a sense of the revelation of reality, of the really real, the ὄντως ὄν: the world as we were never able so clearly to see it before".<sup>336</sup> Murdoch's concern about art's relation to reality manifests itself particularly in her discussions of unity and disunity in art. She maintains that great art is disunified because reality is disunified. Reality consists of the discontinuities of the individual's experiences and does not have a comprehensible unity and order. As opposed to good works of art, Murdoch says: "Ordinary works of art may be seen as illusory unities, the reassuring image of the satisfied ego, pleasing through a felt unification of the sensibility, an intuited harmony".<sup>337</sup> She continues:

A prime difficulty in human life: we must have stories (art forms), but stories (art forms) are almost always a bit or very false.... The true story may not even look like a story because it will inhibit the automatic movement of egoism, with its imposition of a pleasing innocuous form. We want to control the tale ourselves and give it our ending ....<sup>338</sup>

Imposing unity on art is the product of the egoism of the artist, rather than the product of their attention directed away from the self towards reality, and this is the 'prime difficulty' of an artist in creating an artwork. Artists should avoid imposing unity upon their work. However, in other places, Murdoch states: "Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of *unity* and form".<sup>339</sup> In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, Murdoch emphasises that "[a] work of art has got to have a form, it has got to have notation, it has got

---

<sup>336</sup> "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists," 454.

<sup>337</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 104.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>339</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 84. (My italics).

to have something which is fixed and authoritative ...”.<sup>340</sup> So on the one hand, Murdoch objects to unity in art as it is a product of the artist’s ego which conceals reality. On the other hand, she emphasises that unity is a necessary component of an artwork and is therefore unavoidable. In the rest of this chapter I will explain how these two contradictory ideas are reconcilable and even essential in Murdoch’s theory of art.

‘Unity’ is a concept repeatedly employed in different contexts throughout Murdoch’s work.<sup>341</sup> Murdoch writes: “It is the traditional inspiration of the philosopher, but also his traditional vice, to believe that all is one”.<sup>342</sup> The aspiration for unity and unification is a strong drive in philosophy, art, and other intellectual activities.<sup>343</sup> So, Murdoch brings the concept of ‘unity’ to the context of art as well and repeatedly questions whether the unity portrayed in art is a false or distorted depiction of the imperfection and randomness of reality. In Murdoch’s view, “...it is realism which makes great art great...” and reality is chancy and transient.<sup>344</sup> Life is contingent and pointless. Even an attempt to be virtuous is pointless.<sup>345</sup> There is no real unity and purpose in human life. Reality is not a limited whole, and therefore unachievable. The human consciousness is not unified either. It contains various emotions and thoughts that are both vigorous and unstable, and in constant interplay with a reality that is dynamic and contingent. There is no unity in human life and everything is subject to change. In

---

<sup>340</sup> Christopher Bigsby, "Interview with Iris Murdoch," in *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 101.

<sup>341</sup> Consider, for example, the ‘unity of the virtues’ in Murdoch’s moral theory as discussed in Chapter 3, Section Two. Briefly, in the discussion of Murdoch’s virtue ethical approach, I argued that while Murdoch does not believe that morality can be reduced to a unity like a single principle, she also does not think that morality “can be satisfactorily characterized by an enumeration of varying ‘goods’ and virtues” either. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 492. Murdoch argues that the human intellect, while identifying the hierarchical order of virtues, seeks unity in them. She suggests that “reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity”. *The Sovereignty of Good*, 56. Through contemplating the variety of virtues, we find some sort of unity in the world of virtues. The virtue that unifies all the virtues is the virtue of love.

<sup>342</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 49.

<sup>343</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 1.

<sup>344</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 64.

<sup>345</sup> See Chapter 3, Section Three.

Murdoch's view, art must reveal to us the chanciness and the pointlessness of life. The unity imposed in an artwork is not compatible with reality and is a product of personal fantasy.<sup>346</sup>

Nevertheless, Murdoch argues that in a work of art we naturally seek "... the comforting sense of a unified self, with organised emotions and fearless world-dominating intelligence, a complete experience in a limited whole".<sup>347</sup> However, this is a shameless display of "...the self-magnifying illusion-making lying ego...".<sup>348</sup> The idea of a unified self is the demand of one's ego to identify itself with any easily comprehensible quality of consciousness or the preference of some qualities over others. This is a false picture, which is the product of one's fantasy. The kind of art that displays this sort of unity is what Murdoch calls 'bad art' – it presents a false unity that pacifies one's ego.

The unity in bad art results from the triumph of ego or egoistic fantasy over crude reality. It is the function of fantasy to create a consoling picture of the victory of a putative unified self over randomness and contingency, which leads to a false feeling of happiness and consolation. Fantasy protects the ego against the messiness and formlessness of reality by deluding it into believing that it can form a unified picture of this formlessness. Fantasy conceals reality by consoling the ego. In a bad literary work, for example, fantasy manifests unity as "... the sentimental untruthful tale of how the brave attractive ego (of course he has his faults) triumphs over accident and causality and is never really mocked or brought to nought".<sup>349</sup> However reality is not all glorious or predictable. Reality consists of unintelligible and accidental details that human consciousness cannot fully comprehend. Fantasy denies this and creates a world with form and purpose. The kind of art that displays the self-aggrandizing images of fantasy is pleasing and consoling to the ego. For Murdoch, *most* art objects are nothing but "...a false unity, the product of a mortal man who cannot entirely dominate his subject matter and remove or transform contingent rubble and unclarified personal

---

<sup>346</sup> For an account of human fantasy see Chapter 4, Section Two.

<sup>347</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 88.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

emotions and attitudes”.<sup>350</sup> The consolation of the false unity is not the consolation of reality, but the consolation of fantasy or what is fake. Murdoch goes as far as saying: “Almost anything that consoles us is a fake”.<sup>351</sup>

Nevertheless, in Murdoch’s view the sense of joy and pleasure in art comes primarily from a sense of unity. For her, taking pleasure in art is certainly an essential function of it. In an interview, in response to the question of what effect she would like her novels to have, she states that “I’d like people to enjoy reading them... literature is to be enjoyed, to be grasped by enjoyment”.<sup>352</sup> And for art to be enjoyable it must possess unity and form. Murdoch writes:

Art, and by ‘art’... I mean good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession .... It is able to do this partly by virtue of something which it shares with nature: a perfection of form which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness.<sup>353</sup>

The ‘perfection of form’ in art elicits a sense of joy and delight in the perceiver. It is because the individual naturally fears plurality and chaos, and tends to intuit a unity in instances of plurality, that they experience such joy and delight. Murdoch argues that the individual finds the lack of any form distressing, and the perception of what are discrete parts as a unified whole reassuring.<sup>354</sup> That is why art cannot avoid form. One of the most important functions of art is to create joy and delight in the perceiver of art, which comes largely by the individual’s perception of form in art. So it seems that art can never truthfully represent the formlessness and randomness of reality, because to create joy it

---

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>351</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 58.

<sup>352</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, "Two Interviews with Iris Murdoch," in *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 230.

<sup>353</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83.

<sup>354</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 1.

needs unity and form, and reality is not unified. Yet as I will argue in the context of Murdoch's theory of art, this paradox is both necessary and meaningful. To demonstrate this, it is useful to consider Murdoch's own example of good art and how it incorporates both unity and disunity.

Murdoch frequently uses literary works as an example of good works of art, and 'tragedy', particularly Shakespearean and Greek tragedy, as the greatest art of all.<sup>355</sup> Tragedy, in her view, is a form of art in which the writer overcomes their fear of plurality, and portrays evil without trying to console the reader.<sup>356</sup> In tragedy "... in the interests of truth, the artist must inhibit his magic".<sup>357</sup> The kind of magic that tragedy denies to its reader is the consolation of an egoistic and illusory unity by instead presenting contingency, misery, and death. The idea of contingency and death destroys the ego and its dream of eternal happiness and power.<sup>358</sup> Tragedy can inflict distress or fear in the audience by looking directly at human evil. Murdoch refers to this as the paradoxical nature of tragedy. Tragedy destroys itself as art, for art is beautiful and charming whereas miseries are ugly and unattractive.<sup>359</sup> At the same time tragedy maintains itself as art, for it exhibits the truth within the boundaries of an artwork. However, Murdoch claims that tragedy, as the highest of all artistic forms, fails to present real life, even though it exhibits what is incomplete and contingent. Tragedy depicts the truth, but in a

---

<sup>355</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. 92-99. Murdoch says: "There are extremely few good tragedies and, one may say, bad tragedies are not tragedies". Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>356</sup> Murdoch holds that the true understanding of tragedy is the synthesis between the Kantian sublime and the Hegelian theory of tragedy. In Kant, the subject experiences the thin abstracted totality grasped by the imagination. In Hegel, this abstracted totality of Kant inserts into history and becomes concrete. In Kant's sublimity, the totality is not given. Kant is concerned with the empty freedom and helplessness of human beings facing the contingent dreadfulness of the world. Yet, to Hegel, reason obtains a total understanding of the human social situation. For Murdoch tragedy must be a combination of these two: it must be humanised not given. See "The Sublime and the Good," 213-14. See also *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 99-100.

<sup>357</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 116.

<sup>358</sup> Murdoch's theory of tragedy is close to Aristotle's idea of tragedy as a purification of strong emotions or *catharsis* that has been treated as the heart of Aristotle's philosophy of the topic. Murdoch states: "such purification [depicted by Aristotle] must surely be part of our general moral enterprise and should engage the moral philosopher". Ibid., 99. And Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (South Bend: Infomotions, 2001). VI-CIV. See also Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 26-34.

<sup>359</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 116-23. I will discuss the idea of beauty in art in Chapter 7.

way that is bearable. She writes: “Real life is not tragic. In saying this one means that the extreme horrors of real life cannot be expressed in art”.<sup>360</sup>

Murdoch explains that real-life cases, such as the example of Goebbels and his wife poisoning their children during their last days in Hitler’s bunker, can cause overwhelming distress and sadness, yet are not tragedies. In the case of Goebbel’s children, it is far more awful than tragedy, not because it is real, but because it has no form or boundaries.<sup>361</sup> Murdoch says: “Art offers some consolation, some sense, some *form* whereas the most dreadful ills of human life allow of none. Auschwitz is not a tragedy”.<sup>362</sup> ‘Form’ is the unity found in art that while displaying some aspects of reality, transforms other aspects of it. While form is necessary in creating an artwork and representing reality, it also creates boundaries for it.<sup>363</sup> In Murdoch’s words: “[Art] magically charms reality, nature, into a formal semblance”.<sup>364</sup> That is why in a more moderate statement Murdoch says: “Since it [tragedy] is art it must have borders, it must be some kind of magic, but must also inhibit magic in its more familiar and consoling uses”.<sup>365</sup> Tragedy, being a form of art, must be attractive and enjoyable, but not attractive in a familiar and easily accessible way. The charm of tragedy is not readily perceived and felt because it does not transform reality but reveals “... the true nature of sin, the futility of fantasy and the reality of death”.<sup>366</sup>

---

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 93. (My italics).

<sup>363</sup> Artistic form is one of the aspects of an artwork that make up the artwork. It usually refers to one half of the distinction between form and content. In different theories of artistic form, it has been discussed that it is not always easy to distinguish between the content and the form of an artwork, such as music. For the purpose of my discussion here, I am not going to explore the difficulties with the concept of artistic form. Following Murdoch, by form I refer to what makes up an artwork, namely, what makes a painting a painting and what makes a novel a novel, regardless of its content and what it does or does not represent. For more details on the subject of artistic form, see Lars-Olof Åhlberg, *Notions of the Aesthetic and of Aesthetics: Essays on Art, Aesthetics, and Culture* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014), 122-43. See also Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1-29.

<sup>364</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 122.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

So the individual can take some pleasure in tragedy – “... unconsoling coldness ... can be accompanied by a gloomy relish”.<sup>367</sup> Murdoch does not expand on this point any further. Yet the question arises: ‘How is it possible to take pleasure in the misery and pain portrayed in tragedy?’ If we look closely at what Murdoch means by enjoyment in art, we find that this enjoyment must be a deeper emotion than some mere sensual pleasure, such as eating one’s favourite food, or some other trivial pleasures, such as the pleasure one takes in watching soap operas. This deeper emotion is the result of the artist’s use of technique to convey a deeper understanding of some facets of human life and consciousness, within the limitations of an artwork. In other words, it is the result of the mastery of the artist over the art form they practice and their effort to present reality within the boundaries of form in a way that *engages* its perceiver. To explain this aspect of Murdoch’s theory of art, it is useful to recall my discussion, in Chapter 3, of the kind of emotion that accompanies virtuous activity. The pleasure one takes in deeply engaging with the disastrous events of a tragedy resembles the kind of emotion a virtuous person takes in acting virtuously, despite all the difficulties they might go through. A generous and compassionate person enjoys giving to charity and helping other people, despite losing some of their money or despite the sadness and pain they might experience by encountering people who are suffering from poverty and injustice. Irrespective of how painful a situation can be, a virtuous person obtains a degree of satisfaction from acting virtuously.<sup>368</sup> To Murdoch the same is true of art. The work of art that can engage the individual intellectually and on a deeper level is enjoyable to them. Murdoch writes: “In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly”.<sup>369</sup> The enjoyment in art is the result of the artist’s ability to engage the audience with the artwork – an artwork which is the product of the artist’s skill in displaying diverse and random aspects of reality within the unity of an art form. This kind of engagement enables the audience to shift their attention from their selfish fantasies and to obtain a clearer vision of reality. To Murdoch, the enjoyment of art “... is a thing totally

---

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>368</sup> See Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 66-82.

<sup>369</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 88.

opposed to selfish obsession. It invigorates our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul”.<sup>370</sup> Engaging with art gives rise to a form of pleasure, and ultimately love, which, as we have seen in previous chapters, involves a more accurate vision of reality.<sup>371</sup>

In Murdoch’s novel *The Unicorn*, which includes elements of tragedy, Hannah’s unbearable sense of guilt due to her unsuccessful attempt to kill her husband leads her to self-purification and self-punishment. But since this self-punishment is the result of her acute self-centeredness, which influences the other characters of the story as well, it leads to more violence and devastation at the end of the novel. This story does not provoke enjoyment in the reader in the conventional sense, but rather creates a sense of suspense and shock at the unusual succession of events and the melancholic setting of the story. In this novel, “... the satisfying calming completeness of art is internally contradicted by absolute contingency and humiliating death”.<sup>372</sup> Ordinarily, there is no pleasure to be taken from a pointless death. Yet, there is a sense of “supreme pleasure” which comes from reaching “...heights of clarified intensity and dread...”<sup>373</sup> – the unpredictability of the narrative line and unfamiliarity of the characters, which resemble the messy and aimless nature of reality. Through reading this novel, the reader experiences events and people, however unpleasant, that they would not otherwise experience, and this gives them a sense of ‘a gloomy relish’.

As we see in the example above, through reading a great novel one experiences a rarefied enjoyment which is rooted in the novelist’s artistic aptitude and ability to engage the reader’s imagination with the line of the story and the characters’ feelings of pain and remorse. This provokes one into reflecting on the different ways one can see life, which is only possible in a good work of art. By imposing form upon the chaotic and contingent reality, art makes it more visible and accessible. Form is the unity necessary for a good artwork. It is the product of the artist’s mastery of the techniques associated with their artistic medium, and is

---

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>371</sup> For Murdoch’s cognitive account of love see Chapter 2, Section Two.

<sup>372</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 120.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 117.

accompanied by their attempt to display disunity and incompleteness. Murdoch states:

Much modern music (post-Schoenberg) defeats our old-fashioned wish for the melody to ‘come home’. A lack of ‘finish’ may result from artistic failure or from a deliberate internalised disunity which only the perceptive client will understand .... ‘Loose ends’ may be a, frequently used, way of indicating patterns or realities which attend the work ‘from the outside’.<sup>374</sup>

The disunity in good art, which is inspired by the disunity in reality, manifests itself differently in different art forms. In what Murdoch refers to as modern music, the disunity is the lack of typical melodic patterns and in literature, it could be ‘a lack of finish’. The lack of finish or completeness gently pushes the reader outside of their comfort zone and obliges them to look more attentively and see things differently. The manifestation of disunity in art is outside the individual’s comfort zone because they “... are not used to looking at the real world at all”.<sup>375</sup> ‘Loose ends’ makes their imagination grow by challenging them to picture different possibilities through which the narrative could take shape. A lack of melody in some contemporary music makes it more of an opportunity for contemplation than an opportunity for relaxation. Loose ends and incompleteness also represent the banal and absurd realities of life – that the miseries of life are pointless and life does not end in a grand event, but rather in death. Art should be able to show this absurdity while inevitably softening or modifying it. Murdoch writes:

... [In art] the awful things are contained in open surroundings, aware of contingency and absurdity, absolute ultimate loss of dignity, and the impossibility of an aesthetically complete presentation. The highest art here trails away into life. The context modifies the ‘tragic moment’ even when its point is a senseless

---

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>375</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

death like that of Petya Rostov in *War and Peace*.<sup>376</sup>

Art presents reality in its disunity, contingency, and absurdity. However, it can only do so by “modifying the ‘tragic moment’” and thereby inducing a sense of enjoyment, which is due to its inevitable unity together with the skilfulness of the artist. While being moved by an artwork, such as tragedy, the audience also mistrusts it. Given its formal structure, the audience sees it as just a story. In my view, this is what Murdoch means when she describes good art “... as purposiveness without purpose, finality without end”.<sup>377</sup> A work of art represents the chanciness and contingency of reality, but it does so in a purposive way, which involves imposing upon it a degree of form or structure necessary for engaging the audience. It is the paradox and the magic of good art, which leads the audience to take pleasure in it.<sup>378</sup>

So great art, produced by a free and uncorrupted imagination, conveys a duality. Through imagination one joins the world rather than escapes it. Great art both educates and reveals, by portraying contingency and accident, and at the same time inspires intuitions of unreality through limitations of form and unity. Murdoch says: “This double revelation of both random detail and intuited unity is what we receive in every sphere of life... [and] quite clearly in art and intellectual work.... [An] increased understanding of an art reveals its unity through its excellence”.<sup>379</sup> So while for Murdoch the tendency towards unity is a consoling escape from reality, she allows for a degree of it in art. Artists create unity in art by means of form. The main problem for the artist then becomes ‘how much form’ to impose before the artwork loses touch with reality.<sup>380</sup>

---

<sup>376</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 97. In her discussion of art, Murdoch, being a novelist herself, refers most often to the novel form, as to her “[t]he novel form more frankly admits, indeed embraces the instability of art and the invincible variety, contingency and scarcely communicable frightfulness of life. The novel is a discursive art”. *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-06.

<sup>378</sup> I will return to this point in the next Chapter.

<sup>379</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 93-94. After all, as discussed earlier, to Murdoch, intellect is naturally inclined towards unity and unity is an emotional motive for both philosophy and art. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 1-2.

<sup>380</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

As explained in this chapter, Murdoch sees false unity in inferior art as the work of the ego and fantasy, whereas the unity that is necessary for great art is its *form* – a strong form in which free beings are “strolling around in real life as it were”.<sup>381</sup> Form in good art resists the imposed patterns of fantasy, which is the main enemy of any art. It provides the audience with a sense of unity, but at the same time reminds them of the complete chanciness of life. There is a constant conflict in art between “the form-maker and the truthful, formless figure” of reality.<sup>382</sup> This conflict, for Murdoch, happens in life as well. The subconscious mind of the artist creates art and imposes form on it. Without any input from the subconscious, there is no work of art. However, it is the job of the intellect to prevent the subconscious from being too coercive in determining the emotion and the structure of the artwork.<sup>383</sup> Although form is the absolute essence of art, it should not be imposed in such a way that it stops the artist from representing the contradictions and paradoxes of the subject matter.

To illustrate Murdoch’s point here, it is useful to consider Vincent van Gogh’s painting of “A Pair of Shoes”. The painting portrays a pair of dull brown work shoes that are rather worn out. The unusual visual angle of the shoes, while taking the audience out of their comfort zone, does not compromise the sense of unity of the artwork as a perfect painting. However, such a unity, which is the product of the artist’s technique and the strong strokes of the brush on the canvas, emphasises the mundaneness of the subject matter, and the details of the subject delineated there suggest the importance of this prosaicness and the possible story behind it.

Murdoch argues that although form should be present, the artist should not readily give in to it.<sup>384</sup> Good art is full of surprises. It does not take up a predetermined form, but rather maintains its contingent openness. A good novel, for instance, cannot be a series of predictable events preaching a particular motto.

---

<sup>381</sup> Bigsby, 101.

<sup>382</sup> Michael O. Bellamy, "An Interview with Iris Murdoch," *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>383</sup> Christopher Bigsby, "Interview with Iris Murdoch," *ibid.*, 115.

<sup>384</sup> Frank Kermode, "Interview from "the House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists"," *ibid.*, 10-11.

It must give way to unpredictability as reality is so. The kind of unity that comes with the form found in great art does not conflict with reality. Murdoch says: “Truth is always a proper touchstone in art, and a training in art is a training in how to use the touchstone”.<sup>385</sup> If we look at Pablo Picasso’s cubist paintings, for example, we find that even in his most abstract works, he pictures reality in its messiness and accidentality.<sup>386</sup> In his paintings we see men and women with objects such as violins and bottles, illustrated from very different and unusual angles, and sometimes a single object portrayed from several angles at the same time. The objects depicted in Picasso’s paintings are the objects he was involved with in life in some way, however they are expressed in a very unusual way. Through its novel way of expression, this artwork surprises the audience, engaging with them by motivating them to discover and decipher its elements, while showing them different ways of looking at reality, even insignificant ones. These characteristics of surprise, discovery, and engagement are what Murdoch considers to be characteristics of good art.

### ***Conclusion***

In her discussion of art scattered throughout her writings, Murdoch constantly switches between the concepts of unity and disunity, which may create the impression that she is not consistent in her view of art. However, as I constructed a Murdochian theory of art from the various references she makes to it in her writings, I argued that if we elaborate on these two concepts in the context of her moral theory, we are able to present an account of her theory that reconciles these two seemingly paradoxical concepts. A good work of art, being the product of the artist’s imagination, rather than their self-aggrandizing fantasy, should be a truthful representation of reality. Reality is disunified, chancy, and contingent. Rather than being an unrealistically optimistic presentation of life, which resonates to the artist’s selfish inclinations, a good artwork is faithful to the disunity and chanciness of reality. Yet in Murdoch’s view, it is also important for an artwork to be enjoyable. The audience for art must take pleasure in receiving

---

<sup>385</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 86.

<sup>386</sup> Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *Picasso: Birth of a Genius* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 158-59.

the artwork. Although we can appreciate that the contingency and messiness of life are not particularly enjoyable, and can even be quite distressing, in a good artwork, the experience of disunity becomes enjoyable, as the reality represented in the work must be contained within the boundaries of the art form. However, in a good artwork the experience of the disunity of an artwork becomes enjoyable, as the reality presented in the artwork has to be presented within the boundaries of an art form. While Murdoch warns us of the danger of too much unity imposed upon an artwork, she argues that the artwork should maintain its enjoyability, which is mainly experienced by it being limited to a comprehensible, limited whole.

In the next chapter, I will expand on Murdoch's view of what makes a work of art good. This will lead to a discussion in the final chapter of Murdoch's view of the ways in which good art can be morally educational.

## Chapter 6

### Good Art: Murdoch's Moral Evaluation of Art

#### *Introduction*

Before I consider, in the next chapter, the ways in which art can be morally educational, it is necessary to discuss the kind of art that in Murdoch's view has the potential to contribute to one's moral development. My aim in this chapter is to provide a critique of Murdoch's view of 'good art' as art that displays good moral character, and to suggest a more moderate account of good art that is consistent with Murdoch's moral theory.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the concepts of unity and disunity in Murdoch's theory of art. I argued that a good work of art is a combination of the unity of art form and the disunity of content, with the strict condition that the artwork should not lose touch with reality. Within the inevitable unity imposed by an art form, the artist should justly and faithfully present the disunity and chaos of reality. Building upon my discussions of Murdoch's theory of art as well as her moral theory, my aim in this chapter is to examine Murdoch's view of 'good art' in more detail.

For Murdoch, art is inseparable from morality. She claims that "... art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is ... a case of morals".<sup>387</sup> I will argue that Murdoch's theoretical treatment of art and morality suggests that a good artist must be virtuous (at least as far as their artwork is concerned), because good art is morally educational and only a virtuous person can produce art containing the vision that morally educational art requires. I will discuss the drawbacks of this view and argue that a non-virtuous artist is also capable of producing morally educational art. I will also argue that a moral flaw of an artwork does not necessarily count as an aesthetic or artistic flaw and, and even when it does, an aesthetic flaw does not necessarily prevent an artwork from being morally educational.

---

<sup>387</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 58.

## *Art, Morality, and an Objection to Murdoch's Theory of Good Art*

In an interview, Murdoch was asked whether a novelist should also be a moralist and a teacher. She answered that the novelist should avoid being a teacher in a didactic manner, but that values are expressed within an artwork and that the artist is “a compulsory moralist”.<sup>388</sup> In spite of the consensus among commentators about the philosophical character of her novels,<sup>389</sup> Murdoch repeatedly rejects the idea that art in general, and literature in particular, must aim at presenting the artist’s philosophical viewpoint. She denies that she has inserted her philosophical views into her novels.<sup>390</sup> Murdoch states that “[literature’s] function is art, forget about morality, its function is to be good art”.<sup>391</sup> And again, “[my] novels are not moral tracts. They are works of art. But obviously there is a moral orientation, which is the same as in my moral philosophy”.<sup>392</sup> For Murdoch, presenting the artist’s moral views or being morally educational is not the main goal of an artwork, rather its primary goal is “... to be grasped by enjoyment”.<sup>393</sup> However, in other places in her writing, she goes so far as to say: “Art is far and away *the most educational* thing we have, far more so than its rivals, philosophy and theology and science”.<sup>394</sup>

---

<sup>388</sup> Meyers, 226-27.

<sup>389</sup> See, for example, Byatt, 184. Tracy, 69. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Eros and the Individual," *ibid.*, 37. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Good for Nothing-Review of Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit, by Elizabeth Dipple," *London Review of Books* 4, no. 10 (1982): 15. Elizabeth Dipple, "The Green Knight and the Other Vagaries of the Spirit; or, Tricks and Images for the Human Soul; or, the Uses of Imaginative Literature," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 138-39.

<sup>390</sup> Stephen Glover, "Iris Murdoch Talks to Stephen Glover," in *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 36. It must be pointed out that when Murdoch’s commentators claim that she has inserted her philosophical views into her novels, they commonly refer to her moral views. That is why, following Murdoch and her commentators, and for the purpose of my current discussion, in this context, by philosophical views I am referring to moral views.

<sup>391</sup> Christopher Bigsby, "Interview with Iris Murdoch," *ibid.*, 112.

<sup>392</sup> Barbara Stevens Heusel, "A Dialogue with Iris Murdoch," *ibid.*, 199.

<sup>393</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, "Two Interviews with Iris Murdoch," *ibid.*, 230. This point is explained in the previous chapter.

<sup>394</sup> Murdoch, "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists," 461. (My italics)

Hence, Murdoch's view appears to be the following: an artist is not supposed to express their philosophical view in their art. An artist is not a moral teacher, nor is an artwork a 'moral tract'. Yet the artist cannot help being a "moralist" and an artwork inevitably contributes to one's moral development. To put it differently, the artist should not try to *insert* their moral views into their work, but the artwork necessarily has some moral orientation and thus is morally educational. And not only that, "... it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen".<sup>395</sup> The question arises: 'What does Murdoch mean by considering an artist to be a moralist *inside* their work and an artwork to be morally educational?' To answer this question, I begin by explaining why, in Murdoch's view, morality is inseparable from art.

In Murdoch's view, almost any account of reality is value-laden. As explained in my discussion of her moral philosophy, Murdoch criticises the fact-value division, resorting to the transcendental concept of the Good embedded in one's consciousness. A realistic understanding of the world, which is the core of morality to Murdoch, involves seeing it evaluatively.<sup>396</sup> There is no escape from doing so, as "[p]erception itself is a mode of evaluation".<sup>397</sup> In Murdoch's view, art is inevitably tied to morality because the ability to perceive the world and to portray it the way it truly is, which is a crucial task of an artist, introduces value into the world. She states "... art is not *either* photographs of facts *or* outbursts of private feeling. In understanding how great art utterly transcends this (version of the fact-value distinction) we exercise our general ability to distinguish what is illusory from what is real".<sup>398</sup> This can be more easily seen in the case of literary works than in other forms of art, as to Murdoch, "... language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value .... literature is soaked in the moral".<sup>399</sup> Literary forms of language can more easily capture the features of reality and human behaviour. Literary works contain accounts of human

---

<sup>395</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 85.

<sup>396</sup> See Chapter 1, Section Two.

<sup>397</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 315.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>399</sup> "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists," 27.

characters and their activities and struggles. The author cannot refrain from making moral judgments, especially when the subject matter is human behaviour.<sup>400</sup> In Murdoch's view, "[t]he author's moral judgments is the air which the reader breathes".<sup>401</sup> In these artworks, the author is able to describe the details of reality. Murdoch states: "... I would venture to say that ultimately we judge the great novelists by the quality of their awareness of others, and that for the novelist this is at the highest level the most crucial test".<sup>402</sup>

In *Zorba the Greek*, for example, Nikos Kazantzakis uses literary devices to condemn the villagers who stone and then kill a lonely widow for having a love affair with an outsider. The author's way of portraying the dramatic scene displays his disgust of the ignorance, greed, and brutality of the mob that killed her.<sup>403</sup> His description of the scene is certainly not morally neutral. So since the artist's perception of facts about the world and their evaluative judgements are intertwined, their representation of the world is essentially a moral activity. The artist's value-laden perception of reality manifests itself in their artwork. That is why Murdoch states that "... great art is analogous to moral knowledge, an absolute convergence of fact and value.... an enlightened (just, 'obedient') vision of necessity...".<sup>404</sup> Art is not just a neutral presentation of facts.

So, for Murdoch, art is inevitably fused with morality. However, this alone is not what Murdoch means by the claim that an artist is a moralist inside their artwork. In her view, for a work of art to present the artist's moral orientation or to possess some moral character is not sufficient for it to be regarded as morally educational. A good work of art is one that has *good* moral character. As explained in the previous chapter, disunity, as an essential aspect of art, is a matter of being faithful to the discontinuity, contingency, and chanciness of reality. In Murdoch's view, a good work of art should be able to embrace the reality of human life and present it in a just and truthful manner. Being able to present

---

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>402</sup> "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 281.

<sup>403</sup> See Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, trans. Carl Wildman (London: Faber, 2000).

<sup>404</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 142.

reality the way it is requires the artist to be able to ‘see’ reality the way it is. This, to Murdoch, is the artist’s moral task, because morality involves a just and loving way of seeing and perceiving the world. It is the realisation that other people also matter. They have needs, interests, and views that are worthy of our attention. We need to make an effort to see them in their own right and to develop a truth-seeking vision. In Murdoch’s view, the recognition of particular realities as existing outside of us establishes the essence of good art.<sup>405</sup> As “... a great source of revelation”, good art displays, more clearly and from different perspectives, aspects of human nature as well as the world in which we live.<sup>406</sup> As a mode of cognition or a way of perceiving the contingency and frightfulness of reality, good art represents the truth.<sup>407</sup> Murdoch says: “The question of *truth*, which we are indeed *forced* to attend to in all our doings, appears here as an aspect of the *unavoidable* nature of morality”.<sup>408</sup> So a truth-seeking and a revealing vision is at the core of both art and morality.

Accordingly, for Murdoch, art is not only “an excellent analogy of morals”, but indeed “a case of morals”.<sup>409</sup> Since a good work of art is one with good moral character, a good artist must have the same kind of virtue as a good man to be able to create a good artwork. In her view, “... the artist’s discipline includes the *exercise* of virtue: patience, courage, truthfulness, justice”.<sup>410</sup> A good artist has virtue and the capacity to see the world the way it truly is. Murdoch says: “The good artist, in relation to his art, is brave, truthful, patient, humble”.<sup>411</sup> They know that the contingent realities of the world deserve their “respectful and loving attention”, the kind of moral vision possessed by virtuous individuals.<sup>412</sup> The

---

<sup>405</sup> "The Sublime and the Good," 218.

<sup>406</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 85. See the example of Picasso’s paintings as depicted in Chapter 5.

<sup>407</sup> As discussed Chapter 5, Murdoch suggests that good art is rare, because truth is unbearable and constantly degenerating into fantasy. *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>409</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 58.

<sup>410</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 86.

<sup>411</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 84.

<sup>412</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 377.

question arises here: ‘Does a good artist really have to be a virtuous person in order to be able to create good art?’ Murdoch writes:

The good artist is a sort of image of the good man, the great artist is a sort of image of the saint. He is only a sort of image, since in his whole person he may be *a dreadful egoist*. Artists have their own specialised temptations to egoism and illusions of omnipotence. Art is power. We are all specialists in morality ... and it is difficult (impossible) for the whole man to be virtuous. But inside his work, ‘and in so far as he is an artist’, ... he can be humble and truthful and brave and inspired by a love of perfection.<sup>413</sup>

In Murdoch’s view, artists can be quite egoistic, because the power they have as artists can tempt them into thinking they are better than others. However, according to her, it is possible for an artist to be an egoist and yet to display virtue in his art. When it comes to their artwork, the good artist is a virtuous person. The egoism of a good artist is not manifested in the artwork. So a good artist, regardless of whether they are a genuinely virtuous person or ‘a dreadful egoist’, is someone who manifests virtue – humility, honesty, courage, and so on – in their art.

It is clear that a great artist can be a dreadful egoist. To this extent Murdoch is right. There are many examples of good artists who were not particularly good people in their life. Pablo Picasso is an example of a great artist with a questionable moral character. His granddaughter described him as someone who was indifferent and unsympathetic to everything outside his art. He was very destructive to the women who were significant in his life, to his children, and even to his grandchildren.<sup>414</sup> Arthur Koestler is another example of a great artist with a poor moral character. It is rather well known that Koestler – a celebrated author – had been accused of sexually assaulting a number of women, including Jill Craigie, the wife of his friend Michael Foot. Nonetheless, as John Sutherland puts

---

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 428. (My italics)

<sup>414</sup> Marie Wilson, "From Obsession to Betrayal: The Life and Art of Pablo Picasso," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 11, no. 3 (2004): 164.

it, “this monstrously unstable, incorrigibly selfish man wrote a novel which, arguably, if it did not change history, changed the way the west saw its recent history”.<sup>415</sup> Considering these examples, we can conclude that a great artist can be a bad person in the Murdochian sense of the word – unsympathetic, extremely selfish, and inattentive to other people.

These examples raise the question: ‘How can an egoist be a great artist?’ Murdoch’s answer seems to be: ‘He can be virtuous “inside his work”’. In what follows, I examine Murdoch’s claim that an artist can be a ‘dreadful egoist’ in their life and yet be an image of the good man or even the saint in their artwork. I will argue that this claim is inconsistent with central aspects of her moral theory, in particular her emphasis on moral vision.

Murdoch portrays morality as a process (or, as she calls it, ‘a pilgrimage’), which begins with the individual’s effort to break through their egoistic tendencies. ‘Egoism’ is a powerful energy that blinds the individual to the true nature of reality, and gives rise to unrealistic illusions or fantasies. What makes the moral quest a difficult journey – which is almost impossible for most people to complete successfully – is the power of egoism. In Murdoch’s view, the main requirement for being a good person is being realistic or true to life. And to be able to see reality the way it is, the individual needs to develop the right vision. As explained in Chapter 3, moral vision is a requirement for virtue, for it allows the individual to make good moral judgments. A virtuous person’s beliefs, attitudes, and emotions are in harmony. Moral vision also serves to unify the virtues. In Murdoch’s view, love is the supreme virtue, which unites all the others, for it requires knowledge of reality and the possession of a truthful vision, as well as the ability to be just and compassionate.<sup>416</sup>

The key point in Murdoch’s ethics is that in order for the individual to come closer to seeing reality the way it is, and to be just and loving, they need to go beyond their egoistic tendencies, and “[i]t is in the capacity to love, that is to

---

<sup>415</sup> John Sutherland, *The Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* (London: Profile Books, 2011), 461.

<sup>416</sup> See Chapter 3, Section Three. See also Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 73-84. And Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 55-56.

*see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is a proper goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion”.<sup>417</sup> This applies to the artist as well. Murdoch states: “Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel) ...”.<sup>418</sup> In order for an artist to be able to have the required moral vision to see reality and to be compassionate, which are to Murdoch essential qualities for a good man, and thus a good artist, they should *not* be ‘a dreadful egoist’. It follows that if an artist is extremely self-absorbed, they do not satisfy the necessary condition for perceiving and portraying reality, and their artistic creation is a medium for them to gratify their egoistic tendency and their consoling fantasy.<sup>419</sup> If the virtues are unified, one cannot lack the virtue of love and selflessness and yet possess all the other virtues, except superficially. Therefore, it seems impossible for an artist who is devoid of moral vision and compassion, and is egoistic in their everyday life, to be virtuous, that is to use right moral vision in the process of creating their artwork. Artists cannot pretend to have or portray in their artwork what they lack in real life. So Murdoch’s claim that an artist who is ‘a dreadful egoist’ should be the “image of the saint” in their work is inconsistent with her ethics of vision and the idea of the unity of the virtues.

One might argue that the artist, regardless of their personal character, must adhere to moral rules and principles in their work. In this case the artist does not have to be a good man, but they are still capable of creating an artwork with good moral character, so long as they are aware of and follow the moral rules. If morality is a matter of following rules, then it is easy to see how an artist with a morally questionable character can be a good person inside their art. Having rejected rule-based morality, this solution is not available to Murdoch. As discussed in Chapter 3, Murdoch does not advocate an ethics of rules, rather a version of virtue ethics that emphasises the individual’s vision and the unity of the virtues. And if morality is a matter of acquiring the virtues –character traits that

---

<sup>417</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 65.

<sup>418</sup> "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists," 456.

<sup>419</sup> After all, as Murdoch says, a genuine effort to see the reality of other individuals justly and lovingly should humble a person, and in this case, the artist.

are deeply embedded in one's personality – a morally bad person cannot become a moralist at once in their artwork. In other words, if acquiring the virtues is a long and arduous process, and results in profound changes in one's character, then it is impossible for an artist to be virtuous in their artwork but vicious outside of their work. It is nonsensical to claim that someone can be virtuous occasionally.

If we accept that a selfish person can be a great artist, and that an artist cannot be egoist and yet be virtuous inside his work, then we have reason to question whether Murdoch is correct in suggesting that the moral value of an artwork necessarily has a bearing on its aesthetic value.<sup>420</sup> According to her, when the moral view contained in an artwork is flawed, we should conclude that the work of art is aesthetically defective. In this case, this moral defect would count as an aesthetic blemish even if it goes unnoticed, because this blemish has the potential to be picked up by the morally sensitive audience, and as a result, to spoil their response to the work. Not only that; such a bad artwork cannot be morally educational either. Although to Murdoch, moral education is not the primary purpose of an artwork, when a narrative (for instance) succeeds in deepening the moral understanding and emotions of the audience and makes them feel pleasure and joy, she considers the narrative to be a better work of art than the ones that fail to do so.

Murdoch's assumption here seems to be that if an artwork engages one's moral understanding and emotions, it will be more captivating, and thus can be morally educational. Many of the emotional responses of the audiences are dependent on moral assessments. If a work of art provokes the wrong *moral* responses from the audience, such as approving of or adopting a morally defective view, it will fail to secure the appropriate *emotional* responses and, as a result, it

---

<sup>420</sup> This aspect of Murdoch's view resembles a philosophical view called Moderate moralism (or 'ethicism' as Berys Gaut terms this position), which is the view that many works of art address moral understanding. Although 'ethicism' and 'moderate moralism' differ in some respects, they both advocate a similar idea with regards to the relation between ethics and aesthetics. See Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, no. 3 (1996): 223-38. See also Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 182-203.

will fail to be a good work of art.<sup>421</sup> For example, an artwork promoting immoral or degrading values, such as vanity or lust, may elicit blame rather than admiration in the morally sensitive audience. In Murdoch's view, this artwork is not only morally flawed, as it promotes immoral perspectives, but also aesthetically flawed, as it fails to elicit admiration and joy in the audience.<sup>422</sup> Therefore, to Murdoch, in such cases a moral defect can be considered an aesthetic defect.

Murdoch is right in saying that in some cases a moral defect can compromise the aesthetic value of an artwork. As an example, we can consider Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, which due to its high technical quality and its revolutionary approach to cinematography is considered to be one of the best propaganda films in history. Since this film uses spectacular techniques to promote the Nazis' profoundly unethical, anti-Semitic system, and invites the audience to approve and adopt its moral approach, it can be said that the aesthetic value of this work is diminished by its obvious moral defect. So, there is no doubt that in some cases there is a direct connection between moral and aesthetic value in a work of art. However, it is not always the case. In some artworks moral defects do not necessarily detract from the aesthetic value of an artwork.

As an example, consider Murdoch's novel *The Time of the Angels*. The main character of the story, Carel Fisher, is the priest of a London church, and does not believe in the existence of God. Carel has sexual relationships with his housekeeper – a relationship that has led to the death of his wife – and with his sick niece. As the narrative goes on, we find out that the sick niece, who is willingly confined in a room in Carel's house, is actually his biological daughter. A conversation Carel has with his brother, Marcus, provides us with Carel's views, which is the key to understanding his gloomy and isolated personality and his illicit activities. Through the character of Carel, Murdoch shows a Godless universe to be extremely cold and sinful – one in which any evil act is permitted.

---

<sup>421</sup> Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism Versus Moderate Autonomism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 4 (1998): 421.

<sup>422</sup> See Chapter 5.

In his afterword to the novel, Richard Holloway makes the following insightful observation:

The planet Murdoch is a stranger, colder place, because God's death has emptied it of light and meaning. But does a godless universe have to be as cold and dark as this? If God *is* dead there are several ways to understand the event and they don't all have to freeze our hearts.<sup>423</sup>

As Holloway points out, Murdoch offers a one-sided, unsympathetic presentation of a godless world, within which there is nothing but darkness and evil that consumes both the good and the bad. This presentation does not seem to be 'just' or 'loving' in any way. It rather seems quite biased and unfair. In this narrative, almost all the characters, especially the character of Carel, seem unrealistic and exaggerated. It is hard, if not impossible, to sympathize with them or to put oneself in their shoes. Applying Murdoch's own moral standards, this narrative can be said to be morally defective, because the presentation of the situation is far from being realistic, fair, or loving. Nevertheless, the novel is still considered a good artwork. Its moral defect does not detract from its artistic value. It seems to be due to the fact that despite the exaggerated gloomy atmosphere of the narrative, it is not unintelligible. On the contrary, it seems that the moral defect of the narrative offers the audience an insight into situations or characters that they could not otherwise experience, and this is one of the aspects of the narrative that makes it artistically valuable and morally educational. The exaggerated and unrealistic plot of the story, and the evil character of the protagonist, fully engages one's imagination, and offers one a gloomy sense of enjoyment – the kind of enjoyment that Murdoch considers to be one of the main missions of art. So, as we can see in the example above, the moral defect of the novel does not count as an aesthetic defect. The novel is considered to be a great novel because of Murdoch's skill in offering a perfectly intelligible and enjoyable work of art, even if (or especially because) it requires some effort on the side of the reader. The defect of the moral character of an artwork can only be considered

---

<sup>423</sup> Holloway, Richard, "Afterword," in Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels* (London: Vintage Classics, 2008), 239-40.

an aesthetic defect if it affects its intelligibility and its enjoyability for a sensitive audience.

Another good example that can help us clarify this point further is Matthew Kieran's comparison between the *Rottgen Pietà* and Michelangelo's first *Pietà* (which was sculpted after *Rottgen Pietà*), both of which portray a grief-ridden Mary holding Christ's dead body.<sup>424</sup> Kieran explains that Mary's oversized face and her facial expression in the former work, which is a wooden sculpture, is the demonstration of horror and a desperate sadness. Christ's figure is disturbingly distorted and his wounds are exaggerated in scale. Some might find such a grotesque conception of human nature difficult to comprehend, due to the artist's exaggeration of the level of grief. Michelangelo's first *Pietà*, on the other hand, marks a radical shift in representing Christ and his sacrifice. Mary's beautiful youthful face suggests the acceptance of her sacrifice and the direction of her face towards Christ's body encourages the viewer to see Christ as cradled by his mother and fully supported in her lap.

As Kieran suggests, the attitudes conveyed in the two works and the responses they evoke in the observer are dramatically different. In the latter work, Jesus is to be mourned as a son and his sacrifice makes available forgiveness to all humans, while what the former work seeks seems to be the awakening of the feelings of guilt and responsibility for the rupture from God and the death of Jesus. Kieran argues that the moral characters of these two works are radically distinct. The nature of the violent sacrifice (portrayed in *Rottgen Pietà*) might seem very aggressive and vengeful, as the artist intends us to internalise guilt and self-mortification. This seems to be morally problematic.<sup>425</sup> The latter conception, oriented around the virtue of love, forgiveness, and mercy, is deemed more intelligible in a secular world. The conclusion Kieran draws is that the moral

---

<sup>424</sup> See Matthew Kieran, "Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 4 (1996). See also "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism," in *Art and Morality*, ed. José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>425</sup> Murdoch would also regard the feeling of guilt and self-pity aimed at by this artwork morally problematic. To her, this kind of feeling of guilt keeps attracting one's attention back to the self. Self-pity makes it hard to fix one's attention to the real situation. See Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. 89 and 99.

character of a work can affect its intelligibility, and as a result, the appreciation and evaluation of the viewer. In so far as the moral character of an artwork compromises its intelligibility, an artwork's moral character is relevant to its aesthetic value.<sup>426</sup> So as Kieran correctly argues, any work of art (especially narratives) can have a cognitive dimension that is moral. This dimension affects one's emotional response to the work, the quality of the experience the work affords, and the insight it conveys. Many works enhance our understanding of the world and give us some insight by engaging us with their morally problematic content. Kieran's claim is based on "the assumption that, for creatures such as ourselves, experience is a primary means of understanding .... This applies not only to being subject to morally bad experiences but to being implicated in them in morally problematic ways."<sup>427</sup>

So good artworks not only engage us, but demand our emotional and perceptual responses. The work fails at being good art if it does not motivate the response it aims at. Good art stimulates the individual's imagination. This directly affects the quality of their contemplation and understanding of the world. The individual's moral perceptions and emotional responses are highly dependent on their imaginative understanding of people and the world. As Kieran writes, "[even artworks] which commend, or fail to condemn, characters and states of affairs that we would judge to be morally bad can, through getting us to take up a perspective we would not otherwise entertain, enhance the value of the imaginative experience afforded".<sup>428</sup> It is partly through experiencing bad things that we understand and appreciate good things. A lack of experience deprives us of a full understanding of the world.<sup>429</sup> So, experiencing bad things in an artwork

---

<sup>426</sup> Matthew Kieran, *Revealing Art* (London: Routledge, 2005), 169-75.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-92.

<sup>428</sup> "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism," 63.

<sup>429</sup> As James Harold explains, a work of art may embrace a morally defective perspective, but that does not mean that the work itself is morally flawed. It is only wrong when we are asked not only to imagine that perspective, but also to approve of it, or to enjoy imagining it. So, according to Harold's view, it is only in either of these two cases, namely, inviting audiences to approve of a morally defective perspective, or inviting them to enjoy the experience of such a perspective, that some works of art can be considered to be morally flawed. See James Harold, "Immoralism and the Valence Constraint," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 1 (2008): 51-52.

(provided this does not affect its intelligibility) can also make possible an understanding we could not otherwise attain.

To further clarify the flaws of Murdoch's view, I return to her view of good art and bad art, and briefly explore her criticism of popular literature and film as examples of bad art. Murdoch states: "Popular literature and film argue the dullness of the good, the charm of the bad. The violent man is the hero of our time".<sup>430</sup> Murdoch suggests that popular literature and film cannot be considered good art because they are often morally flawed. She categorically rejects the idea that popular art – which is any art form intended to be received by the masses – can be morally educational, regardless of its moral character, in so far as it is aesthetically valuable. Murdoch's dismissal of popular art further demonstrates the shortcomings of her view of good art. We cannot deny that some popular film and literature lack creativity and the ability to expand one's vision. Surely some forms of art are more in-depth, detailed, challenging, and creative. However, I do not agree with Murdoch's claim that popular literature and film are ethically, and as a result aesthetically worthless because they do not accurately display reality. They may be aesthetically worthless if they fail to be sufficiently intelligible or creative or to inspire one's imagination. In other words, instead of encouraging us to see the world in a different way, they just distract us from reality. However, I would agree that some popular art is artistically valuable, even considering Murdoch's own criterion of good art. Several reasons can be given in support of this view.

To begin with, according to Murdoch's moral theory, to be moral is to be realistic and truthful. If this is the case, then we can argue that what is portrayed in some popular literature and film is indeed the 'reality' of our age. 'Moderation' and 'contentment', for instance, are traditionally considered to be moral virtues. But in today's society, an out-of-touch and self-indulgent celebrity can become the object of admiration for sections of that society. So what Murdoch considers to be bad art due to its moral flaw, such as popular film, can be in fact good art based on her own definition of good art as faithfully portraying reality. Moreover,

---

<sup>430</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 13.

reality can be dull and morally undesirable, and what is evil can be charming, as Murdoch herself maintains. Through experiencing the bad and unjust in popular film and literature the individual is given a chance to experience something that they might not otherwise experience. If the person only experiences the good and never the deceptive charm of the bad, they might miss out on the experience of a significant part of reality, which is composed of evil, and the harm and degradation of vice.

Even Murdoch herself acknowledges that on television or in the cinema, we may sometimes experience that "... art which lies can also instruct .... [that such] blunted art did convey some conception of *the facts* to a large audience".<sup>431</sup> She cannot deny the fact that what she calls 'bad art' "... displays the base aspects of human nature more clearly than anything else .... One might even say that the *exemplification* of human frailty in bad art is a clearer warning to us than its *representation* in good art".<sup>432</sup> Furthermore, it is sometimes through comparison to its opposite that the individual gets a better realisation of what is good. Experiencing the bad and its deceptive charm can deepen their understanding of the good through the comparison their mind draws between these two concepts. Therefore, while some popular literature and film cannot be regarded as good artworks, as they fail to represent reality in its purest form (in order to entertain the audience), other examples portray the everyday insignificant realities of life, while still being enjoyable, which is what Murdoch believes an artwork should do.

*Breaking Bad* (by Vince Gilligan) is an American television series which has received critical acclaim for portraying the complexities of the human psyche through its great cinematography, its bold visual style, and its engaging theme. It is the story of Walter White, a chemistry teacher, who finds out that he has a terminal cancer. When he faces his mortality, he turns to a life of crime (cooking methamphetamine) to pay for his cancer treatment, and also to provide financial stability for his loving family – his pregnant wife and their disabled son. Through its good use of cinematic technique and its interesting, unpredictable storyline,

---

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 85-86.

this television series succeeds in fully engaging the audience and inviting them to experience and reflect upon extreme situations, where evil is presented as a complex synthesis of the good and the bad. At times, one may find it difficult to distinguish the good characters from the bad ones. Even the most sinister characters could be sympathised with at some point. Facing the moral dilemmas and engaging with them emotionally and intellectually can be an unusually challenging experience for the audience of this popular television series.

Murdoch's narrow conception of good art and bad art, and her criticism of popular art (and much of modern art) has led some of her commentators to do away with this aspect of her theory. Simon Blackburn, for example, criticises Murdoch's dismissal of television as a series of trivial, momentary, and incomprehensible images or her sarcastic attitude to some silly sentimental novels. He also addresses Murdoch's uncompromising attitude to truth. He calls this "the relentless downgrading of the everyday", which seems to conflict with her own view.<sup>433</sup> As Blackburn says, "[t]he everyday and contingent include smiling at a neighbor, saving the child, alleviating the pain, earning a living, or teaching the truth".<sup>434</sup> He rejects Murdoch's understanding of reality as only what is elegant and morally agreeable. So on Blackburn's account, Murdoch's conception of good art is too narrow and excludes a great deal of artwork commonly thought to be good artworks.

My last argument against Murdoch's view of the moral evaluation of art is that there is not always a direct connection between the moral value and the aesthetic value of an artwork. There are many artworks that do not have any detectable or measurable moral character, and therefore, are not susceptible to moral evaluation. Although Murdoch takes her theory "... to apply to all the arts and not just the literary arts", there are some arts, such as some musical

---

<sup>433</sup> Simon Blackburn, "The Good and the Great: Knowledge, Virtue and Uplift in a Benighted World. A Review of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, by Iris Murdoch," *The Times Literary Supplement* (1992): 23.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24. Heather Widdows also objects to Murdoch's view and maintains that her conception of the kind of art that helps the individual in their moral life is extremely narrow, and as a result, hard to defend. This aspect of Murdoch's thought, like many other aspects of her philosophy, is directly in conflict with the prevailing contemporary view. See Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, 136.

compositions (concertos, symphonies, and so on) and non-representational arts, to which Murdoch's criterion of good art does not apply.<sup>435</sup> Much of what is purely orchestral music, for example, is normally assessed by criteria other than moral criteria. Undoubtedly, there are some musical compositions that are known for their meaningful themes, such as operas of Richard Wagner, and most significantly, his grand composition *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Many artists and philosophers of art have endeavoured to interpret this work of Wagner, which is said to have four levels: mythic, dramatic, political, and spiritual.<sup>436</sup> Wagner's work has been assessed from different perspectives, including the moral perspective. But there are some other musical compositions that cannot be evaluated morally, such as Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*. It is not the moral character of Schoenberg's work that is determinative of its artistic value, rather it is its novel way of transcending tonality and its intricate techniques. However, this music is considered to be a great work of art. It can also contribute to one's moral development, without having a good (or even bad) moral character.<sup>437</sup> Moreover, even the types of art that can have moral character, such as literature and some styles of painting, can be so complex in terms of subject matter, genre, constraints, attitudes, and the like, that critics usually find it quite hard, if not impossible, to make an ultimate moral judgment about them. Yet, critics would not hesitate to consider some of them great artworks, due to their other merits. Focusing too much on the moral character of an artwork may only cloud one's artistic sensitivity and lead one to quickly mark a morally flawed artwork down as a bad artwork.

### ***Conclusion***

I criticised Murdoch's claim that good art is art with a good moral character and that an artist must be a virtuous person "inside his work" in order to create good art. A good artist could indeed be a non-virtuous person. Acquiring

---

<sup>435</sup> Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 218.

<sup>436</sup> Roger Scruton, "Love in Wagner's Ring," in *Art and Morality*, ed. José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (London: Routledge, 2003), 143-69. See also Thomas S. Grey, *Richard Wagner and His World*, Bard Music Festival (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>437</sup> In the next Chapter I will examine the ways in which artworks can be morally educational.

the virtues is not a necessary condition for an artist to become a good artist. If we agree that an artist with good artistic vision and skill has the potential to produce a good artwork, irrespective of their moral views, then we need to allow that an artwork can be artistically valuable, regardless of its moral character. In other words, the artistic or aesthetic value of a work of art is not necessarily dependant on its moral character, as Murdoch suggests it is.

This view is consistent with the spirit of Murdoch's theory of art and morality, but avoids its flaws. It also allows us to regard a wider range of artworks as good artworks that can contribute to the individual's moral development. So, I abandon Murdoch's definition of good art and instead support the view that an artwork with a bad moral character can nevertheless be regarded as a good work of art if its bad moral character does not compromise its intelligibility and appropriateness. With this conclusion in mind, in the next chapter I will discuss the ways in which, in Murdoch's view, a good work of art can be morally educational.

## Chapter 7

### Murdoch and the Morally Educational Role of Art

#### *Introduction*

Having examined the central aspects of Murdoch's moral and aesthetic views, we are now in a position to consider the role of art in the individual's moral development. Although Murdoch occasionally alludes to the morally educational role of art, she does not discuss it systematically. Her views are either implicit in her other discussions on the topic of ethics or scattered throughout her work. So it is my goal here to show how they form a coherent and plausible position.

In this chapter, I will develop a Murdochian view of the morally educational role of art, drawing on what I consider to be central aspects of her moral and aesthetic views, as well as some of the few comments or suggestions on the topic of moral education scattered throughout her work. I will identify the various ways in which art can contribute to the individual's moral education – all, I believe, come down to the quality of the individual's 'attention' to an artwork.<sup>438</sup> As discussed previously, the character and the moral development of the individual, rather than any of their particular actions and choices, are the principal concerns of Murdoch's virtue ethics.<sup>439</sup> If the individual is successful in their moral development, namely, if they acquire the character traits commonly held to be virtues, it is very likely that what they choose to do would be what it is morally right to do. Murdoch's emphasis on moral growth leads her to adopt Simone Weil's notion of 'attention' and place it at the centre of her moral theory. She argues that virtues are acquired through one's progressive ability to silence their ego and to 'attend to' other people – that is, to appreciate other people as unique

---

<sup>438</sup> I should point out that by art I am referring to what Murdoch calls good or great art, with the modifications I suggested in Chapter 6. I should also emphasize again my view that not all good artworks can necessarily contribute to the individual's moral education. As I argued in Chapter 6, some forms of music, for example, can be considered great art and experiencing them can induce great pleasure, but they might not be morally educational in any way.

<sup>439</sup> See Chapter 2, Section One.

individuals who deserve one's effort to truly understand them, and possibly empathise with them.

In what follows, I draw on my reading of Murdoch's moral and aesthetic views to elaborate three ways in which the individual's attention to art and their aesthetic experience can lead to moral improvement: 1) Attention to art is an exercise of selflessness and love. 2) Through one's attention to beauty in art, one learns about 'the Good'. 3) Attention to art is an exercise of imagination, which plays an important role in one's moral development. It must be noted that these three routes to moral improvement are not easily separable, as they are deeply intertwined in Murdoch's work, but I will attempt to delineate them as far as possible in order to explain them more clearly.

### ***Section One***

#### ***Attention to Art without Seizing or Using it***

Murdoch maintains that a work of art triggers the attention of the individual. In her view, attention to an artwork is a pure form of moral activity and a great opportunity for moral development because: 1) It is attention directed away from the self towards the appreciation of beauty (the exercise of selflessness) and 2) It is attention to something without seizing or using it (an exercise of love and truthfulness). I will explain each of these points in turn.

In Chapter 2, I explained that the concept of attention plays an important role in Murdoch's moral theory. In her view, the primary object of one's attention is one's ego or self and its misleading consoling fantasies. We are naturally egoistic, and this is the main impediment to our moral growth. One's fantasizing ego, Murdoch says, is "[t]he chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) ...".<sup>440</sup> Attention directed to one's ego prevents one from seeing other people free of one's misconceptions and prejudices. Since, on Murdoch's account, the essential component of moral reasoning is acquiring knowledge (i.e. the right perception) of the world, being able to see the world untainted by one's personal fantasies is a necessary condition for one's moral growth. Therefore, for Murdoch,

---

<sup>440</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 57.

moral improvement requires “... a long deep process of unselfing” – freeing oneself from selfish desires and fantasies.<sup>441</sup> This means that we need to make a conscious effort to divert our attention towards that which is not the self. Attention without regard for the self diminishes the self in favour of the object being attended to. It acknowledges the distance and otherness of things, and respects them in their otherness. It is only through re-orientation away from the self that one begins to see reality for what it really is.

In Murdoch’s view, in creating or contemplating a work of art the individual exercises the same sort of attention, the primary object of which is not the self, but rather something separate from it. Murdoch writes:

... 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. This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound.... Beauty is that which attracts this particular sort of unselfish attention. It is obvious here what is the role, for the artist or spectator, of exactness and good vision: un sentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention.<sup>442</sup>

Attending to a work of art is an effective way of exercising detachment from the self and its desires, as art is capable of redirecting the individual’s attention towards it. One of the main qualities of such attention is that it is the exercise of coming upon an object and not using or seizing it. Artworks are not to be treated as things of utility, namely, as having instrumental value. The individual is not supposed to use an artwork the same way as they use an object like a bookshelf or a cup. Rather, they should contemplate, cherish, and enjoy the artwork. Careful attention to a piece of music (say Beethoven’s “Sonata Pathétique”) can emotionally, and even intellectually, affect the individual and strip them of their day-to-day concerns and preoccupations without being used or

---

<sup>441</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 54.

<sup>442</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 64.

possessed in the ordinary sense. We actually enjoy, value, and cherish such a piece of music *because* it cannot be used. It is distant and unattainable, yet capable of fully engaging the audience. Good artworks are revered for being distant and separate. It is this distance between the self and the artwork that provides one with the space required for contemplation. Stepping back and attending carefully to an artwork as something that is not ‘for me’ lays the foundation for making a habit of looking beyond the self, towards what is other, disinterestedly and unselfishly.

So one of the crucial moral aspects of attention to art on Murdoch’s account is the exercise of being fully present to what is not the self and what does not have any instrumental value to the self. In her view, this is how a virtuous person perceives other individuals. She says: “The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing”.<sup>443</sup> For Murdoch, it is vital that we do not treat other people as things whose value to us is only instrumental. When one allows other people to be ‘other’, separate and different, one creates the opportunity and the space required for the self to attend to the other person and to see them in their own right, where this attention is not influenced by the self’s prejudices and misconceptions. By not treating other people as merely having instrumental value, and respecting them despite their ‘otherness’, one learns to see them in their own right. One’s quality of consciousness when attending to other individuals should be the same as one’s quality of consciousness when attending to an artwork. As Murdoch says, “... if the quality of consciousness matters, then anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue”.<sup>444</sup> Exercising detachment through selfless attention is indeed “... one of the most difficult and central of all virtues”.<sup>445</sup> That is why Murdoch says: “Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention

---

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 93.

to nature: something which is easy to name but very hard to achieve”.<sup>446</sup> Thus, the exercise of selfless attention, or attention without seizing and using, in attending to art is an exercise in acting virtuously.

For Murdoch, the disposition to be able to disregard one’s self in order to be able to see the other is indeed the highest virtue – the virtue she calls love.<sup>447</sup> Loving attention is another way of attending to something without using it. Murdoch states: “The essence of both [art and morals] is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality ...”.<sup>448</sup> And again, [l]ove is the imaginative *recognition of*, that is *respect for*, this otherness.<sup>449</sup> Love, as the highest form of attention, is seeing and acknowledging the distance between the self and the other (an artwork or another person) and respecting it. It is surrendering to “... something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness”.<sup>450</sup> Love is not only knowing that the other person does not merely exist for my use, and is different and separate from me, but is also appreciating and welcoming this difference. The kind of love learned through attention to art is different from ordinary human love, which is, for Murdoch, “... normally too profoundly possessive and also too ‘mechanical’ to be a place of vision”.<sup>451</sup> However, love learned through art is the highest form of love, because it is impersonal. In this sense art has a unique position. Murdoch’s conception of impersonal love learned through art is an elevated perception of reality, which automatically leads to one’s humility by surrendering to this reality. For Murdoch, it is a quest for the real.

Truthfulness and a commitment to reality are obligations for both the artist and the audience of the art. Murdoch says: “Art shows us the only sense in which the permanent and incorruptible is compatible with the transient; and whether

---

<sup>446</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>447</sup> See Chapter 2 (especially Section Two).

<sup>448</sup> Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 215.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid., 216. (My italics)

<sup>450</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 86.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 73.

representational or not, it reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see”.<sup>452</sup> Love is the submission to reality – “... the detail of the world”.<sup>453</sup> Through attending to art, the individual better captures the contingent and transient reality of life. As Murdoch says, attention to art “... enhances our ability to see the detail of our surroundings”.<sup>454</sup> Through attending to art, one recognises the chanciness and pointlessness of life and becomes at peace with this reality. The perceiver of art enjoys experiencing the detail of random realities of life boldly portrayed in an artwork. For example, Paul Gauguin’s painting *Still-Life with Three Puppies* depicts the mundane event of three puppies drinking or eating from a pan. In the foreground, there are three goblets and some fruit. The domestic elements of this painting, objects that tend to be overlooked in day-to-day life, become the centre of one’s attention when portrayed thus by the artist. Through attending to the mundane realities that are portrayed in this painting through Gauguin’s artistic vision, one takes pleasure in experiencing the state of being fully present and attentive to some contingent realities of the world. So learning to fully attend to art teaches the individual the virtue of love, which is the state of appreciating the reality of others in their otherness – and not as a ‘thing’ - and accepting and respecting this reality. By being fully present in the face of an artwork, one learns to attend to and enjoy the beauty of the artwork, which according to Murdoch, is an analogy of the Good. In what follows I will show how attending to beauty can become a morally educational experience.

## ***Section Two***

### ***Attention to Beauty as an Analogy of the Good***

In Murdoch’s view, attending to art and appreciating the beauty therein is another way art can contribute to one’s moral education. She draws our attention to the close relation between beauty and the Good and claims that the appreciation of beauty is a pointer to the appreciation of the Good. Murdoch writes:

---

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>454</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 330.

Beauty is a clue to good. Love is desire for good, virtue is being *in love* with good. As we refine our conception of beauty we discover good .... Our desire for beauty leads to and becomes our desire for perfection .... Beauty can be an image of good, and thus a way to good; or a substitute for it.<sup>455</sup>

In the context of Murdoch's work, appreciation of beauty (in art and nature) is conducive to appreciation of the Good.<sup>456</sup> Learning to attend to beauty, especially in art, is an exercise of obedience to reality or the Good. As I will explain, 'obedience' is a moral concept referring to the state of loving attention, or the state of being fully present to the object of attention.

As discussed previously, Murdoch argues that in an era where the concept of God and the institution of religion have lost much of their authority, the individual identifies with their own inexhaustible power of will.<sup>457</sup> With the individual's will as determinative of their moral values, morality becomes relative and dependent on the individual's conditioning. Murdoch attempts to salvage morality from subjectivity by giving the Good the power that once belonged to God. God, as Murdoch understands it, "... contains the certainty of its own reality. God is an object of love which uniquely excludes doubt and relativism".<sup>458</sup> For Murdoch, however, traditional religions and the role 'God' plays in them contribute primarily to separating the individual from reality and consoling them by erroneously attributing meaning and purpose to life. While Murdoch does not believe in the God of traditional religions, she claims:

There is ... something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things which automatically suggests that 'there is more than this'. The 'there is more than this', if it is not to be corrupted by some sort of quasi-theological finality, must

---

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 343-44.

<sup>456</sup> Murdoch says: "Beauty is the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and [sic] change of consciousness". *The Sovereignty of Good*, 82.

<sup>457</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>458</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 62.

remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were, a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form. But it seems to me that the spark is real, and that great art is evidence of its reality.<sup>459</sup>

In Murdoch's view, when we look more closely at human virtues and the compassion individuals exercise towards each other, we feel that there is more to life than this. For her, such a conviction is not only intelligible, but also necessary, because submitting to the authority of something beyond human will humbles the individual and provides them with values that are real and exist independently of their personal and psychological conditioning. Murdoch advocates a version of moral realism, according to which the transcendental concept of the Good is the objective condition for all moral experiences and moral judgments. In her view, the Good is "part of the world", and not just "a movable label affixed to the world".<sup>460</sup> She compares the Good with the image of the Sun in Plato's allegory of the Cave, as the ultimate source of light, which leads the individual in the direction of moral perfection. The Good does not exist in the same way that other ordinary things do, yet it is present in almost all the individual's encounters with the world. Yet, while the transcendental Good exists in every experience of the world, it is too abstract and elusive to be apprehended fully.<sup>461</sup> The Good in its abstract and perfect form is not fully comprehensible to the human mind. This is what makes the attempt to gain an understanding of the Good distinctive. That is why Murdoch resorts to 'beauty' as an analogy of the Good that can provide guidance to the understanding of the Good.

Murdoch argues that just like the Good, beauty in its perfection is abstract and incomprehensible, yet attractive and powerful. These qualities make it a perfect pointer to the Good. However, despite the resemblance between the two, beauty is generally more *visible*. For most people, it is usually easier to identify, attend to, and to appreciate beauty than the Good. Murdoch writes:

---

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>461</sup> See Chapter 1, Section One.

It is as if we can see beauty itself in a way in which we cannot see goodness itself .... I can *experience* the transcendence of the beautiful, but (I think) not the transcendence of the good. Beautiful things contain beauty in a way in which good acts do not exactly contain good, because beauty is partly a matter of the senses. So if we speak of good as transcendence we are speaking of something rather more complicated and which cannot be experienced.<sup>462</sup>

In its absolute form beauty shares the indestructible and incorruptible nature of the Good.<sup>463</sup> However, beauty and its uplifting role in human life is physically more accessible than the Good. Murdoch says: “We see and love beauty more readily than we love good, it is the spiritual thing to which we are most immediately and instinctively attracted”.<sup>464</sup> Individuals appreciate the beauty of a tulip garden more easily than a person’s good intentions, because the beauty of the flowers is more a matter of appearance that can be perceived by senses. Similarly, the aesthetic features of an artwork can quite easily be perceived due to their sensory qualities.

We may object that while it seems true that most people do not have difficulty appreciating the beauty of a red tulip or sunset over the ocean, this is not always the case when it comes to art. Recognising beauty, especially in some modern and contemporary works of art that push the boundaries of the traditional understanding of beauty, such as Luciano Brio’s electro-acoustic compositions or Mark Rothko’s non-figurative paintings, is not as easy as Murdoch seems to suggest. Many people do not appreciate the beauty of such artworks in a way that a trained artist or an art critic would. Moreover, for Murdoch, art cannot help but to beautify and charm. Even “the misery of the world is beautiful”, when depicted in the form of art.<sup>465</sup> In art, “[h]ell itself it turns to favour and to prettiness”.<sup>466</sup> Here, one cannot help but wonder how the misery of the world is supposed to be

---

<sup>462</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 58.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 14.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 122.

seen as 'beautiful' when depicted in art, and how this beauty is accessible to the audience of art. As discussed in Chapter 5, for Murdoch tragedy is the best example of great art that is loyal to the meaningless, but beautiful, miseries of life. In her view, "Goya's 'horrors of war' [for example] are terrifying but beautiful. Great art is beautiful..."<sup>467</sup>

Murdoch's point can be explained by separating the task of the artist in creating, and the audience in receiving, an artwork. When discussing the appreciation of beauty in art, she primarily emphasises the quality of 'attention', which is paid by an audience to an artwork. Murdoch uses Simone Weil's concept of 'obedience' to demonstrate the significant task of the audience in receiving art. Murdoch says: "The contingent can become spiritually significant, even beautiful, as in art, as in Simone's Weil's idea of the beauty of the world as an image of obedience".<sup>468</sup> Obedience, as Murdoch puts it, is "realism exposed to good".<sup>469</sup> It involves acquiring the discipline to fully receive the object of attention. It is a patient and loving attention towards what is unintelligible and pointless. The individual does not need to know the purpose of life and its miseries to be able to attend to it carefully and lovingly. In the state of obedience, the individual resists their preconceptions and prejudices. They just submit and accept reality the way it is. Obedience is submitting to necessity. It "... ideally teaches a position where there is no choice".<sup>470</sup> Even though "... the evils and the miseries of human life are not beautiful or attractive ...", the virtue of fully submitting to the contingent reality makes the reality presented in art look beautiful.<sup>471</sup> Murdoch writes:

Tragedy then would be a (unique) moralising or redeeming of the beautiful. Only within a high morality can the spectacle of terrible human suffering become a thing of beauty. If only saints can watch awful pain without some subtle degradation or evasion, then tragedy might be a temporary, perhaps edifying, simulation of

---

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 477.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>470</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 39.

<sup>471</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 122.

sanctity .... Fear of the contingent, fear of chance, of the dreadful machinery of human fate, certainly seems to be in place here.<sup>472</sup>

On Murdoch's view, in experiencing beautiful things, especially works of art, "... the sense of separateness from the temporal process is connected perhaps with concepts of perfection of form and 'authority' which are not easy to transfer into the field of morals".<sup>473</sup> When a person attends to a painting or a piece of music, the quality of their attention is usually different from that of attending to a 'useful' object. As discussed earlier, most individuals attend to an artwork impartially and without an expectation of any gain in the ordinary sense. They experience a sense of complete presence, due to the authority of beauty, which may not be fully conceived. They are fully obedient to the object of their attention. They are impartial and unbiased. So to be able to appreciate the beauty of an artwork, one needs to submit fully to it.

As well as obedience, which is a moral concept referring to the quality of attention, the audience is also required to develop an artistic vision and sensitivity to the aesthetic features of an artwork. Murdoch does not emphasise this point in her work. Yet it seems that reading a tragedy can become a redeeming experience only when the reader has developed the capacity to *recognise* its excellence and is ready to submit to its beauty. It is not the case that every person has the artistic vision to see the beauty in an artwork. An insensitive and untrained audience may not be able to fully grasp the beauty of an artwork, as they lack training in art appreciation or aesthetics. Many people do not have the capacity to appreciate an outstanding work of art. For example, by looking at an abstract painting, such as Kandinsky's *On White II*, a person who lacks the required artistic sensitivity and training might only see some thick black lines, both curved and straight, vertical yellow and red rectangles, a few circles, and a multitude of coloured lines and shapes scattered over the canvas, but no beauty. In some abstract paintings the artist draws the attention of the audience to aspects of reality that may be taken for granted, such as light and colour. By bringing some aspects of reality out of their

---

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>473</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 58.

context or portraying them from unusual angles, the artist provides the audience with a completely different perspective. This makes the experience of the abstract art in question a novel and educational experience for the audience. Yet again, to appreciate beauty, especially in these forms of art, a person needs to train themselves in the arts. They need to develop the vision necessary for appreciating reality and its beauty in art. For example, a person might find the huge sculpture of *Maman* by Louise Bourgeois venomous and terrifying. They might only experience the negative emotions of agony, disgust, and repugnance. It is also helpful here to consider an example discussed by Matthew Kieran, namely, Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, which consists of three large canvases. While acknowledging the artistic value of the triptych, Kieran describes Bacon's work as follows:

The figure on the left [canvas] is crouching on a table, huddling itself in a bird-like manner, its vaguely human face a quarter on and turned away. The central figure is side on, the elongated neck stretching from the bulbous, ostrich-like body, bringing its face in full confrontation with the viewer. The threatening, repulsive, mouth of lips and teeth is somewhat agape, and where there should be eyes the face is bandaged. The mouth emerges directly from the neck rather than belonging to a distinct face. The third canvas represents a sharpened, cow-like body, its elongated neck bringing a viciously howling mouth into three quarter view.<sup>474</sup>

And thus it goes on. The sensations one feels when viewing this work are of horror, disgust, and pain. It is not easy to see any 'beauty' in such a work of art. However, an artist or a person who is trained in aesthetic appreciation and has the required artistic sensitivity and vision is expected to be able to appreciate the beauty of such a unique work of art. Here, it may help to explain what we mean by the 'beauty' that is perceived by a sensitive audience in such work as Bacon's.

---

<sup>474</sup> Kieran, *Revealing Art*, 185.

As Derek Matravers notes, there is a difference between an artwork that is merely ‘pretty’ and one that is ‘beautiful’.<sup>475</sup> A pretty artwork is one that merely presents a pleasing appearance and nothing more. A beautiful artwork, on the other hand, does not simply display a pleasing appearance but contains some sort of value or aesthetic merit. Artists and art critics have differing opinions as to where this value lies. For example, some artists and critics hold that a beautiful artwork is one that is intellectually intriguing, whereas others hold the value lies in its originality and creativeness. We can build on Murdoch’s discussions of art in order to see what this ‘valuable thing’ – namely what makes an artwork beautiful – is. As discussed in the previous chapter, for Murdoch the main reason an artwork is worthwhile (i.e. a great work of art) is that it has a good moral character. However, I argued that with some modification of her view, we can say that the beauty of an artwork lies in its truthfulness and loyalty to reality. Murdoch writes:

Art is informative and entertaining, it condenses and clarifies the world, directing attention upon particular things. This intense showing, this bearing witness, of which it is capable is detested by tyrants who always persecute or demoralise their artists. Art illuminates accident and contingency and the general muddle of life, the limitations of time and the discursive intellect, so as to enable us to survey complex or horrible things which would otherwise appal us.<sup>476</sup>

Loyalty to reality, or as Murdoch calls it, ‘realism’, is the main aspect of beauty in art. In other words, beauty is an aspect of realism presented in an artwork.<sup>477</sup> If the artwork is true to life, and the perceiver possesses the vision necessary for appreciating the aspect of reality presented in the work, then they can appreciate the beauty of it. That is why Murdoch says: “We enjoy art, even

---

<sup>475</sup> Derek Matravers, *Introducing Philosophy of Art in Eight Case Studies* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 105-08.

<sup>476</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 8.

<sup>477</sup> An artwork that has no aesthetic merit but an appealing appearance is an instance of what Murdoch calls ‘bad art’. Bad artworks are not intellectually or morally stimulating, which means they lack any aesthetic value. See Chapter 6.

simple art, because it disturbs us in deep often incomprehensible ways”.<sup>478</sup> So, being obedient as well as obtaining artistic vision is the task of the perceiver of art, while portraying reality is the task of the artist. As Murdoch puts it, the audience must “... be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it”.<sup>479</sup>

Now I return to Murdoch’s initial claim that beauty is more accessible than the Good, which is why learning to attend to beauty shows one how to attend to the Good. We saw that when in a state of obedience, individuals are impartial and unbiased. However, in Murdoch’s view, when it comes to other people rather than works of art, it is not easy for an individual to be as impartial. When the object of attention is a human relationship, “... clarity of thought and purity of attention becomes harder and more ambiguous...”.<sup>480</sup> In human relationships, the individual’s ego stands more strongly in the way of a loving and just attention to other people. In these cases, individuals seem to be more affected by their social and psychological background and environment. For example, a woman may tend to be less empathetic to women than men and to judge them quite harshly, as the result of her past experience of being constantly bullied by some of the girls when at school. Yet when the same person attends to Edgar Degas’ “The Dance Class”, she may sincerely enjoy the beauty of the way the girls in the picture are depicted, and imagine the relationships between them in a less prejudiced way (for example, she would not be imagining the dancers as bitter rivals, but would imagine that they shared a camaraderie). It is the accessible authority of the beauty of the artwork, and its apparent purposelessness, that makes it easier for the individual to fully submit to it. In Murdoch’s view, these characteristics make beauty a good ‘starting-point’ to the individual’s appreciation of the Good in human relationships, and therefore, to their moral development.<sup>481</sup>

So that is what Murdoch means by the accessibility of beauty compared to the accessibility of the Good. It seems to be easier for the individual to attend to

---

<sup>478</sup> Murdoch, "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," 10.

<sup>479</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

an artwork, wholeheartedly and open-mindedly, than to attend to other individuals. For example, in the abovementioned Degas' painting "The Dance Class", the beauty of the colours and forms immediately attract the attention of the observer. One does not need to know much about the context of the painting – the location of the rehearsal room, the relationships of the girls depicted in the painting, the poster on the wall and so on – to be able to be fully present and attentive to the artwork. Attending to such an artwork can immediately enhance the individual's mood and give them a positive feeling. It can instantly clear the mind of the individual of their exasperating preoccupations and engagements. Regardless of whether the observer understands or knows much about this artwork, they still can take pleasure in it, if they obediently attend to it.

So practising such unpossessive, loving attention to art (obedience) is one of the most effective ways for the individual to make moral progress. Obedience to art and its beauty is a moral practice, the exercise of which helps one to learn to attend to the reality of other individuals beyond one's selfish desires and judgments. In Murdoch's view, attention to beauty in art and the enjoyment of that beauty is a form of love – a pure and impartial form of attention.<sup>482</sup> The love of beauty is a clue to the love of the Good, "... since such love is naturally, or readily, pure and unpossessive".<sup>483</sup> Murdoch suggests that "... a love of beauty [is] something spiritual, as itself a love of truth and of virtue *and* a capacity ... for virtuous and truthful love".<sup>484</sup> Murdoch refers to the love of beauty as something spiritual, due to its quality of being an unpossessive love of something impersonal. It is a detached, selfless attention to something that cannot be possessed.

Nonetheless, as discussed previously, since a work of art is created by individuals, it is very likely to be distorted by their egoism.<sup>485</sup> "To silence and expel self" is, for Murdoch, a crucial task of the producer of art, which "demands a moral discipline".<sup>486</sup> For her, most artworks, are products of human fantasy, a

---

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>483</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 16.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>485</sup> See Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>486</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

system of energy aiming at the proliferation of the ego.<sup>487</sup> The development of imagination is the remedy to the natural egoistic fantasies of the artist and the audience, and it is this development of imagination, which is the main requirement to attaining a real vision of the Good. This is the third way in which art for Murdoch is morally educational, and the last point I am going to discuss in this chapter.

### ***Section Three***

#### ***Attention to Art to Develop a Stronger Imagination***

I explained in Chapter 4 that Murdoch's Platonic and Kantian influences lead her to claim that morality is the creative task of imagination. Murdoch refers to the activity of imagination as something we all do in our dealings with different people and different events, and it is this activity "... which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual".<sup>488</sup> In this sense, "we are all artists".<sup>489</sup> For Murdoch, in the process of moral development, people use their imagination to picture different possibilities in each situation and to destroy their biased and unfair images of reality. If the individual possesses a strong imagination, it is more likely that they can picture the effects of their actions on other people more clearly. They might also be able to picture what other people are going through and why they do what they do, and so be able to empathise with them. Being able to imagine all these different possibilities prevents the individual from judging others too quickly and unjustly. So cultivating a strong imagination helps us in our moral improvement.

As I have already, when one's act of imagining is in danger of being influenced by one's egoistic inclinations, it is called 'fantasy'.<sup>490</sup> Although we are all to some extent able to imagine different aspects of different situations, our imagination is more or less polluted by our selfish desires, because, according to Murdoch, the human mind is strongly inclined to fantasy, or egocentric

---

<sup>487</sup> Ibid., 83 and 65. See also Chapter 5 of this thesis.

<sup>488</sup> "The Darkness of Practical Reason," 198.

<sup>489</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 322.

<sup>490</sup> See Chapter 4, Sections Two and Three.

imagination. While the creative imagination paves the path to experiencing reality, fantasy distorts reality and clouds our judgment. So there is a close relation between the activity of imagination and one's vision of reality. Murdoch famously says: "I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort".<sup>491</sup> The more attentive the individual is to reality and the clearer their vision of reality, the better they can imagine different possibilities – the possibilities that are more likely to be actually the case. Also, the better one is able to imagine different possibilities, the more likely it is that one can imagine the reality of the situation.

Considering the important role imagination plays in the individual's moral understanding and moral judgments, I will show how on Murdoch's account, art can play a significant role in the individual's moral growth through strengthening their imagination. As Murdoch puts it, "[art] can stretch the imagination, enlarge the vision and strengthen the judgment".<sup>492</sup> By imaginatively presenting different aspects of reality, an artwork is capable of capturing the attention of the audience and inviting them to experience different aspects of reality in their imagination. This is the first way that art can contribute to the individual's moral education: by enlarging their imagination. Another way art can do this is through showing the individual how to use the images and metaphors created by their imagination to achieve a better grasp of reality. This is rooted in Murdoch's conviction that "[i]magery, metaphor, ... [as] an important part of human learning is an ability both to generate and to judge and understand the imagery which helps us to interpret the world".<sup>493</sup> In what follows, I will discuss these two points, and explain that both of them ultimately lead the individual to become more sensitive and more empathic to other people.

As has been claimed in the previous chapter, Murdoch's view is that a good work of art is one with a good moral character.<sup>494</sup> A work of art with a bad

---

<sup>491</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 35-6.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-8.

<sup>493</sup> *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 215. See also Chapter 5 of this thesis.

<sup>494</sup> See Chapter 6.

moral character may lead its perceiver (especially in case of literature) to develop an immoral view. However, I argued that appreciating a work of art with a bad moral character is not necessarily tantamount to endorsing and adopting the immoral position presented in the work. Any work of art, regardless of its moral character, can have great aesthetic value and can contribute to the individual's moral growth. It can do so by enlarging their imagination. As Kieran argues, a work of art with a bad moral character allows us to experience bad things in our imagination. Instead of having to experience such bad things in reality or never experience them, one gets the opportunity to experience these things in one's imagination and learn about those aspects of reality. This can help the individual expand their imagination, as it enables them to experience things they would not otherwise experience. However, as Kieran continues, experiencing the bad character of artwork can only be morally educational *if* the individual is capable of suspending their actual moral judgment, or *if* they are able to entertain the incorrect moral judgment of the artwork in their imagination without endorsing it.<sup>495</sup>

So most great works of art are capable of capturing the individual's imagination, and providing them with experiences (good or bad) they would not otherwise experience. However, a specific experience might not be what the individual would morally endorse. In this case, they should try to suspend their judgment. They should not allow their moral judgment to affect their aesthetic evaluation, if it does not affect the intelligibility of their experience. They can use this opportunity to experience something different in their imagination, which is an aspect of reality that they would normally avoid. This can give them a better understanding of what they do not approve of, without having to actually experience it in real life, as they would be experiencing it in their imagination. This helps their imagination grow. Gregory Currie puts this point nicely when he says,

... it is often hard for us to sustain an imaginative exploration of a complex situation. That is where fictions come in. Fictions can act

---

<sup>495</sup> Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism," 67-8.

as aids to imagination – holding our attention, making a situation vivid for us.... They can help us enter empathically into characters, make their choices, pursue their goals....<sup>496</sup>

In narrative art the reader experiences in their imagination, the personal journeys of the characters, and pictures the different situations from the perspective of those characters. The individual gets to experience vicariously the rewards or punishments, which are the consequences of the actions of the characters. For example, in Murdoch's novel *Bruno's Dream*, the reader can imagine the dreadful side of life through the vision of a dying old man. They can experience vicariously the emotions of a housekeeper in an unhappy love triangle; the fantasies of a happily married woman who yet desires another man; and the illusions of a simple drunken man who pursues love in places he should not. This gives the individual an insight into the lives of other people. They can experience what the world is like from the perspective of all these different characters.

It is not only narrative art, but also other forms of art, such as painting, that can allow the individual to experience life from different perspectives in their imagination. With regards to his work *The Potato Eaters*, which is a depiction of the hard lives of peasants, Van Gogh writes:

It would be wrong, I think, to give a peasant picture a certain conventional smoothness. If a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam – all right, that's not unhealthy; if a stable smells of dung – alright, that belongs to a stable; if the field has an odour of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano or manure – that's healthy, especially for city people. Such pictures may teach them something. But to be perfumed is not what a peasant picture needs.<sup>497</sup>

As Van Gogh's description of his depiction of village life suggests, it is through the revealing of the rough, possibly unpleasant or unfamiliar reality of

---

<sup>496</sup> Currie, in Levinson aesthetics and ethics. 163-64.

<sup>497</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: With Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence*, 3 vols. (Boston: Thames and Hudson, 1999), Vol II. 370.

peasants' lives that the viewer gains some insight into their lives and gets to experience things in their imagination that they would not otherwise experience. In Murdoch's view, experiencing different examples of people and events and experiencing their vulnerabilities and the contingency of their positions in one's imagination shows that one's moral position can have a very unclear and shifting quality. By her lights, if one's imagination is trained through engagement with different artworks, it is more prepared to picture different possibilities in real life situations. Then the individual avoids the mistake of taking their first assumption as an ultimate judgment.

Artists use images and metaphors created by their imaginations to express the most serious realities of life. In Murdoch's view, the imagination is where the aesthetic and the moral are fused, as they are both concerned with the realities of life and other individuals. Murdoch says: "Moral imagination is partly aesthetic, it is a place where the aesthetic is moralised".<sup>498</sup> The individual's thinking is a mixture of figurative and non-figurative thoughts, or as Murdoch puts it, "[a]t deep levels metaphor and perception merge".<sup>499</sup> Seeing the reality of other people is one's moral task and one cannot help but use metaphors and pictures in one's imagination in order to access reality. Through the experience of art the individual learns the state of *seeing as*, namely the metaphorical (figurative, by the use of image or imagery) confrontation with the world. Murdoch says:

The art object points beyond itself, the world is seen beyond it, somewhat as the artist saw it when he attempted his statement, although of course he is not just copying the world. The art object is porous or cracked, another reality flows through it, it is in tension between a clarified statement and a confused pointing, and is in danger if it goes too far either way. Much modern art instinctively tends to abandon complete clear statement and complete separate

---

<sup>498</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 329.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

object in favour of a merging of art into the continuity of the world

.....<sup>500</sup>

Art shows the individual how to understand the world through metaphors. For Murdoch, metaphors are “fundamental modes of understanding”.<sup>501</sup> They are present in many different aspects of the individual’s thinking. Carefully attending to an artwork teaches the individual an in-depth figurative grasp of the world. Art shows the individual the confused layered aspects of everyday reality and invites them to see and picture the complexity of life. It asks the individual not to settle on one picture in their imagination, but to try to move on to what may be a better grasp of the reality presented in them. It is only through metaphorical understanding that the individual can have a deeper grasp of reality. Moreover, in Murdoch’s view, “[o]ur understanding of a higher morality than that which comes easily to us tends to be intuitive and pictorial, we live all the time in semi-pictorial modes of awareness”.<sup>502</sup> To put it differently, “... our moral experience shares in the peculiar density of art, and in its imaginative cognitive activity”.<sup>503</sup> In a sense, for Murdoch, being realistic is to go beyond what is simply seen and to attend to and to get imaginatively engaged with a deeper reality. A strong imagination allows the individual to have a better realisation of ‘the Good’, as the Good in its absolute form is beyond explanation or definition. Normally, when the individual speaks about something being good, they have a faint understanding of what ‘the Good’ is. If they have a stronger imagination, however, they can better picture the Good *as* something beyond, something perfect, something desirable. Through the power of imagination they can imagine the Good as perfection and experience its attraction. It motivates them and gives them a better sense of direction in their moral life. This is how imagination structures the world. Murdoch states: “Imagination suggests the searching, joining, light-seeking, semi-figurative nature of the mind’s work, which prepares and forms the consciousness for action”.<sup>504</sup>

---

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 323.

Art does not teach one how to behave, but how to imagine different possibilities of how the world could be and then decide how to behave. In fact, the choice comes naturally.

So attending to art helps the individual expand their imagination by experiencing diverse aspects of reality. It also trains their imagination to enable a more accurate and in-depth grasp of reality by better picturing those aspects of it that are not understandable except by the use of images and metaphors. The artist's honest depiction of circumstances and people that are not normally within the experiences of the audience contributes to the depth of their imaginings. Through attempting to imagine different possibilities, the individual learns to examine critically their initial judgments, and even suspend their judgment in some cases. Furthermore, a strong imagination allows the individual to put themselves in another person's place and consider different possible explanations for why people are behaving the way they are. The individual becomes more sensitive towards other people's needs. That is why Murdoch considers imagination as "a moral discipline of the mind" and says:

... imagination appears as a restoration of freedom, cognition, the effortful ability to see what lies before one more clearly, more justly, to consider new possibilities, and to respond to good attachments and desires which have been in eclipse. This effort may be compared with that of 'composing' and 'holding' a difficult work of art in one's attention, an effort which is similar in the good artist and in the good client. (Teaching art is teaching morals.) 'Be more sympathetic, imagine her situation, see it from her point of view.' Fairly everyday advice. Imagination is here a moral discipline of the mind ...<sup>505</sup>

Most art has the power to capture the individual's imagination. Art pictures imaginative possibilities that are based on reality. Oftentimes, carefully attending to other people and imagining their needs and intentions are difficult tasks. Having a stronger imagination and the ability to imagine different

---

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 322.

possibilities fosters sensitivity and compassion in people, because they can better imagine and feel what the other individual is experiencing. Lack of a strong imagination and sensitivity is one of the reasons an individual inflicts pain on others. Consider the following scenario: Tim's grandmother – who is quite unwell and vulnerable – asks him to visit her tomorrow. He promises her that he will go to her place first thing in the morning. The next morning, Tim's friend comes over unannounced for a chat. Tim thinks to himself that he can visit his grandmother another day. He does not like disappointing people, so he does not tell his friend about his initial intention to visit his grandmother, as he does not want to disappoint him by refusing his visit. He does not even inform his grandmother that he will not visit her that day, again, because he does not like to disappoint people. Murdoch can say that the reason why Tim can so easily break his promise to his grandmother is that he does not have a strong enough imagination to be able to imagine the possible consequences of his decision – the grandmother feeling very lonely and sad by Tim's apparent abandonment of her; her becoming extremely worried about Tim for not showing up, and so on. Tim does not intend to inflict so much pain on his grandmother, but his lack of ability to imagine her condition makes his decision morally wrong. If Tim had developed a stronger imagination through attending to art, for example, it would not be too hard for him to associate the disappointment he would feel if he was stood up with that of his grandmother.

Art, then, can deepen and widen the individual's imaginative understanding of other people across different times and cultures. An exercise of imagination enables the individual to become more sensitive to other people and their emotions and needs, by helping them to picture what other people may be going through. Individuals can imagine the situation from the perspective of the other person. They can think beyond the present moment and relate the past to the present, and the future, and thus imagine the possible effects of their decisions and actions on other people. They are better able to imagine the unarticulated aspects of personality and motives of the other individual. The receiver of art learns to pause for a moment and shift their attention away from themselves and to see other people from a completely different viewpoint, to be more empathic toward them, and to judge them more fairly. This, for Murdoch, is virtue – "... really

apprehending that other people exist".<sup>506</sup> Attending to an artwork helps the individual to develop a stronger imagination that can picture the conditions of other individuals more realistically and more lovingly. This is a moral ability that is very difficult to acquire solely through life experience. For example, a person might never experience village life, yet they can experience a particular imaginative depiction of it through the artist's techniques presented in a painting such as *The Potato Eaters*, the bold and skilful strokes of brush on the canvas, the application of dark and neutral colours, and the artistic vision manifested in the way of setting the scene and depicting the peasants' lives. This not only helps them experience what they would not otherwise experience, but also allows them to be more careful in judging the lives of peasants, in particular, and in general, the lives of other people that live differently to them.

Let's now recall Murdoch's example of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law discussed in Chapter 2. Let's imagine a different scenario in which attending to art influences M's attitude towards D and helps her to be more loving and sympathetic towards D. Imagine M spends her spare time reading classic novels. She also regularly goes to art galleries and spends a great deal of time attending to the artworks in there. She possesses the required cognitive and intellectual capacities to be fully present and to understand the artworks she attends to, and she experiences a great pleasure in doing so. The appreciation of beauty in an artwork engenders serenity and happiness in her and creates an appreciation for what is good. By being fully present to an artwork, she intellectually and emotionally engages with the imagination of the artist and resonates to it. She makes an effort to imagine what the artist has intended to depict in his artwork. By giving her full attention to an artwork, she gains a strong grounding in the here and now. The practice of being fully present and attentive to art leads her to pay closer attention to the details of her surroundings and experience them more intensely. This practice helps her to develop a better vision of reality. She learns to devote more attention to the pertinent details in different situations and gains a heightened sense of reality and an increased openness to the objects of her attention. When D is around, M is capable of being fully present

---

<sup>506</sup> "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," 284.

and to observe D, not only as her daughter-in-law, but also as a human being who is worthy of her love and respect, regardless of their relationship. M can tell when she is under the influence of her own prejudices, as through her experience of appreciating art, she can distinguish a disinterested approach from a biased one. When she feels agitated by D's playfulness and carelessness she withholds judgment, as she knows that she needs to attend to D more closely as there are many aspects to each situation that are not easily seen and require more effort to discern, just as she has experienced in various artworks and novels. Through her experiencing different art, she knows there is always more to reality than first meets the eye. She knows that she needs to use her imagination and to try to picture other aspects of reality. So she does not give in to the first negative impression she forms. The practice of being attentive to details helps her to develop a better vision of reality and its complexity and chanciness, to imagine various possibilities before making judgements.

Having developed a stronger imagination through her engagement with art, M is capable of relating the present moment to her past experiences and future decisions. In the past, her own mother-in-law never tried to develop a good relationship with her, and this affected negatively M's relationship with *her* husband. So she can imagine how her negative perception of D – if it ever manifests itself – may have a negative influence on her son's relationship to his wife. Having a strong imagination, M is able to imagine things from the perspective of D and combine this picture with her past experience as a young woman, before making any moral judgments. M tries to put herself in D's shoes and picture what it is like to be so young and inexperienced. She is able to imagine that meeting M has probably been an intimidating experience for D. By closely attending to D she can see how D is quite uneasy and anxious in her presence. That is why, instead of being calm and collected, D acts clumsily and awkwardly. M can imagine how, being a mother, her strong emotions and her desire to protect her son can prevent her from being fair and impartial towards D. She is conscious of the fact that her son's strong love for D hurts her ego and this can make her jealous and judgmental. (She can picture this particularly well because she experienced being jealous and judgmental in her imagination a while

ago, while reading a novel about the destructive consequences of jealousy). Despite her feelings of jealousy, she makes an effort to see D in her own right, and not allow her attachment to her son to affect her fair judgment of D and her respect for D as an independent person. Instead of judging her harshly for being immature and naïve, she patiently attends to D. This careful and disinterested attention leads M to see D in her own right. Being – to some extent – unaffected by her biases and her selfish motives, M can feel for D and empathise with her. M does not only see D more justly, but also more lovingly. So M’s experience of attending to different artworks is in fact practising love, which in Murdoch’s view, is the highest moral virtue.

### ***Conclusion***

Murdoch contends that an artist’s intention when creating a work of art is not didactic. Nevertheless, participating in works of art is “the most educational of all human activity”.<sup>507</sup> Throughout her philosophical work, while discussing her moral view, Murdoch uses the example of art as a significant means to facilitate the process of moral development. As I constructed a Murdochian account of the educational role of art in the moral life out of her various writings on the topic, I identified three ways in which attention to art can be morally educational, drawing upon my discussions of Murdoch’s moral view in earlier chapters. I used Murdoch’s concept of ‘attention’ and its distinctive qualities to argue that understanding the educational role of art fundamentally comes down to the qualities of one’s ‘attention’. I discussed the ways in which a good work of art has the potential to trigger the individual’s careful and truthful ‘attention’, which is one of the main abilities that an individual needs to develop in their moral quest. The main quality of such attention is that it is directed ‘away’ from the self, towards something that is not ‘for’ the self. In Murdoch’s view, when one attends to an artwork one is fully present. One does not use the artwork in an ordinary sense, but instead cherishes and contemplates it. Just as one does not treat the artwork as a ‘thing’ to be used, one should not attend to other people as ‘things’.

---

<sup>507</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good*, 85.

Through the experience of fully attending to an artwork, one learns to attend to other people carefully in their own rights.

Through experiencing the transient reality depicted in an artwork, one experiences its beauty. Experiencing beauty in art makes it easier for one to understand the Good, as beauty and the Good have similar qualities. This is particularly important to Murdoch because she puts forward an objective account of morality, where the authority of the Good determines whether the individual's decisions are morally good. I argued that perceiving beauty in an artwork is not always as simple as Murdoch seems to suggest. However, as I explained, regardless of the difficulty of appreciating beauty in an artwork, the audience of art needs to exercise 'obedience' – the state of being fully receptive and fully present to an artwork. In this state, the audience may not experience the artwork, especially some modern artworks, as 'pretty', but they are capable of experiencing the 'beauty' of the artwork, which is the depth of reality that the artist has successfully presented herein. According to Murdoch it is easier for the individual to appreciate beauty in art than the Good in life, because it is easier for them to be impartial and unbiased towards the reality presented in art. Practicing the states of obedience and impartiality towards the beauty of art is an exercise of obedience and impartiality towards other individuals, and ultimately, more vividly experiencing the Good. That is another way in which attending to art can contribute to our moral education.

I finally discussed the idea that the content of an artwork, while inspired by the random reality of the world, is the product of the artist's imagination. Experiencing a work of art helps the audience to expand their imaginations as well, which is important in their moral lives and moral progress. Through experiencing art, the individual experiences some aspects of reality that they would not otherwise experience. This makes them pause and contemplate different possibilities in their imagination when encountering other people in real situations. Instead of making hasty moral decisions, they entertain different possibilities in their imagination and assess those pictures. With a more developed imagination, the individual becomes able to picture the more complex aspects of each event. They can combine their present experience with their past experiences

and compare this combination to future possibilities. They try to put themselves in other people's shoes and see the world from their perspectives. A stronger imagination and the ability to picture different possibilities help the individual to become more sensitive and compassionate towards other people, which is the core of Murdoch's ethics. Moreover, a better figurative and metaphorical understanding of life helps the individual to gain a more in-depth understanding of important concepts, such as the Good. A better appreciation of the Good motivates the individual in their moral quest, and helps them to make better moral decisions.

## Conclusion

In order to address my research question, “How can art contribute to our moral development?”, I have, over the course of this thesis, developed a Murdochian account of morality, the value of art, and the role of art in moral education. By way of concluding the thesis, I would like to present a short summary of the overall view that I find in Murdoch’s work. Murdoch develops her own distinctive account of virtue and virtuous action. ‘The Good’, in her view, is the condition of all human experience. Morality is objective, in the sense that we all share an *a priori* concept of the Good. But the objectivity of morality does not mean denying the impact of circumstances on moral judgments. Although all societies and cultures adopt some kind of moral code, these are tailored to the particular conditions that exist within a society, with the result that different societies have different moral codes. However, it is always a grasp of ‘the Good’, as perfection, that provides a sense of moral orientation and guides our decision-making. To develop moral virtues, we have to obtain a better understanding of the Good.

Virtues are character traits that are morally admirable and form an important part of our identity. Developing the moral virtues is valuable in itself, rather than for any instrumental gain. The most important of all virtues is the virtue of love, a form of empathy, which requires us to acknowledge the fact that the interests, experiences, and values of other people differ from our own and that they too matter. Love is a core virtue that is required for all the other virtues. In order to acquire the virtue of love – and thereby the other virtues – we have to make an effort to obtain an accurate understanding of the other person and their particular situation by selflessly attending to them. This will allow us to make moral judgements and decisions that are not just and true, but also empathetic.

Moral growth involves obtaining a better vision of reality and developing an ability to see other people more accurately, justly, and lovingly. The action that accompanies this vision is a virtuous action. This means that regardless of any cultural or circumstantial differences between us, right vision and the virtue of love lead us to do what is morally good. Moral development, then, is about

developing moral vision (a vision of the Good) and the virtue of love, and this requires a consistent and on-going effort to attend to the world around us. We use our imagination to picture the circumstances of other people, their emotions, thoughts, motives, and ultimately everything that we are unable to experience directly. If we do not try to attend to others more closely, we will (most likely) not have a good understanding of their reality (which is the prerequisite for the virtue of love) and our judgments of them will not be accurate or just. Using our imaginations to picture morally challenging situations from different points of view (and to do away with false impressions, which are products of our fantasy) enables us to put ourselves in other people's shoes, and to make better judgments about how to act or behave towards them.

In light of this view of morality and moral development, Murdoch argues that engaging with good art can be one of the most effective ways of growing morally. Good art is a kind of art that depicts a version of reality that has been shaped by the imagination of the artist. In good art, the artist does not avoid picturing human misery and the pointlessness of human life. The defining characteristic of good art is that it is still beautiful (in the sense of being true-to-life and intellectually stimulating, within the limits of art forms) even when it is depicting the most appalling aspects of life. The beauty of art can engage us intellectually with what we may be appalled by in real life. By appreciating beauty in good art we begin to develop an appreciation of what is good. The form of attention involved in the encounter with art is similar to the form of attention involved in morality (a form of obedience or submission to reality), in so far as there is no hope or possibility of gaining any material benefit. Engaging with the imagination of the artist helps our imagination to grow. An enlarged imagination enables us to picture what other people may be going through, to put ourselves in their shoes, and to love them and empathise with them, in spite of all the ways they differ from us.

Engaging with Murdoch's work enabled me to understand the experience I had when reading Dostoyevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov* and to explain the

profound influence the novel has had on me.<sup>508</sup> Although I had been entirely occupied with the mundane routines of my everyday life, when reading the novel my attention was fully focused on its content; and it was a different kind of attention, one that was both disinterested and obedient. The skill of the artist and the authority of the artwork helped me to see and experience, in my imagination, the misery of the child more intensely and from a different perspective. I could see more clearly the pain of the innocent child enduring the abuse of her parents. Although I had always been aware of child abuse and human pain in a general sense, the quality of my attention and the ability of the artist to fully engage it led to a deep change in my inner world – in my way of seeing the pain of other people, beyond the veil of my self-occupied mind. When reading the book, I was fully attentive and submissive to the authority of reality and beauty (the beauty which is the artistic form of the novel and the mastery of Dostoyevsky in implementing it), and therefore, the change in me was deep and lasting. Reading the novel also helped me to piece together the fragments of my childhood experiences in my imagination, and to connect those experiences to the experiences of other children who endure suffering and pain. It prompted a change in what Murdoch would call my whole “fabric of being” – my inner life and my view of other people. This experience enabled me to be more humble and more obedient in the face of reality. It helped me to be more attentive and more sensitive to the pain of other people, because I could imagine more clearly what they were going through, and thus, to be more compassionate towards them. As Murdoch would put it, I learned to love – not a blind love, but rather a just and compassionate attention to the reality of other people, in their individuality and their distinctiveness.

---

<sup>508</sup> See Preface.

## References

- Åhlberg, Lars-Olof. *Notions of the Aesthetic and of Aesthetics: Essays on Art, Aesthetics, and Culture*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014.
- Altorf, Marije. "After Cursing the Library: Iris Murdoch and the (in) Visibility of Women in Philosophy." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 384-402.
- . *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*. Continuum Studies in British Philosophy. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Annas, Julia. *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . *The Morality of Happiness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- . "Virtue Ethics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, edited by David Copp, 515-36. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Antonaccio, Maria. *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- . "Reconsidering Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy and Theology." In *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, edited by Anne Rowe, 15-22. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- . "The Virtues of Metaphysics: A Review of Murdoch's Philosophical Writings." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Justin Broackes, 155-79. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Antonaccio, Maria, and William Schweiker, eds. *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by S. H. Butcher. South Bend: Infomotions, 2001.
- Backus, Guy. *Iris Murdoch: The Novelist as Philosopher, the Philosopher as Novelist: 'The Unicorn' as a Philosophical Novel*. European University Studies. Berne: P. Lang, 1986.
- Baldanza, Frank. *Iris Murdoch*. Twayne's English Authors Series. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974.
- Bellamy, Michael O. "An Interview with Iris Murdoch." In *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley, 44-55. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Biggsby, Christopher. "Interview with Iris Murdoch." In *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley, 97-119. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Blackburn, Simon. "The Good and the Great: Knowledge, Virtue and Uplift in a Benighted World. A Review of Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, by Iris Murdoch." *The Times Literary Supplement* (1992).
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Iris Murdoch*, Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.
- Blum, Lawrence A. "Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 50, no. 3 (1986): 343-67.
- . "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Justin Broackes, 307-23. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

- Bove, Cheryl Browning. *Understanding Iris Murdoch*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993.
- Brugmans, Edith. "Murdoch on the Impossibility of Moral Scepticism." In *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, edited by Anne Rowe, 47-59. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Burns, Elizabeth. "Iris Murdoch and the Nature of Good." *Religious Studies* 33, no. 3 (1997): 303-13.
- Byatt, Antonia Susan. *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1965.
- Carroll, Noël. "Moderate Moralism." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, no. 3 (1996): 223-38.
- . "Moderate Moralism Versus Moderate Autonomism." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 4 (1998): 419-20.
- Cirlot, Juan Eduardo. *Picasso: Birth of a Genius*. New York: Praeger, 1972.
- Clarke, Bridget. "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Justin Broackes, 227-53. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Conradi, Peter J. *Iris Murdoch: A Life*. London: HarperCollins, 2002.
- . *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch*. London: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Crisp, Roger. "Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Justin Broackes, 275-91. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . "Virtue Ethics." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig, 622-26. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Crisp, Roger, and Michael A. Slote. *Virtue Ethics*. Oxford Readings in Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Diamond, Cora. "'We Are Perpetually Moralists': Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value." In *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, 79-109. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Dickerson, A. B. *Kant on Representation and Objectivity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Dipple, Elizabeth. "The Green Knight and the Other Vagaries of the Spirit; or, Tricks and Images for the Human Soul; or, the Uses of Imaginative Literature." In *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, 138-68. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- . *Iris Murdoch: A Work for the Spirit*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor "The Brothers Karamazov." New York: The Project Gutenberg, 2009.
- Fiander, Lisa M. *Fairy Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, and A.S. Byatt*. Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.
- Gaut, Berys. "The Ethical Criticism of Art." In *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, edited by Jerrold Levinson, 182-203. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Gerstenberger, Donna Lorine. *Iris Murdoch*. The Irish Writers Series. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975.

- Glover, Stephen "Iris Murdoch Talks to Stephen Glover." In *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley, 33-43. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Gomes, Anil. "Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53, no. 3 (2013): 321-37.
- Gordon, David J. *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995.
- Grey, Thomas S. *Richard Wagner and His World*. Bard Music Festival. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Hall, Pamela M. "Review of *Virtue Ethics Old and New*, by Stephen M. Gardiner." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 2 (2008): 332-32.
- Hämäläinen, Nora. "What Is a Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist?—Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics and Metaphor." *Philosophical Papers* 43, no. 2 (2014): 191-225.
- Harold, James. "Immoralism and the Valence Constraint." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 1 (2008): 45-64.
- Holland, Margaret. "Social Convention and Neurosis as Obstacles to Moral Freedom." Chap. 7 In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Justin Broackes, 225-74. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Hooft, Stan van. *Understanding Virtue Ethics*. Understanding Movements in Modern Thought. Chesham: Acumen, 2006.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. Kitchener: Batoche, 1999.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- . "What Does the Aristotelian Phronimos Know?". In *Perfecting Virtue: New Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics*, edited by Lawrence J. Jost and Julian Wuerth, 38-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Johnson, Deborah. *Iris Murdoch*. Key Women Writers. Brighton: Harvester, 1987.
- Jordan, Jessy E. G. "Reconsidering Iris Murdoch's Moral Realism." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 48, no. 3 (2014): 371-85.
- Kane, Richard C. *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles: Didactic Demons in Modern Fiction*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.
- . *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Karl, Albert. "Epilogue: Meister Eckhart – between Mysticism and Philosophy." In *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, edited by Jeremiah Hackett, 699-707. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Kazantzakis, Nikos. *Zorba the Greek*. Translated by Carl Wildman. London: Faber, 2000.

- Kermode, Frank. "Interview from "the House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists"." In *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley, 9-13. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Khogeer, Afaf Jamil. *The Integration of the Self: Women in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch and Margaret Drabble*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2006.
- Kieran, Matthew. "Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 4 (1996): 337-51.
- . "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism." In *Art and Morality*, edited by José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner, 56-73. London: Routledge, 2003.
- . *Revealing Art*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Leeson, Miles. *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist*. London: Continuum, 2010.
- Leighton, Angela. *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Lovibond, Sabina. *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.
- . "Review of Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining, by Marije Altorf." *Religious Studies* 45, no. 3 (2009): 365-69.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Good for Nothing-Review of Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit, by Elizabeth Dipple." *London Review of Books* 4, no. 10 (1982 1982): 15-16.
- Martin, Priscilla, and Anne Rowe. *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life*. Literary Lives. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Matravers, Derek. *Introducing Philosophy of Art in Eight Case Studies*. Durham: Acumen, 2013.
- McDowell, John. "Virtue and Reason." *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 331-50.
- McLean, Mark. "Discussion- on Muffling Murdoch." *Ratio (New Series)* 13, no. 2 (2000): 191-98.
- Meyers, Jeffrey "Two Interviews with Iris Murdoch." In *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley, 218-34. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Mole, Christopher. "Attention, Self and *the Sovereignty of Good*." In *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, edited by Anne Rowe, 72-84. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Moran, Richard. "Iris Murdoch and Existentialism." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Justin Broackes, 181-96. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Muggeridge, Malcolm. "Foreword." In *Waiting on God, by Simone Weil*: Routledge, 2009.
- Murdoch, Iris. "Against Dryness." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 287-95. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "Art Is the Imitation of Nature." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 243-57. New York: Penguin, 1999.

- . "The Darkness of Practical Reason." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 193-202. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "Ethics and the Imagination." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 52, no. 1-2 (1986): 81-95.
- . "The Existentialist Political Myth." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 130-45. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "Existentialists and Mystics." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 221-34. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 386-463. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "A House of Theory." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 171-86. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "Knowing the Void." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 157-60. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 3-30. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "Metaphysics and Ethics." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 59-75. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1992.
- . *The Sea, the Sea*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1978.
- . *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- . "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 261-86. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . "The Sublime and the Good." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 205-20. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . *The Time of the Angels*. London: Vintage Classics, 2008.
- . *The Unicorn*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1963.
- . "Vision and Choice in Morality." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi, 76-98. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- Nicol, Bran. *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*. New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 1999.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. "'Faint with Secret Knowledge': Love and Vision in Murdoch's the Black Prince." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, edited by Justin Broackes, 135-53. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . "Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Eros and the Individual." In *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by Maria

- Antonaccio and William Schweiker, 29-53. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- . "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?". *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 163-201.
- . "When She Was Good, Review of *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, by Peter J. Conradi." *New Republic*, May 2001, 28.
- O'Connor, Patricia J. *To Love the Good: The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*. American University Studies Series V, Philosophy. New York: P. Lang, 1996.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Translated by H. F. Stewart. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950.
- Pigden, Charles R. "Introduction." In *Hume on Is and Ought*, edited by Charles R. Pigden, 1-38. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Plato. *Gorgias*. Translated by Donald J. Zeyl. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987.
- . *Republic*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- . *Republic*. Translated by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004.
- . *The Symposium*. Translated by M. C. Howatson. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Robjant, David. "As a Buddhist Christian; the Misappropriation of Iris Murdoch." *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 6 (2011): 993-1008.
- . "The Earthy Realism of Plato's Metaphysics, Or: What Shall We Do with Iris Murdoch?". *Philosophical Investigations* 35, no. 1 (2012): 43-67.
- . "Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist? Some Trouble with Sabine Lovibond, the Mother in Law, and Gender." *Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 6 (2011): 1021-31.
- . "Symposium on Iris Murdoch: How Miserable We Are, How Wicked; into the 'Void' with Murdoch, Mulhall, and Antonaccio." *Heythrop Journal - Quarterly Review of Philosophy and Theology* 54, no. 6 (2013): 999-1006.
- Rose, W. K. "Iris Murdoch, Informally." In *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley, 16-29. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Ruokonen, Floora. "Iris Murdoch and the Extraordinary Ambiguity of Art." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2008): 77-90.
- Russell, Daniel C., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, Cambridge Companions. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Schwartz, Michael. "Moral Vision: Iris Murdoch and Alasdair Macintyre." *Journal of Business Ethics* 90, no. 3 (2009): 315-27.
- Scruton, Roger. "Love in Wagner's Ring." In *Art and Morality*, edited by José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner, viii, 303 p. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Spear, Hilda D. *Iris Murdoch*. Modern Novelists. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Stevens Heusel, Barbara. *Iris Murdoch's Paradoxical Novels: Thirty Years of Critical Reception*. Rochester: Camden House, 2001.

- . *Patterned Aimlessness: Iris Murdoch's Novels of the 1970s and 1980s*. London: University of Georgia Press, 1995.
- Stevens Heusel, Barbara "A Dialogue with Iris Murdoch." In *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley, 194-208. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Sutherland, John. *The Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives*. London: Profile Books, 2011.
- Swanton, Christine. "The Definition of Virtue Ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, edited by Daniel C. Russell, xiv, 365 p. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Taylor, Charles. "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy." In *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, 3-28. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Todd, Richard. *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearian Interest*. London: Vision, 1979.
- Tracy, David. "Iris Murdoch and the Many Faces of Platonism." In *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, 54-75. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: With Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence*. 3 vols. Boston: Thames and Hudson, 1999.
- Vice, Samantha. "The Ethics of Self-Concern." In *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, edited by Anne Rowe, 798-817. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. New York: Octagon Books, 1979.
- . *Waiting on God*. Fontana Books. London: Collins, 1959.
- Widdows, Heather. "Iris Murdoch's 'Good': A Critical Analysis of Its Nature and Relevance." *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 960 (2001): 56-75.
- . *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- Wilson, Marie. "From Obsession to Betrayal: The Life and Art of Pablo Picasso." *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 11, no. 3 (2004): 163-82.
- Wolfe, Peter. *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels*. Columbia,: University of Missouri Press, 1966.
- Young, Julian. *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.