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ATTENDING TO REALITY: IRIS MURDOCH ON THE MORAL GOOD

Ante Jerončić

Andrews University, Michigan, USA

“The good and just life is thus a process of clarification, a movement towards selfless lucidity, guided by ideas of perfection which are objects of love.” – Iris Murdoch¹

SUMMARY:

Attending to Reality: Iris Murdoch on the Moral Good

Even a scant acquaintance with current cultural and philosophical trends will readily point to a widespread predilection for subjectivist forms of moral reasoning. By “subjectivist” I refer to various non-cognitivist and constructionist paradigms in moral philosophy and popular parlance that reduce ethical statements to expressions of individual or collective preferences, feelings, or prejudices stripped of any object-given normativity. The following are but some of the factors that fuel such perspectives: the proverbial fact/value dichotomy and anti-realist sentiments pervading large swaths of analytic philosophy; poststructuralist and postcolonial “genealogies” that tie the language of universal morality to discourses of power, patriarchy, and totalitarian agency; and the utilization of the language of virtues, values, and “moral clarity” for a specific set of domestic and foreign policy commitments. Such intellectual positions, accor-

1 Profound thanks go to the friends and colleagues whose feedback made an invaluable contribution to the thinking in this article: L. Monique Pittman, Karl Bailey, and Vanessa Corredera. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my research assistant Mercedes McLean who labored with me in correcting and clarifying the final draft.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 14.

dingly, result in a *double remove* of ethics: from the structure of reality on the hand and from human existence and accounts of human flourishing on the other. In order to interrogate these issues at a greater length, I will briefly turn to Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy in order to examine how her specific form of ethical realism addresses such claims about ethics. Despite some reservations about the cogency of her approach, I will argue that her basic intuition to connect morality with the wider realm of meaning and accounts of human flourishing is indispensable for any theological account of the humanization of life.

Key words: *Iris Murdoch; metaphysics; ethical realism; the moral good; human flourishing*

Thrasymachus's Burlesque: Whither Morality?

The opening section of Plato's *Republic* presents Socrates and a couple of his friends leisurely spending their time in Polemarchus's house anticipating the beginning of a night festival. There is a relaxed feel to this scene, one evoking a jovial tête-à-tête between good acquaintances, when at one point the repartee turns to the meaning of justice. Different definitions are proposed during the ensuing discussion, none of which end up being quite satisfactory to Socrates. The somewhat hapless dialogue carries along until Thrasymachus steps onto the scene and stirs up the proverbial pot. His attitude is brazen and cocky—Plato compares him to a wild animal²—and he flaunts his supposed intellectual prowess in the face of his interlocutors. Like Callicles in the *Gorgias*, but with a different twist, he opposes the very attempt to define justice, to root it in some ultimate reality. Morality is but a façade, exposed for what it truly is by those that are wise. “Aren't all moral concepts always put in the service of exploiting the weak and defenseless?” asks Thrasymachus. “And aren't they that follow them, in turn, like sheep believing in the goodness of the shepherd, all the way to the slaughterhouse?” In his wording, “justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger” (338c2–3).³ And if Socrates cannot see that, continues Thrasymachus, then he is dull-witted. “Your justice, Socrates, is but a stalking-horse; a clever pretext for ulterior motives,” scoffs Thrasymachus snootily.

As one is to expect, the supervening dialectical slugfest with Socrates is quite a read. While Socrates is initially taken aback by Thrasymachus, he eventually dispenses his opponent by means of his favored discursive arsenal; one marked by ironic jabs and dogged insistence. By the time all is said and done, Socrates will have reduced his opponent—how thoroughly wonderful!—to a blush. Over the last century or so different interpretations of Thrasymachus's position, including the exact meaning of his blush, have been offered.⁴ Some see him as an advocate for natural rights or perhaps a form of legalism, others again present him as an ethical egoist

2 Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic, 1991), 336b5–6. Additional references to the *Republic* will be given parenthetically in the text.

3 The intertextual link here to Thucydides's “Melian Dialogue” and its melancholy acquiescence to *Realpolitik* will not be lost on perceptive readers: “Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner [Baltimore: Penguin, 1954], 5:89).

4 See for example Paul W. Gooch, “Red Faces in Plato,” *The Classical Journal* 83.2 (1987/1988), 124-127, and Ivor Ludlam, *Plato's Republic as a Philosophical Drama on Doing Well* (Lanham: Lexington, 2014), 102-104.

according to whom he notion of justice is incompatible with the pursuit of self-interest, while yet others see him as an ethical nihilist whose project is to show that justice does not exist. On that count, he fills the role of a proto-postmodernist of sorts.

Unfortunately, a detailed assessment of Thrasymachus is beyond the scope of this article. My goal here, rather, is to posit this enigmatic figure as an archetype for two distinct yet interrelated claims about the nature of ethics: “Morality is dangerous!” and “Morality is a human construct!” The first pertains to the *function* of moral claims, of what they do and how they are being used, while the second addresses their origin and *status*. Much of the current disenchantment with morality, both intellectual and practical, pertains to one or the other of these two aspects—*function* and *status*. In respect to function, we see Thrasymachus standing as a progenitor for a whole array of thinkers, who like him contend that the categories of right and wrong, at least frequently so, are not so much rooted in reality as surreptitiously wielded to achieve assorted power interests. What they propose as a counter-move are various forms of genealogical and archaeological undertakings, that is, procedures for unmasking by which the real sources of morality, including such matters as moral obligation and conscience, are purportedly revealed.

Susan Neiman in her *Moral Clarity* addresses some of these reservations concerning the unequivocal beneficence of moral discourse, especially when presented in a universalist or objectivist form.⁵ In our contemporary culture, most people harbor, justifiably so, deep suspicions about any notion of, well, “moral clarity.” One could point to multiple instances from both the current and previous US administrations, she notes, in order to illustrate that. How can one forget the chilling dualism of the “axis of evil” and “us vs. them” rhetoric, or the moral legitimations of extrajudicial killings, or perhaps the way moral self-righteousness about one’s place in the world exuded a normalizing and ideological effect concerning the most inhuman of practices—torture. While these are exhibits from our more immediate past, the problem, of course, is much broader. Anyone knowing anything about 19th and 20th century history, in other words, anyone knowing anything about colonialism, fascism, and communism, knows about the capacity of evil to cloak itself in universalist discourse. It is not surprising then given such and other specimens that we are apprehensive about anyone claiming to know what morality is and what moral judgments deserve the level of universal normativity. After all, isn’t the language of moral clarity quite reminiscent of the sort of doublespeak that populates Orwell’s *1984*?

There is also a subtler attack on the function of morality, one that casts it as an impediment for human self-realization and authenticity. On this count, “fulfillment is not defined in terms of obedience to social roles, cultural ideals, or the perfection of a certain set of virtues. It is defined with respect to enhancing the richness and complexity of a person’s life.”⁶ Accordingly, any account of ethics that runs against such aspirations becomes highly problematized. Such misgivings come in different forms, ranging from the virulent anguish of Nietzsche’s Dionysian piety, to postcolonial and poststructuralist suspicion of essentialist discourse, to James Joyce’s

5 See Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008).

6 William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12.

libidinal celebration of the bodily as found in his poem “The Holy Office.”⁷ They also inform current ethical debates in the Adventist faith community, at least occasionally, where anecdotal narratives, personal experiences, and other forms of affective reasoning are invested with the weight of a moral arbiter, as if the depth of *pathos* directly correlates to ethical normativity. The very idea that empathy might in some instances itself be implicated in structures and acts of injustice is often lost in the shuffle.

The issue of the function of moral claims, of what they *do* and what they *intend*, inevitably relates to the matter of their origin and *status*, the second area of concern mentioned above. For Thrasymachus, we recall, justice is spurious precisely because it is arbitrary and reflective of subjective interests and preferences. Here too Thrasymachus stands for a venerable stream of thinking about the nature of moral obligations, one that ties them to constructivist impulses. In view of this, ethical statements are expressions of individual or collective preferences, feelings, or prejudices stripped of any object-given normativity— “object-given” referring to the moral realist claim that the good resides outside of us. While there are different varieties of constructivism, they all have in common the view that “moral reality is constructed from the states or activities. . . undertaken from a preferred standpoint.”⁸ You take it away, however that standpoint might be conceived, and you have taken away morality. Thus a subjectivist, to name one example of constructivism, will readily claim that individual tastes and opinions are the things which construct moral reality. In sum, moral constructivism echoes “J. L. Mackie’s contention that ‘values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world.’ In other words, we do not *discover* moral truths as traditional realism held, by examining human life, the nature of communities, or reality; we invent them.”⁹ Instead of being a matter of *mimesis*, then, ethics more properly inhabits to the sphere of creative vitality and *agon*. William Schweiker writes:

The problem we face in ethics is then that the ground of value has shifted from being to power, or, more precisely put, being itself, the source of value, is conceived in terms of power. Seeing this shift does not entail jettisoning metaphysical questions from ethics. It is not to champion will over mind, doing over being. But it is to realize that the metaphysical dimension of ethics has also shifted. The modern world no longer sees nature as creation or the human as created in the image of God. We no longer dwell in the classic, mimetic universe wherein persons and things derived their value from a place in the system of being.¹⁰

Christian Smith’s *Lost in Transition* offers a great study on the preponderance of such subjectivist sentiments in contemporary culture.¹¹ The conclusions of the book are based on a

7 See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 683.

8 Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14. He also adds: “Realists believe that. . . the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective. That a person takes a particular attitude toward a putative moral standard is not what makes the standard correct” (15).

9 Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 107.

10 William Schweiker, “The Sovereignty of God’s Goodness,” in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 217-218.

11 Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford Univer-

series of in-depth interviews that Smith and his team of the researchers have conducted with a cross-section of American youth. In it we repeatedly encounter images of individuals groping for a coherent language to express their values in the context of today's society marked by consumerist capitalism and rampant individualism. One cannot but squirm observing the inability of most participants to use any sort of coherent moral language. While most of them agree that sexual violence and capital murder ought to be condemned, they have a hard time pinning down why exactly cheating, for example, is unethical. Even more troublesome, in my view, is the tendency to continually fall back on how one *feels* about things, as if this sphere of "common sense" or "innate feelings" was a pristine source of normative authority somehow untouched by power constellations, ideological claims, and other processes of socialization.

What is so eerie about this study is the extent to which it mirrors my experience of teaching ethics to Adventist college students. I am often surprised to see how otherwise conservative individuals who believe in the primacy of Scripture channel such subjectivist sentiments about the status of moral judgments. Their whole moral understanding usually boils down to quoting the perennial favorite "Do not judge, and you shall not be judged" in order to support their contention that any apportioning of moral blame is immoral in itself. Even after weeks of discussion and lecturing most students still have a hard time to distinguish between condemning and judging (in the sense of moral deliberation), inevitably conflating the two. And even when faced with stock examples of human rights violations such as female genital mutilation, or the fact that the very concept of forgiveness does not make sense in the absence of moral judgment, the subjectivist reflex hardly recedes.

So far, then, I have briefly attended to two main objections leveled against ethics in contemporary society. I have noted how misgivings about the function of ethics, i.e. the way we use claims of moral obligation, correlate to our understanding of its status and origin. As a result, morality frequently faces a *double remove*: first, from the structure of reality; and second, from human existence and accounts of human flourishing. In order to interrogate these issues at a greater length, I will briefly turn to Iris Murdoch's ethical realism. Despite reservations concerning some of her substantial claims, some of which I will address at the end of this article, I find considerable appreciation for key intuitions marking her philosophical approach. I think "intuitions" is the right word here, as I have in mind certain generalized affinities that are congenial to my own biblical and theological sensibilities: her articulation and defense of metaphysical ethics, her realist and cognitivist moral ontology, and her efforts to present a "philosophy of life" aiming at moral conversion. Part of such overlapping concerns pertains to the fact that Platonists and Christians "seek a good which transcends the self but which nevertheless accords or resonates with the self."¹² Thus my interest in exploring Iris Murdoch. Again, not that I *need* her to legitimize my commitment to the objectivity of moral value—the Bible with its theistic framework is quite capable of doing that—but in order to express a gesture of hospitable *rapprochement*, one that scours for commonalities and resonances for the purpose of dialogue and fostering of "alliances."

sity Press, 2011).

12 Schweiker, "The Sovereignty of God's Goodness," 219.

Murdoch's Metaphysical Ethics

Murdoch begins her delineation of moral ontology by posing the following dilemma: "Is morality to be seen as essentially and by its nature centered on the individual, or as part of a general framework of reality which includes the individual?"¹³ The first option, the "liberal" view as she puts it,¹⁴ names various voluntarist takes on human identity and ethics that conceive of the individual "in terms of the simple capacity or freedom to act, thus severing any connection between freedom and a conception of goodness in the formation of the self."¹⁵ For her, this encompasses dominant expressions of post-Kantian philosophy, and existentialism most notably so. On those terms, the moral good is synonymous with the exertion of the will by means of creative fiat. Murdoch herself favors the "natural law" view where we see the individual "as moving tentatively vis-à-vis a reality which transcends him. To discover what is morally good is to discover that reality, and to become good is to integrate" oneself with it.¹⁶ Our world is not morally sterile, a piece of clay receptive to unbridled imprints of arbitrary exertion. Rather, we need to find ways to attach morality to the "substance of the world,"¹⁷ to what reality *is* independent of our personal, communal, and historical coordinates. As Murdoch memorably puts it: "Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality."¹⁸

To further her argument, Murdoch presents us with her version of natural "theology" where Platonic realism and Romantic intuition merge to account for axiological shocks—those stabs of C. S. Lewisian *Joy* or *Sehnsucht*—tingeing our existence. The breathtaking sublimity of the Grand Canyon or the embrace of a loved one or a multi-hued sunset over the Adriatic Sea—all these panoplies of wonder are signs of transcendence and the goodness of being, the apprehension that "there is more than this."¹⁹ Far from being sporadic incidents of "oceanic feelings" or "thin places," such experiences, suggests Murdoch, serve as beacons of the "ubiquity" and "omnipresence" of value.²⁰ Or in the words of Alfred North Whitehead, "our enjoyment of actuality is a sense of worth, good or bad. . . . Its basic expression is — Have a care, here is something that matters!"²¹

13 Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter J. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 68.

14 See *ibid.*, 70.

15 Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, "Introduction," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), xiii.

16 Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," 70.

17 *Ibid.*, 65.

18 Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter J. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 215.

19 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 71.

20 See for example Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 259.

21 Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and that Modern World* (New York: Mentor/Macmillan, 1925), 159. For this reference to Whitehead I am indebted to Franklin I. Gamwell, "On the Loss of Theism," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 173.

That, in turn, leads to two related assertions. First, Murdoch rejects the proverbial fact/value distinction according to which statements of value cannot rise to the level of truth claims. In A. J. Ayer's famous version of the argument, "the meaning of a statement is determined by the way in which it can be verified, where it being verified consists in its being tested by empirical observation. Consequently, statements like those of metaphysics to the truth or falsehood of which no empirical observation could possibly be relevant, are ruled out as factually meaningless."²² For Murdoch such a bifurcation of fact and value cannot possibly be correct as it ignores "the way in which almost all of our concepts and activities involve evaluation. . . . [In] the majority of cases, a survey of the facts will itself involve moral discrimination. Innumerable forms of evaluation haunt our simplest decisions."²³ Correlatively, valuing is not a specialized activity of the will consigned to isolated acts of ethical or aesthetic valuation, but rather presents the transcendental condition of knowledge. It is not so much that we think *about* morality, but thinking itself, to the extent that it is an evaluative activity, *is* morality. That is why ethics "is and ought to be connected with the whole of our being."²⁴

Second, the recognition of the ubiquity of values alerts us to the importance of metaphysics whose task it is to probe the "unconditional element" (Paul Tillich) in reality as such.²⁵ Akin to artists who "try to capture fleeting moments in a unified whole, so too the quest for metaphysics is a way to do justice to reality, to the intimations of transcendence or the moral Good in even our most ordinary experiences and endeavors."²⁶ In that sense, metaphysics "is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself."²⁷ Namely, we intuitively respond to predications of being such as unified, balanced, integrated, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, graceful, elegant, and so on.²⁸ That is why metaphysics, as I understand Murdoch to be claiming, is a form of aesthetic cognition par excellence. Like Plato's concept of *synoptikos*, denoting the ability of a person to see things "in a unified manner,"²⁹ so too Murdoch affirms the

22 A. J. Ayer, "The Vienna Circle," in *The Revolution in Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1957), 74. For this reference to Ayer I am indebted to Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29.

23 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 25-26. For Murdoch's discussion of the naturalistic fallacy and its component parts see her "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter J. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).

24 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 495.

25 For an excellent overview of the rise and demise of modern metaphysics see A. W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things The Evolution of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

26 Murdoch doesn't mean to suggest, I think, that every single form of artistic expression concerns such a search for unity in an intentional way; much of contemporary art, after all, favors the fragmentary and the nonrepresentational, and with it the brokenness bodies, the "ugly," the pressing air of dystopian disintegration.

27 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 1.

28 On this point see Frank Sibley's seminal essay "Aesthetic Concepts," in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

29 Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 91.

centrality of integrated “seeing” or *theoria* as a way of bringing meaning to human existence.³⁰ In that sense, metaphysics and mystical consciousness—the latter naming efforts to intuit and discern the Whole—inhabit proximate semantic neighborhoods (as Schopenhauer himself intriguingly suggests).

Murdoch, I suggest, is aware of the stock objections that invariably follow on the heels of such claims, including those that deem her position profoundly confused, quaint, falsifying, or even cowardly. The vociferousness and scope of such objections are so broad that even a mere cataloging of them would be impossible here. To wit, we not only have individual thinkers but whole academic disciplines whose principal objective is to debunk and expose such seeming fatuities for what they really (or supposedly) are: arbitrary, parochial, prejudicial, or solipsistic extrapolations of personal concerns and interests artificially elevated to a status of universal normativity. Thus, whether the stress is on the limits of human knowledge, the function of power-relations, the dynamics of social construction, the opacity of language, or the erasure of the subaltern, argumentations along Murdochian lines might appear naïvely pre-critical.

In response to such challenges, Murdoch proposes several lines of confutation and clarification. For one, she reminds us that what is really at stake here is the perennial tension between the universal and the particular. She repeatedly asks: “How do the generalisations of philosophers connect with what I’m doing in my day-to-day-moment pilgrimage, how can metaphysics be a guide to morals?”³¹ In other words, how can metaphysical thinking not only do justice to the plurality of human experience but also avoid being put to use for nefarious purposes? Murdoch’s response to this most intractable of conundrums in Western intellectual history is to argue that “there are times for piecemeal analysis, modesty and commonsense, and other times for ambitious synthesis and the aspiring and edifying charm of lofty and intricate structures.”³² In other words, as Antonaccio helpfully summarizes,

a truthful apprehension of individuals requires two kinds of thinking: a unifying kind of thinking, which renders our fragmentary lives more complete by imposing some kind of artful shape on it; and a particularizing kind of thinking, which resists the impulse to order or classify and instead individuates phenomena with a kind of laser beam of attention. This fundamental pattern in Murdoch’s thought is evident in the movement between metaphysics and empiricism which structures *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.³³

Antonaccio further notes that “Murdoch’s theory of art and her theory of morals are structured by parallel tensions: the tension between form and contingency, in the novel; and the tension between metaphysics and empiricism, in moral theory.”³⁴ Such considerations are indeed at the heart of Murdoch’s project, and she continually affirms the potential danger of

30 One should not infer from this that Murdoch somehow subscribes to a theory of mimetic infallibility or naïve correspondence theory of truth. As I will note below, she tirelessly points to the human propensity for self-deception in our descriptions of the reality.

31 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 146.

32 *Ibid.*, 211.

33 Maria Antonaccio, “Form and Contingency in Ethics,” in *Form and Contingency*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 112.

34 *Ibid.*, 124.

metaphysics as much as she argues for its indispensability. The fleeting and kaleidoscopic nature of existence, she argues, cannot be captured in systems that for the sake of unity and comprehensiveness purge that which really matters in life—the nuances, the gradations, the subtleties of difference. “What makes metaphysical (‘totalizing’) coherence theories unacceptable,” writes Murdoch echoing Kierkegaardian sentiments, “is the way in which they in effect ‘disappear’ what is individual and contingent by equating reality with integration in system, and degrees of reality with degrees of integration, and by implying that ‘ultimately’ or ‘really’ there is only one system.”³⁵

However, the real polemical thrust of Murdoch’s defense of metaphysics, I believe, concerns both the nature of the self and the function of language in identity-construction. She makes that particularly evident in her rigorous defense of “consciousness,” i.e. the actuality of the self and inner space of freedom vis-à-vis anti-humanist impulses in poststructuralist thought. In the latter, the self is often perceived as transitive, conflicted, derivative, and illusionary; “an opaque product of variable roles and performances which have been imposed upon it by the constraints of society and by its own inner drives or conflicts.”³⁶ In these theoretical models, the self is decomposed into a totalizing assemblage of disharmonious parts—“an interplay of different layers of signs and symbols,”³⁷ a semiotic chimera of sorts. What is left in the wake of such an *apokalypsis* or “uncovering” is a portrayal of the human self in terms of a heterogeneous, intermittent cacophony; a cornucopia of *différance*, a continual sliding off from one signifier to another.

Murdoch rejects the deterministic cast of these approaches and contends, perhaps uncharitably so, that they channel “a deep human wish: to *give up*, to get rid of freedom, responsibility, remorse, all sorts of personal individual unease, and surrender to fate and the relief of ‘it could not be otherwise.’”³⁸ Now, that might or might not be true. What is important to the argument is her underlying concern that without something like a self, without some notion of agency that carries the possibility of “distancing,” the very concept of morality becomes problematic if not unintelligible. Thus even someone like Foucault who does not envision the possibility of a space unencumbered by relations of power, i.e. a way of conceptualizing the self apart from the capillary forces of normalization, is at least able to say that something like *that* comprises our condition. Foucault, the agent, sees, analyzes, names, and critiques and thus is in the position to assume a position of otherness from that which he criticizes; he is not just a facsimile of discourse. It is such a possibility of critical distance that Murdoch has in mind when she claims, alongside thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Seyla Benhabib, that human consciousness is not just a gluey, tempestuous Petri dish concocted by fatalistic forces, be they societal, psychological, or linguistic. “The person we wish to defend here, endorsed by common sense,” she writes, “is not easily magicked away. Our present moment, our experiences, our flow of consciousness,

35 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 196.

36 Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 121.

37 Tyron L. Inbody, “Postmodernism: Intellectual Velcro Dragged Across Culture?” *Theology Today* 51, no. 4 (1995): 531.

38 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 190.

our indelible moral sense, are not all these essentially linked together and do they not *imply* the individual?"³⁹ Even Kierkegaard, who is loath to admit any easy correlation between consciousness and certainty, would consent to as much.

While I am aware that such a truncated treatment of Murdoch's thought falls glaringly short of doing justice to the subtlety of her approach, it suffices to illustrate how some of her central commitments such as the omnipresence of value, the function and importance of metaphysics, and the reality of a self-determining consciousness figure in her account of moral realism. Before turning to some critical comments about Murdoch's approach, a few observations about her conception of the Good in relation the human transformation and self-realization are in order.

Seeing the Good

We have already noted how for Murdoch the moral good functions both as the ground of our knowledge—recall Plato's image of the sun in the *Republic* as that by which we see everything else—as well as its measure, its guide. The quest for improvement and fine-tuning, the exigency for betterment and excellence, the presence of comparative judgment informing our tastes and decisions—all these aspects of gradation and improvement point to the idea of perfection as embedded in the very act of cognition. Again Antonaccio:

[Murdoch] argues that although we do not directly experience the good (since it is the condition and not the object of knowledge), we do experience images and shadows of perfect truth and goodness. In every sort of cognitive activity (e.g. intellectual studies, work, art, human relations), we intuitively learn to distinguish gradations of good and bad, better and worse. The whole of our experience thus furnishes us with evidence of the idea of perfection in the activity of truth-seeking.⁴⁰

At the same time, the Good is transcendent in that its exact parameters, including material content, elude our comprehension. It cannot be controlled, grasped, or exhaustively interpreted, nor can it be exactly mediated through any particular good action. We know in which direction to look at, but we will never arrive at the final destination if by that we mean a perfect *adequatio* (Husserl) or epistemological correspondence of perception and object. Borrowing the language of *apophatic* theology, Murdoch stresses our limited capacity to offer linguistic predications of the Good and with it our inability to properly describe what the Good in his essence *is*. The Good as "a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention" stands outside of us and judges all human constructs.⁴¹

But there is another more anthropological reason why the knowledge of the Good eludes us. In a true post-Freudian fashion, with significant overtones of Plato and St. Paul, Murdoch continually returns to the way in which different drives and instincts, fallibility and corruption, blind us to truth and moral goodness.⁴² We are naturally cave-dwellers—to use Plato's analogy

39 Ibid., 153.

40 Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 111.

41 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 54.

42 Murdoch writes: "One may say that what [Freud] presents us with us a realistic and detailed picture of fallen man" (Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and*

from the *Republic*—trapped in darkness and illusion about our true condition. Our psyche is “as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are. . . ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings.”⁴³ Put bluntly, our “fat relentless ego” is a great enemy of morality.⁴⁴ Such a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature, by Murdoch’s own admission, is at the foundation of all of her writings, including her novels where the protagonists “always seem to love the wrong person or get caught in nets of illusion. That they, and we, are so caught reflects our condition, a condition . . . equivalent to the doctrine of original sin.”⁴⁵ In fact, “it would be difficult to name a contemporary novelist . . . who takes Freud more seriously in his unyielding portrait of the self-deception of the ego, especially as the ego searches for the good.”⁴⁶

It is in this context that we find the dynamic interplay of two key concepts in Murdoch’s moral vision: *attention* or *vision* and *detachment*. Like the tradition of Russian personalism that understands ethics as being “about truth and falsehood, . . . about living in recognition of reality,”⁴⁷ so too Murdoch sees misperception as the great enemy of morality. On her Platonic terms, “it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge; . . . with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline.”⁴⁸ That is, we stand in need of an ocular conversion; morality is always a struggle to see rightly. Or as she puts it elsewhere: “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.”⁴⁹

The term “moral effort” is a crucial one here in that it connects perception to the idea of character.⁵⁰ What we “see” is determined by who we are—a frequent echo in C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*—and who we are cannot be accounted for without some recourse to mo-

Literature, ed. Peter J. Conradi [London: Chatto & Windus], 1997), 341.

43 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 50.

44 *Ibid.*, 51.

45 Stanley Hauerwas, “Murdochian Muddles,” in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 198.

46 David Tracy, “The Many Faces of Platonism,” in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 60.

47 Rowan Williams, *Prospect Magazine*, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/rowan-williams-dostoevsky-russian-literature-personalism-interview/#.Ubsb2-ec824> (last accessed February 20, 2015).

48 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 37.

49 *Ibid.*, 35-36.

50 Murdoch writes: “Truthfulness, the search for truth, for a closer connection between thought and reality, demands and effects an exercise of virtues and a purification of desires. The ability, for instance, to think justly about what is evil, or to love another person unselfishly, involves a discipline of intellect and emotion. Thought, goodness and reality are thus seen to be connected” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 399). Hauerwas echoes this perspective when he notes that “Christian ethics is not first of all concerned with ‘Thou shalt’ or ‘Thou shalt not.’ Its first task is to help us rightly envision the world. . . . We can only act within the world we envision, and we can envision the world rightly only as we are trained to see” (Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983], 29).

ral categories such as character and virtue, in other words, the moral good. That is why in order to properly attend to reality we need to be changed, and we are changed, in turn, by pursuing, in the words of Simone Weil, “morally disciplined attention”⁵¹—a concerted reflection in the form of prayer and meditation, of that which is morally good, not unlike the meditation of the righteous person in Psalm 1.

Assessing Murdoch

Let me briefly retrace the steps of our discussion so far. I began with the observation that contemporary ethics faces challenges both in regards to the status and function of moral claims. As we have noted, such misgivings often take the form of subjectivist proposals that deny the stance-independent or objectivist status of moral norms as well as their beneficence for human self-actualization. I then turned to Murdoch’s moral philosophy in order to address such a double remove of morality in order to argue for a moral realist perspective that situates ethics as the ground of *Dasein* or being-in-the-world. The Good, as Murdoch repeatedly stresses, underwrites our basic acts of cognition and reminds us that the pursuit of truth and virtue are essential to subjective well-being. On all of these issues I find myself in basic agreement with Murdoch.

And yet some lingering questions remain. First, since the Murdochian Good is not a *Being* or an extrinsic reality outside of me, how can I ever be sure that what I consider as a given is not simply an expression of my historical consciousness? While I have reservations about Nietzsche’s genealogical method, for example, not least of which is its continual slide into instances of genetic fallacy, I do wonder how Murdoch’s account could properly defend itself against the onslaught of such a hermeneutics of suspicion. In order to respond such a challenge she could argue, in principle, that our innate sense of the Good is epiphenomenal to evolutionary codings, and in so doing provide a naturalistic account of moral intuitionism. But that line of disputation, as we will see, is closed to her the moment she rejects empirical verifications of the Good.

Second, I believe that there is a quantum leap from an ontology of cognition that argues for the transcendental of value to the idea of moral obligation. That is, one can grant Murdoch the claim about the ubiquity of value and yet remain unconvinced that gradations of perfection have any moral claim upon one’s life. And besides, isn’t Murdoch’s argument itself a curious instance of the “naturalistic fallacy”—that just because I encounter moral and non-moral value in my daily existence that that in itself obliges my assent? In approaching such a dilemma, I side with the position that, ontologically speaking, the moral *ought* can properly function only within a framework of the divine command theory. Stated plainly, God—understood in the broadest theistic sense as a divine lawgiver—is the lone basis of moral obligation. Correlatively, and I am following Stephen C. Evans here, what justification for the law-like character of modern moral theories can we provide in the absence of a transcendental cause?⁵² One can read,

51 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 23.

52 C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Evans terms this conundrum the “Anscombe intuition” in reference to Elizabeth Anscombe’s original statement of the problem. See G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M.*

for instance, Derek Parfit's brilliant discussion about "decisive reasons... to act in some way" in *On What Matters* and after plodding through a thousand pages or so still fail to become convinced as to why exactly such reasons demand one's submission.⁵³ And so with Murdoch's ethics as well. We have already noted how her notion of transcendence is entirely immanentist in character; there is no supernatural *beyond*. Simply retaining the formal structure of divine command theory while getting rid of its substance, i.e. the belief in a God who has the right to demand our allegiance, might not do the trick in the end. Granted, this is a hypercharged issue whose complexity I have not even begun to address here, but I do contend that this presents a lacuna in Murdoch's thought and that her proposal, consequently, stands in need of a more cogent phenomenology of moral obligation to account for the *ought* demanded by the Good.

Third, Murdoch insists that we should not identify the Good "with pleasure, or a will to live, or what the government says. The possession of a moral sense is uniquely human; morality is, something unique... *sui generis*, 'as if it came to us from elsewhere.'"⁵⁴ While I understand Murdoch's motive in doing so, a refusal to provide an account of natural goodness prevents her from specifying different forms human goods, such as pre-moral (material well-being), reflexive (personal well-being), and social (communal well-being).⁵⁵ After all, it is quite difficult to delineate such goods and their normativity function without the ability to give an account of states and activities that are proper to humans and on which their flourishing depends.⁵⁶ With that in mind, one wonders whether, in the end, Murdoch's ethics is more an invitation to "spiritual" transformation—certainly one essential aspect of human flourishing—rather than a synthetic vision of how to morally orient human existence in pluralistic societies.

The failure of such a position becomes even more glaring as we consider exponential increases of power in our world in varied cultural and technological domains—biotechnological developments, transhumanism, "states of exceptions" (Carl Schmitt), the panopticing of society, child labor, exploitation of women, and so on. Such dehumanizations of life call for, I believe, continued humanist efforts, both religious and nonreligious, to articulate transcultural goods, norms, and judgments that are, in Hans Jonas's words, "compatible with the permanence of genuine human life."⁵⁷ I am not sure how Murdoch's ethics could ever provide such normative resources given her self-imposed constraints.

Such reservations aside, I am grateful to Murdoch for articulating a broader vision of the moral landscape, one that moves beyond questions "of what we ought to do" to broader ones "about what it is good to be or what it is good to love."⁵⁸ She prods us to revisit long neglected paths that strive to connect morality with the wider realm of meaning and reminds us

Anscombe, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005).

53 Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

54 Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 26.

55 Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 120-121. For a good discussion of this issue see R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, eds., *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

56 See for example Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

57 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 11.

58 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), 3.

that ethics is essential to how we envision and protect human flourishing. Like some of her theological counterparts—Augustine, von Balthasar, and C. S. Lewis come readily to mind here—Murdoch maintains that experiences of beauty and goodness, fleeting as they might be, evoke a yearning “for the infinite, a hunger for more than matter can provide.”⁵⁹ So while I do not consider myself a Murdochian, that would be quite impossible, really, given my theological convictions, I do see her as someone who valiantly attempts to clear long neglected paths by focusing not just on the good life but on the good beyond life.

SAŽETAK:

Promišljanje stvarnosti: Iris Murdoch o moralnom dobru

Čak i nedostatan poznavanje suvremenih kulturnih i filozofskih pravaca odmah će ukazati na raširenu sklonost subjektivističkim oblicima moralnog promišljanja. Pod „subjektivističkim“ mislim na razne ne-kognitivne i konstruktivističke paradigme u moralnoj filozofiji i popularnom govoru koji etičke tvrdnje svode na izričaje osobnih i kolektivnih sklonosti, osjećaja ili predrasuda lišenih bilo kakve objektivne normativnosti. Slijede samo neki čimbenici koji pothranjuju ovakva gledišta: poslovična dihotomija činjenica/vrednota i antirealistički nazori koji prožimaju znatna područja analitičke filozofije; poststrukturalistička i postkolonijalna „rodoslovlja“ koja jezik opće moralnosti vezuje sa diskursima moći, patrijarhata i totalitarnog djelovanja te uporaba govora o vrlinama, vrednotama i „moralnoj jasnoći“ za specifičan skup domaćih i inozemnih političkih interesa i opredjeljenja. Shodno tome, ovakva gledišta vode *dvostrukom odmaku* od etike: od strukture stvarnosti ali i ljudske egzistencije i ljudskog procvata. Zbog potpunijeg propitivanja ovih pitanja ukratko ću se osvrnut na moralnu filozofiju Iris Murdoch i istražiti kako njen specifičan oblik etičkog realizma pristupa ovakvim tvrdnjama o etici. Usprkos suzdržanosti u vezi s uvjerljivošću njenog pristupa nastojat ću obrazložiti da je njena temeljna intuicija u povezivanju moralnosti sa širim područjem smisla i prikazima čovjekovog procvata neophodna za teološki prikaz počovječenja života.

Ključne riječi: *Iris Murdoch; metafizika; etički realizam; moralno dobro; ljudski procvat*

⁵⁹ Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 56.