

Good, Self, and Unselfing - Reflections on Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

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1. Introduction

When discussing Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy it is often easiest to start by saying what she is opposing. Such is the case also in this paper, which concerns Murdoch's views of our identity as persons or "selves". The good enemy against which Murdoch writes is what she calls the "current", the "modern", or the "liberal" view of morals. This is a view whose essential features are shared by such apparently quite different philosophers as, for example, R. M. Hare or J. P. Sartre, and whose ancestors are Hume, Kant and Mill (VC, 34). One of the several critical characterizations Murdoch applies to the picture of the individual contained in this view is "existentialist". In Murdoch's account, such philosophers as Sartre, who claims the title, as well as others who do not, are existentialist when they emphasize the solitary omnipotent will at the cost of the substantial self, that is, if they identify "the true person with the empty choosing will" (S, 9, 35). Murdoch's objection to this picture might be put as follows: by making morality a matter of a solitary choosing will, the view neglects ordinary human moral experience and instead builds an empty abstraction which it then elevates into a "man-God", the moral super hero of modern times.

Having said this as an introduction, I shall leave aside the details of Murdoch's objections, as well as the question of their accuracy. Instead, I shall draw a sketch of her positive viewpoints of the matter, the view of human identity which she sets against the "current view". In her view, man is set "against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him" (AD, 290). I shall explore the transcendental argument by which Murdoch aims to establish this. This is an argument concerning the concept of "Good" as a unifier of our experience and hence, as a condition of our being persons. The argument is, in fact, "not of the most rigorous kind", as Murdoch puts it herself. However, when it is supported by imaginative appeals to experience (metaphors, new concepts) and by moral reasons for its acceptance, it seems - not only to Murdoch, but also to many philosophers inspired by her - that it can support an attractive alternative to the picture of the man presented by the current view. The aforementioned moral reasons are taken up at the end of this paper. They are reasons for replacing the man-God with other kinds of sacred objects, with goodness as exhibited in contingent particular beings such as real people.

2. Good and the Self

According to Murdoch, moral philosophy in the contemporary secularised world should retain a concept which has the characteristics formerly attributed to God. Her suggestion for such a concept is "Good", characterized as "a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention" (S, 55). However, when speaking of the reality, or necessary existence of Good she wants to avoid "any heavy material connotation of the misleading word 'exist'" (S, 64). So in which sense does Good exist? In my interpretation, it exists as a condition of experience. In other words, one can in Murdoch's philosophy find a transcendental argument that proceeds from our human experience to the necessary

conditions of this experience. The experience central to the argument is one concerning moral progress, or what Murdoch also calls our "pilgrimage". It involves a strong sense of direction on one hand and the knowledge that it is someone's - a particular person's - experience on the other (S, 22-23).

Let us first examine the idea of direction. Murdoch asks: "Are we not certain that there is a 'true direction' towards better conduct, that goodness 'really matters'?" (S, 60). She claims that in all our evaluations we use a standard of excellence, which cannot be found in the evaluated things themselves. This standard is the idea of perfection, which brings scales and distances to the area under assessment. Such scales and distances are necessary for all thinking. In order to understand any domain of life, we have to be able to relate things to each other, classify them as better or worse, important or not - in short, evaluate. As so often in her philosophy, Murdoch here takes art as an example. Learning to understand some art form means learning to evaluate its objects according to degrees of excellence. This activity also reveals that there is "little that is very good and nothing that is perfect". (S, 61-61.) The same goes for all human activity. We know that even the best are not perfect. This knowledge is, nevertheless, made possible by the idea of perfection that brings with it the sense of a right or a wrong direction in which one can move.

Murdoch compares her argument concerning the idea of perfection to the ontological proof which, rather than a proof, is an "assertion of faith", appropriate for those already convinced (S, 63). In other words, it can only be made on the basis of some experience of Good as perfection (or God in Anselm's case). If one wants to speak of proof, it is a proof an individual can ultimately give only to herself, not a universal moral formula seen valid by virtue of rationality only (MGM, 392). Not so much the formal qualities of the argument but the experience out of which it arises makes in convincing. However, the moral philosopher can help even the sceptic to find the proof within herself by "appeal to certain areas of experience, pointing out certain features, and using suitable metaphors and inventing suitable concepts where necessary to make these features visible" (S, 75). Then, if a person can find hierarchies of value in her experience, she will, according to Murdoch, also find the idea of perfection as the end point of them. Hence, if successful, the moral philosopher can make the sceptic discover the evaluative nature of all her thinking: to discover that in this sense she really is a believer of Good. From this one can proceed to understanding how Good also functions as a condition for the unity of our experience and ultimately for our being persons with particular identities.

Murdoch claims that "if there is any kind of sense or unity in human life [...] it must be sought within a human experience" (S, 79). Unity is experienced by someone. The notion of a person or individual is, according to Murdoch, inseparable from morality. In her view, the movement towards Good can be described as activity that aims at an increasing precision of moral concepts, and such activity is highly personal. Our moral vocabulary is of course subject to some public rules, and our concepts are derived from a

public context. However, we take these concepts "into our privacy", where we can reassess them. For Murdoch, this in fact is the main characteristic of "live personality". Within certain limits, an individual's use of moral concepts is a function of her history. (S, 25-26.) Moreover, as (and if) our understanding of moral concepts grows, we also become increasingly aware of their relationships and hierarchies. "Increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity", Murdoch notes (S, 57). Hence, whatever unity there is in our experience it is there due to our ability to evaluate, and to Good that provides the standard for these evaluations. Good is compared by Murdoch to a magnetic centre of reflection, or (her favourite image) the sun outside the Platonic cave, in the light of which we can see the world properly, but which itself is very difficult to look at (if at all possible). Without Good we would have no sense of direction in our lives and therefore no unity of experience. In other words, we have to evaluate in order to be integrated persons. How we evaluate is in turn a function of our individual histories, our struggles for increased precision of our moral concepts. In this way Good and our movement towards it is also a condition of all the experience we call *our own* experience, and, hence, a condition of our having "a self".

This is my (admittedly sketchy) reproduction of the "transcendental argument" by which Murdoch supports her view of the human being as set against a background of value.¹ Of this picture she then asks, whether we cannot find just this in our deepest experience (see MGE, 507).

3. Good and Unselfing

However, the question of why we should accept her picture is not just a question of experience. Since all our thinking is evaluative, the question is also evaluative: whether this is not the picture of us that we should accept for moral reasons. Every moral system is, according to Murdoch, reflecting an evaluative vision, commanding an ideal. And since this cannot be avoided, it is important that the system is commanding a worthy ideal (S, 78). I come now to what I think are Murdoch's moral reasons for preferring the ideal she is presenting to the one implied by the "existentialist" current view.

The idea of Good as the unifier of our experience avoids at least two moral dangers tightly connected to the existentialist view of the person. Both of these dangers have to do with the notion of freedom that goes with the existentialist view. In it, freedom is identified with an empty choosing will, as Murdoch puts it (S, 36). The creator of value is the will, whereas the world outside the moral agent consists of facts. So we are talking about the famous fact-value distinction, which Murdoch was among the first to criticise (see, Diamond 1996, 79). In the existentialist view, the human being moves against a background of facts, and it is at her will to choose how she evaluates these facts. The moral agent is "free to withdraw, survey the facts, and choose again". (VC, 83)

One problem is that this picture of human freedom tends to marginalise the ethical. It sees facts as that which human beings share with each other. We can discuss our moral differences by reference to, and clarification of, the facts relevant to the question. If there is no agreement on what the facts are, that is, if the disagreement concerns "purely values", the argumentation becomes more difficult and perhaps impossible. (VC, 81). But this is the area where the solitary will moves - it is "marooned upon a tiny island in the middle of a sea of scientific facts", or to use

another of Murdoch's metaphors, we have "a big world of facts, little peripheral area of value" (S, 27 MGE, 25).

Another problem is that in the existentialist view the solitary will, supposedly stripped from a metaphysical background, is turned into a hero figure. It is affirmed that an agent, identified with her will, can attain an authentic existence by sheer force of that will alone. Such a strong emphasis on the freedom of the individual will is, however, more likely to enhance than constrain selfish impulses, which according to Murdoch are so fundamental to human beings. She describes the human psyche in Freudian terms as a "historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself" or also as a "fat relentless ego". This ego is the enemy of moral life and thus moral philosophy is properly the discussion of techniques for its defeat. The question for moral philosophers is "how can we make ourselves better?" (S, 50-52, 78.) In modern moral philosophy Kant's original quest for finding something clean and pure outside the selfish empirical psyche has only lead back again to the self and degenerated into a "Luciferian philosophy of adventures of the will" (S, 48, 83), which looks more like another project of self-aggrandizement of the selfish ego than an answer to the question how to make ourselves better.

Murdoch's metaphysical picture is drawn as a guard against these moral dangers.² It points at the evaluative aspect of all thinking. Valuing is not one (peripheral) kind of cognitive activity among others, but rather the condition of any cognitive activity, the condition for there being persons who think. As such, valuing is not something we can choose whether or not to do. This is what Murdoch means by saying that the idea of the Good lies beyond our experience and exercises its authority from there (S, 62-63). Taking seriously this picture of Good as the condition for our being selves in the first place should also humble the fat ego. Rather than me being the creator of value, value creates me.

Murdoch's answer to the question how we can make ourselves better is: by paying attention to the Good. However, as stated in the beginning, Good is a "non-representable object of attention". There is no immediate way of encountering it - it exists as the ideal endpoint of those hierarchies of value that we *can* perceive. This means that moral improvement is improvement of vision: it requires close attention to what lies outside of the selfish mechanism of the human psyche. Murdoch characterizes the proper kind of attention (following Simone Weil) as "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (S, 34). The most important and most difficult individual realities for our attention are other people. Cultivating one's vision in order to see beyond the self to other individual selves is true moral activity. This calls for what Murdoch refers to as "techniques of unselfing". Attending to Iris Murdoch's philosophy can be recommended as one such technique.³

¹ For a detailed but somewhat different account of Murdoch's transcendental argument see Antonaccio, 2000, chapt. 5.

² Murdoch does note that her picture involves moral dangers of its own, although she claims in a rather self-assured manner that "we know roughly how to deal with these dangers and part of moral life is to deal with them" (VC, 91-91).

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