NOTE TO USERS

Iris Murdoch on Knowledge and Freedom

Alice Conlin

Department of Culture and Values in Education
McGill University
Montreal
August 2003

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-98425-7
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-98425-7

This work is dedicated to my mother, Frances, my brothers and sisters (who are too numerous to be named!), my joyful Noam, and to my beloved, Gordon

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> The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course a good man can be endlessly eccentric, but he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims. The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. (Iris Murdoch, 1997, p. 348)

Prologue:

We are besieged with the demands that others make of us. At times it is clear what action to take in order to do what is right and to remain ourselves. But at other times we are confronted with demands that we know will erode our integrity should we meet them. And yet, this confounded state of affairs is quite normal. In the western world, we place a high value on autonomy-producing education because autonomy is the centerpiece of the philosophy of liberal individualism in liberal democracies. The liberal theory of the personality with its emphasis on the freedom of an individual's actions has made individual choice guided by rational self-interest within acceptable social limits, the supreme instance of moral behaviour.

When an individual criticizes what "acceptable social limits" are, there is no way to arbitrate claims because there is nothing that approaches a normative theory of morality behind the rational choice model. If one person thinks that it is irrational to have severe economic disparity in social life, and another considers this state of affairs perfectly acceptable, there is no way to settle the dispute. If the two could agree that social justice was a worthwhile goal but disagreed on how it should be attained, then they could agree to compromise on how much justice it is incumbent upon the state to provide. But they could not know whose claim held more moral weight. And this is not a small problem, it is not an easy thing to know how to proceed in moral matters, and whether or not one's carefully weighed choices have their intended results. Where once it was religious authourity that decreed how we should behave, now we operate in a moral climate that is littered with leftover concepts from moribund religious worldviews. And we have nothing but our experience of their absence to guide us morally.

Is our freedom from the authority of creed, and our insistence upon our own moral conscience a position from which we can ever attain a state of grace or, is it a way to evade our moral deserts as Nobel Laureate Milosz Czeslaw (1998) scoffs:

> Religion, opium for the people! To those suffering pain, humiliation, illness, and serfdom, it promised a reward in the afterlife. And now we are witnessing a transformation. A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death- the huge solace of thinking that for betrayals, greed, cowardice,

> murders we are not going to be judged.... there is a scale to weigh sins and good deeds. In Tibetan Buddhism the judge is the Master of Death and in coming to his verdict he is assisted by pebbles, black ones cast on balance by the Accuser, white ones cast by the Defender. All religions recognize that our deeds are imperishable. (p.17)

Even a pronounced atheist/moralist like Solzenitzhen would be hard-pressed to disagree with Czeslaw's dark appraisal of public morality. He might believe that we could construct a scale on more just principles than those religious dogmas allow; however, it is the point of this work that humans need to be inspired to hold principles and that we are inspired by what we perceive as just, and worthwhile, and beautiful. So in the absence of dogma, one would be best served by attending to contexts, and embracing the particular that is afforded by one's peculiar experience.

One must understand that which is outside of oneself in order to attain a more ethical vision. This is the insight of the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch and the greater subject of this paper. Murdoch's moral philosophy is compelling today because it provides a new way to situate human freedom in a time when choices seem to grow both increasingly numerous and perilous. What is at stake is nothing less than our seeing ourselves as moral entities, and the repercussions should we fail.

Religious authority once supplied the framework for discussions of morality and people made sense of the varied demands made of them in light of a conception of morality that seemed to exist wholly independently of them. Whatever interior arrangements they

made were in relation to an unchanging moral standard. Freedom was the sweet state of certainty that one's lifetime was played out at the gates of virtue. The grace of such an existence was its own reward just as virtue is its own reward. This is not a state that we moderns can attain without some anxiety about whether or not we are truly recognizing and meeting our proper ends.

Our Judaeo-Christian ancestors did not conceive of themselves as autonomous individuals who create the conditions of their freedom with their free will and rational mind. Our ancestors conceived of freedom as actions in conformity with the requirements of universal moral constraints. Today we favor a conception of freedom that inverts this dictum. The legitimacy of the actions of an autonomous individual is exactly his freedom from any external constraint. This type of freedom is, as Isaiah Berlin calls it, a "negative" freedom because it is only freedom *from* constraint and has no substantive content. It has no virtue. Once an individual has freed himself from every restraint, he realizes that he only had freedom *from* fear, hunger, injustice, et cetera. And once these are taken care of, he is left with a sense of yearning and no freedom at all.

This seemingly insuperable impasse is one that Charles Taylor (1975) addresses in his book, *Hegel*:

> Much philosophical thought in the last century has been engaged with this problem. [...] how to go beyond a notion of the self as the subject of a self-dependent will and bring to light its insertion in nature, our own and that which surrounds us, or in other terms, how to situate freedom. (p. 29)

We intuitively sense that we can have no freedom until we can conceive of ourselves as bound up with the good. Our everyday experience convinces us of this necessity as we muddle our way through moral quandaries, which in each generation we claim to be more unyielding than the last. Maria Antonaccio (2000) states the situation precisely in her book on the moral thought of Iris Murdoch: "[t]o say that the self and the self's freedom cannot be abstracted from a situation that defines its purpose and ends is just to say that the self is integrally related to some account of the good (p. 8)."

But how is this possible? Moral theory exists within a matrix of philosophical stances toward the self that make knowledge of the good a theoretic quagmire. How can moral theory account for a self that is cognizant of the good? How can one speak of knowledge of "good" in any real sense in a world where empirical models reign supreme, and good is notoriously insensible to the senses that can be quantified. One can measure the decibels of a scream but one cannot likewise measure the quality of a kind gesture. One can only describe one's experience of it, and the description of experience, of course, is a highly subjective business. All of the self's resources cannot be used to provide information because of the limits of the instrumental conception of the self in liberal democratic theory. From within the framework of liberal or communitarian theories of the self, one cannot erect a theory of value or a substantive account of the good.

Two dominant strains of thought situate the self-concept today, i.e., radically unencumbered or encumbered. The first is characterized by an autonomy that elevates the self until it is actually self-constituting. Antonaccio, (2000), maintains that the

radically unencumbered self: "...constitutes its own world through its acts and choices apart from determination by the givens of its situation (p. 8)." And the second expresses a communitarian ethic that tends toward totalism and the virtual submergence of the self; it is distinguished by a belief "...that the aims and purposes of the self are in fact constituted by the givens of its natural and social, and historical existence in particular communities (ibid, p. 8)."

Neither of these schools of thought can account for a self that is sufficiently conceived as a moral center. The thesis of autonomy does not adequately acknowledge the relation of the self to others and the dialogical nature of the self, and the communitarian or Natural Law variants do not give a generous instantiation of the self as a moral agent with a particular appreciation of reality separate from that which the Natural Law conception supplies; the 'relation' is more significant than the individual.

To have an account of the good that is not simply an expression of preference or alternately, a completely impersonal scheme not attached to the experience of a particular individual, one must have a theory of reality that privileges the self as a moral identity constituted by a *prior framework of value*. There must be a concession to the concept of an objective standard outside of the self that shows the nature of reality. There must be a turn towards a metaphysics that does not hide its moral character like the metaphysics of the past when, as Stuart Hampshire (1960), the Oxford Linguist philosopher, describes it:

> ...to show the nature of reality was to show the place of man in nature and therefore his proper duties and purposes; it was to show the way to his salvation, to the kind of knowledge that

> would set him free from his ordinary interests and preoccupations. (cited in Antonaccio, 2000, p. 31)

This is difficult today when we must come to terms with Freud, and when the grand metaphysicians, Kant and Hegel, have lost their grip on our imagination. Modern analytic philosophers have rejected metaphysical ethics as methodologically unsound, and they have not provided anything in their place. We are left with what Murdoch (1997) calls: "...too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality (p. 287)." Although we denounce as misconceptions our former conceptions of ourselves, a new and satisfactory conception remains enigmatic. We have a disinherited mind in the sense that the concepts we once held about who we are and how we should live have lost their value while our need for them seems to have remained. Although we no longer let certain concepts lay claim to our being in what can be judged a progressive movement toward a more just society, we seem also to have lost faith in our ability to make good choices.

Values?

Despite the reservations of analytic philosophers, people still have powerful beliefs in the existence of morality. There seems to be what Charles Taylor (1992) calls an *inescapable framework* of values. And this inescapable framework presupposes the existence of a transcendental notion of the good. We are imprinted with a belief in the reality of goodness or at least the pangs of conscience that attend unwise choices, and yet we have no concepts that help us to understand our predicament.

In this paper, I examine a significant response to this dilemma. And I do it in the spirit of an investigation into the transformation of concepts or what is called, in German, *Begriffgeschichte*. My methodology can be described as an investigation into meaning simply because I am human, and that is what I do, or as William G. Perry puts it: "[o]rganisms organize, and human organisms organize *meaning* (Paul Kegan, 1984, p. 29)." I examine the descriptive account of reality articulated by Iris Murdoch who rejects the current approach to moral theory and posits the existence of the transcendent reality of goodness.

Now, the meaning of transcendence for Murdoch is not entirely transparent. But I think that she would argue that many of our dearly held concepts lack the same transparency, and are even false in so far as they do not serve the purpose for which they are created. If we can assume that morality should call forth a just posture toward others, then we are obviously disserved by moral concepts that do not inspire moral behaviour. If we do not believe that morality contains any kind of unity from any source whatsoever, then what do we mean by the concept at all? Murdoch (1997) believes that there must be some form of transcendence connected with morality because she is all too aware of the problem of solipsism. She states:

> It seems to me that the idea of the transcendent, in some form or other, belongs to morality: but it is not easy to interpret. As with so many of these large elusive ideas, it readily takes on forms which are false ones. There is a false transcendence, as there is a false unity, which is generated by modern empiricism: a transcendence which is in effect simply an exclusion, a

> relegation of the moral to a shadowy existence in terms of emotive language, imperatives, behaviour patterns, attitudes. 'Value' does not belong inside the world of truth functions, the world of science and factual propositions. So it must live somewhere else. It is then attached somehow to the human will, a shadow clinging to a shadow. (p.347)

Murdoch hopes to recentre moral life in a reconceptualized self that is no longer languishing without a spiritual or emotional home. She characterizes the longing of the unacknowledged virtue-aware self as the sort of longing one feels at the loss of a home. She notes:

> We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society. We no longer see man against a background of values of realities, which transcend him. (p. 290)

Murdoch (1997) decries the loss of a metaphysical picture of reality and intimates that certain concepts must be retrieved if we are to once again have an image of ourselves that is rich enough to approximate truth.

> We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world. For the hard idea of truth, we have substituted the facile idea of sincerity. What we have never had, of course, is a satisfactory Liberal theory of personality, a

> theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn. (p. 290)

The particular concept that Murdoch retrieves to form her metaphysical ethic is the notion of a prior framework of value as a background. She believes that we threw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater when we placed our highest value on our negative conception of *freedom*. She states: "[w]e have bought the Liberal theory of personality as it stands, because we have wished to encourage people to think of themselves as free, at the cost of surrendering the background (ibid, p. 290)." Murdoch's plan is to retrieve the background, and to renew the concept of freedom so that it honors the individual in relation to a background of morals.

Murdoch accepts the platonic concept of a pristine Good beyond the chaotic realm of being as the central principle of reality. But her Platonism is modified to acknowledge the world of particularity and pluralism when she attaches her notion of human consciousness and its private interior meaning that plays a partner role in assessing the good. She casts the moral posture as one of transaction between the experiencing self and the transcendent good in terms that have much in common with Martha Nussbaum's conception of moral behavior as the interplay between the demands of standing terms, or general principles about what the good life is composed of, and a properly imaginative perception. However, they arrive at their similar conceptions with different commitments, and Murdoch goes much further than Nussbaum in embracing a moral realism while at the same time maintaining the possibility of the subjective self.

Introductory Remarks on Thesis Structure

In chapter one, I describe the different conceptions of self that Murdoch and Nussbaum have, and I show how these affect their depictions of human good. And I relate how each one defends the internal logic of her claims against the critique of moral relativism. I examine Iris Murdoch's conception of *reality* and *consciousness* in the distinctive way that she fuses them to a transcendent morality. I show the way in which she is careful to acknowledge the irreducible plurality of beings by paying careful attention to their particularity. The similarities between Murdoch's approach to moral perceiving and that of Nussbaum are extensive but Murdoch's approach is the more fruitful one. I argue that Murdoch's philosophy is emboldened and vivified by her cleaving to the conception of the good beyond being, a point that Nussbaum does not endorse.

In chapter two, I turn to Murdoch's description of the journey from illusion to reality and the role of love or *eros* in this journey. I examine the many points of intersection between her description of the escape from selfishness and Wendy Farley's (1996) theory of how we acknowledge the other through a type of attention that she calls *eros for the other*. I show how Murdoch's theory of the good is based on a love of particularity and plurality to forestall criticism that in seeking to have a standard, she is guilty of totalizing thought. The resonance of her ideas with those of the great philosopher of consciousness, Emmanuel Levinas, is a testament to her love for open, and not closed, philosophical systems.

In Chapter three, I discuss the problem that evil poses for Murdoch's moral philosophy, and how Murdoch and Farley interpret the experience of the void as yearning for relation. I examine the traces of a shift in the *primary metaphor of moral activity from will to vision* that Iris Murdoch proposes. And I discuss as well what Antonaccio (2000) describes as: "the shift in the ground of freedom from choice to knowledge" (p. 113), and what this shift may mean for the ongoing project of excavating human freedom.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I present Murdoch's views on *form* as the consolation of human yearning. I discuss the role of the creative imagination in providing opportunities to engender, and to enlarge moral understanding. I also look at the role of beauty and art in the moral sphere. And finally, I consider the ways educators can enrich their practices by applying some of the insights of Murdoch, Nussbaum, Farley and Scarry on the relation of knowledge, perception, the moral life, and freedom. It is in the emerging paradigm of teaching and learning in the affective dimension that exciting opportunities lie.

Throughout this thesis, I will use the word "man" to mean person and I will use the masculine pronoun "he" to mean person, as well. Please do not mistake my intention. I am aware of the feminist critique of such language but I find the alternatives cumbersome, and perhaps one can note with felicity that the majority of my research is from books written by women. Whether these women writers consider themselves women before they consider themselves persons, I cannot know but my own predilection for personhood before womanhood directs my actions.

I am honored to partake in the ongoing conversation about what human freedom feels like. It is my goal to shed light on some new, or at least renewed, and worthwhile approaches to this timeless investigation.

N.B. I occasionally use endnotes in cases where standard notation would burden the text.

Chapter One

Martha Nussbaum's Aristotelianism and Iris Murdoch's Metaphysical ethic: the Role of Perception in Moral Understanding

Facts and Values

In her last book, *Metaphysics and Morals* (1992), Murdoch pleads for the precept that undergirds her entire moral philosophy. She asks her readers to acknowledge their sense of self that is *implied*:

> Our present moment, our experiences, our flow of consciousness, our indelible moral sense, are not all these linked together and do they not *imply* the individual? (p. 153)

The beauty of Iris Murdoch's concept of moral understanding is its lusty quality. Which other moral philosopher holds the individual's experience of self-consciousness in such regard that she appends her theory of the self to it? Murdoch discusses sentiments that we feel but hesitate to speak of because we do not consider the inner realm of consciousness trustworthy. She describes the moral sensibility in tones that resonate with our own hidden experience. It is perhaps not rigorous in an empirical manner to speak of such concepts as an 'indelible moral sense', and yet what we choose to recognize as a valid object of knowledge is very much a matter of choice, and a matter of subjective opinion.

The bias that distinguishes the world of veridicality from that of subjective judgment is itself based on a subjective judgment about the nature of reality. Why is it that moral reality is not an appropriate realm of knowledge? Why is it that facts are endowed with a reified sense when values are considered to be (merely) a matter of subjective opinion? Is it, perhaps, nothing more than a contingent conceptual framework that assigns our relationship to facts and values? A.E. Denham describes the estimation of facts and values in her essay on Murdoch's moral psychology; facts are exalted as:

> ...genuine features of the mind-independent world awaiting our discovery while values are not discovered but *invented* ---we create them by coloring the objects of our sentiments with our sentiments themselves. (MFS, Vol, 47, no 3, 2001, p. 607)

Perhaps our moral concepts do as Denham states: "...fall upon fully real evaluative states of the world (ibid., p. 607)." I raise this question because I wish to introduce Murdoch's view of the world and its substantive ethical content in a way that highlights its departure from the more traditional approaches to ethics that center on the study of language and observable choice-making behavior. The choice of speech and other acts as the locus of research in ethics is a laudable one if you are concerned to create repeatable experiments in the manner of the scientific method. But a research paradigm that mimics the method of the physical sciences may not be the most useful if we hope to understand the stubbornly personal aspect of moral understanding.

Values and the Moral Qualities of Actions

The scientific or instrumental reason approach by necessity emphasizes the distinction between fact and value, and inevitable diminishes the experiencing person by reducing

that person to a sum of factual observations about his or her behavior. In Murdoch's (1970) view, too much weight is given to the idea of choice constituting value. She asks: "...if the moral quality of an action depended upon choice, should not what prepares a person to make that choice be important? (p. 53)" For Murdoch, inquiry into the moral decision process is fruitless if it overlooks what Murdoch calls the pre-philosophic world. Murdoch believes that the idea of a moral good is conceived in a pre-philosophic world of perception, belief, and emotion where questions of value seem to defy the strict antinomy of fact and value. Murdoch (1997) states:

> ...fact and value merge in a quite innocuous way [...]. 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 [...]. On this view, it may be noted moral freedom looks more like a mode of reflection that we may have to achieve, and less like a capacity to vary our choices [...](p. 95)

Murdoch's approach to moral philosophy can be best described as combination of meta-ethics and philosophical moral psychology. Denham (2001) describes the foundation inquiries of these two areas, and also describes Murdoch as having a phenomenological approach. She notes:

> The central question of meta-ethics are "What, if anything, determines the truth of moral judgements?" and "How, if at all, are those truths to be discerned? [...]Because philosophical moral psychology is concerned principally with pure description, and because, further, it often proceeds from a subjective point of

> view (describing the nature of moral experience as presented to the subject or the subjects whose experience it is) it is sometimes aptly dignified with the label "moral phenomenology". (p. 605)

Perhaps we must follow Hume, and acknowledge that on the deepest level knowledge is nothing more than trustworthy belief. And maybe we should not be so afraid to acknowledge certain beliefs to be at the heart of our conception of human nature. If we want to have a useful set of 'best practices' to help us understand what we do when we reflect morally, then we should not be hesitant to acknowledge that moral features may be a part of reality even if we cannot have objective knowledge of them. According to Murdoch, these moral features may be seen only from a certain perspective. As Denham notes: "[t]he thought that there are aspects of reality that can only be discerned from some specific perspectival viewpoints is pivotal to Murdoch's meta-ethics from start to finish (Denham, ibid., p. 606)."

In this chapter, I introduce the philosopher Martha Nussbaum's conception of moral perception in its Aristotelian framework. I show what Nussbaum attempts to construct by way of an ethical norm, and I show how she falls short because of her unwillingness to grant a transcendent aspect to her conception of the human self. I then show how Murdoch manages to provide the framework for an ethical norm (whose content will be discussed in chapter two) and I show how both of them have a very similar appreciation for the role of perception in moral understanding. Murdoch and Nussbaum's shared view of the form of the novel as the best conduit for moral perception will be treated in the concluding section of this paper.

There are a great many points of intersection between Murdoch's and Nussbaum's conceptions of moral perception. Both of these philosophers take as their starting point an ambitious project to define the notion of the human being as an agent uniquely qualified to perceive the claims in whose correct response the demands of a moral existence are met. And yet they differ in how they conceive of these claims.

Nussbaum's Conception of Morality

Nussbaum (1990) takes pains to present an Aristotelian morality that is not subject to the charge of subjectivity by its having recourse to a notion of the human being as being a special locus of value, and to forms of human functioning in accord with the excellences as they are modeled by persons of practical wisdom. She states:

> Aristotelian deliberation as I conceive of it is concerned very deeply with one general notion above all: the notion of the human being. The starting point of an Aristotelian inquiry into ethics is the question, "How should a human being live?" ...And the general answer to this question suggested by Aristotle himself is "In accordance with all of the forms of human functioning that make up a complete human life."(p. 95)

In her essay "An Aristotelian Conception of Morality", Nussbaum postulates that 'good human functioning' is something we can recognize as such because we have the "guidance of the tentative conception" of "human good"(1990, p. 95). Knowledge of human good is possible but it is, of course, always revisable in the face of particulars. The particular constellation of situations and their demands call on us to

improvise and reconfigure what we mean by 'good human functioning'. But there are some set values in human perceiving that cause human perception to have its uniquely human and moral character thus preventing the descent into a type of dystopia. These 'essential values of perception' suggest that moral perception is guided by an ameliorative principle.

An Empty Moral Situation?

According to Nussbaum, our perception is conditioned by an essentially human value that we bring to all of our particular circumstances and our fidelity to these essential values keep us on the path of progressive improvement. Nussbaum (1990) does not explicitly state that the discernment of perception operates with a perfectionist tendency but how could it be otherwise when prior commitments accumulate and fidelity to them works its way into our characters. As she says:

> ...particular human contexts are never if seen well, sui generis in all of their elements, nor divorced from a past full of obligations. And fidelity to those, as a mark of humanity, is one of the essential values of perception. (p. 95)

In other words, there is an internal compass that prevents the perceiving human from slipping into moral relativism, and it is called the notion of good human functioning: "...the notion of good human functioning steers and guides the inquiry at a deep level, focusing attention on certain features of situations rather than others (1990, p. 95)." Because we respond to the imperative of our human nature, we perceive an "evolving

perception of the human good" (ibid., p. 95). In other words, human subjectivity is, at least in part, constituted.

Now, I am not sure that Nussbaum would be pleased to have her thought construed to suggest that human subjectivity is, at least in part, constituted by but I believe that it is a logical outcome of her statements. How do we come to have a 'tentative conception' and how does it guide us? These questions are not easily answered by an appeal to the Aristotelian formula of practical wisdom which one gains by interaction with the world, i.e., a form of human 'doing' rather than a form of human 'being'. Although Nussbaum may recover a more substantial notion of the human self in Aristotle, she stops short of providing a sufficiently situated self of whom we do not question whence comes the 'tentative conception'.

Nussbaum has elsewhere defended non-relative Aristotelian values[1] but with her reformulation of Aristotelian rationality in "An Aristotelian Conception of Rationality", she takes a step back from her acknowledgement of general principle to acknowledge the primacy of the particular. And even more tenuously, she maintains that although there are general rules that must constrain any particular act, she maintains "the priority of the particular in good deliberation". Nussbaum (1990) states: "...discrimination rests with perception. The experienced navigator will sense when to follow the rule book, and when to leave it aside." (p. 97) With these positions, Nussbaum courts a dangerously shallow concept of morality. Nussbaum (1990) disclaims our ability to construct a

rational method for discovering the good because of the primacy of each moment of perception. She states:

> A general account may give us necessary conditions for choosing well; it cannot by itself give sufficient conditions. Aristotle says this plainly: just as the agent's own decision rests with perception, so too does our decision as to whether he or she has chosen well. (p. 93)

Nussbaum insists, however, that general principles play a role, and that 'fidelity to prior commitments' demand this because the perceiving self is duty-bound to improvise morally in order to maintain responsibility to both the "history of commitment, and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context" (1990, p. 94). Now, if the context were one like Nazi Germany on the night of Kristallnacht, then one can see the limitations of relying on experience to guide one. It seems today, that following the infamous night of Kristallnacht, not only Germans but also others should have protested. Where was the rulebook that evening? In this example, we see what is at stake for Nussbaum with her commitment to context, and we see why she is at pains to grant her concept of self an ontological weight that is not accounted for within the framework of Aristotelian rationalism.

A "General Account" of What?

Nussbaum has a conception of the nature of the human self that is implicitly substantiated. This is something that Nussbaum implies in her insistence that the good

response be a categorically humane response. She states: "[a]ny choice that will be a good choice *for her* must be a good choice for her as *a human being* (1990, p. 94)."

And Nussbaum does, of course, appeal to what is in all appearances and everything but name a transcendent concept of self. Nothing less than a prior framework of value in which the individual self is embedded can account for its having a 'tentative concept of human good'. Nussbaum is not a moral realist and cannot acknowledge the missing background that explains what is implicit in her conception of self.

What she relies on to anchor her account of moral understanding to save it from being just an account of momentary preferences is the admission that the world may have real ethical content that provides a substrata to the context at hand. And that this would serve as a way of delimiting contexts. She does not unqualifiedly support this proposition; she only suggests that it may be possible because she sees the shortcomings of an entirely contextual basis for moral behavior. She concedes what Murdoch celebrates i.e., that what perception aims to see is the way things are.

> ...the Aristotelian view does not imply subjectivism, or even relativism. The insistence that deliberation must take contextual features into account does not imply that the deliberated choice is correct only relative to local norms. Aristotelian particularism is fully compatible with the view that what perception aims to see is (in some sense) the way things are. (p. 95)

This admission is an important one for Nussbaum because she has taken risky stances, and come up with valuable conceptions that need to be supported even if that requires her

provisionally accepting positions that do not recommend themselves on first sight. If the definition of true wisdom means being able to simultaneously maintain two mutually incompatible beliefs, then Nussbaum is doing us all a service.

Nussbaum (1990) is aware of the criticism that she offers an essentially contentless ethical norm, and she embraces this incongruity at the heart of her theory. It is, she says because truth itself is limitless and its content can be discovered only by attending to the occasions of life, and seeing what they offer in the way of understanding. (p. 96) Her frank acknowledgment of the limits of her understanding hits the same notes as the rhetorical answer Hebrew sages give to skeptics who ask why, if G-d exists, there is so much human suffering, and to which they reply "G-d is big". The answer is beyond our understanding, but it is there nonetheless. Nussbaum keeps faith with the ability of experience to provide the best answers in the fullness of time, while we do our best with the experiences of today, and do not ask questions about truth because we have no recourse to final answers.

Nussbaum's Aristotelianism does not prevent her from having a brilliant account of attention and the moral/creative imagination in fiction, as we shall see in chapter three. But her refusal to allow her conception of self to have any part of an *impersonal good* limits her conception of the self in important ways. This is not true for Iris Murdoch whose conception of self is suffused with the Platonic concept of a Good beyond being.

Murdoch's Two-Fold Theory of the Good

In this section, I describe Iris Murdoch's conception of 'reality' and 'perception' in the distinctive way she fuses them to a transcendent Good to justify her moral realism. Murdoch understands the good as an antecedent background that constitutes our consciousness and gives us a moral sense. She has a realist theory of the good that is twofold. First, the good is exactly the inescapable framework that, in the first instance, calls on us to be moral; it is what Antonaccio (2000) calls the: "condition for human valuing, the framework or context within which human beings pursue any good whatsoever (p. 48)." Second, the good exists in a state beyond being as an unattainable source of the good itself. It is like an invisible sun whose light is no less real for its source being obscured. As Murdoch says in her essay "The Sovereignty of the Good" (1970): "[w]e see the world in light of the Good, but what is the good itself? The source of vision is not in an ordinary sense seen (p. 98)." According to her, the vision we have of the world is inextricable from the dual aspects of the good, and the image we have of ourselves should do justice to this reality.

Perspectival Aspects of the Good

It is important to understand that the world, for Murdoch, is partly created by us all through the interior activity of imagining but it is, in another sense, more real than we can know. The vision we have of the world is limited by our own capacity for experience. Denham (2001) borrows the language of aesthetic perception to refer to the perspectival aspects of morality, "...moral aspects are perspectival whether or not one detects them depends on one's experiential capacities and point of view (p. 614)."

We have only incomplete knowledge of the world exactly because its moral character is dependent upon our imperfect perception. Just as Nussbaum finds moral understanding infinitely indefinite, Murdoch (1970) finds the concept of the Good indefinable because understanding goodness presents us with what she calls: "the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality (p. 32)." The difficulty of the task precludes its ever being achieved, however, its magnetic quality draws us on in the direction of increasing goodness.

Nussbaum and Murdoch are like Moses, who only gazes toward the Promised Land from Mount Nebo before expiring. But Murdoch believes that the Promised Land is real, whereas Nussbaum is not so sure. Both would, however, agree with the maxim that each of us reaches our own Mount Nebo, however constituted. Nussbaum is content to accept present experiences and measure her good against them in the Aristotelian tradition while Murdoch wants to measure her good against an eternity. She does just this by evoking a Platonic concept of the good, and her own theory of reality or metaphysics. According to Murdoch, it is the task of religion and metaphysics to present us with metaphors and stories that enable us to realize the good within our grasp. Murdoch suffuses her respect for the present particular with a Neo-Platonic understanding of a good beyond being.

Murdoch feels that analytic philosophers separate too hastily questions of truth from questions of goodness, and she believes they err when they consider only the former a fertile field for knowledge while the latter is left to languish. In her view, this does a

disservice to ordinary people who struggle with moral issues in a world transformed by technologies that shape and reshape our images of the world and ourselves. These emerging images appear to pose ever-greater questions about fairness. We have more information than we can use, and very little that helps us to understand how we are inserted into a moral landscape. We need a new way of seeing ourselves, and we need to part with any theory of reality that does not acknowledge the reality of goodness in terms that do not diminish it.

According to Murdoch, goodness is real, and we have access to it. The more we enlarge our perception, the more we expand our knowledge of the good. And it is our perceiving the reality of other people that provides our consciousness with its ethical nature. For Murdoch, the task of philosophy and religion is, as Antonaccio (2000) aptly describes it: "the defeat of the ego by fostering techniques to overcome selfishness and to enlarge one's perception of reality and others (p. 51)." She wishes her philosophy to provide us with a picture of ourselves in the world where we can know our relation to the good, or in what amounts to the same thing, where we can have a theory of value.

She does just this with her concept of moral "vision" or understanding as a state of perceptive consciousness that is attuned to the good in its transcendent aspect. Murdoch avoids the charge of moral subjectivism in her formulation of moral understanding by attaching her concept of moral understanding to a theory of the reality of goodness. And she maintains that we gain access to the knowledge of goodness through affirming the reality of other people.

The first principle of Murdoch's moral philosophy is that we must perceive the reality of other people, for it is the starting point of knowing the good in ourselves, and being moral. Our perception grows increasingly rich as we attend to the reality of others, and our moral understanding increases. As Nussbaum (1990) bluntly states:"[o]btuseness is a moral failing, its opposite can be cultivated (p. 156)", Murdoch believes that we can cultivate our moral sensibility by actively attending to our contexts.

There exist potentially rich areas for educators to exploit in the work of both Nussbaum and Murdoch because they believe 'active' perception is something that can be inculcated. However, while Murdoch attempts to provide a meta-ethic that gainsays our active perception from inadvertently leading us into evil actions, it is a problematic claim to say that she succeeded. Murdoch is committed to the irreducible plurality of experience forestalling any systematic prescription of right behaviour.

Her moral theory is not prescriptive. It is, as Denham notes: "attuned to the ways in which the diversity and complexity of ethical experience defy systematization" (ibid., p. 604). Murdoch's meta-ethic cannot prescribe ethical behaviour but if it gives us insight into the mechanism whereby we develop moral understanding, then it has already done a great service. Murdoch's moral phenomenology departs from traditional moral theory and leaves the door open to an understanding of moral perception that is both startling in its presuppositions, and quite familiar with its commonsensical quality.

Murdoch presupposes that we have a moral sense because morality exists, and that we have a concept of value because values exist. Murdoch (1970) presents her view thus: "[m]y view might be put by saying: moral terms must be treated as concrete universals....It is all well and good to say that 'to copy a right action is to act rightly' ....[*in the spirit of Aristotle and Nussbaum*] but what is the form I am supposed to copy? (pp. 29-30, bracketed comments mine)." Murdoch goes on to reject rationalist conceptions of the good that rely upon the notion that good moral functioning is something we learn from conventions:

> It is a truism of recent philosophy that this operation of discerning the form is fairly easy, that rationality in this simple sense is a going concern. And of course for certain conventional purposes it is. But it is characteristic of morals that one cannot rest entirely at the conventional level, and that in some ways, one ought not to. (1970, p. 30)

Murdoch insists upon the primacy of experience, and not convention, as the starting point for moral understanding, or as she calls it, virtue. Murdoch states:

> We ordinarily conceive of and apprehend goodness in terms of virtues which belong to a continuous fabric of being. And it is just the historical, individual nature of virtues as actually exemplified which makes it difficult to learn from another person. ...Where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand, and *grow by looking.* (1970, p. 30-31)

Murdoch continues her description of the process whereby we apprehend goodness, and she states that moral knowledge is accumulated through an active perception. One does not simply see--one must look!

Murdoch's moral philosophy is premised upon her contention that moral concepts should be treated as though they were concrete universals even though there can be no way of ascertaining that moral values exist independently of us. Moral values cannot be said to exist on their own because we must perceive them. As Denham (2001) reminds us, "their value is only discernable by a human and moral perception" (p. 607).

According to Murdoch, we experience goodness in a form of gestalt when we evaluate, and the outcome of our evaluation is moral knowledge. Antonaccio (2000) cogently describes this gestalt: "[g]oodness unites value and cognition in the evaluative activity of consciousness (p. 51)." But we must keep in mind that our consciousness evaluates, and grows more perfect at perceiving a good that both structures it internally, and yet lies outside of itself.

The existence of goodness is not, of course, to be understood in the terms of a metaphysical naturalism that underlies rational-scientific conceptions of the world. Murdoch insists that there are truths about the world other than naturalistic ones. We are all moral persons before we are scientists, and perhaps these worlds of scientific and moral truths actually coexist. Murdoch (1997) suggests as much: "[m]oral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world of science and logic. They set up for different

purposes, a different world (p. 321)." In Murdoch's metaphysics, the condition for freedom is knowledge of reality in a world that is imbued with value, and where knowledge of the good is the most perfect, and yet unattainable reality we always strive to know.

Murdoch's theory of value is not dependent on the fallible but willing human. It rests instead on Murdoch's theory of consciousness as a mode of moral reflection with a prior framework of value. In this way she avoids the charge of subjectivity about her concept of the good. She conceives her good as objective to the knowing agent, and not a function of the agent's will. For her, consciousness is the condition for moral choice, and it displaces freedom from external restraint in the familiar liberal democratic conception of the self, as the *sine qua non* of moral behavior.

Murdoch (1970) denies the view that values are a function of the human will. In her view, values: "...are not moving about on their own as adjuncts of the personal will...[*they are*] patently tied on the world, they are stretched as it were between the truth seeking mind and the world"(p. 96, bracketed comments mine). Values are knowable, and yet we must be 'truth seeking' to perceive them. I will discuss exactly how we are truth seeking in chapter two where I describe Murdoch's concept of attention guided by love to the magnetic center of the good.

Murdoch has an abiding concern for the practice of human freedom, and she finds fault with the flimsy shadow self that is at the heart of moral theory. She would like

philosophers to take seriously a discussion of self in relation to others, and in relation to the good, instead of foisting upon us a theory of human nature disguised as philosophy. According to Murdoch, moral philosophy lacking the vital concept of the good does not respond to the concerns of people who yearn to know their place in the world. Murdoch bemoans the lack of a theory of moral understanding that has ordinary human experience at its center. Murdoch (1970) notes:

> The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates values by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. (p. 97)

Murdoch offers her concept of moral vision to relocate the individual as a locus of values, and to renegotiate the terms of human freedom so they are more in line with the desires of plain folk, and to make the concept of freedom understandable if not attainable in any absolute sense.

I have shown the different conceptions of self that Murdoch and Nussbaum have, and how these affect their depictions of human good And I have introduced Murdoch's meta-ethic. It is my thesis that Nussbaum has an unintentional conception of an ideal informing her Aristotelian notion of 'good human functioning', and that Murdoch's endorsement of a Platonic ideal gives her theory of moral understanding an internal coherence. Murdoch acknowledges that her concept of the good is, of course, a metaphor but she contends it is not a meaningless one. And she urges us to see the important place we give to metaphors, "...we are creatures who use irreplaceable metaphors in many of

our most important activities (1970, p. 93)." Murdoch insists that although the good man is rare, we all have a moral sense as our birthright.

In chapter two, I show the content of the good in Murdoch's metaphysics, or more accurately, how she considers it indefinable but not empty. Murdoch (1997) proclaims in "On God and Good": "[w]e need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central (p. 337)." And Murdoch's concept of loving attention is at the core of her philosophy. In this chapter, I discuss how Murdoch's concept of good manifests itself in our relation to beings outside of us. And I examine the concordance of so much of what Wendy Farley calls *eros for the other* with Murdoch's conception of love, as well as the relation of eros and love to moral vision.

Murdoch's concept of moral vision is a potentially weak point in her moral theory because it relies on an understanding of consciousness that is not, on first view, convincing. Until one accepts Murdoch's conception of a perfectionist principle operating at the level of consciousness, it is difficult to see how her theory may reflect our experience. And when one accepts the concept of the perfectionist principle, there is still the problem of evil, which I examine in chapter three. In chapter two, I aim to dispel doubts that may arise about whether Murdoch's philosophy is more that linguistic equations.

Because Murdoch uses so many platonic conceptions, it is easy to wonder if they refer to actual life-world experience. I aim to articulate how Murdoch's moral philosophy is an excellent reflection of moral experience, and to show how it offers a full and optimistic conception of the individual. But for now, I turn to a confusion that arises from the different ways that Murdoch relates about how one arrives at knowledge of reality, and in what amounts to the same thing, about how one arrives at knowledge of the good. Murdoch describes two ways of attaining knowledge of the good, the first is through art, and the second is through love.

Murdoch, at times, stresses the incomprehensibility of reality, and her own posture toward her conception of the good seems muddled in a way that mirrors the incomprehensibility of reality. In "Vision and Choice in Morality" (1997), she writes:

> The insistence that morality is essentially rules may be seen as an attempt to secure us against the ambiguity of the world [...]If I am right, however, this cannot properly be taken as the only structural model of morality. There are times when it is proper to stress not the comprehensibility but the incomprehensibility of the world. (p. 90)

At times, Murdoch (1970) champions the ability of art among other means, such as to witness the reality of the moral insight, 'there is more than this'. In her essay entitled "On God and the Good", she criticizes much existentialist thought as being a romantic form of self-assertion that is incapable of inspiring moral behaviour. She states:

> It is not this [*romantic self-assertion*] which will lead a man on to unselfish behaviour in the concentration camp. There is,

> however, 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 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. Art indeed, so far from being a playful diversion of the human race, is the place of its most fundamental insight, and the centre to which the more uncertain steps of metaphysics must constantly return. (p. 73, bracketed comments mine)

It is because of passages such as the one I have just quoted that Nussbaum approves of Murdoch's approach to the concrete and particular instance of good but interprets Murdoch's concept of the good as being achievable by neither personal love nor philosophy. Nussbaum summarizes Murdoch's position this way:

> Murdoch holds [*not an abstract philosophical vision of the good but rather*] instead, that the vision of the accidental comic and surprising *is* of highest importance, but that neither personal love nor philosophy can achieve it. The flawed and the comic particular can be lovingly embraced only by the vision of art. (1996, eds, Antonaccio and Schweiker, p. 49, bracketed comments mine)

Murdoch's (1997) first priority is the imaginative exploration of the moral life of "ordinary moral agents" (p. 97). Her essays into aesthetic theory sometimes depart from this goal, and can be best understood as attempts to grapple with the insight of art, and her attempt to relate these insights to what she calls the exploitation of mystery in "Vision and Choice in Morality". Murdoch (1970) notes:"[w]e live in a world whose mystery transcends us, and ...morality is the exploitation of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual (p. 97)." There are instances in Murdoch's writing (i.e., "Why Plato Banished the Artists") where she seeks to explain the mystery of morality in a type of aesthetics but the great majority of her writing elucidates her theory of morality by way of the loving attention that each individual can put forth. Art, and aesthetic appreciation play a great role in her moral thought insofar as they invoke or inspire a turn away from the ego with its love of fantasy, and toward the reality outside of the self. In fact, Murdoch (1997) equates art and morality:

> 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 extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realization of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man. (p. 87)

Murdoch conceives of an ethic of love, and in chapter two I describe how it functions, and I show how the philosopher Wendy Farley extends the concept of *love* or what she calls *eros* in her book *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World.* Farley adds to the concept of a loving vision that perceives what is real in ways that renew Murdoch's familiar search for the unity of transcendent love.

Chapter Two

Murdoch's Love and Farley's Eros: From Illusion to Reality?

"The central concept of morality is 'the individual' thought of as knowable through love." Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of the Good

Murdoch's moral vision and Farley's eros: Separating reality from illusion

To understand what Murdoch means by "knowable through love", one must pay close attention to the special qualities she ascribes to *consciousness*. In chapter one, I discussed the role Murdoch assigns to *consciousness* in her framework for an ethical norm, and I showed how it was guided by a perfectionist tendency. In this chapter, I describe the nature of *consciousness* and thus the *apport* of Murdoch's ethical norm. It is futile to assess the *content* of Murdoch's ethic because it is essentially a posture one assumes and therefore it has myriad permutations.

I show how Murdoch's moral vision is not an elaborated metaphysical system but rather, an idiosyncratic posture that has infinite respect for the particularity and irreducible plurality of beings. Murdoch is supremely concerned with particular experiences and she sees the process of moral philosophy as an ongoing excavation of the ever-evolving human. As Murdoch (1997) says: "[m]an is a creature who makes pictures of himself and comes to resemble the picture. This is the process that moral philosophy must attempt to describe and analyze (p. 75)."

Murdoch (1997) conceives the greater part of morality as an interior process that one arrives at through relations with others. And although she concedes that human beings share language, she emphasizes how people's interior worlds are unfathomable even to themselves. Language may belong to the public sphere, she says:

> But it is also the property of individuals whose inner private consciousness, seething with arcane imagery and shadowy intuitions, occupies the greater part of their being. (p. 275)

I show in Chapter One how Murdoch criticizes moral philosophers for not grappling with moral issues in a way that acknowledges the *pre-philosophical world*[2] we live in. And I show the way Nussbaum's hesitation to embrace a transcendent concept of the *good* limits the internal coherence of her position on the possibility of ethical action. Despite Nussbaum and Murdoch's very similar understanding of the role of *perception* in moral understanding, their thought diverges in important ways.

Murdoch maintains that perception is a moral act that tends toward perfection while Nussbaum (1990) only acknowledges that perception is: "in part constituted by appropriate response"(p. 79). Nussbaum does not have a framework of value that can explain how morality does not collapse into nihilism. Murdoch's metaphysics is more a matter of insight and intuition than an *elaborated metaphysical system*, as Patricia O'Connor (1996) analyzes it in her book *To Love the Good: the Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch.* O'Connor describes Murdoch's view as following from the simple insight that "there is more than this":

> Murdoch's is a Natural Law view in the sense that agents are held not to create moral value; value is transcendent. But she

> does not argue for the necessity of, nor seek to supply an elaborated metaphysical system. The only metaphysics we have is a tiny spark of insight that "there is more than this," coupled with the intuition of the unity of the moral life. (p. 129)

Murdoch's Metaphor of the Good, and its role in rendering moral vision

When Murdoch speaks of her meta-ethic she calls it a metaphor because she knows that the existence of good cannot be affirmed or denied. In "Metaphysics and Ethics"(1997) Murdoch acknowledges the anti-metaphysical arguments about the lack of verifiability of metaphysical claims, including most significantly the "Naturalist Fallacy", i.e., G. E. Moore argues in *Principia Ethica* (1903) that: "goodness" is a foundational property similar to the foundational notion of "yellowness," and is not capable of being explained in terms of anything more basic.

Moore criticizes moral theories that identify moral goodness with any property at all. His criticism has two variants: the naturalist fallacy whereby goodness is defined by a natural property such as pleasure, and the metaphysical fallacy where moral goodness is defined in metaphysical terms such as God's will. Moore's stance is that we intuit the good reflexively. Murdoch accepts this part of her former teacher's theory but champions the place of belief in the transcendent in a philosophical account of morality.

Murdoch claims: "[t]hese [anti-metaphysical] arguments only prove that we cannot picture morality as issuing directly from a *philosophically established* transcendent

background, or from a factual background. But this is not yet to say that the *belief* in the transcendent can have no place in a philosophical account of morality (p.65)." Murdoch acknowledges the weak form of the anti-metaphysical argument that moral beliefs are not always justified. In her 1959 article, "A House of Theory", Murdoch acknowledges: "moral beliefs were often supported by erroneous judgments" (Partisan Review 26, p. 25). But she maintains that this does not: "...*ipso facto* discredit the area of moral belief, properly understood as an area of conceptual moral exploration (ibid, p. 25)." Murdoch emphasizes that her exploration of moral concepts is incomplete but she wishes to share her vision of what role belief plays in moral life. Murdoch (1970) calls her meta-ethic: "a general metaphysical background to morals" (p.42).

In Murdoch's conception, which she calls "inconclusive" and "non-dogmatic", one strives for an ideal end point that may never be reached but where one's belief in a framework of value obliterates the ethical contingency, and the consequent sense of loss that an individual with no such certainty experiences. The good exists, and although we are frail conduits for moral understanding, we can recognize the good. Antonaccio (2000) describes the Murdochian concept of consciousness as teleological. She states that for Murdoch: "...consciousness distinguishes among degrees of value and is oriented toward an ideal *telos* or endpoint. (p.114)" Murdoch herself would deny this:

> [that] human life has no external point or telos is a view as difficult to argue as its opposite, and I shall simply assert it. I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained. There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were no externally

> guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians search. We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance. That is to say that there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense to the term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense (1970, 79).

It is most correct to describe Murdoch's thought as an attempt to acknowledge that something guides the moral life while not defining it; it is the work of each person to wrest the moral meaning from her particular experience. This is why Murdoch is so eloquent on the subject of the individual; she wants to claim for the individual a full-bodied but empirically problematic "intuition" that allows him to perceive moral goodness. She must resort to the idea of perfection working in consciousness, which is teleological. But she does not set out to make philosophical arguments in defense of this idea.

Murdoch argues in defense of *belief* in the idea of perfection because it is impossible today to argue for, or against the existence of metaphysical properties. Murdoch is at pains to provide an alternative to deontological ethics while retaining the idea of freedom that is very much a part of deontological moral theory. She recasts the concepts of the individual, consciousness, and freedom as she reinterprets moral reality in order to provide a philosophical description that provides a more accurate description of moral life. As she concisely puts it:

> Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative

> understanding, of two irreducible dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect, of otherness. (1997, p. 216)

Although Murdoch herself insists upon the always receding, non-teleological nature of her theory, she does speak of a hierarchy. But, in her conception, the open-ended nature of one's (always increasing but never complete) knowledge of the other enables her theory of the good to have apparent direction while not having a true telos. The object of our attention, i.e., the reality of the other, is always beyond the limits of our understanding, and therefore transcendent in the sense of beyond the limits of our experience. We can understand others on a superficial level but not with the empathy that their being requires, and not with the kind of knowledge that approaches her idea of perfection. She states:

> For all of our frailty the command 'be perfect' has sense for us. The concept Good resists collapse into the selfish, empirical consciousness. It is not a mere value tag of the choosing will.... the proper and serious use of the term refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know.... and carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence. (Murdoch, 1970, p. 93)

While Murdoch seems to stress the unattainable perfection of the good she also grounds her ethic in human experience. She calls morality "a sort of unesoteric mysticism having its source in an unconsoled love of the good" (ibid., p. 92). Murdoch is eager to bring

the concepts of love and good into a discussion of morality, and she insists that although love is an expression of the good available to us; we always yearn for a more complete expression of the good that is not available to us; we are therefore unconsoled.

Murdoch's good as the property of the common man

Murdoch acknowledges that she is speaking of a metaphor when she speaks of the good but she thinks that the usefulness of the metaphor surpasses that of many philosophical models. She considers her concept of the good a form of praxis that she is careful to distinguish from abstract forms favored by moral philosophers. Her good is accessible; it is, as Murdoch (1970) claims: "not just a property of philosophy and not just a model" (p. 93). Murdoch pronounces:"[a] moral philosophy should be inhabited (ibid., p. 47)", and maintains, "...we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement within our limitations (ibid., 93)."

Murdoch is at pains to distinguish her moral theories from moral philosophies that have a conception of the individual as merely the shadow of an abstraction about what it means to be human. She reminds us that we are living in an age that vaunts straw figures in the place of real individual beings.

> We are still living in the age of Kantian man, or Kantian man-god ....free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy. (Murdoch, 1970, 70, footnote19)[3]

The hero of Murdoch's moral philosophy is the common man who exercises his self-consciousness and translates it into moral vision without philosophical arguments.

Murdoch's conception of the good is essentially Platonic; the good is present in things but not reducible to them. Murdoch (1970) calls "good" indefinable: "...because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality. (p. 42)" The good is, in fact, contentless, and yet we can apprehend it by entering into proper relations with others; there is an intimate connection between the recognition of the reality of the o*ther* and the reality of the good.

Murdoch's Good is connected with knowledge

According to Murdoch, we achieve knowledge of the reality of the good by attempting to *see* the reality outside of ourselves. In Murdoch's (1966) view, we are blinkered by our anxious and inflated egos, which ceaselessly create illusions that obscure reality as a veil that descends over us: "[w] e are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world (Encounter, 27, p. 50)."

In her view, our task is to learn to see beyond ourselves, and to orient ourselves toward goodness: "[g]oodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness (1970, p.93)." It is with our ordinary pre-philosophical consciousness that we are able to sense the presence or absence of virtue, and our grasp will always be imperfect and incomplete because we are ourselves imperfect and incomplete.[4] And yet we are able to perceive or intuit the good or its eternal absence, and we learn the outline of the good when we are stirred by our experiences with life and especially with art. In her frank estimation: "[w]e see

differences, we sense directions, and we know that the good is still somewhere beyond (ibid., p. 93)."

Murdoch believes that we must develop our moral vision and that, although we have a perfectionist tendency at work in our consciousness, we must still work at knowing the good. She suggests that we need to exercise a type of moral discipline:

> But I would suggest at the level of serious common sense and of an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge; not with the impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but 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. (1970, p.38)

Now, there is a need for moral discipline exactly because it is the nature of us humans to subsume all that is not *us* into the category *less than us*. One can see this tendency in the social world and it has given rise to the adage that man is wolf to man. Murdoch pins this tendency on the natural flow of *psychic energy*.

She believes that psychic energy creates illusions and she considers her idea of *attention* to be an antidote to the natural flow of psychic energy. Murdoch (1970) states: "[o]f course, psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly

coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary…" [*and*] "[a]ttention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion (p. 37, brackets mine)." This way of looking at morality, as a reality to which we must join ourselves by overcoming illusion is an idea that is very similar to ones that appear in a more recent book written by Wendy Farley (1996).

Farley is very concerned with the practice of morality in illusory social worlds, and although she forms many political theses and takes stands on matters as diverse as ecology and feminism, and historiography, in this paper I only look at her views on the relationship between reality, the perceiving self, morality and social world. These are the points of her scholarship that intersect with Murdoch's moral theory.

I compare the thought of these philosophers because they have challenged thinking about moral philosophy with their holistic approach to the moral life. They both take the concepts of love and beauty, and use them to approach moral thinking. Farley in particular, connects beauty with justice more explicitly than Murdoch did fifty years earlier. Murdoch's discussion of beauty is more centrally concerned with aesthetics, and the focus of this work is the experience of moral freedom. I return to an examination of beauty in the thought of Murdoch, Farley, and Elaine Scarry in the conclusion of this paper.

Farley's Eros and its Role in Rending Totalizing Thought

In Farley's book, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World*, she is at pains to combat moral relativism that comes in the guise of plurality. She is absolutely committed to the importance of plurality of many kinds but insists: "...we must distinguish 'multiplicity' from falsehood and moral evil (p. 17)." Farley's writing shines with the Christian commitment to acknowledge the ethical dimension of life in order to be fully alive, or more than merely undead. She mines the philosophical works of Emmanuel Levinas to great effect in her insightful book about our ends and purposes in a radically changing moral environment. She states, "[i]t is necessary to embrace plurality without conceding the obligation to make ethical judgments (p.17)."

Farley is concerned with how beauty, morality and religion have been shunted to the opposite side of reason and consigned to a "merely" subjective status. According to Farley, this misguided emphasis on a narrowly delimited reason separates our experiences into knowable and unknowable, and thus limits our ability to make claims about knowledge of the good. This false dichotomizing imposes a limitation on our actions because it creates a social world that may be founded on illusory principles but which has a very real constraining effect on all of our actions, including, most importantly, our interactions with others.

Farley proposes that we must not deny the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of reality. Farley is a moral realist like Murdoch. For her, reality or being is not value-neutral; it only appears so because of a persistent illusion that we individuals are incapable of

piercing. John Rawls refers to this phenomenon as the "veil of ignorance". Like Murdoch, Farley views reality as something that we can apprehend only by striving against illusion.

Farley has an insight similar to Murdoch's "there must be more than this", and it is Levinas' (1969) dictum: "[t]he true life is absent" (p. 33). Farley employs Levinas' description of goodness as acceptance of alterity or what she calls plurality. She is in agreement with Murdoch's statement that we can know what is real (or true) by practicing virtue. Murdoch (1970) says: "...virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is (p. 93)."

Farley, however, does not speak of overcoming selfish consciousness, which is Murdoch's focus. Rather, she emphasizes escape from totalizing thought. According to Farley, totalizing thought is thought that is essentially intolerant of difference. It rejects the plurality of reality, and it is hostile to the concrete and particular. It is a strength of Farley's thought that she has these specific ways of analyzing moral postures. Her systematic approach is a boon to a philosophy that is based on everyday experiences. Farley extends Murdoch's philosophy of *love* in important ways with her similar but more concrete concept of *eros*.

Intolerance of difference is clearly a feature of many cultures although Farley tells the story of the intolerance of the Western world. She maintains that the experience of early capitalism (the impact of which as a juggernaut of swift social change cannot be

underestimated), and colonialism brought about the type of *totalizing thought* that is characteristic of the Western worldview. Farley (1996) considers the success of this way of thinking that she calls "totality" to be "part and parcel of the "crisis" that confronts Western civilization (p. 44).

> The economic motivations for this intolerance find support in the increasingly reductive forms of reason. The formalism of modern thought makes possible the technological and scientific innovations that produce the modern world. At the same time, language to articulate ethical, religious, aesthetic dimensions of reality is so dramatically impoverished as to become virtually invisible and impotent. Those categories of experience that would contest the reduction of beings to things or challenge the morality of domination [*by false hierarchies*] are dismissed as merely subjective. (p. 44) (Brackets and remarks mine.)

Although Farley (1996) is concerned to show the role of totalizing thought in twentieth-century imperialism and the advent of totalitarian governments, she is quick to deny a facile analysis of the relationship between philosophical conjecture and real politics or morality. She only wants to emphasize that modern philosophy and ethics have been rendered impotent by the more powerful forces of economics and politics:

> This is not to say that Enlightenment philosophy, with its dualism and formalism, *produces* the horrors of imperialism and totalitarianism. Modern philosophy is much richer than this implies---and its historical efficacy much weaker. The nuances

> of modern philosophy and ethics proved impotent against the much more powerful forces of economics and politics. (p. 45)

The essence of totalizing thought is that it, in Farley's words, *essentializes* everything it encounters, and relegates particulars to a subordinate relation to the abstractions that define social relations, e.g., you may hear the expression "it is a free country" which seems to imply that we are all able to choose as we please, when in fact the choices that we have are conditioned by things that we cannot choose, i.e., the circumstances of our birth, our gender, our physical or mental limitations or their lack, our relative attractiveness, and so forth. Totalizing thought diminishes our encounters with others by providing a categorical framework that allows us to dismiss the particular claims of another being; it jeopardizes our ability to experience the other as real.

Farley's eros and justice

In Farley's view, it is a hallmark of totalizing thought that reason is separated from emotion. This is the element that gives it its totalizing effect, and makes it seem quite the norm to live passively alongside injustice. According to Farley (1996):

> The absolutizing dynamic of illusion makes it supremely intolerant of this concreteness and multiplicity. Illusion can relate to concreteness only by absorbing it into the One, and therefore destroying it as concrete and plural. This intolerance is evident also in the inability to recognize either the beauty or suffering of other beings. It is a characteristic error of much of

> modern thought to imagine reality or being as itself value neutral. (p. 21)

Farley (1996) suggests that instrumental reason, which she identifies with the choice of a rational will, has a corrosive effect on reality because it defines our relations to other beings. She believes that the injustice we witness in our social world is occasioned by our illusory sense of reality as morally neutral, or thing-like. She does not believe that we should accept this vitiating ontology. She maintains:

> The complex interplay of forces that produces the modern (and perhaps "postmodern") world has left us with a destructive, even lethal sense of reality as thinglike. An uncritical or passive acceptance of this ontology exemplifies the way illusion functions; a theory of reality (in this case, the reduction of reality to things) is permitted to mediate the experience of being to such a degree that not only is the reality of beings concealed but the very question about their reality is precluded. (p. 198)

Farley proposes a type of metaphysics as an alternative: "[m]etaphysics is the philosophical alternative to ontology, an alternative in which the reality of others and the justice owed to them is preserved (p. 64)." The type of metaphysics that Farley proposes is one that acknowledges the exteriority of other beings from any totalizing ideas and simultaneously makes real relationship with them possible. Farley (1996) notes:

> Beings are exterior to all forms of precise correlation, always more than and different from ideas about them. Correlatively, the insufficiency of personhood is not lack in a negative sense but the capacity for relationship. (p. 71)

In Farley's view, we are drawn toward the other with a *metaphysical desire* because we are not self-sufficient. We need the other for a sense of well-being; the other is actually a source of the self, and good relations with the other is a result of that little-understood activity--the pursuit of happiness. Farley (1996) describes the individual ego and its desire: "[t]he individual ego is not self-sufficient, it does not contain the secret of happiness within it. It is drawn toward the other with 'metaphysical desire' (p. 71)." It is her contention that in our present condition of domination by totalizing illusions of social reality, we suffer a degraded moral existence.

She believes that we become accustomed to injustice to others by adopting a disposition for unreality, or to rephrase it, by believing the illusion of another person's unreality. As individuals, we can get by in an imperfect world by not really acknowledging the reality of others. In order to mollify our sense of outrage when faced with another being in degraded circumstances, we have recourse to the second element of Farley's depiction of totalizing thought, and this second element is the fiction of subhumanity. Farley contends that we subconsciously believe that the people we see suffering in front of us are not like us, and are, in fact, inferior to us. Because we do not value our common humanity, we deny the plurality of human existence, and wound our own humanity.

Reality, Illusion, and Truth in Murdoch's and Farley's Moral Philosophy

Theories of reality anchor both Murdoch's and Farley's conceptions of right relation. And yet how do they know what is illusion and what is reality? Murdoch is often misunderstood to present a *vision* in place of what she insists is a *moral vision that allows*

one to see what is really there. An illustrative example of this misinterpretation is William Slaymaker's (1982) summary of Murdoch's conception of reality: "Murdoch's reality is a vision that defines and redirects the energies and passions of the often misdirected psychic mechanisms. Seeking and finding reality are thus liberating experiences (p.23)." A more careful reading of Murdoch reveals that seeking and finding reality is the result of a moral vision that allows one to see beyond the consoling fantasies of the ego, or what she calls illusion. Murdoch's use of the term illusion has a great deal in common with Farley's use of the same term.

Farley considers illusion the state that denies plurality, or what Nussbaum would call particularity. Reality demands to be appreciated in its concrete form according to Farley (1996) who links concreteness with multiplicity:"[r]eality is concrete and because of this concreteness, it is infinitely multiple (p. 21)." Farley sees the logic of illusion as a form of solipsism whereby any concrete particular that is outside of the *one* must be absorbed into it so that it cannot pay tribute to the fact that the *one* is not *all.* The absolutizing distortion of the *one* absorbs or denies any person, custom, idea, competing belief system, so that the general logic of totality is reified.

The *illusion* that Murdoch speaks of is only superficially different from Farley's *totalizing thought.* Where Farley says we must reject the abstract modes of thought that inhibit our true apprehension of the other, Murdoch would respond that one must turn away from the self to see the unself. For Murdoch (1970) it is the ego that must be defeated through conscious effort to see beyond its needs: "[t]he self, the place where we live is a place of illusion (p.93)." Murdoch and Farley use the language of psychoanalysis to propose theories of the self, which is, of course, all philosophy ever

does. What distinguishes their thought from other moral theorists like Kohlberg, et al., is their insistence upon the importance of what we *believe*. They recover the concept of truth and use it in their moral philosophy instead of making claims that rest on the notion of veridicality.

Both Murdoch and Farley believe that we should retain a vocabulary that speaks of truth, though they acknowledge that any search for unity can be subject to error. They believe that their approaches for discerning truth are themselves safeguards against delusion. Murdoch (1997) is eloquent about the danger of seeking unity by ignoring difference. She claims:

> [...] Philosophers have been misled, not only by a rationalistic desire for unity, but also by certain simplified and generalized moral attitudes current in our society, into seeking a single philosophical definition of morality. If, however, we go back again to the data we see that there are fundamentally different moral pictures which different individuals use or which the same individual may use at different times. Why should philosophy be less various, where the differences in what it attempts to analyze are so important? (p. 97)

Farley speaks of the need to critique thought that is indifferent to the concreteness of life. She shares Murdoch's intuition that philosophical definitions of morality must be multiple. She states:

> To the extent that patterns of thought, regardless of their content, contribute to an atmosphere of indifference to the concreteness

> of life, it is appropriate to subject such patterns to critique. (p. 46)

Murdoch (1970) identifies philosophical exploration with truth seeking. She states: "[t]o do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth (p. 38)." Farley (1996) is of the same opinion. How else can we interpret her statement: "[e]thical existence cannot survive an abandonment of the desire for truth (p. 65)." The truth for Farley is that there is a *good*, and as Murdoch says: "it is possible to get it wrong".

Murdoch is aware that her views may be unconvincing in an intellectual climate that is informed by an instrumental reason approach to moral understanding. Murdoch (1997) tells her fellow philosophers that the partial and emergent nature of a moral philosophy rooted in a full concept of a conscious and evolving self is not a sign that the philosophy lacks rigor. She states:

> ...it would be a pity if, just because we realize that any picture is likely to be half a description and half a persuasion, we were to deny ourselves the freedom in the making of pictures and the coining of explanatory ideas which our predecessors have used in the past. (p. 75)

Murdoch clearly believes that where there is risk, there is opportunity. She points to the important reasons for continued experimentation and reminds her fellow philosophers that the big questions are still unanswered:

> After all, both as philosophers and as moral beings we are concerned with the same problems with which they were concerned: What is freedom? Can it be shown that men are free? What is the relation of morality to social realities? (ibid, p. 75)

In chapter three, I look at the problem of how evil exists despite the perfectionist principle operating at the level of consciousness in Murdoch's moral philosophy. I examine the kind of yearning that inspires moral endeavor, and the type of desire that inspires not possession but respect for alterity. I also discuss Murdoch's conception of vision, and not choice, as operating in moral life, and I explain Murdoch's conception of how morality can present itself as a necessity to the properly attentive individual.

Chapter Three

Evil and Yearning, Being Good and Knowledge

"Fiction is the art form of human yearning." Robert Olin Butler

In this final chapter, I examine the problem of evil for Murdoch's moral philosophy. I describe Murdoch and Farley's attempts to express the stirrings that they identify as authentic strivings to be human, and to be fully alive. I discuss the way in which these suggest an absence that justifies human yearning for moral existence. And I look at how one's experience of life and concept of death might change should there be a change in the way the self-other relation is conceptualized.

The Problem of Evil in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

According to Murdoch, it is in purifying our attention that we can become better people and we do this by loving the good. And we love the good spontaneously because we sense an unreality when we are not in the presence of good unless our perception is deformed by counterfeit social realities. On the subject of evil Murdoch (1997) remarks in her 1961 article on literature "Against Dryness" that there is a difference between violence and evil, and that modern literature "...contains so few convincing pictures of evil (p. 294)." She maintains that we are incapable of imagining evil although she acknowledges that we can produce evil. She makes reference to Hitler to illustrate the human imagination's problem with the form of evil. Murdoch (1997) claims that Hitler's odiousness existed alongside the optimistic picture of himself with which he worked. And that although he was evil, he did not imagine that he was.

> Our inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile, dramatic, and in spite of Hitler, optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work. (p. 294)

It is true that Hitler did not imagine that he was evil; in *Mein Kampf* (1943) Hitler unselfconsciously presents himself as a saviour of the Aryan *Volk.* One could make the argument that he could not imagine himself as evil despite his evildoing. Murdoch would presumably suggest that he was unable to see beyond his own ego but it is a fact that he retained the concept of a moral consciousness despite the desolation he wreaked on humanity. Hitler (1943) writes: "...only when an epoch ceases to be haunted by the shadow of its own consciousness of guilt will it achieve the inner calm and outward strength brutally and ruthlessly to prune off the wild shoots and tear out the weeds (p. 30)." One can see Hitler's dystopia as a reaction to living in a time of uncertainty about moral deserts. He was aware of the effect of his proselytizing on the masses and he responded to what he called the need to *close the circle* with higher ideals:

> Take away from present mankind its religious dogmatic principles which are upheld by its education and whose practical significance is that of ethical-moral principles, by abolishing religious education and without replacing it by something equivalent, and the result facing you will be a grave shock to the foundation of man's existence. One may therefore state that not only does man live to serve higher goals but that, conversely these higher ideals also provide the presupposition of his

> existence as man. So the circle closes. (Hitler cited in Stern, (1975, p. 94.)

Murdoch would, of course, consider all of Hitler's projects the work of myth and illusion—a vision of false unity. Murdoch (1997) connects her remarks about our inability to imagine evil with criticism of our uncritical self–centeredness that makes it difficult to produce forms that honour the individual and, which correspond to the richness of reality:

> Our difficulty about form, about images - our tendency to produce works that are either crystalline or journalistic - is a symptom of our situation. Form itself can be a temptation, making the work of art into a small myth which is a self-contained and indeed self-satisfied individual. We need to turn our attention away from Romanticism, away from the dry symbol, the bogus individual, the false whole, towards the real, impenetrable human person. That this person is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable is after all the fundamental tenet of Liberalism. (p. 294)

Eros and Love as a Desire for Relation

Both Murdoch and Farley seek to renew our conceptualization of the space between people, and to recast the relation of self to other in order to replace the "valorization of autonomy to the point of isolation" that Farley (1996) describes as "central to modern

economic and philosophic thought" (p.71). These two women have very similar projects. Both describe an unattainable but infinitely desirable species of relation. For Murdoch (1970), this would require the taming of the selfish ego and a realignment of our attention:

> The more the separateness and the 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.... The direction of attention is, contrary to nature outward, away from the self which reduces all to a false unity, toward the great surprising variety of the world and the ability to so direct attention is love. (p. 66)

Murdoch talks about the *separateness and differentness* of other people in a sense that shares much with what Farley calls the *mystery* of the reality of other beings. In an echo of Murdoch's thought Farley (1996) states: "[m]ystery remains essential to the reality of other beings; beings are not things and they remain exterior to any thought or system that would defraud them of their uniqueness (p. 71)."

The reason we need a metaphysical ethic, or as Farley (1996) may call it, an ethic that acknowledges the "exteriority" of others, is that there is a mystery that attaches itself to our being so that we are always more than ideas about us. We are exterior to all forms of systematizing thought, and we must acknowledge this about others too if we are to have just relations with them. Farley insists upon the exteriority of being and how reason must accommodate this facet of being to make ethical existence possible:

> Metaphysics expresses and preserves this exteriority, always holding open the gap between concept or system and reality. "Metaphysics" is an eros that vivifies philosophy and opens reason to the other. (p. 71)

How do we open reason to the other? What Murdoch and Farley propose is a theory of human motivation. They tell a story of desire.

Desire for Reality as Desire for Moral Existence

When Murdoch says goodness is knowledge of the beloved other, and Farley speaks of eros for the other, they speak of a type of desire. But what spurs this desire on? What kind of desire do they assume is at work in the breast of each one of us? Nussbaum (Antonaccio, 1996) would consider Murdoch's love too Platonic because Murdoch and Plato "...connect the love of persons with the love of impersonal goodness [...] in a way that may contain too little room for the real-life human individual (p.38)." In the collection of essays edited by Antonaccio, Nussbaum's article is entitled "Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Love and the Individual". In the article Nussbaum relates the image of man as blind and longing, just as Plato describes in Phaedrus 250D. Nussbaum believes Murdoch subscribes to such a view of man; she describes this view in pleasing tones:

> We live bereft of sight, and filled with yearning. Cut off from the vision of the Good that was ours in another world, we seek to return to that world and that knowledge. In our striving, beauty,

> and the body's erotic response to the sight of beauty, plays a necessary and central role...(p. 29)

The yearning that Nussbaum speaks of is central to Murdoch's view of mankind. In the conclusion of this paper, I discuss the role of beauty and art in providing a sense of reality and well being to the Murdochian individual but now I turn to Farley's use of the term eros, and Murdoch's love as a desire for relation.

When Murdoch (1970) claims that we need a moral philosophy that has as its centre the concept of love, she is speaking of a love that is the opposite of selfish love (p. 46). She is talking about love that has goodness as its real object. The type of desire occasioned by the eros that Farley speaks of is an elaboration of Emmanuel Levinas' concept of metaphysical desire. For Levinas, (1950) metaphysical desire is desire that preserves the distance necessary to accommodate the "mystery of beings" (p. 33). It is an essential element of Levinas' philosophy that the other be allowed its alterity. As Levinas writes in *Time and the Other*: "[i]f one could possess, grasp and know the other, it would not be the other. Possession, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power (p. 90)."

It is a desire that does not consume the other but rather meets the other in a manner that does not diminish it. Farley (1996) states:

> Eros functions here as a metaphor for modes of thought and relationships whose movement runs in a direction opposite to that of totality: outward, toward others, toward the world. In emphasizing this reversal of direction, what is most significant is that all beings and forms of being-persons, other animals, art

> objects, cultures, religions, ecosystems, galaxies, and so on---are real and valuable in themselves and not simply as members of a totality for which they become examples or ciphers. (p. 67)

Like Murdoch, for whom loving attention is revelatory, Farley sees the work of eros to be the rendering of the real features of the world. Farley also sees something special in our capacity for attention that allows us to become better people, or to put in Farley 's language, to cleave totality. Farley (1996) claims that accepting the particularity of the other engenders compassion in us. In her words, "...truth and obligation are linked by attention to the concrete other. The suffering and the beauty of actually existing beings provide the most radical surds to philosophical and political totalities (p.65)." There is, according to Farley (1996), a necessary ethical dimension to attention:"[i] t is attention to this suffering and beauty that cleaves totality, that purges illusion, and that calls human beings to responsibility and compassion (p. 65)."

The type of desire that Murdoch and Farley find valuable needs to be described using concepts that we only have access to by way of metaphor because the desire for a moral life presents itself by way of an experience of desire. It is a calling to our senses that is not easily expressed in terms or reasons. This is the intuition that makes their moral philosophy fruitful; they simply provide a framework for discussing human yearning for moral existence while not having to prove the necessity of any conditions. Murdoch (1997) calls for a return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth. She states:

> We need to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity [the only virtue of liberal individualism] to the other-centred concept

> of truth. We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we constantly and overwhelmingly deform by fantasy. (p. 293)

Murdoch (1997) blames our current picture of freedom for expecting too little of us; she claims that *we need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being*. She notes:

> Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts in terms of which we picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and a deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention. (p. 293)

A Theory of Human Motivation?

Murdoch's understanding of desire may represent a theory of human motivation. This is significant because such a theory has eluded moral philosophers who believe that it is not appropriate for secular humanists' accounts of morality to describe the contents of a good life in ways that may encroach upon human freedom. Murdoch (1997) summarizes:

> It is felt to be important that morality should be flexible and argumentative, centred upon the individual, and that no alleged

> transcendent metaphysical realities, such as God, or History of the Church, should be allowed to overshadow the moral life. (p.95)

And yet, in what does the moral life consist? In this section, I argue that we should not abandon our most precious task of self-understanding to the vagaries of science and to disallow all forms of knowledge that it denies. If the moral life does not consist in a fruitful if painstaking realization of a vision of perfection as Murdoch maintains, then why do we persist in our efforts to enlarge our understanding of what it means to be human, and what gives our struggles their form?

Without an impulse for perfection, would not the category 'good' be meaningless for us? And isn't it also true that our very conception of the individual is, as Murdoch (1970) says: "a conception inseparable from morality" (p. 30). It is a completely different kind of experience to think of six hundred people drowned in a ferry accident than to think of six hundred newly discovered stars. Don't other human beings by their very existence elicit a moral response in us? And if this intuition must be based on what could be considered a mystical truth, then why should this basis make it any the less meaningful or true?

If we acknowledge that contemporary ethics has denied the supersensible foundations of religious belief while simultaneously endorsing the type of morality that is a consequence of religious belief, then we see the awkward position of contemporary ethics. How can we reason our way from an 'is' to an 'ought' when our reason forces us to deny the

reality of the Good? Murdoch (1970) hints that we need only 'unformulated faith' to believe in a good that is rarely connected with experience:

> Morality has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience. (p. 74)

For Murdoch, it is the vision of perfection that inspires us, and its pursuit is the way of ascertaining that our beliefs are true, and thus to know freedom.

Murdoch's Vision of Perfection

Murdoch (1970) believes that Kant's Idea of Reason and the dictates of Christianity illuminate the same moral impulse. She claims:

> His [Kant's] is not the 'achieved' or 'given' reason which belongs with 'ordinary language' and convention, nor is his man on the other hand totally unguided and alone. There exists a moral reality, a real though infinitely distant standard; the difficulties of understanding and imitating remain. And in a way it is perhaps a matter of tactics and temperament whether we should look at Christ or Reason. (p. 31)

Although moral reality is infinitely distant for Murdoch (1992) and we can only yearn for an unalloyed experience of goodness, those things that are good, we experience as truth. She notes: "...value is everywhere, the whole of life is movement on a moral scale, all good, which is a transcendent source of spiritual power, to which we are related by truth (p. 56)." It can be argued that Murdoch (1970) is using circular reasoning here, and she has responded to this criticism in defense of her theory of the good:"[t]o say that it is a normative theory is not to say that it is an object of free choice: modern philosophy has equated these ideas but this is just the equation I am objecting to (p. 44)."

Vision, and not choice, is what we need to achieve moral good in Murdoch's view. The self does not exist except in dialogic relations with others; therefore we cannot speak of an agent without acknowledging the matrix of relations within which it is embedded. And wherein lies true moral agency? It certainly does not exist in individual acts of choice but rather in the private interior realm where the world actually exists for each individual.

Whether or not the interior world of the mind can be said to have a factual existence is not at all relevant here because we experience it as such. And because the idea of a fact existing in isolation from interpreting belief is itself what Whitehead, in *Modes of Thought* (1967), calls a founding myth of finite thought or thought that is unable to embrace the infinity necessary for human gestures:

> The notion of a mere fact is the triumph of the abstractive intellect....A single fact in isolation is the primary myth required for finite thought, that is to say for thought unable to embrace

> totality. This mythological character arises because there is no such fact. (pp 8-9)

Murdoch (1970) aims to retain that infinity within the private realm of internal experience where the individual's attention "builds up structures of value [*so that*] at crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over (p. 37, bracketed comments mine)." Our interior moral life is more or less free of illusion or 'bad faith' depending upon the work of our attention.

The Necessity of Morals

Murdoch proposes that we have free choice in the same proportion that we have clear vision but that if our vision were perfectly clear, we would have no choice at all. The occasions of our action would be compelled by our unimpeded vision of the significance of events outside of us. Morality would present itself as a kind of necessity.

Murdoch sees us as fumbling through our years with the Pauline regret: *The good that I would do I do not, but the evil that I would not, that I do.* Saint Paul's remorse is a result of his imperfect vision or what Murdoch (1970) calls the void: "[d]ifficult and painful choices often present this experience of void of which so much has been made: this sense of not being determined by the reasons (p. 36)."

Now this experience of having to make a choice without guidance appears to substantiate the claims of those philosophers who equate the individual with his or her will. Murdoch (1970) acknowledges this:

> Indeed this experience of emptiness seems perfectly to verify the notion that freedom is simply the movement of the lonely will. Choice is outward movement since there is nothing else there for it to be. (p. 36)

However, Murdoch questions whether the void is not the realm of our freedom but in fact, the confines of our limited imagination. As she states: "I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of 'see' that implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort (ibid., p. 37)."

If we have not duly attended to our contexts, then at the moment of choice, we seem to be radically unencumbered. But in reality, we are simply benighted by our egos that prevent us from (ever?) attaining knowledge of the features and moral imperatives of the world. Is this seeming lack of choice consistent with human freedom? Murdoch would respond that the true context of human freedom is knowledge of the other outside of us and thus the corresponding absence of choice. Although complete knowledge of the other is, of course, impossible, it is in striving for it that we learn virtue. Murdoch would concur with Stendhal's observation, "[w]e can achieve everything in solitude save character (David Tracy, (1996) Antonaccio, p. 72, fn 46)."

Being and Being Good

In "The Many Faces of Platonism" (1996), David Tracy refers to Murdoch's moral project as "hope for the reunion of thought and exercises." (p. 73), and this is an excellent

summary of her goal. There is a gulf, it seems, between thought and action. Kilpatrick (1992) talks about a visual base of virtue as if there was an ordering principle in effect in the world that one has only to see. However he may seem to value the Murdochian concept of moral vision, he also develops the idea that while in the stillness of being we hear our conscience, when we act somehow we are incapable of following its directives. According to Kilpatrick, this causes the dissonance that we experience as absence.

It is very important to remember that for Murdoch, one is most free in the interior imagination. It is in the richness of the protected inner world that moral agency exists, and in expressing our interior yearning in the absence of selfish possessing of the world that we find outside of ourselves, we experience reality without an accompanying sense of loss. Murdoch (1997) stresses the psychological difficulty of striving for such a relation:

> Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves. (p. 385)

How do we respond to the self-contained aimlessness of the universe? Can we, as Rainer Maria Rilke proclaimed in the Ninth Elegy of his Sonnets to Orpheus, bring together that which we seem to sunder with our very presence?

-am I not right
to feel as though I *must* stay seated, must
wait before the puppet stage, or, rather,
gaze at it so intensely that at last,
to balance my gaze, an angel has to come and
make the stuffed skins startle into life
Angel and puppet, a real play, finally.
Then what we separate by our very presence
can come together. And only then, the whole
cycle of transformation will arise,
out of our life-seasons. Above, beyond us,
The angel plays. If no one else, the dying
Must notice how unreal, how full of pretense,
Is all that we accomplish here, where nothing
is allowed to be itself. Oh hours of childhood,
when behind each shape more than the past appeared
and what streamed out before us was not the future.

For Rilke the human act of re-imagining the world is a moral necessity. The world is uninhabitable for him without intervention; it needs to be recreated with his fervent attention. He wants to call up an angel with his gaze. He yearns for an experience of existence so fulfilling that death is but a moment, and not the moment you live in fear of. He yearns to feel the for-nothingness of life, and to be free.

In the conclusion of this paper, I discuss Murdoch's ideas about the relationship between the for-nothingness of art and the for-nothingness of human life. I look at the ways in

which stories and storytelling are connected to a moral imagination. And I examine Elaine Scarry's ideas on the ways morality and beauty may be related.

Conclusion

As the sweet apple turns red on a high branch
High on the highest branch and the apple pickers forgot-
Well, no, they didn't forget-were not able to reach.
Sappho, translated by Anne Carson
(Quoted in Farley, (1996) p. 200)

It seems counterintuitive that Murdoch presents such disparate ways of understanding virtue. On the one hand, she suggests that we should pay zealous attention to all that surrounds us. And on the other hand, she encourages what would seem to be an apathetic disregard for any purpose at all. Murdoch (1970) states: "[t]he Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. 'All is vanity' is the beginning and end of ethics (p. 71)." She claims that one should simply try to be aware, and not to strive for anything in particular in order to disengage the anxious, fantasy-producing ego. For Murdoch, moral improvement must come on the heels of an emptying of the self, or what she calls unselfing. She notes:

> The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing' in the midst of a scene where every natural thing, including one's own mind, is subject to chance, that is to necessity. That 'for nothing' is indeed the correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of good itself. (ibid., p. 71)

It requires great courage to be steadfast in the thick of life with its all of its dramas, and particularly one's own internal drama, and to be certain that one's own being is not the center of all being. And it is difficult to keep in clear sight that, verily, every being is subject to a capricious fate. Michael Levenson (2001) describes the limited scope of the spiritual insight that one actually has access to. He states:"[t]he root, sheer recognition of separate reality is exactly the spiritual insight available to modernity (p. 576)." Acknowledging a reality other than our own is a huge accomplishment, and worthy of our efforts according to Murdoch. Nussbaum combines Murdoch's aesthetic views into a unified ethic when she speaks of the "life and vision of art" (Antonaccio and Schweiker, 1996). Nussbaum describes Murdoch's aesthetics views in terms that suggest that the union of thought and exercise is perfect. She claims:

> In the life and vision of art, we attain a specificity of perception that life itself generally denies us. In art we see the whole human being. Whereas in the rest of life we cannot both embrace the real and pursue the good. (p. 48)

But, in fact, the relationship is not perfect. Like Sappho's apple, complete ethical illumination is always beyond our reach. All we can learn is how we could pursue the good if only we were not constrained by our commitments and fears. Good art is, in Murdoch's view, a way to view a human experience that is more purified of fantasy than the experience to which we normally have access. Murdoch (1970) states:

> Literature and painting... show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition. They show us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its

> supreme importance; the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue. The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of human life itself, and form in art is properly the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe. 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. This form often seems to us mysterious because it resists the easy patterns of the fantasy, whereas there is nothing mysterious about the forms of bad art. [...] Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision. We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated; and indeed this is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all. (p. 75)

Murdoch's concept of virtue, and the role she gives to aesthetic perception are what she privileges with the capacity to help us remake ourselves in the images we choose. Murdoch believes that "we need new concepts by which to picture our substance", and her philosophy is an attempt to provide us with useful new concepts. Murdoch esteems all of the arts, and literature, she holds in the highest regard. Murdoch (1970) notes:

> ...the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. (p., 34)

Murdoch's views are in nearly complete harmony with Nussbaum who considers some fiction to illustrate what she calls Aristotle's "yearnings of thought and excursions of sympathy". In Nussbaum's view (1993), Henry James succeeds in *The Golden Bowl* (1909) to capture the work of the moral imagination. She states:

> It depicts in its cadences the moral effort of straining to see correctly and to come up with the appropriate picture or description...(p. 88)

Her thoughts are almost the same as Murdoch's on the same subject. Murdoch (1970) states:

> The knowledge and imagination which is virtue is precisely the kind which the novelist needs to let his characters be....and to study them themselves in that most significant area of their activity. Where they are trying to apprehend the reality of others. (p. 57)

Murdoch has the greatest faith in literature to help us out of ourselves, and into relation with whom and what surrounds us.

In Murdoch's view, stories are so powerful because they engage the imagination, which is the most free and important place for the stirring of a moral consciousness. Murdoch (1970) believes in the ability of art to provide a truthful image of the human condition, and this true image is something that a person cannot always behold in person. In "Against Dryness" (1997), Murdoch discusses how one's imagination needs to respect the contingent. She states:

> Reality is not a given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent, is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy. Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality. (ibid., p. 294)

Murdoch maintains that reading fiction is so important because:"[r]eal people are destructive of myths, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for the imagination(ibid., p. 294)." According to Murdoch, we must attach ourselves to what is outside of us. It is an error to be too concerned with "finding yourself" for, Murdoch states: "[i]t is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not the mechanism itself that liberates (1970, p. 67)." Murdoch calls for nothing less than a re-education of the senses. Murdoch claims: "[w]hat is needed ... is a new orientation of our desires, a re-education of our own instinctive feelings(1992, p. 503)."

How does one re-educate desire? The experience of beauty can, at the very least, get attention, and in Murdoch's (1970) view, "...beauty appears as the visible and accessible aspect of the Good. (p. 70)." Farley (1996) notes the inexhaustible quality of beauty, and likens beauty to a stream. Beauty, she says:

> ...alerts us to the overflowing of reality beyond neat boundaries...Beauty is like a stream flowing out of an infinite source. It never ceases to flow out of itself, but it is never exhausted. (p. 82)

Elaine Scarry has written a book, *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), wherein she argues that when you perceive beauty in the absence of justice, you experience it as loss. Justice

is often the missing part of beauty, and beauty renders service to justice with its erotic coupling of absence and presence. Scarry's description of the perception of beauty is an excellent description of how beauty reorients desire. Scarry (1999) notes:

> The structure of perceiving beauty appears to have a two-part scaffolding: first, one's attention is involuntarily given to the beautiful person or thing: then, this quality of heightened attention is voluntarily extended out to persons or things. (p. 81)

According to Scarry, the world itself behaves like an instrument of ethical knowledge. Scarry (1999) continues:

> It is as though beautiful things have been placed here and there throughout the world to serve as small wake-up calls to perception, spurring lapsed alertness back to its most acute level. Through its beauty, the world continually recommits us to a rigorous standard of perceptual care: if we do not search it out, it comes and finds us. (p. 81)

Both Scarry and Farley see that the world imposes an ethical requirement on us to remain alert, and even to delight in the plurality of the world. Farley (1996) claims:

> A passion for reality and acknowledgement of the obligations other beings impose on us require a delight in plurality. (p. 17)

Farley considers it an ethical requirement that the world not be treated as though it were ethically neutral, and that the existence of living things demands compassion of us because of their very state of existence. Farley (1999) claims that true knowledge about

other beings in the world must be concerned with justice: "...because beauty and vulnerability coexist in living things, true knowledge cannot bypass compassion. (p. 86)."

Nussbaum also agrees with the inclusion of an affective domain under the purview of knowledge. Nussbaum (1990) notes:

> The emotions are themselves modes of vision, or recognition. Their responses are part of knowing, that is truly recognizing or acknowledging consists in. (p. 79)

Now, this may sound speculative given its distance from the ways we are accustomed to thinking but we are creatures who have held different images of ourselves at different times and our self-conceptions are revisable. As Eliot Eisner (1991) notes:

> The idea that truth exceeds belief is itself a belief in the possibility of ontological objectivity. Yet all that we can ever know is the product of an active mind in commerce with a world. (p. 51)

Educators can profitably adopt many of the approaches to the 'other' that Murdoch, Nussbaum, Farley, and Scarry recommend. It is one and the same thing to teach and to teach values because the affective domain is where the imagination rests. According to Murdoch, language itself is a moral medium, and freedom is inseparable from knowledge. Murdoch (1970) claims: "[f]reedom, itself a moral concept and not just a prerequisite of morals cannot here be separated from the idea of knowledge. (p. 38)

[1] Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach" in Midwest Studies in Philosophy (Vol. XII, ed Peter A French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, 1988)

[2] As Murdoch (1970) claims: "We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in words. This is why it is and always will be more important to know Shakespeare than to know about any scientist; and if there is a "Shakespeare of Science" his name is Aristotle." (p.34)

[3] This reference is cited in Wolfram Volker, *The Rhetoric of Love: Das Menschenbild und die Form des Romans bei Iris Murdoch*, 33. My edition of Murdoch (1970) has no footnotes.

[4] It is important to note that Murdoch has a view of the human as fallen in the 'original sin' sense: in her conception of morality, the existence of evil is acknowledged.

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