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A study in Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

Gåvertsson, Frits

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Perfection and Fiction

A study in Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

Frits Gåvertsson



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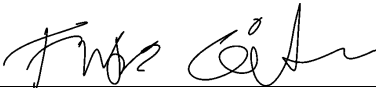
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Perfection and Fiction

A study in Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

Frits Gävertsson



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To Anna

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Preface

As evidenced by the title of this work, Dame Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) believed that morality is intimately connected to self-improvement aiming at perfection, and that the study of (literary) fiction has an important role to play in our continuous and never-ending strive towards moral development. This thesis, which deals with Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy, and which is divided into eight chapters, can be read as a single sustained argument for the pronounced role of literature in moral understanding given a Murdochian framework that culminates in a series of close-readings of other literary texts inspired by Murdoch's stance. The basic argument to be found in this book can be stated rather briefly:

If we accept (the controversial thesis) that the scope of morality is broader than certain conventional conceptions allow, and that it is better thought of as a kind of ubiquitous vision than a demarcated area of inquiry, morality seems to exhibit features that are practical, personal, and particular, but this should not lead us into anything like radically anti-theoretical conclusions. If we also subscribe to the idea that personal moral development is largely a matter of developing our moral conceptions into a coherent practical world through continual adjustment, it would seem that literary fiction is a promising (although by no means the only) candidate for moral insight and understanding that could help us on our way. This suggestion seems even more compelling if we think that the required honing of our conceptions should be guided by our understanding of alternative points of view (that we are also met with through our encounters with others), as well as being based on our encounters with the world at large and the particular individuals that we encounter in it.

The thesis can also be read in a much more modular fashion. Those primarily interested in Murdoch's moral philosophy can focus their attention on chapters one through four, whereas those that are primarily interested in Murdoch's aesthetics can concentrate on chapter five. The last three chapters, which comprise close-readings of, in turn, Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965), Sophocles's *Antigone*, and John Williams's *Stoner* (2012 [1965]), can be read as stand-alone chapters.

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Frits Gåvertsson
Lund, July 2018

1. Introduction

This is a study of Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy. As such it does not address her substantial output as a novelist, playwright, and poet—26 novels between her first, *Under the Net* (1954) and her last, *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995), six plays including *A Severed Head* (1964), *The Italian Girl* (1969), both adapted from her novels of the same name, and *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (1986), two collections of poems (1978 and 1997 respectively)—nor her fascinating life-story.

Rather, what this work aims to do is to clarify Murdoch's often dense philosophical prose and evaluate her (moral) philosophy with special emphasis on the role that fiction plays within her theory.¹ The second primary aim of what follows is to situate Murdoch in a larger tradition of ethical thought by showing how she builds on, deviates from, and develops themes from said tradition. To this end some effort is spent, in what follows, to try to pinpoint influences from, and reactions to, a large and eclectic group of thinkers.

Even though this volume is concerned with the connections between morality and fiction, I will confine myself to the study of Murdoch's philosophical works without relating this to her novels. The primary reason for this is that the interpretative openness of her novels might well mislead rather than clarify. On such concerns regarding Murdoch and further motivations for the stance taken here see Hämäläinen (2016a: 152-154). In order to bring out the ways in which Murdoch's ethics and aesthetics interrelate the textual focus of what is to follow

¹ It is rather common (*cf. e.g.*, Green 2016: 281) to distinguish between fiction, which might or might not be of a sufficiently high calibre to count as literature (*e.g.*, Harlequin romances), on the one hand and literature that is of sufficiently high calibre but not fictional (*e.g.*, well-crafted biographies), on the other. In what follows I assume no such distinction as what I have to say does not heavily depend, or so I believe, on literary merit (in the sense of deserving, whatever that means, to be called literature in the sense outlined). While it seems clear that properties such as complex and compelling character-portrayals and insights into life's larger themes (*cf.* Kivy 1997: 120-139) makes it easier to utilize a fictional work for the purposes of doing philosophy I do not believe that such properties are in any way necessary (since the philosophical use we might make of fiction and literature should not be delimited). For classifications of common ways of utilizing fiction and literature for the purposes of moral philosophy see *e.g.*, Crary 2013; Hämäläinen 2016b; Hagberg 2016: 1-11. We will turn to Murdoch's own (Platonic) distinction between good (or great) and mediocre (or bad) art in Chapter 5.

is primarily directed towards two groups of essays that Murdoch wrote in the 1950's and 60's. The group of essays that is most concerned with ethical theory, and which shall be the main focus in Chapters 2 through 4, is collected as *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). The group of essays where Murdoch primarily deals with aesthetics and literature was never collected into a single volume but the thematic connections between them nevertheless make it clear that we are dealing with a systematic connection. These essays will be the primary focus of Chapter 5. We shall return to these issues in §1.3 below.

Since the drawbacks and problematic aspects of Murdoch's thought, such as her opacity, mysticism, metaphysical extravagance, and deviation from Anglo-American philosophical orthodoxy, are fairly well known and well established I will not spend much time elaborating on these perceived flaws. Rather, I will spend some time pointing to advantages and even try to meet some of the criticisms just outlined. Still, I hesitate to classify the current work as an outright defence of Murdoch's position. What I offer here is rather a critical study chiefly aimed at deepening our understanding of Murdoch's philosophy.

It should be noted at the outset that the interconnectedness of Murdoch's position creates unfortunate problems with exposition since it is often unclear whether a certain feature of Murdoch's thought follows from or is a prerequisite for another. Thus, the expositional route I have settled on here is obviously open to questioning.

There are many important contributions that address Murdoch's celebrated work as a novelist—she was, already during her lifetime, critically acclaimed to the point of winning the Booker prize for *The Sea, the Sea* (1978b) and remains one of the most celebrated novelists of the second half or the twentieth century—even from a more or less philosophical perspective, such as A. S. Byatt's *Degrees Of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965), Ellen Abernethy Aschdown's dissertation *Form and Myth in Three Novels by Iris Murdoch* (1974), Bran Nicol's *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction* (2004), Sabina Lovibond's *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy* (2011), and Anna Victoria Hallberg's dissertation *Novel Writing and Moral Philosophy as Aspects of a Single Struggle: Iris Murdoch's Hybrid Novels* (2011).

Murdoch's life has been chronicled extensively. Most notably in her official biography, Peter J. Conradi's *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (2001), in her husband, notable literary critic John Bayley's *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (1998), novelist and personal friend A. N. Wilson's *Iris Murdoch As I Knew Her* (2003), and in a volume of annotated letters edited by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (the latter of whom also manages the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University, London) *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995* (2015).

While it is still true that Murdoch's philosophy is the area of her work that has been least commented upon there has been growing interest in recent years. Nora Hämmäläinen's *Literature and Moral Theory* (2016a) locates Murdoch's contribution to philosophy within the broader movement—sometimes termed 'the literary turn'—of philosophers turning to literature for philosophical insight. A number of important anthologies, such as *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (1996) edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (2007) edited by Anne Rowe, and *Iris Murdoch Connected: Critical Essays on Her Fiction and Philosophy* (2014) edited by Mark Luprecht, bring together essays commenting on the totality of Murdoch's output, including her philosophical writings. In addition, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (2012) edited by Justin Broackes focuses almost exclusively on Murdoch's philosophy and the reader will find extensive references to Broackes' excellent introduction within the present work.

There are also a few book-length treatments that focus primarily on Murdoch's philosophy, such as Maria Antonaccio's *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (2000) and *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (2012a), Heather Widdows' *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (2005), Kate Larson's dissertation *Everything Important is to Do with Passion: Iris Murdoch's Concept of Love and Its Platonic Origin* (2009), Hanna Marije Altorf's *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imaging* (2008), and Floora Ruokonen's dissertation *Ethics and Aesthetics: Intersections in Iris Murdoch's Philosophy* (2009).

The present volume, which aims to add to this growing appreciation for and understanding of Murdoch's (moral) philosophy, is divided into eight chapters structured as follows.

In this introductory chapter, after some preliminary remarks about the intellectual milieu surrounding her (§1.1), and about Murdoch's main influences (§1.2), I start (§1.3) by giving an outline of Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), which shall be our main focus in Chapters 2 through 4. After that I go on (§§1.4 and 1.5) to argue that Murdoch's approach to moral philosophy should be located in an old tradition of ethical thought commonly referred to as perfectionism. Perfectionism—as I understand it here—is a family of ethical theories that aim to articulate a conception of our end and how it can be attained.

Chapter 2 goes on to investigate Murdoch's understanding of the nature of morality by looking at her methodological assumptions (§2.1), her understanding of the scope of morality (§2.2), her Platonism (§2.3), her conceptualism (§2.4), her realism (§2.5), her theory of concept possession and how it relates to the idea of moral progress (§2.6), and her understanding of moral motivation (§2.7).

Chapter 3 highlights a series of benefits—including avoiding the all too common tendency to over-intellectualise the moral life (§3.1), providing a plausible construal of humility (§3.2), evil (§3.3), genuine other-concern (§3.4), moral deference (§3.5), and moral exemplars (§3.6)—that I think makes Murdoch’s theory stand out as one of the most appealing versions of perfectionism available.

Chapter 4 investigates the role ‘theory’ plays in Murdoch’s take on ethics and, in so doing, touches upon further issues such as Murdoch’s Platonic understanding of virtue (§4.3) and the relation between beauty and the good (§4.2).

Chapter 5 is concerned with the close connection Murdoch postulates between art and morality in a series of articles published before the ones that make up the *Sovereignty of Good*. In this chapter I argue that Murdoch, by arguing for such a close connection along, perhaps surprisingly, Platonic lines, establishes a fruitful research-program that enables us to read literary fiction with an eye towards moral insight.

The final chapters—*i.e.* chapters 6, 7, and 8—builds upon the research-program identified in Chapter 5 by providing close-readings of, in turn, Margaret Drabble’s *The Millstone* (1965), Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and, John William’s *Stoner* (2012 [1965]) in a way that seeks to incorporate central insights gathered from Murdoch’s take on the relationship between art and morals whilst, at least to a certain extent (particularly in Chapter 6), developing this research-program beyond Murdoch’s (explicitly Platonic) stance. Given the structure of the work to follow it is possible for those mostly interested in Murdoch’s moral philosophy to concentrate on Chapters 2 through 4 and ignore, or just give a cursory glance at, the rest of the book. Similarly, those primarily interested in Murdoch’s aesthetics can focus on Chapter 5. Since the close-readings that constitute the individual case studies of chapters 6 through 8 might be of interest to readers that find little or no interest in the chapters that preceded them or in other parts of the work they are written in a more or less self-contained manner. Although the disposition just outlined has necessitated some repetition and simplifications of elements discussed earlier I have tried to keep this to a minimum.

Although I, in what follows, attempt to trace influences on Murdoch’s thought, I fear that I have not been able, due to the nature of the present work and its focus on the distinctiveness of Murdoch’s philosophy, to properly treat the importance of a group of brilliant thinkers—including Mary Midgley, Philippa Foot and, Elisabeth Anscombe—who operated in her immediate vicinity. This group is variously referred to as ‘The war-time group’ (Midgley 2013) and ‘the Somerville four’ (after the fact that all of them attended, or had some connection

with, Somerville College, Oxford). In the process of writing this dissertation I have come to realise that such names do the collective somewhat of an injustice in referring to them as a loosely assembled group rather than the distinctive and important philosophical school that I think they constitute.

1.1 The Somerville School

I believe that building on friendships formed as undergraduates Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Elizabeth Anscombe during their stay at Oxford in the late 1940's jointly developed a thought-out oppositional philosophical programme. A programme that each of them, beginning in the 1950's, would go on to elaborate in subsequent individual writings throughout their respective careers. Fully substantiating this idea would need further archival research (at, among other places, the Iris Murdoch archives at Kingston University, London, the Mary Midgley archives at Durham University, and the Philippa Foot archives at Somerville) as well as a sustained argument over what it involves to be classified as a 'school of thought' in the first place. Nevertheless, I will try to provide some reasons for thinking that I am right.

A currently ongoing research project at Durham University—entitled 'In Parenthesis' (www.womeninparenthesis.wordpress.com)—spearheaded by Rachel Wiseman, Clare MacCumhaill and Luna Dolezal, undertakes archival work, oral and social history, and philosophical research with the aim of establishing the existence of 'The Somerville School' as a distinctive school of moral philosophy. Much of what follows owe a great deal to the preliminary results of this project.

It might be argued that it is inconsequential whether we designate this group of philosophers as a school of thought in the first place since what matters, in the end, is surely their individual contributions to analytic philosophy's broad and inclusive style of philosophising. I think, to the contrary, that it is important to recognize the group as a school of thought for at least five reasons (and here I draw on Mac Cumhaill, Wiseman and Dolezal 2017, as well as Lovibond 2011: Ch. 1, and Broackes 2012).

Firstly, I think that failing to recognise this group as a school of thought risks misconstruing their individual contributions since we thereby might neglect, or not fully appreciate, common elements in their thought. That is, we might run the risk of misconstruing the work of each individual member by neglecting context.

Secondly, we run the risk of not fully appreciating the contours of the philosophical orthodoxy that this group saw itself as opposing. This is especially important given that analytic philosophy traditionally has prided itself upon its purported inclusivist liberal attitude stemming from being (self-)defined in terms of argumentative clarity and rigour rather than any common doctrine(s). That is, failing to recognize the Somerville School as a school of thought opposing itself to certain doctrines more or less consciously adhered to by the analytical mainstream—such as *e.g.*, a (more or less) strict adherence to the so-called ‘fact-value’ distinction, ontological or methodological individualism, and reductionism—might led us into thinking of these doctrines as more commonly accepted, and therefore dialectically harder to refute, than they might otherwise have been.

Thirdly, as Mac Cumhaill, Wiseman and Dolezal (2017) put it, ‘[t]o be defined as a philosophical school is to be recognised by one’s community as serious interlocutors’. One way in which the study of the history of philosophy can aid contemporary philosophical practice is by recovering, or less radically bringing to the fore, opinions, practices and voices that were previously neglected because they were deemed irrelevant, uninteresting or peripheral by their contemporary peers. One way for the historian of philosophy to do this is to structure these previously more or less neglected voices into schools of thought, and to label them as such. Such labelling, apart from bringing structure which opens up novel ways to write the history of philosophy, also helps us retrieving these previously overlooked figures and ideas in a way that facilitates discussion about them.

Fourthly, the fact that all of the founders of the Somerville School are women can be seen as bringing added urgency to the above remarks. Properly recognizing what might be analytical philosophy’s first all-women school of thought is not only important in and of itself but it might also provide contemporary women philosophers and philosophy students with ‘a model of philosophical practice that they can recognise and emulate’ (Mac Cumhaill, Wiseman and Dolezal 2017). Sabina Lovibond (2011: 1-2) stresses the fact that the male attributes that are commonly associated with the role of the philosopher (or ‘master thinker’, which Lovibond 2011: 110n3 acknowledges is perhaps more at home in a continental philosophical context) leaves women in a mythologically disadvantaged position. Levelling the playing-field here is not only a matter of providing female role-models for emulation, it is also about disturbing and challenging the common image of the philosopher as imbued with male attributes. Hopefully this will also, as a consequence, help us shake our preconceptions of how a school of thought ought to originate from the customary idea of a ‘charismatic male genius at the start from whom the school gets its name, and a long line of male disciples

working through the research project he created before, at some point, one capable of “killing their father” appears and begins his own line’ (Mac Cumhaill, Wiseman and Dolezal 2017) to something more open.

Fifthly, we run the risk of misconstruing the contributions—in ways that correspond to the four reasons already given in connection to the founding members of the school—of philosophers that can be said to be descendants of the Somerville School. As we shall see philosopher’s such as Alice Cray (e.g., Cray 2007; 2013; 2016) Cora Diamond (e.g., Diamond 1991; 1996; 1997), Bernard Williams (Williams 1985: 240n7; cf. Broackes 2012: 15n37), Charles Taylor (cf. e.g., Taylor 1989: 3, 84, 95-98; 1996; Martinuk 2014), John McDowell (e.g., McDowell 1979; on this see Broackes 2012: esp. 8-10, 15-18) and Michael Thomson (e.g., Thomson 1995; 2004) ought all, to somewhat varying degrees, be seen as continuing the efforts of the founders of the Somerville School.²

Murdoch went up to Somerville College, Oxford, in 1938 (at age nineteen), wherefrom she, along with lifelong friend Mary Midgley, received Firsts in Greats in 1942 (Murdoch and Midgley were the only candidates in Greats from Somerville that year). Another lifelong friend, Philippa Foot, also received a First—in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE)—from Somerville that year whereas the fourth member of their circle of friends, Elisabeth Anscombe, had taken Greats at St. Hugh’s the year before. Mary Warnock, another prominent female philosopher often associated with the group that was to become the Somerville School, came up to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford in 1942 and later went on to become Fellow and tutor of philosophy at St. Hugh’s in 1949.

The reason why this group of philosophers have not, until recently, been thought of as a school nor read together Mac Cumhaill, Wiseman and Dolezal (2017) argue, I think rightly, stands to be found in how the members of the Somerville school figure in undergraduate *curricula* and how we tend to construe the landscape of 20th century analytic philosophy in a way that discourages them being read together. In order to see why, let us briefly sum up the by-and-large accepted legacy of each member of the group (cf. the corresponding list in Mac Cumhaill, Wiseman and Dolezal 2017, which I have modified slightly and supplied with additional references):

Anscombe is famous for (1) her *Intention* (1957) which helped found what we today designate as the philosophy of action (on this see Wiseman 2016), (2) her attack on consequentialism and deontology (meant to pave the way for her own, most would argue fatally Catholic, moral philosophy) in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ (1958a; on this see the contributions to O’Hear 2004; Broackes

² On the connection between Murdoch and Williams, see Broackes 2012: 8n20, 14-15, 17, 26-28, 36n77, 41n82; Hämäläinen 2016a.

2012: esp. 14n36, 15n37 36n77; Wiseman 2016: 31-36), and (3) her association with Wittgenstein (on this see *e.g.*, Monk 1991: esp. 498).

Foot is most famous for developing and defending (1) a secular form of virtue ethics (Foot 1978), and (2) a non-reductive form of meta-ethical naturalism (Foot 2001) as well as for (3) being the originator of the famous ‘trolley problem’ (Foot 1967).

Midgley is most famous for (1) her sustained arguments against reductive naturalism in the philosophy of science (and rather public dispute with Richard Dawkins over his *The Selfish Gene* (1976; *cf. e.g.*, Midgley 1979; Dawkins 1981; Midgley 1983; 1985; 2003; 2010), (2) her emphasis on the ethnographic study of the human animal, and (3) her work in feminist and animal ethics.

Murdoch, if considered as a philosopher—rather than a novelist and public figure—at all, is most famous for (1) being a prominent member of the ‘literary turn’ (Murdoch 1959a; 1959b; 1961; 1970; on this see Goldberg 1993; Hämläinen 2016a), (2) her Simone Weil-inspired Platonic mysticism (Murdoch 1970; 1992), and (3) her opposition to behaviourism (Murdoch 1970).

As should be evident by the spread in these lists it is unlikely that texts from more than one or maybe two of these philosophers ever should appear on the same reading list, be appealed to in a single seminar session, or fall under the field of expertise of any single academic.

In 1938, when Midgley, Murdoch and Foot first came up to Oxford, they were told by Vera Farnell, Dean at Somerville, Mary Midgley recalls, that ‘the women are still on probation in the university’ (Midgley 2005a: 87). A year later the onset of war had made women in the majority. Mary Midgley explicitly credits this lack of male students with paving the way for the group that would go on to form the Somerville School:

The effect was to make it a great deal easier for a woman to be heard in discussion than it is in normal times. (I have seen enough of a number of universities, both here [*i.e.* in the United Kingdom] and in the States, in later life to have checked up fully on this comparison). Sheer loudness of voice has a lot to do with the difficulty, but there is also a temperamental difference about confidence—about the amount of work that one thinks is needed to make one’s opinion worth hearing.

I think myself that this experience has something to do with the fact that Elisabeth [Anscombe] and I and Iris [Murdoch] and Philippa Foot and Mary Warnock have all made our names in philosophy. Not everybody will think this was a good thing, and I am certainly not suggesting that it is worthwhile waging wars so as to make such results possible. But I do think that in normal times a lot of good female thinking is wasted because it simply doesn’t get heard. Perhaps

women ought to shout louder, but of course there is still the question whether men are going to listen.

Later on, all five of us used our voices—which for better or worse we had found in this way—to resist in different ways the bizarre irrationalist climate that had been encouraged by logical positivism. In warring ways, we all attacked what may be crudely called the boo-hurray view of ethics—more politely, the idea that facts are split off from values by a logical gap that makes it impossible to think rationally at all about moral topics (Midgley 2005a: 123-124; *cf.* Midgley 2016a; 2016b; Broackes 3n3; Mac Cumhaill, Dolezal and Wiseman 2017).

We will get back to the doctrines of the Somerville School shortly, but before we do something more needs to be said about the climate at Oxford at the time and about who was, despite the war, still there and who, because of it, was not.

Since Somerville lacked a philosophy tutor at the time Murdoch, Midgley, and Foot were all taught by Donald McKinnon at Keble (on this see Midgley 2005a: esp. 85-86, 94, 97-100, 112-116, 125-126; 2005b; 2016a; 2016b; Conradi 2001: 82-134; Broackes 2012: 2-3). Foot would later become Somerville's first philosophy tutorial fellow in 1949 (O'Grady 2010).

The seemingly unremarkable fact that several members of the Somerville School from the autumn of 1940 onwards were taught by McKinnon—whose 'eccentricity was certainly a nuisance at first' (Midgley 2005a: 116)—Mary Midgley describes as 'an enormous stroke of luck' (Midgley 2005a: 116) since the breath of McKinnon's philosophical interests and profound understanding of Kant was accompanied with a willingness on his part to engage with his students well beyond the allotted tutorial hours.

In addition, Midgley and Murdoch—who were studying Greats—got the rather remarkable honour (highly unusual for first year-students) of being invited to take part in Eduard Fraenkel's (who was exempt from military service due to asthma) class on Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* which took the shape of an ongoing investigation of 'the whole play at a snail's pace over many years, dealing with every conceivable problem of text, interpretation, metre, style, character and background history' (Midgley 2005a: 97).

These broad, and methodologically open, approaches to philosophy and classics contrast sharply with what one would expect that the group would have been subjected to had not many of the other male University dons, such as Gilbert Ryle and Alfred Jules Ayer been enlisted in the war effort (mostly in the intelligence services). Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) was at the time a programmatic rallying-point. The opening paragraph of its first chapter, entitled 'The Elimination of Metaphysics', reads as follows:

The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful. The surest way to end them is to establish beyond question what should be the purpose method of a philosophical enquiry. And this is by no means so difficult a task as the history of philosophy would lead one to suppose. For if there are any questions which science leaves it to philosophy to answer, a straightforward process of elimination must lead to their discovery (Ayer 1936:15).

Ayer's philosophical programme can thus justifiably be labelled as anti-metaphysical, as dichotomising facts and values, and as being fuelled by an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation (as well as possibly being built upon a rather naïve construal of these methods at that). As we shall see in a moment, the members of the Somerville School disagreed with him on all these issues in a way that would in all probability not have been possible had they been subjected to his tutelage.

Gilbert Ryle, anticipating the reception of his *The Concept of the Mind* (1949), remarks towards the end of that work that '[t]he general trend of this book will undoubtedly, and harmlessly, be stigmatised as 'behaviourist' (Ryle 1949: 327). *The Concepts of the Mind*, although it was published after the war still was the result of work undertaken from the early 1930s onwards (cf. Ryle 1929; 1930; 1933a; 1933b; 1936) and is commonly thought to seek to accomplish two interrelated tasks; to argue against Cartesian dualism and to argue that this 'official theory' ought to be replaced by what is commonly known as 'philosophical (or analytical) behaviourism' (for a different reading of Ryle's work that brings him nearer to Wittgenstein see Tanney 2007). While the members of the Somerville School can be said to agree that Cartesian dualism is problematic they also saw significant problems with analytical behaviourism since it tended to disregard, or make secondary, private mental phenomena (see e.g., Murdoch 1970: 4-8/302-305).

Mary Midgley, writing under the title 'Then and Now' for the web-page of the project *In Parenthesis* addresses the matter of whether the four (or five, counting Warnock) of them ought to be classified as a school of thought outright:

Did that make us four into a Philosophical School?

This is a loose term, but the point is worth discussing. We did not at once become a 4-headed unanimous squad of prophets. We each followed our own diverging paths in various directions. But what, for me, makes the unanimity-story still important is a persisting memory of the four of us sitting in Philippa's front room [at 16 Park Town, a piece of Victorian town planning in North Oxford (cf. Midgley 2005a: 146-147)] and doing our collective best to answer the orthodoxies of the day, which we all saw as disastrous. As with many philosophical schools, the starting-point was a joint 'NO!'. No (that is) at once to divorcing Facts from

Values, and – after a bit more preparation – also No to splitting mind off from matter. From this, a lot of metaphysical consequences would follow (Midgley 2017).

The elements that Midgley identifies here—*i.e.* a joint dissatisfaction with ‘the fact-value’ distinction as well as ‘the mind-matter’ distinction—runs at the heart of the oppositional programme that the Somerville school developed in that this rejection of the orthodoxy of the times constituted the basis for a ‘realistic’ metaphysics developed by the group. This metaphysics is realistic (as opposed to realist) for three main reasons.

Firstly, it is realistic in that it resists fantasy and flight by insisting that ethics is formally dependent upon facts of human life (and not just anchored in abstract rationality). This will, as we shall see, be evident in Murdoch’s thought but it is also evident in the writings of the other members of the group.

Secondly, it is realistic in that it seeks to acknowledge the reality of both human evil and the possibility of moral progress. This lead to an opposition to non-cognitivism in ethics because, the members of the Somerville School thought, such positions have no resources to satisfyingly deal with the horrors of the Holocaust since they assume a positive view of members of our species—or any other rational moral agent—as somehow fundamentally decent. In a discussion with David Pears as part of the 1972 BBC television series ‘Logic Lane’ Murdoch described one of the underlying assumptions of this take on ethics as assuming that:

[W]hatever anybody’s likely to think about morals is going to be more or less okay. I mean, one might say it’s a sort of pre-Hitler view. It’s a view which goes with our sort of 19th-century optimism and a feeling of progress and a feeling that people are fundamentally decent chaps, a view which after recent history [...] one cannot in general take (Murdoch 1972, quoted in Krishna 2017).

This should not—as Foot (2001: 7) makes clear—simply be seen as a rejection of obviously problematic free-for-all subjectivism but an attack upon the idea, which is absolutely central to non-cognitivism, that “‘description’ would still not, according to these theories, reach all the way to moral judgment’ (Foot 2001: 8).

Thirdly, it is realistic in insisting that real moral work—and so not only moral philosophy but also our personal struggles to better ourselves—must be centred on the human predicament as this manifests itself in everyday, non-fantastic, situations (rather than through reflection on thought-experiments that abstracts away all too much of this everydayness).

The metaphysics in question (by Mac Cumhaill, Wiseman and Dolezal 2017 labelled ‘depictivist metaphysics’) grew, at least partly, out of a dissatisfaction with the attempt by the analytical mainstream of the day to do away with metaphysics altogether. Against this mainstream the group argued that the elimination of metaphysics would lead to an impoverishment of a creative area of human thought in terms of conceptual exploration and the construction of heuristic images of human life. This idea naturally takes on slightly different guises in the varied writings of the member of the group and it might therefore be useful to provide some illustrative examples before we go on to highlight the commonalities that form the core of the kind of ‘depictivism’ that the group envisages.

The utilisation of everyday examples—such as *e.g.*, the use of a shopping list (Anscombe 1957: §32)—in order to highlight the perplexing underlying order of our encounter with the world can be said to be a hallmark of Anscombe’s philosophy in its entirety. Perhaps her 1958 article ‘On Brute Facts’ (Anscombe 1958b) can serve as an illustrative example. The article starts off with a description of an everyday event coupled with an account of what a Humean might say about it:

Following Hume I might say to my grocer: “Truth consists in agreement either to relations of ideas, as that twenty shillings make a pound, or to matters of fact, as that you have delivered me a quarter of potatoes; from this you can see that the term does not apply to such a proposition as that I owe you so much for the potatoes. You really must not jump from an “is”—as, that it really is the case that I asked for the potatoes and that you delivered them and sent me a bill—to an “owes”” (Anscombe 1958b: 69).

Anscombe’s point is not just that the Humean story here comes close to nonsense, or that in pondering the case at hand we realise that some facts, such as that the customer owes the grocer for the potatoes, cannot be reduced without reminder to other facts (such as *e.g.*, that the customer asked for the potatoes, that the grocer supplied them with the potatoes, *etc.*) because all of them might, as the example goes on to illustrate, be acted out as part of a scripted performance for a motion picture (there can always be special circumstances that alter whatever range we establish using paradigmatic examples). Even if the constitutional context is taken into account, Anscombe argues, it does not necessarily follow that a particular set of facts holding true in an institutional context entail the fact brute relative to it. Furthermore, I take it, the example—in allegedly, at least, breaching the ‘is-ought-gap’—shows that many common everyday inferences are made naturally in a manner that appears valid but is difficult to explain for anyone who insists upon a neat separation of ‘facts’ and ‘values’. For those—like the members of the

Somerville school—who understand many (if not all) everyday (incomplete and therefore ever perfectible) conceptualisations of mundane situations as defying bifurcation into neatly separable evaluative and descriptive components the example is straightforward yet such that it calls for continued philosophical scrutiny of our ways of conceptualising our interactions with the world around us. In a similar manner Mary Midgley has spent the majority of her long career as a philosopher explicating the notion of a ‘myth’, and how myths have the potential to restrict or enrich our moral thinking and much of Philippa Foot’s work centres on the idea that philosophical attention to biological species, and other natural-kind terms, can be normative-descriptive when viewed in a practical ordinary setting.

Murdoch’s philosophy is, as we shall see, loaded with images to the point that much of her philosophy—indeed her philosophy in its entirety—can be described as extended reflections on Plato’s Simile of the Sun (and Fire) (Pl. *Rep.* 507b-509c), Allegory of the Cave (Pl. *Rep.* 514a–520a), and Analogy of the Divided Line (Pl. *Rep.* 509d–511e). In addition, Murdoch’s famous example of a mother-in-law who comes to change her perception of her daughter-in-law, which we will discuss at length in Chapter 2, is a prime example of the kind of ‘depictivism’ that the group engages in. In fact, in the essay ‘Metaphysics and ethics’ (1957a) Murdoch provides a definition of sorts of what she understands as the aim of what I have here called depictivist metaphysics when applied to ‘man’ and morality. The idea is that a form of theorizing, *i.e.* a metaphysics, that concerns itself with our use of concepts, schema, myths, and metaphors in order to describe and analyse our moral experience is needed (see *e.g.*, Antonaccio 2012a: esp. 61-62, 84-85). To do away with such efforts, which, to a certain extent the then-contemporary mainstream sought to do, would leave us impoverished:

I think that it still remains for us to find a satisfactory method for the explanation of our own morality and that of others—but I think 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 (Murdoch 1957a: 122-123/75).

Even if Murdoch and Midgley are the members of the group that are most commonly associated with the idea that myths, allegories and images are central to the philosophical enterprise the same idea can, I maintain, be found in the other member of the group as well. So, in spite of their numerous differences the attempts made by the members of the Somerville School are unified in recognising the centrality of myths, pictures, similes, and images in structuring our thinking

about the world that we inhabit. In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch puts the point thus:

Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision. Philosophy in general, and moral philosophy particular, has in the past often concerned itself with what it took to be our most important images, clarifying existing ones and developing new ones. [...] [I]t seems to me impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without resort to metaphor, since the concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance (Murdoch 1970: 77/363).

Closely connected to the acceptance of the centrality of such pictorial activity is the idea that such pictures—since they constrain the possibilities of perception (and therefore also action, imagination, and self-perception)—are not ethically neutral. This idea gives rise to a conception of metaphysics as theorizing about inhabited reality and about human beings as creatures that make use of concepts, images, explanatory schema, myths and metaphors to describe and illuminate their moral existence (on this see also Antonaccio 2012a: esp. 83-84). Metaphysics, so understood, both generates and evaluates these explanatory schemata. Murdoch puts the point thus:

The difficulty is, and here we are after all not so very far from the philosophers of the past, that the subject of investigation is the nature of man—and we are studying this nature at a point of great conceptual sensibility. Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture. This is the process which moral philosophy must attempt to describe and analyse (Murdoch 1957a: 122/75).

This conception of metaphysics, which encompasses both a method and kind of metaphysical stance that emerges from it, emphasises how we, as human beings embedded in a particular place in time (with all that this brings with it in terms of habituation and education tied to social and linguistic practices and so on), rely upon and are immersed in myths and narratives in our efforts to make sense of our lives and the world around us whilst still seeing us as capable of analysing and evaluating these myths and narratives. We are thus, on this way of seeing things, not simply determined by our own conceptual schemata but capable of self-interpretation in a way that allows us to reflect upon these schemata as a means towards moral reflection and improvement. This realisation naturally brings with it a concern for what has, in later philosophical discourse, been designated as ‘thick

concepts', and we shall return to the issues surrounding what Murdoch prefers to talk about as 'normative-descriptive words' (Murdoch 1970: 41/333) in what follows.

Out of the collective, or joint, 'No!' that Midgley spoke of in the quote above the members of the Somerville School developed an oppositional program that clashed not only with the group's immediate forerunners—such as Ayer and Ryle—but also with the orthodoxy that was to follow them, exemplified by leading figures such as Richard Mervyn Hare and others. This new Oxford orthodoxy built upon the mainstream analytic philosophy (influenced by the logical positivists) that preceded it—by, for instance, strict observance of the 'fact-value' distinction—and developed a research program and an accompanying methodology that is still with us (albeit with a few important modifications) to this day. There is certainly something attractive in the stressing of individual responsibility for one's values and commitments that forms a central element of both Sartrean existentialism and post-war analytic non-cognitivism as this is explored by *e.g.*, R. M. Hare (1963), and Allan Gibbard (1990). What the member of the Somerville School objected to here was that this emphasis on choice, will, and responsibility, all too often, on their reading of their adversaries, took the form of an unrealistically romantic understanding of the human rational agent as someone who creates his values from scratch without reference to the surrounding world. In opposition to this the members of the Somerville School latched on to the realisation that certain stances were indeed simply wrong and must thus be matters of discovery rather than expressions of will (as well as subject to rational argument).

Against the Oxford orthodoxy the Somerville School adhered to a set of theses that often took the form of a negation of the orthodoxy. So, for example, Murdoch, in her 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956a) argues, among other things, against the then prevalent (and still widely accepted) idea—above all associated with R. M. Hare—that 'a moral judgment, as opposed to a whim or taste preference, is one which is supported by reasons held by the agent to be valid for all others placed as he is, and which involve the objective specification of the situation in terms of facts available to disinterested scrutiny' (Murdoch 1956a: 34/77) by arguing that it is not always possible to describe the situation in such terms since our moral concepts—and therefore our understanding of our moral reality—are subject to (increasing) idiosyncrasy (on this particular argument and its contemporary importance see Hopwood 2017).

Common to all the members is a stressing of ethics as dependent upon human nature understood as a substantial notion that requires for its investigation a

metaphysics of the person informed by biological and anthropological factors and not just abstract notions of rationality. Murdoch puts the point thus:

The examination [*i.e.* the examination conducted by moral philosophers] should be realistic. Human nature, as opposed to the natures of other hypothetical spiritual beings, has certain discoverable attributes, and these should be suitably considered in any discussion of morality (Murdoch 1970: 78/363-364).

This stressing of human nature leads to a scepticism concerning abstractions in favour of a turn towards the particular and the specifically human. This turn towards the particular leads not just to the rejection of thought experiments designed to pump intuitions in cases far removed from everyday experience and human physical possibilities but also to a broader emphasis on what is realistic which we saw above was expressed through the metaphysical methodology of the group. This concern for what is specifically human also leads to an emphasis, as we also saw above, on notions such as myths, pictures, similes, and images and how these play a central role in our thinking about ourselves and our place in the world that we inhabit. The emphasis on myths, pictures, and anecdotes as structuring our thought about the world leads to a realisation that these encompass ways of looking at the world which are not ethically neutral since they constrain our possibilities for (self-) perception, action, and imagination. This stressing of myths leads, again, as we saw above, to an interest in ‘thick concepts’, ‘normative-descriptive words’, or ‘lifeworld’ concepts including virtue and vice terms and concepts as well as a rejection of non-cognitivism in ethics and the ‘fact-value’ distinction.

Armed with this background, it is now time to start to focus in on Murdoch’s contribution to the research programme developed by the Somerville School, beginning with her influences.

1.2 Murdoch’s Influences and Legacy

In order to get a firmer grip on Murdoch’s distinctive take on moral philosophy I think that it is essential to pay close attention to how her views develop out of an eclectic collection of influences that include Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Francis Herbert Bradley, Simone Weil, Aristotle, and most importantly Plato. Untangling this intricate web of influences will take up a substantial portion of what is to follow.

Yet, this being said, it is important to keep in mind that while Murdoch certainly owes a great deal to the above-mentioned thinkers she is still a highly original contributor in her own right. This means that relatively little time (in actuality next to none) will be spent on evaluating whether Murdoch's interpretations of her influences are correct or not. The reason for this is simple enough: it matters little for our understanding of Murdoch's thought whether her take on, say, Wittgenstein's controversial so-called 'private language argument' constitutes a reasonable interpretation of said argument. In general, quite the opposite can arguably be said to be the case as Murdoch's interpretations are—as we might well expect from such an original thinker—frequently controversial.

From Hegel Murdoch gathers both an emphasis on the importance of the historical dimension of 'doing' philosophy as well as an understanding of conceptual work:

If we think of conceptualising rather as the activity of grasping, or reducing to order, our situations with the help of a language which is fundamentally metaphorical, this will operate against the world-language dualism which haunts us because we are afraid of the idealists (Murdoch 1951: 33/40).

As is plain to see, this understanding of 'conceptualising' fits well with the depictivist metaphysics developed by the Somerville School. In addition, Murdoch sees this as a source for a simple and direct form of realism (on this see Broackes 2012: 17). We shall get back to these Hegelian influences throughout this book.

From Kant Murdoch gets the notion of a 'necessary regulative idea' (Murdoch 1951: 31/39; *cf.* Kant *KrV*. *Ak.* A3/B7; A822/B850) and the notion of the 'Sublime', which she makes into an intricate hub of her aesthetics.

Even though she disagrees with his conception of aesthetic theorising, Murdoch draws on Tolstoy's moralistic aesthetics in responding to Plato's criticism of (mimetic) art.

Kant, Hegel, and Tolstoy will all have prominent roles to play as Murdoch works her way towards a full aesthetics, and we will therefore have occasion to return to their respective influences on Murdoch's thought in Chapter 5.

From Wittgenstein Murdoch, together with the other members of the Somerville School, gathers an emphasis on the phenomena, or 'what we would like to say', as datum for the philosopher, rather than constraints upon philosophy, when trying to adopt a realistic attitude in philosophy (which requires a substantive account of human nature). Mary Midgley recalls:

I said that I thought that Plato was actually right about the Forms—there did have to be Goodness Itself and the Man Himself behind the particular examples of men and goodness. ‘Yes, said Elizabeth [Anscombe], but then we have to ask, what does this mean? What sort of behindness is it? What are we saying if we say that they are all there...?’ [...] Elizabeth was not being in the least destructive in asking these questions. Her approach was as far as possible from standard triumphant ‘But what could that possibly *mean*?’ which was the parrot cry of brisk young men who had picked up enough logical positivism to be sure already that it couldn’t mean anything. She could see that it did mean something—Plato wasn’t just being foolish—but it was still very hard to say just what (Midgley 2005a: 115).

This approach which, as we shall see, has several things in common with Aristotle is something that we shall return to in §2.1.

Murdoch first encountered the ideas of Martin Heidegger in her early twenties. She mentions him in numerous letters during the late 1940’s, *e.g.*, to David Hicks in October 1945 (reprinted in Conradi 2009: 245) and 14 September 1946 (reprinted in Horner and Rowe 2015: 81-82), to Raymond Queneau dated 2 June 1946 (reprinted in Horner and Rowe 2015: 71-74), and to Hal Lidderdale late spring 1948 (reprinted, with an illustration, in Horner and Rowe 2015: 108-109) and was lent *Sein und Zeit* by Gilbert Ryle (who had reviewed the book in 1929) in March 1949 (Broackes 2012: 111). In Heidegger, whose work is the subject of Murdoch’s last uncompleted manuscript (part of which is reprinted together with an editorial note in Broackes 2012: 93-114), Murdoch finds an impetus towards raising questions ‘especially important now in our newly sceptical age, about metaphysics, empiricism, and the place of moral philosophy, and of religion’ (Murdoch 2012: 93) in a way that interconnects these seemingly various and separable concerns. She also sees him as one among a number of thinkers that offer an alternative to contemporary orthodox analytical philosophy, even if offering such an alternative leads to scepticism from one’s peers:

Would one rather be damned with Schopenhauer, Bradley, Collingwood, and Simone Weil, than saved with Prichard, Ross, Hare, Toulmin, Rorty, and Parfit (Murdoch 2012: 94)?

Heidegger is also seen as embarking upon an early resurrection of the idea that the inner life in all its glory is worthy of philosophical attention. Murdoch quotes the following passage from *Being and Time*:

[T]he basic ontological interpretation of the affective life in general has been able to make scarcely one forward step worthy of mention since Aristotle. On the contrary, affects and feelings come under the theme of psychological phenomena,

functioning as a third class of these, usually along with ideation and volition. They sink to the level of accompanying phenomena (Heidegger 1962: 178/139).

Yet Murdoch finds trouble looming in Heidegger's treatment of both the interconnectedness of ethics with other areas of inquiry and the inner life because 'Heidegger here [*i.e.* in the paragraph just quoted and in its accompanying footnote which quotes both Pascal and St. Augustine] notices, and at once abandons, an idea of immense importance, that of the moral content of cognition and the ubiquity of evaluation' (Murdoch 2012: 97).

Murdoch finds a better suited source of inspiration for the treatment of the ubiquity of morality in F. H. Bradley's *Ethical Studies* (1927). F. H. Bradley's thought seems to have exercised a direct influence on Murdoch. His name is mentioned in the research description she included in her application for a Lectureship at Oxford in 1950 (Broackes 2012: 10n26), a course she gave there in the Trinity term of 1952 is entitled 'Some Problems in Bradley' (Broackes 2012: 5), and she mentions him approvingly (albeit in passing) repeatedly (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1992: 42, 150, 488-491; 2012: 94; *cf.* also 1970: 29/311 and the mention of 'concrete universals', although see Antonaccio 2012a: 171). The kind of (re)conceptualization of morality that Murdoch and her fellow members of the Somerville School rebel against originated in large part with Henry Sidgwick's (1907: esp. 91ff., 374-379) dismissal of the self-realisationism of Bradley (1927) and Green (1883) together with ancient ethics as a whole on the grounds of indefiniteness and was continued by logical positivists that saw the kind of ethics that Bradley advocated as hopelessly metaphysical in nature. He therefore stands as a central rallying-point for the recovery of alternative routes of inquiry in the climate that the Somerville School sought to rebel against. More than that, however, Bradley also provides Murdoch with the means to question the customary delineation of the sphere of the moral since understanding the moral perspective, 'the consciousness of a moral ideal' (Green 1883: §8), or 'the moral point of view' (Bradley 1927: 58) are central tasks for both Bradley and T. H. Green.³ We will return to these issues in the next chapter.

³ Bradley's *Ethical Studies* (1927) remains—besides T. H. Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883)—one of the most influential (*cf. e.g.*, Irwin 2009: 537, §1210) statements of self-realisationism; an ethical theory that identifies self-realisation as the primary aim of morality. The regrettably cumbersome term 'self-realisationism' has by now gained widespread acceptance. Green uses both 'self-satisfaction' and 'self-realisation' (*e.g.*, Green 1883: §§175-176) whereas Bradley prefers the second (*e.g.*, Bradley 1927: 66). (It is difficult to assess temporal priority and mutual influence between the two views as the first edition of *Ethical Studies* appeared in 1876 while *Prolegomena to Ethics* first saw print in 1883 but was based on lectures held from 1877 onwards. On this see *e.g.*, Irwin 2009: §1212 esp. n18).

Even more important than Bradley for the development of Murdoch's thought is the influence of Simone Weil (on this see Byatt 1965; Griffin 1993; Larson 2009; 2014; Lovibond 2011: esp. 28-46; Broackes 2012: esp. 18-21, 33, 34-35; Hämäläinen 2016a: esp. 133-135). In a letter to Gabriele Griffin 1 September 1988 Murdoch describes her initial encounter with Weil—in 1949, when Weil's works were posthumously published (on this see Larson 2014: 153)—as 'total love at first sight'.⁴ Murdoch (1956b) later reviewed *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* under the title 'Knowing the Void' for *The Spectator* in November 1956 (reprinted in Conradi 1997: 157-160; on this see Broackes 2012: 19-20). In Weil Murdoch finds a fuller elaboration of 'the moral content of cognition and the ubiquity of evaluation' that was lacking in Heidegger. It is also through Weil's influence that Murdoch's philosophy takes on a distinctive Platonic turn (with all that that encompasses in terms of Weilian mysticism). Most strikingly, however, Murdoch adopts two concepts, 'attention', and 'unselfing', from Weil. 'Attention' (first mentioned in Murdoch's 'Against Dryness' (1961)) becomes, as Murdoch progressively works through this concept in *The Sovereignty of Good*, a vessel for taking seriously the 'the moral content of cognition and the ubiquity of evaluation' by bringing emphasis to the need for constant revision of our understanding of the world in order for us to fully understand the other. For Murdoch, 'unselfing' (*decreasion* in Weil's terminology) similarly becomes increasingly associated with Plato as a moral ideal as well as a continuous activity closely connected to attention. Even though Murdoch on occasion acknowledges her debts to Weil her only real exposition of Weil's thought is to be found in the above-mentioned review of *The Notebooks*. Murdoch often (*e.g.*, 1970: 33/327, 39/331-332, 55-56/340, 99/385) mentions and cites Weil without referencing a source but when she does (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1992: 52-54, 101-102, 247, 368, 401, 425, 505) it is almost invariably *The Notebooks*.

In no small part through Weil's influence, Murdoch began, in the late 1950's and early 60's, down an increasingly Platonic path. By the publication of 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts' (1967) Murdoch famously explicitly professed to be fighting under Plato's banner (Murdoch 1970: 78/364). With this turn towards Plato comes an increased interest for the concept of love, an understanding of perception as morally loaded (on this see esp. Ch. 2), and an emphasis on the virtues (understood as skills (on this see §4.3)).

⁴ As Larson 2014: 166n1 points out, Murdoch seems to have written two letters to Griffin (8 May 1988 and 1 September 1988, respectively) and Griffin does not specify which one this quote is from. Neither of the letters are reprinted in Horner and Rowe 2015 as the letters appear not to be in the Iris Murdoch Archives kept by Kingston University, London.

Murdoch's influence on contemporary moral philosophy can be said to fall within four broad categories.

Firstly, her work is often acknowledged as central part of a series of hugely influential works in the 1950's, 60's and 70's (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1951, 1959a, 1959b, 1970; Ryle 1966; Cavell 1969; Winch 1972) which laid the groundwork for a string of thinkers—many of whom are represented in a seminal issue of *New Literary History* 5(1) in 1983, dedicated to the relationship between moral philosophy and literature—in the 1980s and 90s (such as *e.g.*, Nussbaum 1990; Diamond 1991; Murdoch 1992; McGinn 1997) that focused on the relationship between literature and morality. This latter group made such an impact that talk of a 'literary turn' is warranted (*cf.* Harpham 1992: 159; Antonaccio 2001: 311; Hämäläinen 2016a). Similar movements can also be discerned in the fields of political and social philosophy (*e.g.*, Rorty 1989; Walzer 1987) as well as in the philosophy of law (*e.g.*, White 1973, Dworkin 1985: 119-177, 1982). At the same time as these philosophers produced pioneering work a corresponding movement (comprising thinkers such as *e.g.*, Booth 1988; Goldberg 1993; Parker 1994, Newton 1995), usually labelled the 'ethical turn', within the field of literary theory and criticism argued for ethical criticism against the background of feminist-, postcolonial- and neo-Marxist criticism. Besides being a central figure in all of these movements Murdoch, perhaps *the* most prominent early proponent of the literary turn (*cf.* Antonaccio 2001; 2012a: 74-97; Hämäläinen 2016a: 152-183; Broackes 2012: 1-92), provided, through her novels, plenty of raw-material for critics belonging to the ethical turn (*cf. e.g.*, Byatt 1965; Dipple 1982; Conradi 1986; Gordon 1995).

Secondly, Murdoch's central role in ethical theory—especially among moral *particularists*—has, until relatively recently (*cf. e.g.*, Antonaccio 2012a: 155-159; Broackes 2012: esp. 7, 17-19; Millgram 2005: Ch. 5; Setiya 2013: 1-2; Hämäläinen 2016a: esp. 30-31, 156-159; Blum 1994), seldom been acknowledged. Particularism, the modern incarnation of 'situationism' or 'situation ethics' (*cf.* Millgram 2005: 168), is a movement in contemporary ethics that questions the possibility of codifying morality, usually basing this scepticism on the idea that what counts as a reason for a course of action in one set of circumstances need not do so (or might even speak against the action in question) on others (although the connection between the first and second thesis has been disputed (McKeever and Ridge 2005)). Leading particularists include Jonathan Dancy (2004), Margaret Little (2000), David McNaughton (1988: esp. 62, Ch. 13) and John McDowell (1998: esp. Ch. 3), although it is not clear whether McDowell self-identifies with the movement. McNaughton (1988: ix) gives extensive credit to Dancy and McDowell but refers to Murdoch only once

(McNaughton 1988: 65) in a section entitled ‘Further Reading’. McDowell only mentions her three times in a relatively early work (1979: 350nn35-37).⁵ This failure by the philosophical mainstream to acknowledge Murdoch as a main contender is—to my mind—unfortunate not only because credit should be given where credit is due or because Murdoch’s take on practical reasoning might serve as a fruitful environment for particularism (*cf.* Millgram 2005: Ch. 5 esp. § 8) but because what she offers is one of the most plausible, interesting, and fruitful systematic treatments of ethics available. Although many of the pioneers of the particularist movement drew extensively on Murdoch I do not think that she herself should be considered a particularist, at least not as this problematic label is usually applied today. We shall get back to this issue in Chapter 4.

Thirdly, Murdoch is, together with the other members of the Somerville School, a central figure in the revival of Greek ethics in the twentieth century. In particular, Murdoch stands out as one of the first theoreticians to pay extensive attention to the so-called ‘skill-model of virtue’. The idea that the virtues are, or can be fruitfully compared to, practical skills has had a tremendous revival in recent years and we will turn our attention to this in §4.3.

Fourthly, Murdoch has had a notable influence on contemporary defenders of moral realism, particularly of a non-reductionist naturalist variety (such as *e.g.*, Foot 2001; Putnam 1990; McDowell 1979; 1995a; Blum 1994). Murdoch’s realism is the focus of §2.5.

With this more general background established it is time, in the next section, to give a short presentation of the main works by Murdoch that shall be our focus in what follows.

1.3 An Outline of *The Sovereignty of Good*

The primary source material that we shall be concerned with in the next four chapters splits rather neatly into two groups of texts. Chapters 2 through 4 are concerned with Murdoch’s moral philosophy as this manifests itself in the collection of papers that was later published as *The Sovereignty of Good*. Chapter 5, on the other hand deals with Murdoch’s aesthetics and as such is chiefly concerned with three articles—‘The Sublime and the Good’ (1959a), ‘The

⁵ On the sparsity of references to Murdoch in McDowell’s work see Broackes 2012: 18-19; *cf.* 7, 11-12, 15-18, 26, 42, 83; Millgram 2002, 2005: esp. Ch. 5, 168n3; see also Hämäläinen 2016a: 156-159.

Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959b), and 'Against Dryness' (1961)—that deal with aesthetics, art (above all literature), and their relation to ethics. Just as Murdoch's treatment of ethics takes the form of a meditation on Plato's the Simile of the Sun (Pl. *Rep.* 507b-509c), the Allegory of the Cave (Pl. *Rep.* 514a–520a), and the Analogy of the Divided Line (Pl. *Rep.* 509d–511e), her treatment of aesthetics takes the form of a similar meditation on, and reaction to, Plato's view of art. Given this Murdoch's *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Poets* (1977) will have an important role to play in Chapter 5 (and §5.2 in particular).

Even though these texts do split up along a rather conventional divide between morality and aesthetics, at least on the surface level, Murdoch's distinctive take on both subjects bring them, as we shall see in Chapter 5 (and in §5.5 in particular), rather closely together. There is also a clear connection between all these texts since Murdoch's ultimate reply to Plato's criticism of art in *The Fire and the Sun* (Murdoch 1977:76-89/ 453-463) constitutes an expansion upon ideas already at work in *The Sovereignty of Good* (esp. Murdoch 1970: 87-88/371-372) which in turn builds upon the bridging of the gap between art, beauty, truth and morals that Murdoch launched in the earlier essays on aesthetics (Murdoch 1959a; 1959b; 1961). Read in this way, the texts that shall be our primary concern in what follows forms a unified project which aims to establish as credible and attractive a form of Platonic perfectionism that, *pace* Plato (see Murdoch 1977: 65-72/443-449), allows great art to function as one important way to aid in a distinctively religious conception of life (*cf.* Broackes 2012: 83; §5.2 below).

This way of focusing on the development of Murdoch's ethics and aesthetics from the 1950's through the 60's and 70's makes her last major philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), less central for our concerns. Although I do, on occasion, draw on this work for comparison, I find it less accessible than the works that shall be our primary concern here (although see *e.g.*, Antonacchio 2012a: 6-7; Mulhall 1997). It is also the case that *The Sovereignty of Good* is much more influential than *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (even though we have seen a growing appreciation for the latter work in recent years; *cf. e.g.*, Broackes 2012: 83-88; Antonacchio 2012b). In addition, even though *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* deals, among many other things, with the connection between art and morality (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1992: 1-25, 80-90, 308-348) this theme is much less pronounced here than elsewhere (and in particular in the texts that shall be our main focus). This is obviously not a flaw in and of itself, especially considering that the main aim of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, as far as I understand it, is to provide a kind of transcendental argument for the reality

of Good (on transcendental arguments in Murdoch and Charles Taylor see Martinuk 2014). Such a project is less obviously serviced by reflection on art compared to the investigation into moral development, which is the central concern, or at least a central concern, of *The Sovereignty of Good*. This is not to say, of course, that the themes that shall be our main concern here—*i.e.* art (above all literature) and its connection to moral perfection (and development)—are in any way absent from *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Art does play a role in Murdoch's central argument (see *e.g.*, Murdoch 1992: 250) and she maintains that the 'whole argument can be read as moral philosophy' (Murdoch 1992: 480) since the ultimate point of the argument for the Good is to establish a framework for a practical morality (see Murdoch 1992: esp. 292-391, 492-504). So, while a fuller comparison between Murdoch's aesthetics and moral philosophy as it manifests itself in her writings from the 1950's, 60's, and 70's and the same themes as they are revisited in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* would be very interesting, this is not the aim of the current volume. It has thus seemed to me more profitable in light of the main concerns of this work to focus on Murdoch's work in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's than to include extended reflection on, and comparison with, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* as well.

Since Chapters 2 through 4 are primarily concerned with *The Sovereignty of Good* I will limit myself to a more detailed discussion of that work here and leave the corresponding work relating to Murdoch's papers on aesthetics and *The Fire and The Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* to Chapter 5 (§§ 5.2 and 5.4, respectively).

Before we get to a more in-depth analysis and explication of Murdoch's approach to moral philosophy and how it relates to a larger philosophical tradition it will be useful to establish a rough outline of the aims, purposes, and major themes of *The Sovereignty of Good* as a whole and to give a schematic account of the kind of ethical theory—*i.e.* moral perfectionism—that Murdoch's distinctive take on ethical theory is an example of (in § 1.5). I start with giving a rough outline, in the form of an analytical table of contents, of the book before I move on to give a schematic account of perfectionism coupled with some illustrative examples. This will take some time but is, I think, useful both for organizing the expositional discussion of Murdoch's work that is to follow and for locating Murdoch in a broader context in terms of a tradition of ethical theorizing. Those readers that are familiar with Murdoch's works can skip, or just give a cursory glance at, the analytical tables given below.

The Sovereignty of Good is comprised of three previously published essays that were all originally given as lectures:

- (i) ‘The Idea of Perfection’ (presented as the Ballard Mathews Lecture at University College, North Wales, in 1962 and published in *Yale Review* 1964),
- (ii) ‘On “God” and “Good”’ (presented at the Study Group on the Foundations of Cultural Unity, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, in 1966 and first published in their proceedings report *The Autonomy of Knowledge* in 1969), and,
- (iii) ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’ (presented and published as the Leslie Stephen Lecture, University of Cambridge, in 1967).

Taken together these essays constitute not only a sustained attack upon ‘modern moral philosophy’ and its adjacent ‘moral psychology’ (Murdoch 1970: 4/301-302, 10/306, 41/332) but also (the outlines of) a compelling and interesting alternative that I think, Murdoch’s insistence to the contrary, makes for more than just ‘a footnote in a great and familiar philosophical tradition’ (Murdoch 1970: 45/336).⁶

As Justin Broackes (2012: 36n77) notes the phrases ‘modern moral philosophy’ and ‘moral psychology’ have become especially associated with Murdoch’s close friend and fellow Somerville School member Elizabeth Anscombe. Broackes also notes that Anscombe never uses the latter phrase in either her ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ (1958) or her *Intention* (1957), preferring instead to talk of the need for an ‘adequate philosophy of psychology’ (Anscombe 1958a: 1). The phrase ‘modern moral philosophy’ as a term for an object of attack became famous following Anscombe’s 1958 article bearing the phrase as its title and Murdoch’s use of the phrase in *The Sovereignty of Good* (at Murdoch 1970: 4/302) is obviously later (but note that she also uses the phrase in Murdoch 1957a: 106/64 and talks of ‘modern ethics’ and ‘certain modern philosophers’ in Murdoch 1956a: 38/79, 42n/83n). In addition, Broackes (2012: 36-37n77) convincingly argues that the problems Murdoch is engaged with—*i.e.* the scientific worldview’s ties to the fact-value distinction, Romanticism’s metaphysics of the person, *etc.* are more distinctly tied to modernity than what is the case with Anscombe’s concerns with legalistic conceptions of morality (Anscombe 1958a), which can arguably be traced back to pre-modern ideas expressed for example in the Jewish, Christian, and Stoic traditions (*cf.* Diamond

⁶ Murdoch’s talk of a footnote is, I take it, a nod to Alfred North Whitehead’s famous characterization of the European philosophical tradition as ‘a series of footnotes to Plato’ (Whitehead 1929: Pt. 1, Ch.1 §1) and thereby a gesture towards the Platonic turn her philosophy had already taken in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ and that would, as we shall see, deepen in subsequent work. Whitehead’s remark is discussed in Murdoch 1977: 78/454.

1988; Crisp 2004). Anscombe argues, at least if we read the article in the customary way (on this see Driver 2014), that secular modern moral philosophy relying on deontic notions should be abandoned because the deontic notions relied upon cannot be sustained in the absence of a divine lawgiver. In its stead Anscombe advocates a return to Aristotelian ethics which avoids these issues given its reliance on aretaic notions (even if Anscombe confesses to some doubts concerning whether the required philosophy of psychology really can be established and whether the notion of *eudaimonia* really can be given a satisfactory explication). It is doubtful whether Aristotelian ethics really is as free from deontic notions as Anscombe's argument—which has a forerunner in Schopenhauer (1995) and a subsequent in MacIntyre (1985: Ch. 1; on this see Crisp 2004)—so understood would require (on this see Crisp 2004).

The aim of 'The Idea of Perfection'—whose title refers to the thesis that practical thought (and knowledge of practical concepts) is 'infinitely perfectible' (Murdoch 1970: 23/317)—is twofold.

Firstly, Murdoch argues against the 'picture of "the man" of modern moral philosophy' (Murdoch 1970: 4/302). According to this picture, Murdoch argues—using Stuart Hampshire's *Thought and Action* (1959) as an example since it is 'without commanding universal agreement fairly central and typical' (Murdoch 1970: 4/302)—, the moral life is seen as centred around overt actions that are real in virtue of satisfying a scientific criterion of interpersonal public observability which leaves the 'inner' parasitic on the 'outer' (in a way that makes the view a consequence of the acceptance of Wittgenstein's attack on 'private mental terms' (Murdoch 1970: 4-8/302-305)). This picture of humanity Murdoch takes, to borrow a phrase from John McDowell, to generate a construal of the relation between 'mind and world' (McDowell 1994). Murdoch argues against this conception on the grounds that it goes against 'what we are irresistibly inclined to say' (Murdoch 1970: 16/312) about cases such as her famous example of a mother that changes her view of her daughter-in-law (see esp. §§2.4-2.6).

Secondly, Murdoch argues that the alternative picture she outlines—on which the continuous work of loving and just attention plays a much larger role than overt choices—better can account for the phenomena, by integrating 'the moral and the ordinary empirical aspects of our existence within a single largely-inclusive world' (Broackes 2012: 48), than either Humean moral philosophy's belief-desire psychology and value-free world or (neo-)Kantian (constructivist) approaches that make value out to be in a sense projected rather than found. Put in another way, the main problems Murdoch sees with alternative views can thus be said to be that they constitute dualistic takes on the metaphysics of the person (either by separating belief from desire or will from impersonal mechanism) and that their

associated axiology cannot properly accommodate our experience of value as a real feature of the world that is discovered. What Murdoch proposes is instead a unified conception of human agency and man as ‘a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision’ (Murdoch 1970: 40/332; cf. Broackes 2012: 8-9 esp. n23). All of this, of course, constitutes a way of working through the ideas formulated by the Somerville School. Early on in the work Murdoch states that:

[I]n this understanding of it, philosophy of mind is the background to moral philosophy; and in so far as modern ethics tends to constitute a sort of Newspeak [*i.e.* the ideologically motivated restricted official language of Oceania, the fictional dictatorial state in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), designed to suit the needs of English socialism (Ingsoc) and make criticism of that ideological system inexpressible (at least in so far as language is dependent upon thought (see Orwell 1949: appx.))] which makes certain values non-expressible, the reasons for this are to be sought in current philosophy of mind and in the fascinating power of a certain picture of the soul (Murdoch 1970: 3/300).

The central project of *The Sovereignty of Good* can be said to be to argue for the superiority of a rival soul-picture through meditations on Plato’s allegory of the cave and the understanding of our practical world and the concepts upon which it depends.

The essay can be divided into six parts:

- (i) An introduction calling for a (methodological) refocusing in moral philosophy from ‘theories’ to ‘facts’ (the ‘facts’ in question are primarily, in this instance, that ‘an unexamined life can be virtuous and the fact that love is a central concept in morals’ (Murdoch 1970: 1-2/229)) and the need for a challenging of modern moral philosophy’s tendency—despite its frequent claims to ‘neutrality’—to render certain values inexpressible due to its reliance on an unsatisfactory ‘moral psychology’ that needs to be replaced (Murdoch 1970: 1-4/229-304; on this see below). Here Murdoch also discusses the influence of George Edward Moore on modern (moral) philosophy (she seems to have in mind primarily Moore 1903). She declares that she will, in a sense, follow Moore himself rather than his later critics in accepting that ‘Good’ is a (unrepresentable, indefinable) quality that forms part of the world which makes the ‘quasi-aesthetic imagery of vision’ (Murdoch 1970: 3/301) apt for moral philosophy.

- (ii) A section providing a sketch of the dominant view of moral psychology (and its adjacent picture of ‘the man’ at Murdoch 1970:4-16/301-311).
- (iii) A section providing an initial presentation of Murdoch’s alternative view (16-23/311-318).
- (iv) A deepened analysis of the nature of moral and practical concepts and what distinguishes them from their scientific counterparts (Murdoch 1970: 23-34/318-327).
- (v) A run-through of how we, on this new picture, are better equipped to handle moral psychology and associated notions (such as ‘choice’, ‘freedom’, ‘will’, ‘reason’, and ‘the Good’) (34-42/327-334).
- (vi) Some final qualifications and clarifications concerning (a) the applicability limitations of Murdoch’s ‘general metaphysical background’ to particular moral acts, (b) the dangers of inflating the importance of ‘specialized and esoteric vision’ since a ‘[g]ive and take between the private and the public levels of morality is often of advantage to both and indeed normally unavoidable’ (Murdoch 1970: 43/334), (c) that Murdoch’s talk of ‘insight and pureness of heart’ (Murdoch 1970: 43/334) should not be taken as a devaluation of the importance of overt action, and (d) a reminder that the account given is explicitly normative (Murdoch 1970: 42-45/334-336).

‘We are not always’, Murdoch admits, ‘the individual in pursuit of the individual, we are not always responding to the magnetic pull of the idea of perfection. Often [...] we are just “anybody” doing what is proper or making simple choices for ordinary public reasons’ (Murdoch 1970: 43/334). I think that two distinct but related issues are at work in this passage. Firstly, I take it that what Murdoch is getting at here is, in part, a distinction between two ways—one reflective and one ordinary—in which we view our lives that is common in perfectionist thought. Julia Annas (1993: 27ff; 2011: 121ff) distinguishes between (broadly prudential) reflection regarding everyday goings-on on the one hand and the Socratic question ‘How ought I to live?’ (*cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 352d) on the other. It is reflection of the second sort that is taken by Annas to form ‘the entry point for ethical reflection’ and which sets ethical theorizing in motion (see also *e.g.*, the discussion in LeBar 2013: Ch. 1 which I take to be heavily influenced by Annas). Murdoch is thus here informing us that the kind of reflection that *The Sovereignty of Good* addresses is of this second sort. Secondly, Murdoch here asserts that intentional action need not be directed at outcomes regarded *sub specie boni*, *i.e.* under the guise of the good. We shall return to this issue (in §3.4) when discussing a general accusation

of egoism directed at the type of approach to moral philosophy Murdoch's theory is a token-instance of.

'On "God" and "Good"' further expands upon the diagnosis of the problematic state of 'modern moral philosophy', and in doing so reiterates and gives further support for some conclusions of 'The idea of Perfection' (esp. at Murdoch 1970: 66-71/354-358, which parallels and develops Murdoch 1970: 34-42/327-334). The title refers to the idea, argued for at Murdoch 1970: 54-66/344-354, that Christian ideas concerning prayer can be given a secular guise through the supplanting of 'loving attention to God' with the more Platonic idea of 'loving attention to the Good'. The supplanting is made possible given the close parallelism that Murdoch sees between Christian theology and morality: (i) just as God, in Christian theology is—above all in prayer—the object of loving attention (Murdoch 1970: 55/334) so we ought to think of (a naturalised reading of) the Platonic Form of the Good as an object of loving attention (see §2.3 below). (ii) In the same way as grace forms, again in Christian theology, 'a supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality' (Murdoch 1970: 55/344), it 'can be readily secularized' (Murdoch 1970: 63/351) so as to be understood as techniques aimed at reorienting 'energy which is naturally selfish' (Murdoch 1970: 54/344) into energy for good action. (iii) Just as grace, in Christian theology, saves us from our own sinful human nature, so its naturalised and secularised counterpart can be understood as the salvation from the modern counterpart to original sin (*i.e.* the understanding of 'the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy' (Murdoch 1970: 51/341)). Given these parallels it is possible, Murdoch argues, to resurrect a form of Platonism where loving attention to beauty—above all in (Great) art—can work as a spiritual exercise (*technê*) through 'the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real' (Murdoch 1970: 65/352) in a way that counteracts our tendency to escape into fantasy. This strategy is further explored towards the end of 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (Murdoch 1959b: 282-286) and *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Murdoch 1977: 65-73/443-449). The essay can be divided into four parts:

- (i) An introduction which reiterates the need for a moral philosophy that recognizes (certain) values as real and a moral psychology that connects the 'ego' with virtue (Murdoch 1970 46-54/337-344).
- (ii) A section that lays out the case for a parallelism between 'God' and 'Good' (Murdoch 1970: 54-66/344-354).
- (iii) A section detailing the outlines of Murdoch's proposed alternative to 'the man' of modern moral philosophy (Murdoch 1970: 66-71/354-358).

- (iv) A final section that seeks to establish intuitive plausibility of the account offered and still objections to the effect that this is an account only suitable for ‘an élite of mystics’ (Murdoch 1970: 73/360) as well as to establish the practical importance of Murdoch’s project (Murdoch 1970: 71-76/358-362).

‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’ argues, as its title suggests, that the notion of ‘the Good’—*pace* those that would want to substitute ‘freedom’, ‘courage’, or, ‘the will’ (Murdoch 1970: 80/336)—is central to morality and sovereign over all other concepts (*cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 509d). The primary object of attack in the paper is the metaphysics of the person stemming from Kant and the broader ‘romantic movement’ (Murdoch 1970: 82/367ff).

The ‘picture of “the man” of modern moral philosophy’ (Murdoch 1970: 4/302) that was the object of attack in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ is thus here presented as having its origin in a broader cultural and artistic movement stretching back (at least) two centuries. We will return to this analysis in Chapter 5, since an expansion upon it forms a central theme of all three of the essays that shall be our focus there (see §5.4; Murdoch 1959a 52-54/215-220, 1959b: 270-281; 1961: 16-17/287-289, 18/291). I must admit that I find the analysis both compelling and plausible. Also, while Murdoch sees ‘existentialism and the analytic philosophy of the present day’ as the most prominent heirs to these cultural ideas (and its adjacent metaphysics of the person) I think it is equally alive and well in today’s philosophical climate (and consequently that Murdoch’s critique is, by-and-large, as relevant today as when it was first put forward).

Through her discussion of ‘Romanticism’ Murdoch supplies a genealogy of sorts of the problems associated with ‘modern moral philosophy’ identified in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ and ‘On “God” and “Good”’. ‘Romanticism’, as Murdoch sees it, takes the individual to be the creator of value (through ‘choice’ and ‘will’). In its stead Murdoch wants to supplant a picture on which value is discovered by individuals (provided that they are not, through resorting to fantasy, neurosis, and, social convention, too preoccupied with the self). Following Plato, Murdoch sees ‘the Good’ as indefinable and as unifying our practical world and the concepts upon which it depends. The notion of a ‘practical world’ I understand as denoting the interrelated network of concept(ualisation)s that make up the ‘cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men live by’ (Murdoch 1957a: 122/74-75) subject to historical (see Murdoch 1970: 26/319-320) and personal (in the sense of being idiosyncratic) change and thus different from ‘the world described by science’ (Murdoch 1970: 26/320). This conceptualism (see §2.4) taken together with a Platonic emphasis on the virtues as analogous to

practical skills (on this see §4.3) leads to special emphasis on virtues involved in accurate perception.

We can cultivate these virtues, Murdoch suggests, through attention to the Arts and other intellectual disciplines (and we shall return to this idea in §§4.2, 4.3 and Chapter 5). The essay can be divided into five parts:

- (i) An introduction (Murdoch 1970: 77-79/363-364) which establishes, in turn, (a) the importance of metaphors for moral philosophy on the grounds that certain central concepts ‘are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance’ (Murdoch 1970: 77/363)⁷, (b) that ‘[m]oral philosophy cannot avoid taking sides’ (Murdoch 1970: 78/363)—*i.e.* be normative—, and (c) that we therefore ‘should commend a worthy ideal’ (Murdoch 1970: 77/363) which is building on a realistic account of human nature in order to answer the question ‘How can we make ourselves better?’ (Murdoch 1970: 77/363).⁸ The answer to this question will later (*i.e.* at esp. Murdoch 1970: 84-88/369-373) turn out to be something along the lines of ‘Through the acquisition and cultivation of the virtues through the study of beauty and the Arts (*technai*)’.
- (ii) A section dealing with the post-Kantian (spanning Nietzsche and the existentialists as well as (then-)contemporary analytic philosophy) romanticist conception of the person as a ‘creator of value’ and Murdoch’s proposed alternative (Murdoch 1970: 79-84/365-369) which she sees as more in tune both with modern psychology, preconceptions of the ‘ordinary man’ and religious thought (Murdoch 1970: 83/368).
- (iii) A section that argues that lessons learned concerning the workings of virtue from (the contemplation of) beauty and the arts (*technai*) carries over to morality (Murdoch 1970: 84-92/369-374).⁹

⁷ Murdoch has Plato’s Simile of the Sun (and Fire) (Pl. *Rep.* 507b-509c), the allegory of the cave (Pl. *Rep.* 514a–520a), and the analogy of the divided line (Pl. *Rep.* 509d–511e) in mind as she will later (*i.e.* at Murdoch 1970: 92-94/376-377) provide her own readings thereof, but I do believe that the thesis she puts forward is supposed to be read as the more general one that all practical thinking is governed by concepts that are deeply metaphorical. On this see also Hämäläinen 2016a: 159-167.

⁸ Note that all of (a)-(c) above are staples of the Sumerville School.

⁹ While Plato preferred to use mathematics to make this point Murdoch utilizes language-learning (in her case learning Russian (see Murdoch 1970: 89/373)). I think that the difference in choice of example between Murdoch and Plato are due more to pedagogical personal reasons than any real difference in doctrine.

- (iv) A section that argues that beauty, the Arts, and morality are unified in the way described earlier through the concept of ‘Good’, which results in a sort of ‘unesoteric mysticism’ (Murdoch 1970: 92/376). It is a form of mysticism in being ‘a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience’ and unesoteric in that ‘the “machinery of salvation” (if it exists) is essentially the same for everyone’ (Murdoch 1970: 74/360). This departure point occasions an interpretation on Murdoch’s part of three Platonic metaphors: the Simile of the Sun (and Fire) (Pl. *Rep.* 507b-509c), the Allegory of the Cave (Pl. *Rep.* 514a–520a), and the Analogy of the Divided Line (Pl. *Rep.* 509d–511e). Briefly put, Murdoch argues that the sun—in the light of which we see everything once out of the cave (Pl. *Rep.* 516ab)—is to be read as us seeing the Forms, *i.e.* understanding concepts, in virtue of their relation to the concept/Form of ‘the Good’ (which is represented in Plato’s Simile by the Sun itself). ‘The Good’ thereby is unifying—which, Murdoch argues (at Murdoch 1970: 94-95/377-378) is shown by the analogy of the divided line (Pl. *Rep.* 509d–511e)—since it is only when we have grasped the Form of the Good that it is possible to see the nature of and relations holding between other concepts (which we previously only had an imperfect grasp of). The Good, which we naturally and metaphorically talk of as a thing, thus becomes the distant ideal of perfection which supplies us with direction in our infinite task to better ourselves by transcending the self (which is symbolised by the fire (see Murdoch 1970: 100-101/382-383.), a false sun (Murdoch 1970: 92-102/375-383).
- (v) A section comprising some concluding remarks to the effect that even though ‘the Good’ is undefineable it is especially close to (but, importantly not to be identified with) love and humility (Murdoch 1970: 102-104/383-385).

The objects of attack, in the three articles are scientifically minded behaviourism making the inner parasitic upon the outer, the omission of central Freudian insights in modern moral philosophy, and the romantic Kantian metaphysics of the person respectively for ‘The Idea of Perfection, ‘On “God” and “Good”’, and ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’. To combat these ideas, Murdoch draws on ‘what we are irresistibly inclined to say’, Christian ideas concerning prayer, and Platonic ideas concerning virtue and the Good respectively in the three papers. So, while the primary object of attack as well as the foundations of Murdoch’s proposed alternative vary between the three constituent

articles, *The Sovereignty of Good* still constitutes a focused and sustained unitary project aiming at supplying a workable alternative to ‘modern moral philosophy’.

With this outline of *The Sovereignty of Good* in hand we can now move on to attempt to place Murdoch’s moral philosophy within a larger tradition of ethical theorising before we move on (in Chapters 2 through 4) to look at the compelling alternative Murdoch offers in more detail. The discussion to follow in these chapters aims at situating Murdoch in broader tradition of ethical thought by showing how she both continues and breaks with tradition in a manner that leads to a compelling and unique position.

1.4 The Fall of Perfectionism

Throughout her philosophical works Murdoch often provides historical, or genealogical, arguments that aim to demonstrate the historicity and contingency of certain categorisations, conceptions, assumptions, and starting points that forms the foundation for a situation that is taken to be problematic. Once such a genealogy is established, the thought goes, we should be better able to retrace our steps and rectify our conceptual errors. For Murdoch this often involves identifying a thinker or movement as the originator of the error in question and then formulating an alternative position free of the error identified. We will come back to the nature of these historical arguments in Chapter 5. For now, I want to attempt to construct one of my own concerning the history of moral philosophy and the fall of the perfectionist tradition that I think is in line with Murdoch’s own views of the matter. Murdoch never constructs such an argument concerning changes in how we view ethical theory, but she does construct such genealogies when it comes to the closely connected issue of the metaphysics of the person (or a ‘picture of Man’, in Murdoch’s terminology), which allows us the possibility of such a reconstruction. In order to demonstrate how modern moral philosophy ended up in a position where the very framing of the debate was such that older ethical theories of the perfectionist variety scarcely made sense since they did not seem to provide answers to the questions that were assumed to be the central ones in ethics we will begin by looking at common features of this earlier tradition of ethical thought.

The alternative to modern moral philosophy Murdoch proposes is a form of moral perfectionism, a kind of ethical theory that aims to articulate a conception of our end and how it can be attained.

Perfectionists generally understand the central, or fundamental, ethical demand to be the attainment of the good, or intrinsically (most) desirable, life through the perfection of human nature (Hurka 1996: 3). The characterization given here is, perhaps, too broad for the scholar of particular branches (*e.g.*, eudaimonism, self-realisationism *etc.*) or individual instances (*e.g.*, Aristotle, Epicureanism, Stoicism, T. H. Green, *etc.*) of this family of theories but it suits present purposes in that it is useful for locating Murdoch in a broad tradition and thus provides some sense of where her ethical theory belongs in the bigger picture. The characterization, although broad, is far from all-encompassing. Perfectionism as understood here differs both from theories focusing on well-being, desire-based theories, and, from ‘objective list theories’ of what makes a person’s life go well in that classical perfectionism explicitly ties (the morally relevant) goods to the development of human nature. Often perfectionists supply a list of goods that are conducive of such development (Aristotle supplies such a list at *Rhet.* 1360^b19–24, for example) and can thus seem deceptively like objective list theories. The difference lies in the fact that the perfectionist ties the list explicitly to the development of human nature whereas the objective list-theoretician does not. Writers as diverse as *e.g.*, Aristotle, the Stoics, St. Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Henry More, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Hill Green, and Francis Herbert Bradley are all perfectionists in this sense. Perfectionism so understood can be further divided into the two historically influential sub-categories of ‘eudaimonism’ and ‘self-realisationism’, based primarily on the term chosen for the end in question. Doing so provides a handy divide between classical theories such as those proposed by *e.g.*, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans, Neo-Platonists, *etc.* on the one hand and their 19th Century descendants such as F. H. Bradley and T. H. Green on the other. Since Murdoch, as we shall see, draws (sometimes heavily) on figures on both sides of this divide (primarily Plato and Bradley, but also significantly on Aristotle) the distinction is of limited use for present purposes.

On such a practical understanding of morality and moral theory our end, the good life, naturally becomes a focal-point for philosophical inquiry. Cicero, in an introductory *apologia* to his *De finibus bonorum et malorum* [*On the ends of good and evil*], puts the point thus:

On the other hand, those who would rather I wrote on a different topic should be equable about it, given the many topics on which I have written, more indeed than any Roman. Perhaps I shall write still more. In any case, no one who has read my philosophical works will judge that any is more worth reading than this one. For nothing in life is more worth investigating than philosophy in general, and the

question raised in this work in particular: what is the end, that is the ultimate and final goal, to which all our deliberations on living well and acting rightly should be directed? (Cic. *Fin.* I.11, part. Trans. Woolf in Annas and Woolf 2001).¹⁰

Cicero here takes it as obvious not only that the single most pressing question in all of Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman philosophy concerns the nature of happiness, but also does so since he assumes a framework for ethical theory that seeks to unite a conception of our end with a general recipe for its attainment in terms of practical rationality (usually construed in terms of the virtues).

The ancient discussion centres on the notion of *eudaimonia* (a compound word comprised of the adjectival prefix 'eu-' (well; good) and the noun 'daimon' (spirit)), which sees widespread usage both in early times and at the height of Athenian influence as well as in later antiquity.¹¹ We are here dealing with a semantic field (see de Heer 1969; McMahan 2004) denoting happiness in ancient Greek comprising words such as the central *eudaimonia* (happiness) and its sometime synonym *makarios* (blessed; happy; blissful) as well as *olbios* (blessed; favoured), *eutychia* (lucky; see (Nussbaum 1986:89n* and McMahan 2004: 7-8, 2006: 10-12)), and the phrase *eu zên* (living well; good life; see e.g., DL VII. 87-88, Arist. *NE*1098^b22, *EE*1219^b1, although see Broadie and Rowe 2002: 287-288)).¹² The Latin literature uses *beatus* (blessed; Seneca, *De vita beata*, Cicero, *De Fin.* I. 14, TD V. 40) and, occasionally, *felicitas* (good luck; fortune; cf. Seneca *Ep.* 76.10). In the Latin Stoic literature, *de vita beata* is sharply distinguished from *gaudium* and *laetitia* (joy; Seneca, *De vita beata* 15.2, Cic. *TD* IV. 13. On this see

¹⁰ This quote, together with the one from Spinoza that is to follow are discussed in a similar manner in Miller 2015: 170-173.

¹¹ I will, in what follows, use 'happiness' but ask the reader to be aware that 'in its pre-theoretical uses *eudaimonia* puts a heavier loading on the objective factor in "happiness" than does the English word' (Vlastos 1991: 203).

¹² W. D. Ross argues for a substantial distinction between *eudaimonia* (activity in accordance with virtue) and *makarios* (*eudaimonia* plus the blessings of fortune) in Aristotle (Ross 1923: 192; see also Joachim 1955). Nussbaum (1986: 327ff.) goes explicitly against Ross's reading by pointing to Arist. *NE*1099^a33-^b8 and by citing Kantian influence as an explanation for Ross' (and H. H. Joachim's) *eisegesis*. In addition to the reasons provided by Nussbaum one should note (as is done by Irwin 1999: 318) that the argument given by Aristotle at Arist. *NE*1100^b34-1101^a22 is difficult to follow if the two terms are not meant to be interchangeable. Annas (1993: 44; see also Arius 48.6-11.) also takes the two to be interchangeable but notes loftier and more stylistic pretentiousness of 'makarios'. There might however be a *de facto* distinction in Epicurus, whom is more prone to use *makarios* in place of *eudaimonia* (See Annas 1993: 345n34, which in turn also references Declava Caizzi 1988: 286-288). In the case of Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecus* (Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 127- 130) it would seem like a technical distinction is drawn, but on the other hand the terms seem to be used interchangeably at the beginning of the letter (Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 122). See also Declava Caizzi 1994.

Miller 2010). That the loftier pretentiousness with a more direct connection with the gods gradually takes on a more significant role when it comes to *makarios* in the Hellenistic era is evidenced by the fact that it is this word that is chosen by the translators of the Septuagint for the *Ashrel*, as well as the term used in the Greek original text of the beatitudes (from the Matthean Vulgate Latin section title *Beatitudines*) of Mt. 5:3-11 and Lk. 6:20-22 (if, as I take as probable, they are both stemming from the *Q-source*, and this in turn is a single document written in Greek, the use of a unified terminology could be explained by a common source).

General agreement on the abstract framework is, as Aristotle is quick to remind us (see Arist. *NE*1095a16-21), compatible with extensive disagreement about substantive conceptions leading to, as Cicero puts it, ‘violent disagreement on these matters among the most learned philosophers’ (Cic. *Fin.* I.11, part. trans. Woolf in Annas and Woolf 2001; the main purpose of Cic. *Fin.* in its entirety is precisely to chart and evaluate this extensive disagreement). It is, in addition, commonly assumed that our end consists in activity since many of the candidate elements of happiness appear—or at least should, given a proper understanding of their nature, appear—to the agent as involving processes, *i.e.* as activities that involve continuous reflective work on our behalf such as *e.g.*, the maintaining of friendships, search for knowledge and understanding as well as the contemplation thereof, the maintaining of health through exercise and diet, *etc.* This, I take it, is why Aristotle requires that *eudaimonia* include so-called ‘second activities’—*i.e.* not mere capacity but active engagement in said capacity—and that it consequently cannot be a mere state (Arist. *NE*1095^b32, 1178^b18-20). Our end is thus seen as dynamic rather than static; it is the matter of leading a life rather than just living it, and doing this involves reflecting on how our actions fit into the structured patterns of our lives generated by our long-term goals. Bradley picks up on this aspect of perfectionism when he writes:

[I]f we turn to life, we see that no man has disconnected particular ends; he looks beyond the moment, beyond this or that circumstance or position; his ends are subordinated to wider ends; each situation is seen (consciously or unconsciously) as part of a broader situation, and in this or that act he is aiming at realizing some larger whole, which is not real in any particular act as such, and yet is realized in the body of acts which carry it out (Bradley 1927: 69).

Some such plans (partly) fix future desires but do not by themselves bring any strong consistency requirement, as it seems perfectly possible to pursue multiple such projects that can potentially come into conflict, although in order to avoid conflict we seem to want to reach a point where our disparate ends agglomerate

and the best way to achieve this is to try to reach a point where our disparate ends are subsumed under a single unifying end.

The assumption that the question of what constitutes happiness and how it is to be attained is of paramount importance in (moral) philosophy is retained well into the Early Modern era. For instance, Descartes, in the letter-preface to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy*, argues that we ‘should endeavour above all else to live well’ (CSM 186; AT 13), which, since it is emphasised in a context where he is concerned with laying out the nature and structure of philosophy, must be seen as much more than a mere platitude. Spinoza, in the very opening of *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, is even clearer as to the fact that his investigations are ultimately driven by a desire to attain the greatest joy and the greatest happiness (*summa felicitas*):

After experience had taught me all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were cause and object of my fear had nothing of good and bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity (TdIE: §1, trans. Curley in Spinoza 1985: 7).

In fact, the Stoic influence on Spinoza’s thought is evident and so well attested (even early on see Leibniz 1989 [1677-1680]: 281ff.; Bayle 1740; Buddeus 1701 (on this see Brooke 2012: 141ff.); Vico 1948: § 335; Hegel 1896: III.358-359; Dilthey 1924: 402) that some contemporary commentators (*e.g.*, James 1993; Oksenberg Rorty 1996: 338) have seen his thought as a continuation of Stoic ideas (although see Miller 2015: esp. 1-6).

If we are to talk of anything resembling a break with the paradigm for ethical inquiry here presented (and it is far from clear that such a break ever really took place) it is, I think, safe to say that it occurs with Henry Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). Sidgwick was not, of course, the sole originator of this new way of looking at ethics as a discipline of inquiry. His general stance is in many ways a continuation of an earlier movement or shift in ethical thinking occurring in the enlightenment era that, inspired by the rigor of ‘the scientific method’ and the systematicity of Newtonian science, sought to copy or emulate the systematic organisation of science (see Griffin 2015). Still, Sidgwick sets the agenda for twentieth-century moral philosophy not only by providing large parts of the substance of the debate but more importantly by providing a general framework for ethical theorizing. This framework, which is expressed in terms of three

methodological approaches—intuitional morality, universal, and egoistic hedonism, respectively—comes with an adjacent understanding of what ethical theory is ultimately about (on this see Crisp 2002; Irwin 2007: §§115, 1143-1144). All methods in this typology are couched in deontic language and presuppose a number of meta-philosophical assumptions that leave little to no room for ethical theorizing such as envisaged by the ancients or, by extension, any classical perfectionist. Sidgwick's influence has not gone unnoticed by philosophers and historians of philosophy throughout history. We can find relatively early discontent voiced by Grace Neal Dolson while she is in the business of discussing Descartes' influence over the Cambridge Platonist Henry More:

At the present time it is considered necessary to judge all philosophical systems by the standards of to-day. If the thoughts of previous generations refuse to be measured by conceptions which did not appeal to their age, so much the worse for them. That such a procedure leads to injustice and absurdity seems to make no difference to the people who employ it. The general practice demands such an enforced conformity, and its behests must be obeyed. Before leaving More, then, we must find a label for him. There are certain questions that must be answered. Was he an intuitionist? Did he believe in hedonism? Could he be counted among the utilitarians? The answers to these questions are made easy by the fact that the same reply will do for them all. A simple affirmative is sufficient. He belonged to all the schools. [...] In fact, it is evident that the system cannot be classified; and, after making the attempt, one is tempted to improve on a familiar Biblical maxim, and to beg people not to put old wine in new bottles (Neal Dolson 1897: 606-607).

It is plain to see that the classificatory categories employed by Dolson—intuitionism, hedonism, and utilitarianism respectively—are lifted from Sidgwick and that it is the predominance of these classificatory categories that causes problems for our understanding of older systems of thought. This goes some way towards corroborating Elisabeth Anscombe's (1958: 9) famous remark to the effect that '[t]here is a startling change that seems to have taken place between Mill and Moore'. A change for which she deems Sidgwick chiefly responsible.

We shall return to Sidgwick's understanding of ethical theory and its limitations in what follows.

1.5 Murdoch as a Perfectionist

In order to situate Murdoch properly within the larger tradition of perfectionist thought we must, in what follows, establish the common features of that tradition in order to see how Murdoch both builds upon, develops, and to a certain extent deviates from that older tradition of ethical thought.

We can understand perfectionist theories as comprised of three main components: a practical rationality component (α) and a telic component (β) united by some relation (R) such that they form what we can call ‘the perfectionist schema’. This schema can, due to its simplicity, easily be represented formally, like so:

$$R(\alpha, \beta)$$

In order to fill out this schema any perfectionist theory must (i) explicate the relevant conception of practical rationality (by *e.g.*, providing an account of virtue), (ii) provide at least a formal specification of our end (*e.g.*, in terms of a list of its constituents), and (iii) specify the nature and strength of the supposed relation (R) between them. Historically, proposed understandings of the relational component include *e.g.*, ‘identity’, ‘partial constitution’, ‘wholly constituted by’, ‘instrumentally necessary for’, ‘constitutes our best bet for attaining’, *etc.*, and it might be useful to illustrate with some historical examples (that are both brief and simplified).

Aristotle accounts for the practical rationality component ($\alpha_{\text{Arist.}}$) by providing a catalogue of virtues coupled with a detailed discussion of their nature, a list of formal features of happiness ($\beta_{\text{Arist.}}$), and, by arguing that the former—understood as active states (*hexis*) involving deliberation and choice united in their relation to practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—together with some necessary external goods constitute ($R_{\text{Arist.}}$) the latter. The doctrine of the mean (Arist. *NE* 1106^a15-11209^b30), a list of general features coupled with illustrative examples applied in practice together with features most characteristic of those possessing the virtues add some substance to the outline and consequently delimits the range of possible substantial conceptions.

Epicurus takes the virtues ($\alpha_{\text{Epicur.}}$) to be merely instrumentally necessary ($R_{\text{Epicur.}}$) for the good life ($\beta_{\text{Epicur.}}$), which he understands as the absence of the frustration of naturally necessary desires (Epicur. *Ep. Men.* 127).¹³

¹³ *I.e.* if the virtues fail to deliver the good (pleasure) we should “say goodbye to them” (*Atheneaeus*

The Stoics, by contrast, give an account of practical rationality (α_{Stoa}) in terms of the virtues understood as skills (*technai*; see e.g., Sellars 2009) involving knowledge and claim that they are identical to (R_{Stoa}), and thus that the possession of them guarantee, the good life (β_{Stoa}).¹⁴

The task of filling out the schema can be approached from the left (by shaping our conception of our end via our conception of practical rationality), from the right (by beginning with a conception of our end and argue for an explication of practical rationality by reference to this conception) or by alternation (See McDowell 1998: 3-22). If we are to proceed from an understanding of practical rationality towards a conception of our end we must supply an account of practical rationality independent of, and prior to, a conception of our end whereas proponents of the reversed strategy must provide a specification of our end independent and (in some sense) prior to an explication of practical rationality. Both strategies must come up with a starting-point that is substantial enough to carry the burden of generating credible binding normative prescriptions as the rest of the framework is substantiated.

As a result of this schematic structure perfectionist ethical theories are to a large extent determined by their specification of the telic component—which functions as a central conceptual link between parts of the theory—, their explication of practical rationality, and the relation between them. Annas (1993: 8-10; 2011: 120) points out that the telic component is *central*, or *primary*, rather than *basic* or *foundational*. That a notion is primary in this sense means that the theoretical explication starts of from primary notions with regards to understanding and determination of the scope of the theory but is not foundational in the sense that

546f=LS 21M; cf. DL 138; Usener 70, 512; although see also DL X 138; U 506; Cic. *Fin.* I 50, 50; Epicur. *KD* 5). Non-natural and non-necessary desires result from faulty beliefs (cf. Epicur. *KD* 29; on this see Annas 1993: 188-200).

¹⁴ See e.g., Ar. Did. *apud* Stobaeus *Eclogae* 77.16-19=LS 63A, SVF 3.16: 'They [*i.e.* the Stoics] say that happiness is the goal: everything is produced for its sake, while it is not produced for the sake of anything else. It consists in living according to virtue, in living in agreement, and in addition, this being the same thing, in living in accordance with nature' (trans Pomeroy in Pomeroy 1999: 41; on the question of authorship see e.g., Meineke 1859: 563-565; Diels 1879: 69-88; Göransson 1995 (on this see Inwood 1995); Long 1996: 107-133; Pomeroy 1999: esp. 1-3). Other formulations include the thesis that virtue is 'self-sufficient' (*autarkes*) for happiness (DL VII 127-128) and that virtue is a 'productive' and 'completing' good which both brings about and makes up happiness (*i.e.* the virtues jointly constitute happiness; See DL VII 97; Ar. Did. *apud* Stobaeus *Eclogae* 71.15-72.13=LS 60M; SVF 3.106; on this see Annas 1993: 388ff.). Differences might have to do with presentation and it might be, Long 1996: 113, argues, that Ar. Did. 5b3 is meant to satisfy readers familiar to the usual way (*i.e.* the one followed by Cic. *Fin.* And DL; On this see Annas 2007) of presenting stoic ethics beginning with an account of the Stoic theory of *oikeiosis* ('homification'), although see also Plu. *Moralia* IV 1035c-d=SVF 3.60, LS 60A.

other concepts are derived from them or reduced to them (see also Cic. *Fin.* IV. 14, V. 14).

Added to this is a list of formal features that the telic component must exhibit (that was taken as a given point of departure for discussion in the ancient world and that is, with little to no modification, accepted by modern self-realisationists and other contemporary perfectionists). The telic component should:

- (i) Be desired by everyone for its own sake (see *e.g.*, Pl. *Euthd.* 282^a1-2, *Sym.* 205^a7f; Arist. *NE*1097^a5-6; Green (1883: §253),
- (ii) form the resting place of desire (see *e.g.*, Pl. *Sym.* 205^a; Arist. *NE*1097^a15-24 Arius 76.21-4, 131.4; Sextus, *PH* I 25; Alex. *Aphr. de An.* II150.20-21, 162.34; Green 1883: §§ 171, 176.9), and hence be,
- (iii) complete (teleios; see *e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1097^a25-30; Bradley 1927: 74-78) and
- (iv) self-sufficient (*autarkes*; See Arist. *NE*1097^a15-1098^b10; Emerson 1883: 45-89; *cf.* Annas 1993: 34-42).

The postulation of *e.g.*, *eudaimonia* as the *telos* of all our actions does not imply that this terminus must always be present and thought of as such in ordinary decision-making, it seldom is. What it implies is only that it is the only ultimate reason we could give which would invalidate and make senseless any further such why-questions (*cf.* Anscombe 1957: §§5-8), thus ending the process. This picture brings together two familiar aspects of the human experience concerned with our rational nature: the demand for reasons for what we do on isolated occasions and the felt need for an organisational structure governing our life as a whole.¹⁵

Adherence to the formal framework provided by the perfectionist schema and the acceptance of the requirements set upon the telic component makes it seem as if, in Tad Brennan's words, 'all of the Hellenistic ethical theories are variations on a theme, with the element of variation provided by the specification of the end' (Brennan 2005: 117).¹⁶

The Stoics, for example, utilize a left-hand side strategy. The reason for this is that they, true to their Socratic-Platonic origins (on this see Irwin 2007: §161), come to the table already equipped with a powerful explication of virtue as a skill, or art, of life (*téchnè peri tòn bion*) and naturally want to draw on this resource. Since they construe the relational component in terms of identity there is little to no work left to be done in filling out the right-hand side of the perfectionist

¹⁵ As is pointed out by Vlastos 1985: 15n16, Hume subscribes to the same understanding of 'ultimate ends' (note the plural) of conduct while denying, of course, that they can be accounted for by reason (Hume 1975: 293-294/appx. I, § V.

¹⁶ Brennan is here talking specifically of Hellenistic perfectionist ethical theories but the same goes, in virtue of the generality of the framework, for other perfectionist approaches to.

schema. In the process, they have also managed to satisfy the self-sufficiency requirement since the acquisition of virtue is something that is within the agent's control. The main problem that they face by doing so is that their understanding of the good life becomes intellectualized and internalized to the point of threatening to violate the completeness criterion (as well as the two demands related to desire), something that their Epicurean and Peripatetic opponents are never slow to point out and frequently criticize them for. Epicurus, on the other hand, has a well-established rich theory of the good life spelt out in terms of pleasure and desire, which makes for an intuitively plausible candidate. The problem facing Epicurus instead becomes accounting for how a plausible (and plausibly moralized) understanding of virtue can possibly be linked to this conception of the good life, which forces him to adopt a weak relational component understood in terms of instrumental necessity, thus threatening to undermine the account's claim to self-sufficiency.

Murdoch provides us, in a characteristically compressed no-nonsense manner, with a filling out of the perfectionist schema in her late work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*:

The good and just life is thus a process of clarification, a movement towards selfless lucidity, guided by ideas of perfection which are objects of love (Murdoch 1992: 14).

Murdoch's theory can thus be given the following schematic presentation: The good life (the telic component) is explicated as 'a process of clarification' and understood as constituted by (the relational component) loving attention to the good guided by 'ideas of perfection' (the practical rationality component).¹⁷

Even though Murdoch's ethics clearly belongs within a tradition of perfectionist thought, and in doing so moves beyond modern moral philosophy's preoccupation with what ought to be done and isolated situations of choice, she also goes beyond the preoccupation with how we ought to live, exhibited by many contemporary revivals of classical perfectionism, to the question of what commands our fullest love. Charles Taylor, a clear example of a philosopher influenced by the Somerville School, engages in a bit of depictivist metaphysics when he likens this movement to a special journey:

¹⁷ It seems reasonable to assume that the thesis as here formulated, if read strongly so as to imply an identity claim, is unnecessarily strong, for while it is certainly the case that Murdoch is not particularly occupied with issues concerning external goods, I do not think that she necessarily need, or should want, to deny their importance altogether.

I would like to use an image here: We were trapped in the corral of morality. Murdoch led us out not only to the broad fields of ethics but also beyond that again to the almost untracked forests of the unconditional (Taylor 1996: 5).

In effecting this guiding journey, Murdoch draws on a range of influences and elaborates on a series of images and ideas that are then intricately woven together into a complex tapestry that pushes the boundaries of classical perfectionism. In addition, Murdoch understands moral activity as intimately bound up with self-interpretation and, as Maria Antonaccio points out, ‘both Taylor and Murdoch would agree that modern ethical thought has ignored this fact [*i.e.* self-interpretation] in adopting some of the assumptions and aspirations of natural science’ (Antonaccio 2000: 45). Many of the central aspects of Murdoch’s thought are summarised rather programmatically at the very end of ‘On “God” and “Good”’:

What I feel sure of is the inadequacy, indeed inaccuracy, of utilitarianism, linguistic behaviourism, and current existentialism in any of the forms with which I am familiar. I also feel sure that moral philosophy ought to be defended and kept in existence as a pure activity, or a fertile area, analogous in importance to unapplied mathematics or pure ‘useless’ historical research. Ethical theory has affected society, and has reached as far as to the ordinary man, in the past, and there is no good reason to think that it cannot do so in the future. For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all. But there can be no substitute for pure, disciplined, professional speculation: and it is from these two areas, art and ethics, that we must hope to generate concepts worthy, and also able, to guide and check the increasing power of science (Murdoch 1970: 76/362).

This passage brings together many of the themes that shall be our concern in what follows. Murdoch starts out voicing a rather radical scepticism concerning modern moral philosophy (and in so doing joins the other members of the Somerville school in general and Elizabeth Anscombe (1958a) in particular). This theme shall be with us throughout the present volume as much of what Murdoch has to say will be made clearer in comparison with the analytical mainstream.

Next, Murdoch goes on, perhaps rather surprisingly, to assert a place for more or less pure ethical theorizing as irreplaceable, only to immediately go on to suggest that the real value of such research still lies in its ability to influence society and ‘the ordinary man’. Murdoch thus emphasises the critical potential of philosophical theory for a ‘reasoned criticism of our moral potential’ (Hämäläinen 2016a: 175) and as ‘a creative realm which generates conceptual tools and

frameworks' (Hämäläinen 2016a: 175) that we need in order to deal with moral challenges. This emphasis points to an understanding of theory as an important theoretical activity that is ultimately practical in that it seeks to answer to basic human concerns by being a kind of picturing activity aiming at increased self-understanding and moral development. The theme of conceptual clarification through concern with how human beings picture the world around them is another thoroughgoing theme of Murdoch's thought, and so also of the present work.

After highlighting the need for theory, Murdoch goes on to emphasise the role she thinks art, and especially literature, fulfils in moral development. This idea, to be most fully explored in Chapter 5, ties together aesthetics and ethics, as Murdoch understands these disciplines, by emphasising their similarity in terms of both being picturing activities. This aspect also ties together the idea of a depictivist metaphysics with the abovementioned scepticism towards modern moral philosophy in general and its emphasis on the so-called 'fact-value distinction', the notion of obligation, and neatly defined choice-situations in particular:

Some people stress the dissimilarity between art and morals because they want to insist that morality is rational, in the sense of legislating for repeatable situations by specification of morally relevant facts. Other people stress the similarity between art and morals because they want to insist that morality is imaginative and creative and not limited to duties of special obligation (Murdoch 1956a: 46/ 86).

While the contrast that Murdoch sets up here most certainly is one about different views on the nature of ethics and ethical thinking, it can, as Maria Antonaccio (2012a: 75-76) points out, easily be misread as painting a simple contrast between, on the one hand, a broadly Kantian construal of morality in terms of moral generalities and rules that is hostile to moral particularity and ambiguity as portrayed in literary works, and on the other a more particularist stance focusing on situational mastery that celebrates these features in literature. What this, to many modern ethicists familiar, way of drawing the contrast misses is the way in which Murdoch sees humans not only as storytelling animals but as self-interpreting animals (*cf.* Taylor 1985; Antonaccio 2012a: 76) whose conceptions of the stories they tell about themselves and their world necessitate reflection on and evaluation of said images and stories. It is this reflection that is the aim of depictivist metaphysics as Murdoch sees it. This also explains the close connection that she sees between art and morals.

The scepticism directed against much of modern moral philosophy on Murdoch's part combined with her status as one of the forerunners of the movement often called 'the literary turn'—which has, for the last thirty or forty years often been intimately linked with discussions concerning the role of 'theory' in both moral philosophy and literary criticism—has led many to interpret her philosophical writings along so-called 'anti-theoretic', or particularist lines. In what follows I will attempt to show that readings of Murdoch's work along such lines are mistaken and that while the kind of depictivist theorising she offers differ in many ways from the analytical mainstream it still qualifies as theorizing (*cf.* Antonacchio 2012a: 75-97; Hämäläinen 2016a: 133-183, esp. 175-183).

To see how these pieces fit together and what they imply will require extensive unpacking of Murdoch's distinctive take on moral philosophy but I do believe that this is well worth the effort since what *The Sovereignty of Good* offers is one of the most attractive versions of perfectionism available.

2. On the Scope and Nature of Morality

This chapter seeks to present the central elements of Murdoch's moral philosophy and to situate it in a wider tradition of ethical thought and discussion. Special emphasis is placed on how Murdoch's understanding of morality as a ubiquitous vision—as opposed to a demarcated area of investigation—makes practical rationality come out as fruitfully thought of as a matter of interpreting something or other as having a bearing on practical life, of bringing something into one's practical world. Such a focus consequently makes a lot hinge on how we understand our articulation of the practical world we inhabit and the nature of the moral concepts we employ in understanding it. Given a plausible understanding of such moral concepts as defying bifurcation into purely non-evaluative and evaluative components and as applying to the entire practical realm a form of moral realism as well as the idea that that our conceptualisation of a situation can, in and of itself, motivate action become defensible.

2.1 A Return to the Phenomena

'Philosophy', says Iris Murdoch in 'The Idea of Perfection', 'has in a sense to keep trying to return to the beginning'. This process of trying to break free from ways of looking at the world forced upon us by the dogmas of theory—'McTaggart says that time is unreal, Moore replies that he has just had his breakfast'—and return to 'the consideration of simple and obvious facts' (Murdoch 1970: 1/299) inevitably starts the whole process over again since those facts—obvious and simple as they might be—require a return to theoretical interpretation (see also *e.g.*, Murdoch 1959a: 43-44/205-206; 1970: 42-44/334-335; 77-78/363-364).

The theoretical interpretations that Murdoch provides of a range of such 'simple and obvious facts'—including what we could call the phenomenology of moral progress, the ubiquity of ethical concern in our lives, the intuitiveness of

realism, the privacy of ethical concepts, and the centrality of the other for ethics—in *The Sovereignty of Good* constitute, when taken together, a vision of ‘moral psychology and the place for morality in the world’ (Broackes 2012: 37) that sees our conceptualisation of ourselves and our moral reality as ‘infinitely perfectable’ (Murdoch 1970: 23/317).¹⁸

Murdoch’s thoughtful, provocative, and unified take on moral philosophy, to which my debts, to echo the words of Samuel Goldberg (1993: 253), ‘are now much too basic and too pervasive to be spelt out in detail’ is presented in a manner both dense and difficult. I hope that the epigonic character of what follows is, at least to some extent, made up for by my attempt to systematise Murdoch’s text in a manner that connects to, and clarifies my position on, central debates in Murdoch scholarship.

What Murdoch describes in the opening paragraph of ‘The Idea of Perfection’—quoted in part above—is, in a sense, what W. D. Ross (1939: 1) calls ‘the time-honoured method of ethics’ based on the belief that philosophical reflection on ethics ought to proceed from everyday thought on the subject embracing as a starting-point what Aristotle calls *phainomena* (phenomena; appearances) as ‘witnesses’ and ‘paradigms’ (Arist. *EE*1216^b26).¹⁹ Murdoch’s immediate influence here is, I think we can safely assume, Wittgenstein (*e.g.*, 1953: §§90, 92, 226; on this see Broackes 2012: esp. 29) rather than Aristotle whom Murdoch sees as a precursor of scientism since she seems to abide by a common interpretation of *phainomena* as akin to data of perception (on this interpretation of Aristotle see Nussbaum 1986: 240ff.):

¹⁸ The focus on *seeing the other* in Murdoch’s ethics makes for interesting comparisons with both Emanuel Levinas’s phenomenological description of the face-to-face encounter as an exploration of the conditions of good actions and lives as well as with Stanley Cavell’s notion of ‘acknowledgement’ with its emphasis on personal responsiveness and responsibility to the other. In what follows I shall forego such comparisons. For the relation between Murdoch and Levinas see Alford 2015; Tracy 1996: esp. 55-56; Şavkay 2012; Antonaccio 2001; Freeman 2015. For the connection between Cavell and Murdoch see *e.g.*, Hämäläinen 2016a; Corder 2016. In what follows I shall mainly be concerned with Murdoch’s position as it is portrayed in her *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) but, as I believe that position to be consistent with much of her earlier and later writings, frequent use of other material will also be made.

¹⁹ Everyday thought, variously called ‘common morality’ (*e.g.*, Sidgwick 1907: xix-xx, 215-16, 373-374), ‘folk morality’ (*e.g.*, Jackson and Pettit 1995), and somewhat obsolescently ‘the moral consciousness’ (Ross 1939: 1) is obviously a staple starting-point in much of the history of philosophy. Ross’s (1939: 1-11) discussion is in many ways excellent albeit (particularly in its later stages, *i.e.* 3-11) coloured by its time. For informative discussions see *e.g.*, Irwin 2007: §§ 2, 67; Annas 1993.

‘[I]f there is a “Shakespeare of science” his name is Aristotle’ (Murdoch 1970: 33/327).

If we resist this common interpretation of Aristotle, however, and instead opt for a more literal reading of *phainomena* as conceptually structured thought then what Aristotle seems to be after is a description of the practical world as it appears to and is experienced by members of our kind, *i.e.* the many, or most people, as capable of serving as a by no means un-revisable basis for moral enquiry (*cf.* the reflections on method in Murdoch 1957a: 118ff/72ff).²⁰ It is an interpretation of Aristotle along these lines—*i.e.* as resisting the so-called ‘Myth of the Given’ (Sellars 1956)—that makes possible the marrying of Murdochian insights with a general Aristotelian outlook such as it manifests itself in *e.g.*, McDowell (1995a; 1995b; 1996; 1998a) and Nussbaum (1986: esp. 240-263).

Here is Aristotle’s most famous formulation of his so-called *endoxic method*:

As in our other discussions²¹, we must first set out the way things appear to people²² [*phainomena*], and then, having gone through the puzzles²³, proceed to prove the received opinions [*ta endoxa*²⁴] about these ways of being affected – at best, all of them, or, failing that, most, and the most authoritative [*kurion*]. For if the problems are resolved, and received opinions remain, we shall have offered sufficient proof. (Arist *NE*1145^b2-7, trans. Crisp; *cf.* Arist. *EE*1216^b25-34; *cf.* Arist. *EE*1216^b25-1217^a19; *Top.* 100^a18-21).

²⁰ Aristotle’s usage of ‘the many’ is sometimes statistical (*e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1150a12, 1151a5, 1152a26) and sometimes rather pejorative (*e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1095a16). *Cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 505b.

²¹ It is unclear whether this is supposed to generalise, and if so to what kinds of inquiry. This particular exegetical problem (which Nussbaum 1986: 478n1 argues, might seem settled in favour of the inclusion of ‘all’ due to the remarks in *APr.* 46^a17-22 which makes explicit the crucial role of *phainomena* for any *technē* or *epistēmē*) need not lead to too much worry here since the present project is confined to ethical theory (even if its generality there is also disputed see *e.g.*, Annas 1993: 142n3).

²² *Cf.* *NE*1095b3-8.

²³ Aristotle here uses *diaprosōntas*, *i.e.*, ‘to raise puzzles’ (*aporiai*) thus providing a link to what he sees as the fundamental drive towards philosophical inquiry. *Cf.* *Met.* 982^b12; *Top.* 145^b16-20. For examples see *e.g.*, *NE* I.8; 1143^b36; 1144^b32; 1168^a28-1168^b13; 1169^b3-8.

²⁴ The proper translation of *ta endoxa* is a matter of dispute: some believe Aristotle to include all manner of pre-existing opinions on a subject while others take him to include only a subset thereof consisting of the most reputable (such as the opinions of other philosophers). Often Aristotle uses *ta endoxa* to refer to these common, reputable opinions (*cf. e.g.*, *Top.* 100^b22-23). See also Barnes 1980. At any rate *endoxa* are, in contrast to (mere) *doxa* rejected by Plato as indicative of truth, opinions that Aristotle sees as tested in some way (either by prior philosophical and scientific scrutiny or by being dialectically scrutinized in the public sphere).

Scrutiny of common opinion (*endoxa*) and perceptual appearances (*phainomena kata tēn aisthēsin*)²⁵ understood as conceptually structured thought (and not anything like ‘hard’ data; On this see Nussbaum 1986: 243-245) is here carried out with the aim of providing an account of an essential human activity that is supposed to help us understand what is of fundamental importance in our pursuing that activity, and doing so correctly (*orthós*), finely (*kalos*), and rightly (*dein*).²⁶

This methodological starting-point takes moral philosophy to be an autonomous discipline, in so far as debates within this field are, in a certain sense, independent of disputes in *e.g.*, the natural sciences and the rest of philosophy. I say ‘in a certain sense’ because while this Socratic-Aristotelian ‘dialectical’ (*cf.* Arist. *Top.* 100^a18-21; on this see Irwin 2007: § 67) view does not require a pre-established whole philosophical system or a full understanding of reality its mode of inquiry will raise puzzles that will require a practical metaphysics and a working through of issues concerning moral psychology (on ‘moral psychology’ in relation to Murdoch see Broackes 2012: 36-38 esp. 36n77).

Scrutiny of appearances naturally, and perhaps unavoidably, amounts to criticising extant opinions and practices—thus avoiding charges of conservatism—and leads to questions regarding the nature of the loci of such opinions and practices, *i.e.* human beings *qua* rational, self-aware, socially embedded beings with their own view of the world, in short to questions concerned with the metaphysics of the person. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates reflects as follows on the Delphic maxim—‘know thyself’—inscribed on the forecourt of the temple of Apollo at Delphi:

I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that (Pl. *Phdr.* 230, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff).

This reflection generalises and abstracts away from the traditional understanding of the maxim as a commandment to know one’s limits (with special reference to *hubris*) and the standardised Homeric way of answering ‘Who are you?’ in terms

²⁵ For this sub-division of *phainomena* broadly construed into beliefs and perceptual appearances see Arist. *Cael.* 303^a22-23; on this see Nussbaum 1986: 245n13.

²⁶ From the fact that something is fine (*kalon*) it follows, according to Aristotle (*e.g.*, *Rhet.* 1366a33-36; *NE*1103a10), that it is choiceworthy in itself and praiseworthy since these conditions are jointly sufficient and necessary for something to qualify as fine. Within the context of the *Nicomachean Ethics* the virtuous person, when guided by correct reason insofar as he has a true conception of the end and its constituent actions, he does what is fine and right.

of name, lineage, and place of birth in that order (See *e.g.* Homer *Il.* 24.349-467, 21.136-199). Socrates' posing of the question is (deliberately) ambiguous between an ontological reading—'What shall I take myself to be?' or 'Where do I fit in the ontology of things?'—and a practical-cum-ethical reading—'What shape or goal should I give to my life?'—that highlights the interdependence of the two readings and make the question wide-ranging in scope, requiring its answer to touch upon not only the already rather broad sphere of human conduct conceived of quite generally (as opposed to a narrowly moral reading) but also the metaphysics of the person, and humanity's place in a wider ontology (see Long 2001). This invites a denial of a methodological priority-ordering such as the one embedded in Anscombe's thesis that 'it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking' (Anscombe 1958a: 26) or the claim that the metaphysics of the person, or the philosophy of psychology, ought to be somehow methodologically posterior.

By a 'practical metaphysics' I mean a metaphysical inquiry and systematisation that arises from needs within ethics and that is tailored to fit practical concerns as opposed to being independently set-up and then simply imported into moral philosophy as the need is felt to arise. This does not mean that results in *e.g.*, the natural sciences and other areas of philosophy cannot be of use to moral philosophy, it simply means that results in other areas cannot be assumed to be straightforwardly translatable into the domain of moral philosophy.

The need for scrutiny of our understanding of ourselves—this need to stop to look which if unheeded might lead us to 'fail to understand not only the world, but ourselves, and value might be lost' (Crisp 2012: 275)—is a thoroughgoing theme in Murdoch's philosophical works (*cf. e.g.*, Murdoch 1957a; 1970: 46f./337f., 86/371; 1992: 26; 147-184 esp. 171f.; on this see *e.g.*, Crisp 2012: 275-276; Hämäläinen 2016a: 155-156).

Philosophical scrutiny of our understanding of ourselves and the world around us should attempt to be as unbounded by theory as possible by constantly questioning underlying assumptions. One such underlying assumption to which we shall now turn is our understanding of the very delineation of the sphere of moral philosophy.

2.2 The Scope of Morality

In the preface to his *Ethical Studies* (1876) Francis Herbert Bradley declares himself unprepared ‘to define the sphere of Moral Philosophy, to say what does fall within it and what does not’ (Bradley 1927: viii). Murdoch is similarly hesitant when it comes to providing such a definitional delineation. The main reason for her hesitancy is that, just as Bradley, she believes that there is more to morality than certain orthodox conceptions, focusing primarily on principled restrictions on interpersonal behaviour, allow.²⁷ This hesitancy on Murdoch’s part is also partly due to a belief that any such attempt, however well-intentioned, cannot but more or less arbitrarily exclude phenomena that ought to be given serious attention by moral philosophers from their sphere of concern. To make matters worse, Murdoch would argue, such delineations usually reflect substantial moral and political views in that they reflect a particular moral understanding of the world and our place within it (see e.g., Murdoch 1956a, 1957a; Diamond 2010). The general idea that morality encompasses more than what conventional delineations would include, which Edward Harcourt (2015: 210) terms (moral) ‘*expansionism*’, comes in many varieties but here it is enough to distinguish between two principal versions—both embraced by Bradley as I understand him—that we can call *scope expansionism* and *vision expansionism* respectively.

Scope expansionists see morality as an object of philosophical inquiry among many but take issue with the, to their mind, excessively restrictive customary ‘delineation of the field of study’ (Murdoch 1956a: 33; on this see Diamond 2010). Thus, what is at stake is simply a matter of scope; once we have expanded the domain and gotten things right, *i.e.* let the right things in, (or at least think that we have done so) we can just go on with considering the philosophical problems attached to the phenomena now recognized as part of the (once again

²⁷ Note this does not imply that our relations to others isn’t central to morality. This is most surely the case. What Bradley and Murdoch are claiming, if I read them correctly, is that such relations are not all that there is to it. Influential statements of the orthodoxy, which emphasise interpersonal activities confined to a more or less neatly demarcated sphere of human activity aptly labelled ‘moral’, are to be found in Mackie 1977: 106-107 and Scanlon 1998: 6, 171-178, 270-271, 342-349 (for a discussion of the former from a vantage-point that shares much with the one adopted here see Goldberg 1993: 1-35, esp. 31-35). The details of these varying accounts need not detain us here (although note that Scanlon is somewhat unclear regarding whether his characterisation of ‘morality in the narrow sense’ should be read as stipulative or as trying to capture some pre-theoretic notion and that if the former is true his account is less suitable as an illustration of my point here). I want to thank David Alm and Fritz-Anton Fritzsøn for helpful discussions regarding these matters.

neatly defined) domain of morality. Accordingly, various sub-versions of scope expansionism can be distinguished depending on what elements, such as *e.g.*, the narrow focus on (principles for) action and the focus on interpersonal conduct, one wants to see expanded, what new elements and phenomena, such as *e.g.*, attention to emotional states one wants to add and how far one is willing to go in expanding them. Scope expansionism, so understood, constitutes a driving force behind what Nussbaum (1999: 164) calls ‘neo-Greek ethics’, *i.e.* modern stances drawing on Ancient Greek ethical theory (*cf.* Annas 1993: esp. 3-10; Crisp and Slote 1997: esp. 1-25; Hursthouse 1999; on this in relation to literature see Hämäläinen 2016a: 17-53, esp. 45-53). Bradley’s qualms concerning the modern outlook are thus similar to those dissatisfactions that Nora Hämäläinen (2016a: 39-41) sees as the reasons behind a broadening of the conception of morality ‘taking place at several levels’ (Hämäläinen 2016a: 39) since the 1950’s: A dissatisfaction with a narrow focus on (principles for) action has led to philosophers emphasising neglected aspects such as character and the virtues (*e.g.*, von Wright 1963: Ch. 7 (on this in turn see Foot 2002: Ch. 7); Foot 1978: esp. 1-18; Anscombe 1958a; Murdoch 1970, Hursthouse 1999), moral perception (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1956a, 1970; McDowell 1979; Nussbaum 1990), judgment (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1970; Nussbaum 1990, 1994; Goldberg 1993), and emotion (*e.g.*, Nussbaum 1986, 1990, 1994). Aside from the factors mentioned above there is also a perception (shared among *e.g.*, Diamond 1991; Nussbaum 1990; Crary 2007, 2016) of the predominant mode of argumentation and writing as limited.

It seems to me that we have good methodological grounds for accepting, at least at the outset, a rather radical version of such scope expansionism in the interest of keeping our options open. Preconceptions and starting-points are never innocent (and if they seem to be then they do so only in the light of unquestioning or unconscious adherence to convention). The fact that our initial pre-theoretical ways of framing questions influence further inquiry by hinting at what to look for and that any way of going about answering these questions carry with it epistemological preconceptions does not mean that any set of starting-assumptions is as good as the next (or, even worse, that the choice between them is merely subjective or irrational (*cf.* Nussbaum 1990: 24, 168-194; Diamond 1991: Ch. 15)). Rather, what seems to be called for is openness to alternatives, self-scrutiny, and an as inclusive starting-point as possible. This is especially important to remember when engaged in moral philosophy since our differences in moral understanding directly limit the possibility of neutral analysis. That is, ‘the supposed ethical neutrality of moral philosophy is illusory’ (Diamond 1996: 82-83; *cf.* Murdoch 1956: 54-56/94-97; 1970) since it ‘works to exclude certain

moral conceptions which it makes appear as logical confusions' (Diamond 1996: 83; *cf.* Murdoch 1956a: 56/96).

Even though Bradley (on the strength of *e.g.*, Bradley 1927: 218: 'there is no part of life at which morality stops and goes no further') might be read as accepting a rather radical version of scope expansionism I believe that some aspects of his thought—*e.g.*, his stressing of 'the moral consciousness' (*e.g.*, Bradley 1927: 61-64; *cf.* Irwin 2009: §1214) and his stressing of the moral point of view (*cf. e.g.*, Bradley 1927: 58) as leading to the necessity of a religious point of view (Bradley 1927: 313ff.)—might indicate that what he actually has in mind is a version of 'vision expansionism'—*i.e.* the thesis that morality is more akin to a kind of ubiquitous vision than a demarcated area of investigation. If Bradley is to be read in the latter manner—*i.e.* as holding some version of the idea that morality is as a matter of fact an all-encompassing vision pervading all thought and consciousness—it seems that he is driven into his radical 'scope expansion' almost by default since it seems natural to assume that such a vision has a global scope. Or rather, it hardly seems that there could be a 'delineation of the field of study' (Murdoch 1956a: 33) given vision expansionism short of a study of all thought and understanding. Hence, if I am right in my understanding of Bradley—*i.e.* as taking his belief that 'there is no part of life at which morality stops and goes no further' (Bradley 1927: 218) as stemming from an understanding of morality as a kind of ubiquitous vision rather than a demarcated area of inquiry (*cf. e.g.*, Bradley 1927: 313ff.)—and if we share, as Murdoch certainly does, in his understanding of morality as intimately connected to self-improvement aiming at perfection (or, to use Bradley's preferred terminology, self-realisation) it seems natural to assume that moral philosophy ought to be concerned with the whole of our mode of being (including non-social aspects (Bradley 1927: 215; *cf.* Murdoch 1970: 97/380)). This does not mean—and here too Bradley is in agreement (*cf. e.g.*, Bradley 1927: 64, 214, 228, 232-237, 244, 309-310)—that any (*e.g.*, artistic or scientific) realization of the agent's capacities belong to morality.²⁸

²⁸ *Cf.* Krook 1959: 238: '[Bradley] proclaims that morality is the whole of life, or experience, viewed *sub specie voluntatis*, under the category or aspect of the will. The moral activity is distinctively an activity of the will; the will is the defining power of man's nature in its moral aspect; the sphere of morality is the sphere of will; whatever is moral is a function of the will'. Linking the distinctive feature of morality with its relation to the will (Bradley 1927: 143, 228-230) is problematic on the grounds that such an emphasis on the will invites a dualistic conception of the person as 'an indiscernible balance between a pure rational agent and an impersonal mechanism' (Murdoch 1970: 54/343). Such dualism must, Murdoch thinks, be resisted in favour of a unified conception of human agency as 'a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision' (Murdoch 1970: 40/332 *cf.* Broackes 2012: 8-9 esp. n23).

Focusing on the whole of an individual's life invites posing the central initial question of ethics in a Socratic manner as inquiring into 'the way we ought to live' (Pl. *Rep.* 352d trans. G. M. A. Grube revised by C. D. C. Reeve), or, 'what living well consists in and how it is to be achieved' (Arist. *EE*1214^a14-15, trans. Crisp) which invites the idea of morality as a ubiquitous element in our lives.

For Plato, as I understand him, morality becomes ubiquitous due to the role played by the Good as essential to the intelligibility of (any and all) Forms (Pl. *Rep.* 506bff., 508-510-b) which results in (something like) moral evaluation ('grace' and 'gracelessness') being applicable to all manner of cultural endeavours (Pl. *Rep.* 400e-401-a). This understanding of Plato is, I take it, in line with the reading presented by Murdoch 1970: 92-102/375-384 (on this see Broackes 2012: 71-74). For similar readings of Aristotle see McDowell 1994: esp. 78-84, 108-110, Nussbaum 1986: Ch. 8. Nussbaum (1986: Ch. 8) draws our attention not only to Arist. *NE*1141^b1ff. but also to Arist.1216^b26 and the stressing of *phainomena* ('appearances') as the 'paradigms' (*paradeigmata*) of philosophical inquiry found in these passages in order to argue for the ascription of a kind of *conceptualism*—*i.e.* the thesis that perception is conceptually structured from the ground up and that characteristically human modes of awareness are intrinsically conceptual—to Aristotle in a manner that is similar to McDowell.

Framing the initial question in Socrates' way—*i.e.* 'How should one live?'—has, as Bernard Williams (1985: Ch. 1) points out, some advantages over alternatives such as *e.g.*, 'What is my (or our) duty?', 'How do I (or we) become morally good?', or 'How do I (or we) become happy?' in that it takes much less for granted (even if 'not everyone will agree about what that is' (Williams 1985: 4)). As Williams hastens to add though, it would be a mistake to think that this way of stating the question assumes nothing at all. It assumes, among—I am sure—other things, that the answers we are after possess a certain level of generality since, as Williams (1985: 4) notes, the impersonal formulation assumes that something relevant or useful can be said about this question 'that embraces or shapes the individual ambitions each person might bring to the question' and that this generality naturally leads us out of the concerns of the ego altogether. Murdoch expands upon this implication:

If this is so [*i.e.* if our focus is to be on the whole of an individual's life rather than isolated situations of choice], one of the main problems of moral philosophy might be formulated thus: are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly? (Murdoch 1970: 54/344).

Secondly, Socrates' question implies that what we are after is not something that is situationally bound but rather concerns a mode, form, or manner, of life, but even so it does not assume anything with regards to what kind(s) of consideration should be applied to the question (Williams 1985: 5).²⁹ Thus, the way of understanding the central questions assumed at the outset leave room for a rather expansive understanding of morality. Other philosophers with more or less explicit ties to neo-Aristotelian or more general neo-Greek revivalism has shared in the Somerville School's felt dissatisfaction with the (nearly exclusive) focus on interpersonal conduct inherent in the conventional delineation. This has led to an emphasis on questions previously considered part of the philosophy of life such as *e.g.*, 'how ought I to live?' and 'what constitutes a good life?' on the grounds that the demands of morality hardly seem intelligible without such a larger context (*e.g.*, MacIntyre 1985; Taylor 1989; see also *e.g.* the contributions to Crisp and Slote 1997; Statman 1997; Foot 2001; Hursthouse 1999; Hämäläinen 2016a: 39-41). The underlying motivation should be clear enough:

A man's life, we take it, can not thus be cut into pieces. You cannot say, 'in this part the man is a moral being, and in this part he is not. We have not yet found that fraction of his existence in which the moral goodness of the good man is no more realized, and where 'the lusts of the flesh' cease to wage their warfare. [...] To be a good man in all things and everywhere, to try and do always the best, and to do one's best in it, whether in lonely work or in social relaxation to suppress the worse self and realize the good self, this and nothing short of this is the dictate of morality (Bradley 1927: 215; *cf.* Murdoch 1992: 494-496).

Such a view of our subject matter, Bradley notes, should seem natural where it not for two fixed habits of thought (often seen as distinctive of a modern moral outlook):

One of these lies in the confining of man's morality to the sphere of his social relations; the other is the notion that morality is a life harassed and persecuted everywhere by 'imperatives' and disagreeable duties, and that without these we do not have morality (Bradley 1927: 215).

Sidgwick (1907: 105) is, to my knowledge, the first to construe it as a defining characteristic of modern ethics to embrace the corrective view in contrast to the

²⁹ I include this range of expressions here so as to make clear that I do not necessarily intend by the expression 'a form of life' something akin to the technical expression(s) (*i.e.* *Lebensform*; *Lebensformen*; *Form des Lebens*) used by Wittgenstein (*e.g.*, 1953: §19, §23, §241, 174, 226 1956: VII: 47). *Cf.* Murdoch 1956a: 57; on their relation see Broackes 2012:23-30 esp. 29n67.

ancients' embrace of a notion of morality as 'attractive rather than imperative' (*op. cit.*; see also *e.g.*, Annas 1993: 4-7; LeBar 2013:12; MacIntyre 1968: 84-109; Murdoch 1970: 97/380). If these hallmarks of the modern moral outlook are questioned it is easier to understand the moral point of view as something that agents 'will naturally come to accept in the course of a normal unrepressed development' (Annas 1993: 4).³⁰ Bradley might sound overly optimistic and we should be cautious not to overvalue these advantages of ancient ethics but it is nevertheless clear that these advantages (shared by perfectionist approaches following the ancient's lead such as *e.g.*, Green and Bradley), at least when stated thus generally, are genuine.³¹

The acceptance of vision expansionism thus sits rather well with an ancient idea of morality as being concerned with the whole of an individual's life. Cora Diamond (1996: 104 *emphases in original*) observes that if we accept the idea that thought is 'inherently and ubiquitously moral, then we need to reject the idea that moral thought is a *department* of thought, and moral discourse a *department* of discourse'. While Diamond is right that some such departmental conceptions characterises much of contemporary moral philosophy it is still the case that her remark is rather ambiguous. Diamond's rejection of moral thought as neatly separable from other modes of thought can be read as anything from a rather harmless and obvious remark to the effect that investigations into morality cannot be totally cut off from other disciplines of inquiry to a full scale anti-theoretical rejection of moral theory as such. What is ultimately at stake here is whether the acceptance of vision expansionism, while arguably incompatible with the kind of moral philosophy that seeks to account for everything within its sphere of concern and which (again, arguably) requires such a neat delineation of the field of study, is compatible with a broader understanding of 'ethical theory' as an activity of elucidation of moral phenomena and our understanding of them.

³⁰ In light of this focus on natural development it is easy to see why Stoics (*cf. e.g.*, Cic. *Fin* 3.16, 17, 20-23; *SVF* 3.229) and Epicureans (*cf. e.g.*, Cic. *Fin* 1.30; on this see Warren 2016), together with Antiochus of Ascalon (Cic. *Fin.* 5.55), all make use of what is nowadays (following Brunschwig 1986 inspired by Antiochus observation at Cic. *Fin* 5.55) called 'cradle arguments': a form of argument that attempts to locate our original and natural impulses, attachments, and aversions by observing the behavior of infants (that are supposedly unaffected and uncorrupted by society) thus using the behaviour of pre-rational creatures as a reference point for determining the natural human good (on this see, apart from Brunschwig 1986 which constitutes the *locus classicus* of the modern debate, *e.g.*, Inwood 2016; Annas 1993: Ch. 2).

³¹ The obvious drawback here is usually taken to be an inability, or at least a difficulty, in handling so-called second-person (see Darwall 2006; Wolterstorff 2008: Ch. 7; Cokelet 2012) reasons. We will get back to this problem in what follows.

Anti-theory in ethics is, roughly, the idea that moral theory ought not to be pursued since there cannot be such a thing as an adequate theory of ethics (since even the best theory will distort our understanding of morality). In its stead anti-theorists seek to promote *e.g.*, inquiries into varieties of moral practice and conceptions of morality. The anti-theoretical movement is far from unified (see *e.g.*, Hämmäläinen 2016a: 78-85; Nussbaum 2000) but many proponents have seen moral theories as aiming to produce what Peter Winch (1972: 153) has called ‘a calculus of action’—*i.e.* a system that (more or less mechanically) generates rules for action—which results in a rather precise understanding of theory, the rejection of which brings with it an affinity between anti-theory and particularism. I think that Diamond trades on the above-mentioned ambiguity concerning what it means to reject moral thought as a department of thought in order to radicalise her reading of Murdoch, thereby gaining an influential ally in her own anti-theoretical and particularist struggle. Diamond’s reading of Murdoch has a lot going for it and her work on the issue has greatly helped increase our understanding of Murdoch’s philosophical project. In addition, her work has helped formulate interesting ideas that have greatly enriched discussions about the prospects of ethical theory. While it is clearly shown by philosophers such as Diamond, Williams, and Crary that Murdochian insights can be developed along rather radical anti-theoretical lines I do not think that there is anything in Murdoch that forces such a reading upon us. Murdoch does reject the idea that moral thought is a department of thought in favour of construing it as an all-encompassing vision but this does not mean that she must, or indeed should, be read as an anti-theorist in the stronger sense. Rather, Murdoch’s conception of theory comes much closer to an activity that elucidates elements of our understanding of morality and offers reasons for organising these elements in one way rather than another (see Hämmäläinen 2016a: 80-81, 133-175). On such a conception of theory Murdoch could, and does (see Murdoch 1992: 53; 1956a; on this see Hopwood 2017) still accept some moral generalities of the kind the particularist opposes and one need not find anything objectionable about moral theory despite accepting vision expansionism by denying that moral thought is a department of thought. Still, Murdoch’s vision expansionism has far-reaching consequences for her understanding of morality and moral philosophy. Not only does the realisation that our implicit or explicit delineations usually reflect conscious or unconscious substantial views render ‘primary apprehension of what morality is’ (Murdoch 1956a: 33) contestable in a manner that makes it ‘advisable to return frequently to an initial survey of “the moral” so as to reconsider, in the light of a primary apprehension of what morality is, what our technical devises

actually *do* for us' (Murdoch 1956a: 33) but it also upsets some rather common distinctions.³²

Firstly, seeing morality as a perfectible and thereby contestable vision of the world makes difficult any rendition of a demarcated field of study. This difficulty, or even impossibility, of demarcation makes it difficult to make a division between two more or less overlapping sub-disciplines of 'normative ethics'—understood as an inquiry into first-order normative questions such as *e.g.*, 'What makes right acts right?', 'Is it wrong to eat meat?'—and 'meta-ethics'—*i.e.* investigations into second-order questions concerning *e.g.*, the semantic, ontological, psychological, and epistemological underpinnings of normative and evaluative judgments—and the corresponding distinction between 'substantive' and 'formal axiology' since the demarcation of such a second-order is obviously dependent upon a more-or-less neat demarcation or specification of the 'first' order (see Diamond 2010: 78; on this see Crary 2011). I believe, in short, that the methods and concerns of moral philosophy ought to go beyond what is suggested by the orthodox bipartite division of the field (*cf. e.g.*, McGinn 1997: 1-6). This does not, as Diamond (2010: 79) points out 'rule out the asking of second-order questions about things that one takes to belong within moral thought' but it does rule out the idea of a neat delineation given beforehand that can be the object of detached study.

Secondly, understanding morality as a permeating and all-encompassing vision goes against treating 'moral concepts as functioning within a world that is given to us independently of the exercise of moral capacities' (Crary 2011: 332). If 'moral concepts don't presuppose a world which is in a sense given for, or even prior to, moral thought and life' (Diamond 2010: 56) so that '[m]oral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic [but rather] set up, for different purposes, a different world' (Murdoch 1970: 28/321) the idea of non-moral properties, predicates *etc.* cannot be taken for granted, or somewhat weaker, their relevance to moral philosophy cannot be taken for granted. If this is so, then this also might render problematic the incorporation of results in other areas into the realm of moral philosophy, especially if we also believe that concepts in these areas are 'set up' for their own purposes which could be disorienting when taken for granted in moral philosophy (*cf.* Murdoch 1970: 24-29/319-322; on this see Diamond 1996; 2010; Crary 2011). Thus, '[s]cience can instruct morality

³² As Diamond 2010: 52 points out, it is unclear why 'we should, on reconsidering it, do any better' but I take it that doing so *whilst being aware* of our tendency to load our understanding with substantial views of our own and doing so while engaging with others in an ongoing debate might open our eyes.

at certain points and can change its direction, but it cannot contain morality, nor ergo moral philosophy' (Murdoch 1970: 29/321).

The phrase 'we are perpetually moralists'—quoted from the section dealing with John Milton in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81)—has been used by Samuel Goldberg (1993; on this see Diamond 1996: esp. 102-104) to emphasise 'the general point' that people 'may or may not happen to understand geometry, or need to' but that it is not a matter either of chance or choice whether they are moralists in the sense of being 'alive as a human being among other human beings' (Goldberg 1993: 2). It is thus a mistake, Goldberg (1993: 2-3) argues (and Diamond 1996: 102 follows suit) to tie evaluation solely to the notion of choice, as it is 'only one of the numerous modes of activity in which our sense of values is evident and determinative' (Diamond 1996: 102-103).

Murdoch is, arguably, the most forceful modern exponent and defendant of the idea that morality, rather than being a delineated field of study, is more fruitfully thought of as a kind of vision that pervades thought so that all consciousness has moral character (see Murdoch 1956a: esp. 39-41; 1970; 1992: esp. 221-223 (on this see Diamond 1996: 103-104)). Most contemporary defendants of this idea, such as *e.g.*, Samuel Goldberg (1993: esp. 253ff), Cora Diamond (1991: 306, 373-380; 1996; 2010; on these see Crary 2011), Alice Crary (2007: 3, 35, 38, 39, 47; 2016), and John McDowell (1979: esp. 350nn35-37; 1994; *cf.* Conradi 2001: 303) follow Murdoch rather closely.³³

It might be thought that the idea of value as ubiquitous wreaks havoc with the so-called 'fact-value distinction'—*i.e.* some version of the idea that the factual and the evaluative are mutually exclusive, distinct, *etc.*—and while in a sense it does, we are, as Diamond (1996: 108-109), I think rightly, points out, left with a different understanding of this distinction since '[i]f value is in a sense ubiquitous, if one wants to speak of it as tied to "quality of consciousness," one *is* distinguishing it from whatever can form *a* subject matter among others' (Diamond 1996: 108 emphasizes in original).³⁴ This distinction paints practical rationality as a matter of interpreting something or other as having a bearing on practical life, of bringing something into one's *practical world* and consequently a

³³ McDowell's philosophical project might be described as substituting Murdoch's (neo-)Platonism for an Aristotelianism and that does away with elements of Catholic mysticism that Murdoch inherits from Simone Weil. For others that follow Murdoch's lead see Broackes 2012: 7n18. For Murdoch's role in the debate over the relationship between fiction and moral philosophy see Hämäläinen 2016a: esp. 152ff.

³⁴ I wish to remain neutral with regards to whether the fact-value distinction is best understood as linguistic, conceptual, or metaphysical, *etc.* in nature.

lot hinges on how we understand our articulation of the practical world we inhabit and the nature of the moral concepts we employ in understanding it.

This model of practical rationality as moralized (total) vision should not, as Diamond (1996: 107-108) points out, be conflated with an understanding of our vision as dependent upon activity. My failure to notice peaches in the shop based on the fact that I am allergic to them is different from my failure to notice the meat-freezer on account of me thinking the consumption of meat immoral. Better yet, to appropriate an example of Diamond's (1996: 107), think of the way a mushroom-fancier in an autumnal woodland might notice every possible gleam of chanterelle but fail to notice the beauty of the landscape completely. On such occasions, what is *there to be seen* is shaped by the activity and thus comes in kinds shaped by particular interests and activities. On Murdoch's model *attention itself* is moralized.

2.3 Murdoch's Platonism

Murdoch was a self-professed Platonist:

I think love is my main subject. I have very mixed feelings about the concept of freedom now. This is partly a philosophical development. I once was a kind of existentialist and now I am a kind of Platonist. What I am concerned about really is love, but this sounds very grandiose (Murdoch, as quoted in Rose 2003: 25).

The existentialist beginning of Murdoch's career as a philosopher acknowledged here—which she herself de-emphasised in later interviews—was rather quickly abandoned. Indeed, Murdoch was—despite her first main philosophical work *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953) and early existentialist-themed novels such as *Under the Net* (1954)—never fully in the grips of the movement (*cf.* Larson 2009: 21-37). A. S. Byatt, in her early monograph on Murdoch, *Degrees of Freedom: The early novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965), sums up her reflections on Murdoch's early novels by saying that if these 'asks Sartrean questions, they do not offer Sartrean answers' (Byatt 1965: 308), and I think that this is telling of how independent Murdoch's treatment of existentialism was, even at these early stages. As the quote which began this section indicates, Murdoch—inspired by Simone Weil (see Larson 2009: 22-23)—soon moved from the existentialist preoccupation with freedom to an emphasis on the Platonic notion of love.

Two important aspects of Murdoch's reading of Plato should be noted from the outset: her naturalistic, or non-dualistic, understanding of Plato's metaphysics and her emphasis on perception as central to morality. We shall return to both of these themes throughout what follows, but for now it is enough to say something more about the first.

Murdoch's interpretation of Plato—like, arguably, that of Simone Weil (see *e.g.*, Weil 1978: 219-221; Larson 2009: 21-51, esp. 22-23) despite the latter's explicit religious convictions—is notably non-dualistic in the sense that she rejects any reading of Plato which operates with an inflated ontology postulating a Fregean third-realm.³⁵ Rather, she takes Plato to assume or argue for an understanding of the world as unified in the sense that it encompasses only one reality which becomes increasingly more real as it progresses towards increasing abstraction and the Form of the Good. This metaphysics is mirrored in Plato's account of moral progress. Murdoch puts the point thus:

Plato pictures human life as a pilgrimage from appearance to reality. The intelligence, seeking satisfaction, moves from uncritical acceptance of sense experience and of conduct, to a more sophisticated and morally enlightened understanding (Murdoch 1977: 2/387).

It is this manoeuvre that paves the way for her naturalism (at least as far as this amounts to a reading and extension of Plato). Such a reading also serves to bring Aristotle and Plato closer together (which is why John McDowell would later be able to develop many of Murdoch's insights along (neo-) Aristotelian lines).

As David Robjant (2012) points out, the metaphysical implications of Murdoch's Platonism have been subject to two lines of attack that in important respects are reversals of one another. On the one hand some commentators see Murdoch's position as flawed precisely because it adheres to (whatever the commentator in question takes to be) a troubling Platonic metaphysical system.

On the other hand, some commentators rightly observe that for Murdoch '[t]here is only one reality and it is located firmly upon the Earth' (Whibley 1998: 382) but then go on to complain that this treatment of Plato's metaphysics as a continuum in accordance with the Simile of the Sun (Pl. *Rep.* 507b–509c) and the Allegory of the Cave (Pl. *Rep.* 514a–520a) at the expense of some connotations of (a heavily ontological reading of) the Analogy of the Divided Line (Pl. *Rep.*

³⁵ While there is no mention of Gottlob Frege in either Conradi 1997 or in Murdoch 1992 he was still, as Broackes (2012: 49n101) points out, very much part of the intellectual milieu of the time as he was considered essential to a proper understanding of Wittgenstein. It is thus reasonable to assume that Murdoch would be more than familiar with Frege's philosophy as well as the tendency by many of her contemporaries to understand Plato's metaphysics along Fregean lines.

509d–511e) gets Plato wrong and does ‘violence to the original Platonic schema’ (Whibley 1998: 383). The idea behind Murdoch’s priority ordering of the Simile of the Sun and the Allegory of the Cave over the Analogy of the Divided Line is clearly expressed in the following quote which also clearly emphasises the epistemic side of the line over its ontological counterpart:

I shall take it that the cave illuminates the line, and that we are to attach importance to these distinctions [*i.e.* those relating to the lower stages of the enlightening process]. The details of what happens in the cave are to be studied seriously; and the ‘lower half’ of the story is not just an explanatory image of the ‘higher half’, but significant in itself. The pilgrim is thus seen as passing through different states of awareness whereby the higher reality is studied first in the form of shadows or images. These levels of awareness have (perhaps: Plato is not prepared to be clear on this, 533e, 534a) objects with different degrees of reality; and to these awarenesses, each with its characteristic mode of desire, correspond different parts of the soul. The lowest part of the soul is egoistic, irrational, and deluded, the central part is aggressive and ambitious, the highest part is rational and good and knows the truth which lies beyond all images and hypotheses (Murdoch 1977: 4-5/389).

Regardless of what we might think of such a reading of Plato it is clear that Murdoch operates with such an understanding given *e.g.*, her use of Schopenhauer’s remarks that ‘[t]he task of metaphysics is not to pass beyond the experience in which the world exists, but to understand it’ (Schopenhauer 1969: 427-428, quoted by Murdoch 1992: 79), and her discussion of the Allegory of the Cave (at Murdoch 1970: 89-91; on this see *e.g.*, Jordan 2014: 373n10, Whibley 1998, Robjant 2012).

The central issue here, of course, is not whether Murdoch gets Plato right—although I think that there is a strong case to be made for thinking that she does (on this see Robjant 2012)—but the power that is to be gained from her interpretation when it comes to accounting for phenomena such as moral progress and motivation.

2.4 Murdoch’s Conceptualism and an Example

Central to Murdoch’s defence of the idea that ‘[t]he area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our

relations with the world' (Murdoch 1970: 97/380) is an understanding of moral concepts as—to use a phrase of Murdoch's repeatedly appropriated by Diamond (e.g., 2010: 53-54; cf. Crary: 2011: 333)—'cloudy and shifting' (Murdoch 1957a: 122/75).

That we are to read Murdoch as primarily concerned with concepts, as opposed to say words or terms, is, I think, evidenced by remarks such as the following:

Words may mislead us here since words are often stable while concepts alter (Murdoch 1970: 29/322),

or,

We were too impressed with words when we assumed that the word 'good' covered a single concept which was the centre of morality. We were not impressed enough when we neglected less general moral words such as 'true', 'brave', 'free', 'sincere', which are the bearers of very important ideas. [...] It is in terms of the inner complexity of such concepts that we may display really deep differences of moral vision' (Murdoch 1957a: 119-120/73).

The idea that concepts are central for morality is duly emphasised by Murdoch early on in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

That mental concepts enter the sphere of morality is, for my argument, precisely the central point (Murdoch 1970: 24/318).

The idea here is that 'a moral concept seems less like a moveable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of *Gestalt*' (Murdoch 1956a: 40-41, cf. *ibid.* 55). The 'cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men live by' is, Murdoch adds, 'subject to historical change' (Murdoch 1957a: 122/74-75):

But once the historical individual is 'let in' a number of things have to be said with a difference. The idea of 'objective reality', for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to 'the world described by science', but in relation to the progressing life of a person. The active 'reassessing' and 'redefining' which is a main characteristic of live personality often suggests and demands a checking procedure which is a function of individual history. Repentance may mean something different to an individual at different times in his life, and what it fully means is a part of his life and cannot be understood except in context (Murdoch 1970: 26/319-320).

Thus seeing moral reality as a matter of a changing practical world made up of conceptions that shift and deepen with time given personal reflection allows Murdoch to paint a plausible picture of moral progress that centres on the inner life of the person and lays the foundation for her particular brand of moral realism by seeing morality—and more specifically ‘the Good’ in Murdoch’s Platonic imagery—as incarnate (*cf.* Murdoch 1992: 508) in everyday experience of our practical world while at the same time removed from us and discoverable only in our dealings with particulars, and above all in our dealings with particular others.³⁶ Imbedded in this imagery there resides, as Nora Hämäläinen points out, a powerful spatial metaphor:

The cave metaphor, and its attached ideas of ascendance, of vision, of moral improvement as both spiritual and cognitive improvement, provides a powerful imagery to which Murdoch constantly returns [...]. Moral experience, as described by Murdoch, has this vertical dimension, the dimension of ascendance, as a central component (Hämäläinen 2016a: 164; see also *ibid.* 161).

Murdoch’s understanding of moral concepts thus implies the thesis—often called *conceptualism*—that ‘our perceptual relation to the world is conceptual all the way out to the world’s impacts on our receptive capacities’ (McDowell 2007: 338) meaning that there is no such thing as raw sense data making perception dependent upon our particular ‘*scheme of concepts*’ (Murdoch 1970: 24/318, my emphasis; *Cf. e.g.*, Murdoch 1970: 29/322, 37/329, 45/336).³⁷ One’s conceptual scheme so understood may restrict, enlarge, and focus the range of options one is able to recognize and thus works to reveal the character of the (as the scheme develops untoward an ideal limit increasingly private) moral world that one inhabits. This does not make it impossible, on Murdoch’s understanding, to see or act upon a need for conceptual innovation as such restriction in and of itself can serve as an impulse to this (on this see Broackes 2012: 12).

³⁶ One should, as a perfectly good philosophical rule-of-thumb, be wary of claims to the necessity of how ‘we’ *have* to perceive things. I also believe that such insistence runs contrary to both the practicality and the perspectival openness of Murdoch’s thought. It is enough, I think, to establish her brand of realism as a plausible candidate that we—that is some of us—*do* think of (or rather perceive) goodness as something beyond us and that invites talk of it in such terms as a helpful tool in getting on with our lives.

³⁷ On this see McDowell 1994: 5, 1212n10, 29-34, 70-72, 135-146. Dreyfus (2005) argues that this model cannot accommodate the phenomenology of unreflective coping. For a, to my mind, thoroughly convincing rebuttal see McDowell (2007). For McDowell, the restriction—which is implied here—to normal mature human beings is gathered from Aristotle (*cf. e.g.*, Arist. *EE*1226^b15-30; see McDowell 1994: 108ff.; Cray 2016). In Murdoch’s case it is plausibly a result of the work that she conducted together with the other members of the Somerville School.

Murdoch combines this conceptualism with the thesis that (most) moral concepts defy bifurcation into purely non-evaluative and evaluative components (which leaves us in no position to claim that someone not sharing the outlook to which the concept belong could understand it). Concepts that resist analysis into non-evaluative and evaluative (on this terminology see Roberts 2011: 492-493) are, following Williams (1985) presumably drawing on Ryle's (1968) notion of 'thick description', usually called 'thick concepts' and the literature on the topic is huge (for two relatively recent overviews see Roberts (2013) and Väyrynen (2016)). I refrain from using the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' evaluative concepts here since I find it plausible that the difference between them, if there is one, is simply a matter of degree (*cf.* Williams 1985: 140-141; on the limits of divergence concerning 'thin' concepts see Foot 1978: 96-109) and since I think it inadvisable—although undeniably tempting in light of her talk of *e.g.*, 'normative-descriptive words' (Murdoch 1970: 41/333)—to understand Murdoch in such a manner since what she is after goes beyond Williams's distinction (on this see Setiya 2013: 10-15; *cf.* Diamond 1996: 82-84). Murdoch seems to acknowledge the existence of empty moral concepts such as 'right' (*cf. e.g.*, Murdoch 1970: 41-42/333-334) but argues that they 'could be dispensed with entirely and all moral work could be done by the secondary specialized' concepts (Murdoch 1970: 42/333). Such concepts of the latter sort are 'patently tied to the world' (Murdoch 1970: 90/374) lest value be relegated to 'a shadowy existence in terms of emotive language, imperatives, behaviour, patterns, attitudes' (Murdoch 1970: 57/347) and they are to a certain extent also private:

[C]ommunication of a new moral concept cannot necessarily be achieved by specification of factual criteria open to any observer ("Approve of *this* Area.") but may involve the communication of a completely new, possibly far-reaching and coherent vision; and it is surely true that we cannot always *understand* other people's moral concepts' (Murdoch 1956a: 41; On the reference to Foot (1954) that accompanies this quote see Broackes 15n39).

There is certainly intuitive appeal to this understanding of concept-possession. As Kieran Setiya (2013: 10; *cf.* Crary 2007: 41-43) points out '[w]e say that our understanding of repentance and love has grown, not merely that we have learned new facts about them'. It is important to realise that what Murdoch has to say on the subject of moral concepts goes not only for the concepts we use to describe our options—such as *e.g.*, classical virtue and vice-epithets such as 'just', 'courageous', 'cruel' *etc.*—but also for concepts with which we describe our circumstances and the people around us with which we interact. This is made clear in Murdoch's most famous example of a mother-in-law, M, who initially

‘feels that her son has married beneath him’ (Murdoch 1970: 17/312) but who successively comes to appreciate her daughter-in-law, D, by seeing her in a different light. As is pointed out by Susan Wolf, ‘Murdoch’s description is, tellingly, much longer than descriptions of examples typically offered in essays of moral philosophy in which choices of whether to kill one to save five, for example, involving runaway trolleys or lifeboats, are sketched in a sentence or two’ (Wolf 2014). On top of this the example is not designed to work in the manner of run-of-the-mill thought experiments used in moral philosophy in aid of conceptual analysis, to clarify abstract states of affairs, or as evidence for or against a given theory, principle, *etc.* Murdoch’s explicit aim is rather to direct our attention to ‘what we are irresistibly inclined to say’ (Murdoch 1970: 16/312) about the case and in doing so laying out the ‘simple and obvious facts’ (Murdoch 1970: 1/299) that are to serve as the basis for further theorizing in accordance with the methodology embraced by the Sommerville School outlined above.³⁸ In short, the example of M and D is an exercise in depictive metaphysics. Since the example, where a few things, worth disentangling, are run together, is much discussed but seldom repeated it is worth giving here at length³⁹:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very ‘correct’ person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M’s mind.

Thus much for M’s first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D,

³⁸ It is worth mentioning, already at this stage, that the way Murdoch utilizes her example here mirrors (at least) one of the ways in which literature is thought to be able to aid moral discovery and progress.

³⁹ The example, quoted here at length, is given at Murdoch 1970: 16-17/312-313 and is followed by an imagined behaviorist interpretation (at 18-21/313-315). After that (at 21-23/316-318) Murdoch gives her interpretation of the story, and this interpretation is followed up with a discussion of moral progress (at 31-33). I am grateful to Dan Egonsson and Andrés Garcia for stimulating conversations and insightful suggestions that greatly helped my dealings with these matters.

imprisoned (if I may use the question-begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: ‘I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.’ Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent, or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D’s behaviour but in M’s mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. And as I say, *ex hypothesi*, M’s outward behaviour, beautiful from the start, in no way alters (Murdoch 1970: 16-17/312-313, emphases in original).

At first glance the example—with its stressing of inner change not observable in outward behaviour—is easily mistaken for a rather straight-forward attack on a form of by now by-and-large outdated behaviourism (even though elements of it remain (see Broackes 2012: 47; Setiya 2013: 9)). However, what is truly at issue here, I believe, are a number of interrelated points; through the example Murdoch lays the foundation for a kind of *moral realism*, highlights the central role of *attention*, and explicates the role of *the idea of perfection* as an *ideal limit*. In the following sections I will work through these features in turn.

2.5 Murdoch’s Realism

The example of M and D is, in part, meant to support a kind of moral realism. Justin Broackes puts the point thus:

[A] main line of argument derives a kind of moral realism or ‘naturalism’ directly from this kind of case: for if we can take at face value M’s perceptions—if we can accept Murdoch’s description of the mother’s change, and accept that what she sees ‘justly or lovingly’ is indeed there to be seen—, then we can conclude that D is indeed (‘in the world’, so to speak) ‘not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay’ and so on (Broackes 2012: 46).

The relevant kind of ‘naturalism’ comes close to what Peter Strawson (1985) calls a ‘liberal’, ‘soft’, or ‘catholic’ version that recognizes the perspective of the natural sciences but unlike its ‘reductive’, ‘strict’, or, ‘hard’ counterpart also recognizes another perspective on the world that is compatible with—but irreducible to—

the scientific one. Even closer, perhaps, is the distinction drawn by John McDowell between two sorts of naturalism. On the one hand there is ‘neo-Humean’ (1995a: 165, 175) or ‘bald’ (McDowell 1994: 67, 73, 76-77, 88-89) naturalism that takes for granted that reality is ‘exhausted by the natural world, in the sense of the world as the natural sciences are capable of revealing it to us’ (McDowell 1995a: 157) but that morality still can be understood as rooted in the natural world even as it is thus understood in abstraction from any specifically human concern. On the other hand there is what McDowell calls ‘Aristotelian naturalism’ (1995: 178), ‘naturalism of second nature’ (McDowell 1994: 86), or ‘naturalized Platonism’ (McDowell 1994: 91) which resists the problematically restrictive conception of nature inherent in ‘bald’ naturalism in order to grant ‘the space of reasons’ (McDowell 1994: 92; McDowell borrows the term from Sellars 1956: §36) a sort of autonomy in that ‘it is not derivable from, or reflective of, truths about human beings that are capturable independently of having that structure in view’ (McDowell 1994: 92).⁴⁰

The thought here is, it seems, that if a certain kind of scientism can be resisted we must allow into the world cases of ‘normative characteristics’ (Murdoch 1970: 42/334), or ‘moral facts’ (Murdoch 1956a: 54) reported by M using ‘normative-descriptive words’ (Murdoch 1970: 41/333) on the pains of not being able to recognize ‘individual’ (Murdoch 1970: 29/322) persons in the world at all.⁴¹ Reality thus, we are forced to admit, contains features which are accessible only to creatures with a certain kind of subjectivity and conceptualisation of the world which is why ‘[t]he idea of “objective reality” [...] undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to “the world described by science”, but in relation to the progressing life of a person’ (Murdoch 1970: 26/320). What we get here is the idea of moral reality as both simple—in that it

⁴⁰ Notice that this running together of Platonic and Aristotelian insights is made possible, at least partly, by the shared methodological assumptions and understanding of phenomena discussed in § 2.1 above.

⁴¹ The kind of ‘scientism’—*i.e.* the kind allowing as real only the publicly observable—which would rule out Murdoch’s proposal is under sustained attack in the later parts of the first essay of *The Sovereignty of Good*. Part of Murdoch’s target here is thus not just scientism, behaviorism, or ‘scientific naturalist conceptions of persons in general’ (Broackes 2012: 47) but any kind of divided understanding of the self. This insistence on a unified self goes against both the kind of belief-desire moral psychology with its adjacent value-free world for which the *locus classicus* is Hume (1978 [1738-40] 2.3.3; 3.1.1f.) and voluntarist (*e.g.*, Kant, Scotus, Ockham) divisions between ‘a pure rational agent and an impersonal mechanism’ (Murdoch 1970: 54/344) since neither of those have any chance of portraying man as ‘a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees’ (Murdoch 1970: 40/331-332; *cf.* Murdoch 1992: 148, 250, 320, 399, 506-507 which also connects this to a Platonic understanding of the soul).

simply amounts to ‘a world of people and things with *refreshing simplicity, spontaneity*, and other such qualities’ (Broackes 2012: 35)—and transcendent in the sense that this reality, in its endless complexity, goes beyond what we may at any point in time capture of it and in the sense that there is more to the concepts we use in trying to understand it than what figures in our partial conceptions (see Broackes 2012: 34-35).

Murdoch imagines that someone might object that her kind of realism runs the risk ‘making morality into a dogma’ (Murdoch 1957a: 109/66):

In short, if you start to think of morality as part of a general way of conceiving the universe, as part of a larger conceptual framework, you may cease to be reflective and responsible about it, you may begin to regard it as a sort of fact. And as soon as you regard your moral system as a sort of fact, and not a set of values which exist only through your own choices, your moral conduct will degenerate (Murdoch 1957a: 109/66).

After noting that this kind of objection is moral in character (as opposed to being ‘logical’ or ‘philosophical’ in that it assumes that ‘certain bad results follow in practice from thinking about morality in a certain way’) and based on (possibly unconscious) substantial ‘roughly [...] Protestant and less roughly [...] Liberal’ convictions (Murdoch 1957a: 109-110/66) Murdoch goes on to discredit this view’s claim to necessity through pointing out that its assumptions of individualism, zealous separation of fact and value, and understanding of freedom of choice become questionable once its underlying assumptions are questioned and alternatives put forth.

A number of interpretations of Murdoch’s realism are available in the literature. This is, in a way, surprising since I feel the need to confess that to me, these interpretations and the driving force behind them, although interesting in their own right, seem alien to Murdoch’s larger philosophical project for at least two reasons.

Firstly, this is so since the thoroughgoing practical aim—*i.e.* the conviction that moral philosophy’s ultimate purpose is to aid agents in their daily lives by asking ‘What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better?’ (Murdoch 1970: 52/342, emphasis in original)—does not seem to be serviced, or at least not very fruitfully so, by metaphysical inquiry of the kind seeking to provide ultimate foundations for moral thought. That is to say, it seems we can get rather far by seeking to establish ‘what we are irresistibly inclined to say’ (Murdoch 1970: 16/312) without having to bother with the ultimate foundations that allow this. This goes for both metaphysical inquires aiming to locate value in the world described by science—to which

Murdoch, as we have seen, would have further objections—and for enterprises relying on more broadly construed metaphysical speculation simply because the questions and the answers at home in such enterprises are not central to the practical project of ethics. The above, I think, goes somewhere towards explaining why Murdoch’s own remarks concerning the ontological status of the Good are so cryptic (on this see also Jordan 2014: 372-374; Hämäläinen 2016a: 159-167)

Secondly, Murdoch exhibits a tendency—inherited, at least in part, we might suspect, from Bradley (see *e.g.*, Bradley 1927: viii-ix, 202-206, 249-250, 313ff.)—to regard her own position as anything but final or definitive. Murdoch often confesses explicit doubts concerning her own conclusions (see *e.g.*, 1970: 70/357, 74/360-361; on this see Altorf 2013) and her text often reads (deliberately, we can be sure) as dialogues without definitive conclusions (on this see Tracy 1996: esp. 66ff.; Altorf 2013). It would therefore run contrary to Murdoch’s understanding of her own project to attempt to give a definitive reading aimed to be the end of the matter. Moral philosophy, Murdoch seems to think, ought to be thought of as continual never-ending explication of the phenomena. In addition, metaphysics, which is to aid moral philosophy, is ‘not about freezing an image of our relation to a transcendent reality in the form of a metaphysical system [...] but rather the perpetual activity of describing our experience of being in the world’ (Hämäläinen 2016a: 165).

This being said, we must still try to get clear on where Murdoch stands, and what her understanding of this perpetual process is, in order to make progress and here reconstructions and interpretations have their obvious role to play. There is then, obviously, something to be said about how Murdoch’s practical project ties in with the metaphysics of value, and there are some interpretative desiderata to be kept in mind when doing so. Any account we give must accord with Murdoch’s self-professed realism while not collapsing into *inflationary realism*—*i.e.* a kind of realism postulating mind-independent, non-natural moral properties discoverable via some intuitive or perceptual faculty—, *pragmatic realism*—*i.e.* a ‘philosophy of “as if”’ (Murdoch 1970:72-73/359-360)—or some (crude) kind of *projectivism*—*i.e.* the idea that value is superimposed by us upon the world in a manner that attains enough ontological respectability (on this see *e.g.*, Brännmark 2002: 64-69)—all of which Murdoch opposes. In addition, any attempted reconstruction or interpretation must do justice to the simplicity of Murdoch’s realism. It is here, argues Nora Hämäläinen (2016a: 162), that Maria Antonaccio’s (2000: 116) description of Murdoch’s stance as a “‘reflexive’ or ‘hermeneutical’ realism”—*i.e.* the establishment of ‘a criterion of valid moral knowledge in and through the reflexive medium of consciousness itself’ (Antonaccio 2000: 116)—fails since the ‘labeling suggests too much of a

theoretical burden' (Hämäläinen 2016a: 162). Hämäläinen (2016a: 162-163) further argues that Antonaccio's (2000: 123) reliance on an 'ontological proof' (based on Murdoch's (1992: 391-430) discussion of Anselm drawing on Simone Weil and Heidegger (on this see Broakes 2012: 21n57)) in understanding Murdoch's realism is problematic since it (i) distorts her understanding of metaphysics by uncharacteristically placing an *argument* rather than *metaphors* at the center of her account, (ii) downplays Murdoch's direct appeal to everyday experience, and (iii) makes Murdoch stand out as too much of an oddity than her central influence on the ethics and literature debate would suggest.

In essence, then, whatever reconstruction or interpretation (in terms of *e.g.*, response-dependent properties coupled with a kind of ideal-observer account of correctness (see Jordan 2014)) of Murdoch's realism might be attempted it must account for her central insight that the vantage-point of common experience presupposes the existence of good and evil as something found rather than created:

On the kind of view which I have been offering it seems that we do really know a certain amount about Good and about the way in which it is connected with our condition. 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. We are not usually in doubt about the direction in which Good lies. Equally we recognize the real existence of evil: cynicism, cruelty, indifference to suffering. (Murdoch 1970: 95/380).

Furthermore, any account of Murdoch's realism must respect that, apart from being presupposed in our ordinary lives, good and evil as well as the reality of the inner life of ourselves and others are also elusive in that they resist anything but metaphorical description and analysis.⁴² Murdoch draws our attention to this immediately after the passage just quoted:

[T]he concept of Good still remains obscure and mysterious. We see the world in the light of the Good, but what is the Good itself? The source of vision is not in the ordinary sense seen. Plato says of it 'It is that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does all it does, with some intuition of its nature, and yet also baffled' (*Republic* 505) And he also says that Good is the source of knowledge and truth and yet is something which surpasses them in splendor (*Republic* 508-9) (Murdoch 1970: 95/380).

⁴² The use of metaphor—in the way employed by the depictive metaphysics of the Somerville School—should not, as Hämäläinen 2016a: 164 points out, be understood as producing a closed or conclusive theoretical framework or suggest anything like an esoteric Fregean third realm.

Morality is thus both natural to us and a source of bewilderment in that its close ties to progress hints at transcendence. Bradley puts the point thus:

Morality is an endless process, and therefore a self-contradiction; and, being such, it does not remain standing in itself, but feels the impulse to transcend its existing reality (Bradley 1927: 313).

Morality is thus taken to transcend individual situations, wants, and choices in a way that requires our careful attention to the demands placed upon us. Our experiences of our practical world thus, as Nora Hämäläinen (2016a: 164-166) argues, suggest an understanding of (practical) metaphysics as an activity amounting to *'image play; approximating with images and metaphorical descriptions a reality and ideas about our relation to and place in that reality'* (Hämäläinen 2016a: 165, italics in original).

Metaphysics understood as the activity of trying to articulate our human condition and its limits thus, according to Murdoch, is inextricably bound up with metaphors and metaphorical thought:

The development of consciousness in human beings is inseparably connected with the use of metaphor. Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision. Philosophy in general, and moral philosophy in particular, has in the past often concerned itself with what it took to be our most important images, clarifying existing ones and developing new ones. [...] [I]t seems to me impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without the resort to metaphor, since the concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance (Murdoch 1970: 75/363).

One reason why metaphors are unavoidable here is the nature of our grasp of moral (and other practical) concepts and it is to this issue that we now must turn.

2.6 Concept Possession and Moral Progress

The example of M and D is also designed to make plausible the claim that full possession of a concept transcends mastery of its public use, by means of a return to the phenomena themselves in terms of a story of a change of vision designed to make us realise that—innocent of theory—we are inclined to conceive of this kind

of conceptual mastery as an unending progress towards perfection (Murdoch 1970: 27-29/319-322; on this see Setiya 2013: 9; Broackes 2012: 41-43). The example thus illustrates Murdoch's understanding of moral progress as a process of a change of *vision* through *attention* towards an *ideal limit*. Her conclusion makes the connection between the rejection of a genetic analysis of meaning, conceptual mastery, and moral progress:

The entry into a mental concept of the notion of an ideal limit destroys the genetic analysis of meaning. [...] Let us see how this is. Is 'love' a mental concept, and so can it be analysed genetically? No doubt Mary's little lamb loved Mary, that is it followed her to school; and in some sense of 'learn' we might well learn the concept, the word, in that context. But with such a concept it is not the end of the matter. [...] Words may mislead us here since words are often stable while concepts alter; we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty. A deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process, takes place. There are two senses of 'knowing what a word means', one connected with ordinary language, the other very much less so. Knowledge of a value concept is something to be understood, as it were, in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal network. Moreover, if morality is essentially connected with change and progress, we cannot be as democratic about it as some philosophers would like to think. We do not simply, through being rational and knowing ordinary language, 'know' the meaning of all necessary moral words. We may have to learn the meaning; and since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit (Murdoch 1970: 28-29/322).

M's moral progress towards perfection in the grasp of concepts and other people comes about through her giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. Murdoch italicises the word 'attention' in the context of the example of M and D and she later reiterates its importance:

I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent (Murdoch 1970: 34/327).

The notion of 'attention', as used by Murdoch, is normative (Murdoch 1970: 36/329) and should thus not be conflated with merely attending to (further) details of the case and finding out more information through doing so (M's view

of D does not get more *detailed* as the example progresses) even though this can be the case⁴³:

M's snobbishness *could* lead her to have some empirically false beliefs about D—that she votes Labour perhaps—but her seeing of D as pert and common is a *mode* of false-because-snobbish seeing of D. Equally, that failure to see D, or false seeing of her, is not 'cured' by M's acquisition of information but by her coming to see D in a different way—namely, lovingly and justly (Cordner 2016: 210).

Nor is 'attention' just a matter of a fuller picture of the other's psychology since, as Blum (2012: 311) and Cordner (2016: 205-206) point out, perceived vulnerabilities forming part of such a larger picture could be acted upon with malicious intent thus failing to constitute anything like a just and loving vision (see also Wolf 2014: esp. 378-382 and the other contributions to Wolf and Grau 2014). There are several distinctions at work pertaining to the perceptual words employed by Murdoch.⁴⁴ First there is the broad category of what is seen (which Blum 2012: 309 calls the 'subjectively perceived' and that I have talked about in terms of a 'practical world' above) as that which is perceptually and morally present and salient to the agent.⁴⁵ The notion of such a subjectively perceived practical world carries no implications of veridicality and can be untrue as the result of a 'distorted vision' (Murdoch 1970: 36/329). But, as we have seen, mere accuracy, even penetrating accuracy (see Cordner 2016: 207) is not enough for attention as Murdoch understands it. Attention requires a direction *to the object* as *becoming present to it* marked by receptiveness that raises above our tendency to 'emotional self-protection' (Velleman 1999: 361; cf. Cordner 2016: 209; Freeman 2015). Just and loving attention is thus, through a process of unselfing (Murdoch 1970: 82/367-368)—of transcending (see Murdoch 1970: 57-60/346-349) the 'fat relentless ego' (Murdoch 1970: 52/342) in a 'progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly' (Murdoch 1970: 23/317)—, a matter of letting oneself

⁴³ Cordner 2016 attributes this mistake of thinking of Murdochian moral progress as a matter of acquiring additional information to Driver (2012), Millgram (2004), and Blum (2012) while pointing out that it is avoided by Bagnoli (2012: 216-217) and Laverty (2007: 99-104).

⁴⁴ As is pointed out by Blum (2012: 309), Murdoch's terminology does not appear to be altogether consistent. It is also important to realize that although Murdoch's vocabulary is largely limited to words carrying visual connotations this is not meant as a restriction to visual perception.

⁴⁵ In so far as 'see' is usually used as a success verb Murdoch's occasional use of this word is sometimes unfortunate. See below, and Blum 2012: 309. As Blum 2012: 309n3 points out the word 'agent', although difficult to substitute, is potentially misleading since one of Murdoch's main points is that 'the value-infused reality subjectively present to the individual person is of moral significance not only in regard to her *agency* but to her *moral being more generally*' (Blum 2012: 309n3, emphasis in original).

be seen as much as it is a matter of seeing. The concept of ‘unselfing’, Murdoch later acknowledged, also has its origin in Simone Weil’s thought:

A discipline of meditation wherein the mind is alert but emptied of self enables this form of awareness, and the disciplined practice of various skills [*i.e.* the Platonic understanding of *techné*, see §4.2 below] may promote a similar unselfing, or ‘*décréation*’ to use Simone Weil’s vocabulary (Murdoch 1992: 245).

As Kate Larson (2009: 41) suggests, it might be that this Weilian influence, or conceptual debt, is not acknowledged in *The Sovereignty of Good* because of the theological context of decreation. Roughly, the idea—as it manifests itself in Weil’s thought—is that since God’s creation of the world and its creatures (crowned by autonomous human beings) constitutes a self-sacrifice on God’s part since the value of God plus his creation is lower than the value of God. To restore this loss of value God’s created beings should return his gift—*i.e.* ‘abdicate from the sovereignty of self’ as Larson 2009: 41, puts it—by partaking in the process of decreation—a description of the created being’s return of the gift of God—which draws us out of our narrow perspective and reveals the necessity of the world and the equal value of all God’s children. Murdoch’s treatment of Weil’s *décréation* is typical of her treatment of her theological influences. What Murdoch does is to secularise the explicitly theological concept by substituting the Platonic Form of ‘the Good’ for ‘God’. This substitution leads—due to Murdoch’s naturalised reading of Plato—to an emphasis on the concept’s epistemological (*cf.* Plato’s so-called ‘Imperfection Argument’ at Pl. *Phd.* 74-76 and the allusion to this at Murdoch 1970: 67-68/355 and the continuous discussion of this in Murdoch 1977) and psychological (*cf.* the Neo-Platonist idea that the soul has a natural tendency to strive towards higher hierarchical stages; on this see *e.g.*, Remes 2008) aspects. This strategy, or understanding of Weil’s project, is hinted at already in Murdoch’s review of Weil’s *Notebooks*:

We are presented with a psychology whose sources are in Plato, in Eastern philosophy, and in the disciplines of Christian mysticism, and yet which bears upon contemporary problems of faith and action (Murdoch 1956a: 158).

The way in which Murdoch characterises Weil’s approach as providing ‘a psychology’ is telling when it comes to Murdoch’s appropriation of Weil’s thought. It also helps explain part of the appeal that Weil, so understood, must have had for Murdoch since it is exactly this kind of insight into philosophical psychology that Murdoch and the other members of the Somerville School saw as seriously lacking in the Oxford Philosophy of their day.

It should, however, also be noted that Murdoch is not simply appropriating, or distorting, elements of Weil's thought as she sees fit to serve her own needs. What Murdoch offers here, I think (and in this I follow Larson 2009: 37-45), is a rather plausible expansion of tendencies already inherent in Weil's Platonic take on Christian mysticism. Louis Dupré argues that, for Weil, '[o]ur very aspiration to live and to love rightly is the only way to avoid an ontological description of God as a divine "object"' (Dupré 2004: 15; on this see Larson 2009: 44). As Larson (2009: 44) points out, this idea has a clear parallel in Murdoch's naturalising substitution of 'God' for 'the Good'.

Given the emphasis on the psychological and epistemic aspects Murdoch is able to utilise Weil's concept by transforming it into a more easily digestible, secular, thesis about our need to combat our tendencies to resort to psychological defence-mechanisms that hinder our perception of the other.

In order to attend properly to the other we must truly let our guard down—*i.e.* avoid falling prey to our tendency to resort to role-playing and other means of making it seem like we are opening up whilst in fact retaining our emotional defences (see Cordner 2016: 209)—which is why it is proper to say, with Murdoch, that just vision is a matter of love.

An explanation as to how this process of letting oneself be seen is a matter of vision (seeing) might be in order here. The idea, I take it, is that attention as being present (letting oneself be seen) and attention as vision (seeing) are interdependent since many emotional defences set up in order to not be affected by the other simultaneously block our vision of that other.⁴⁶

We should not understand Murdochian loving vision along the lines of what Susan Wolf (2014: 370-373) calls 'the positive light conception'—*i.e.* an understanding of loving attention as 'attention that portrays its object as good' (Wolf 2014: 371)—even if it is indeed the case that M comes to see D in a positive light. According to this problematic conception, which is well entrenched in 'common conceptions of love to be found throughout our culture' (Wolf 2014: 372), 'one should, if not eliminate the negative, at least look away from it insofar as one allows oneself to see it' (Wolf 2014: 372).⁴⁷ This, as Wolf points out,

⁴⁶ On this interdependence in regard to Murdoch see Cordner 2016: 209; Velleman 1999: 361; *cf.* Stanley Cavell's (1969: esp. 279) reading of *King Lear* (a play that was a particular favourite of Murdoch's (see *e.g.*, Murdoch 1959a: 52/216, 1961: 20/295)).

⁴⁷ Wolf (2014: 370-372) distinguishes between two versions of 'the positive light conception'. On the 'subjective' version lovingness is construed as M's choosing to see D as bumptious rather than gay and as refreshingly simple rather than vulgar and where both views are correct but where one is loving and the other is not. On the 'selectively objective' version what makes for a loving vision is that it is both accurate *and* positive.

cannot be what Murdoch had in mind for “when M is just and loving she sees D as she really is,” there is no suggestion that M sees only part of what D really is, namely the good part. Moreover, she [*i.e.* Murdoch] frequently speaks [...] of the kind of attention at issue as both loving *and* just. Even if love can be imagined to paint its object in a rosy light, justice cannot’ (2014: 372).

Attending to, and recognizing, the other thus depends upon letting oneself lovingly be seen and recognized. This realisation explains the strong parallelism and close connection Murdoch postulates between art and morals and their connection to love:

Art and morals are, with certain provisos [...], 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 (Murdoch 1959a: 51/215).

The difficulty of attaining loving vision, the difficulty of letting our guard down—which is intimately connected to the danger that comes with exposure—, also hints at the main difficulties to be overcome:

The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis. One may fail to see the individual because of Hegel’s totality, because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined. Or we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own. Fantasy, the enemy of art, is the enemy of true imagination: Love, an exercise of the imagination (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216).

For Murdoch, the threat of *social convention* ties in with her criticism of the scientific naturalist conceptions of persons—‘Ordinary Language Man is too abstract, too conventional: he incarnates the commonest and vaguest network of conventional moral thought’ (Murdoch 1959b: 255)—just as *neurosis* is the mark of the existentialist conception, on which the solitary individual is forced to make choices without anything that even resembles a foundation for them (see Holland 2012: 258).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Murdoch does not—although she is familiar with the work of Sigmund Freud (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1970: 6/303, 9/306, 45/337, 50/341, 53/343; on this see Holland 2012: 261-263; Broackes 2012: 74-76)—use the term ‘neurosis’ in a clinical or Freudian sense.

Given the parallelism that Murdoch finds between art and morals these two philosophical misrepresentations of man also come with their literary equivalents: conventional literature portrays characters as lacking psychological depth and as differing from each other in virtue of social position only whereas neurotic literature treats characters as ‘placeholders for the author’s exploration of personal myths, psychological problems or anxiety about the human condition’ (Holland 2012: 259). Naturally, this is deeply unsatisfactory in a way that mirrors Murdoch’s dissatisfaction with contemporary metaphysics of the person and moral psychology: ‘[t]he existentialist-behaviourist view could give no satisfactory account of art: it was seen as a quasi-play activity, gratuitous “for its own sake” (the familiar Kantian-Bloomsbury slogan), a sort of by-product of our failure to be entirely rational’ (Murdoch 1970: 40/332). By contrast, ‘[t]he great novels are victims neither of convention nor of neurosis. The social scene is a life-giving framework and not a set of dead conventions or stereotyped settings inhabited by stock characters. And the individuals portrayed in the novels are free, independent of their author, and not merely puppets in the exteriorization of some closely locked psychological conflict of his own’ (Murdoch 1959b: 257). We will get back to this issue in Chapter 5.

How social convention (background beliefs, prejudices, *etc.*) can work to obscure features of the other is illustrated in the initial stages of the example of M and D where M’s class-prejudice shields M from exposure by granting emotional self-protection which simultaneously also prevents her from seeing D as she really is (on this see Holland 2012: 260-261).

Similarly, *if*, as is suggested by Margaret Holland (2012: 263), we take M’s maternal jealousy to stem from obsessive attachment it might be a symptom of neurosis which helps one evade difficulties by ‘taking refuge in egoism and projecting one’s psychological dramas onto outer reality’ (Holland 2012: 264). When we do this, we create a *fantasy* which opens up for irrational fears based on perceived threats to one’s identity that discourages reflection and stands in the way of a just and loving vision:

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 (Murdoch 1970: 59/347).

Thus, *fantasy*—an egotistical and self-obsessed quality of consciousness that ‘can imprison the mind, impeding new understanding, new interests and affections, possibilities of fruitful and virtuous action’ (Murdoch 1992: 322) and thus constitutes ‘the chief enemy of excellence in morality’ (Murdoch 1970: 59/347)

because it prevents us from seeing the other—must be distinguished from *imagination*, ‘the effortful ability to see what lies before one more clearly, more justly, to consider new possibilities, and to respond to good attachments and desires which have been in eclipse’ (Murdoch 1992: 322).

When we are able—and this is no easy task—to set aside social convention and neurotic inclinations, thus avoiding resorting to fantasy, and instead look at the world we inhibit with imagination we are, like M in the example of M and D, able to refine our conceptual grasp of ourselves, others, and our world. This laborious process, beset on all sides with the dangers of convention, neurosis, and fantasy, is endless in nature. Murdoch—quite correctly, it seems to me—regards moral progress as the never-ending process of gradually honing and redirecting one’s attention: ‘[w]here virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*’ (Murdoch 1970: 31/324, italics in original).⁴⁹ If this is right then this process leads to increasing idiosyncrasy since progress moves us away from the shared public world and into private vision; ‘since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit’ (Murdoch 1970: 29/322).⁵⁰

Correctness of vision is thus determined by ‘*The Idea of Perfection*’ understood as a ‘*regulative idea*’ or an ‘*ideal limit*’. In speaking of an ‘ideal limit’, or a ‘regulative idea’ Murdoch is almost certainly alluding to Kant’s ‘Ideas of Reason’ (KrV B366 ff., B377, B595-9), but the idea also has both Platonic and Christian mystical roots (with the link between the latter two again provided by Simone Weil’s reading of Plato (on this see Larson 2009: Ch. 2)). Famously, the only subject where Socrates does not deny having expertise is in the art of love, *ta erotica* (Pl. *Symp.* 198d1-2) or *erôtikê technê* (Pl. *Phdr.* 257a7-8; cf. Pl. *Lys.* 204b5-c2, 204c2, 206a1; *Charm.* 155d4-e2; *Symp.* 177d7-8, 198d1, 212b5-6; *Thea.* 128b1-4; *Phdr.* 257a6-9; Xenophon *Historicus Mem.* 2.6.28; Dypedokk Johnsen 2014: Ch. 1, esp. 42-44; Kahn 1996: Ch. 1). We will get back to the notion of an art, or technique, in Plato (in § 4.3), but for now it is enough to note that erotic love and its accompanying search for wisdom is, according to Socrates recalling Diotima’s speech, an unending process (Pl. *Symp.* 207a) in much the same way as Murdoch understands our search for perfection. We have no empirical conception of what it would be like to reach such perfection (it is a concept formed from

⁴⁹ Accordingly, as Millgram (2005: 179n31) observes, we should not expect an argument to lead to an abrupt turn in our moral life and outlook, which explains why Murdoch’s works can seem relatively lacking in argument.

⁵⁰ Wolf 2014: 380-381 draws attention to the similarities of Murdoch’s account with that of Marilyn Frye (1983: 52-83).

notions that transcends the possibility of experience (*see* KrV B377)) but reason is nonetheless driven to count on the possibility of such perfection and thus construct an idea of an ideal limit (*cf.* Murdoch 1970: 31/324, 42). In Kant's practical philosophy the idea of a 'holy will' similarly functions as an unreachable 'practical idea', or model, for finite rational beings to strive towards (KpV Ak. 5:32-33; *see* Broackes 2012: 36n76). Similar ideas are also to be found in Bradley (1927: Ch. 6 esp. 218-219) and in T. H. Green:

Of this object [*i.e.* self-realization] it can never be possible for him to give a sufficient account, because it consists in the realisation of capacities which can only be fully known in their ultimate realisation (Green 1883: §193).

Whether we understand this regulative idea, following Murdoch's Platonic lead, as 'the idea of the Good as the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are' (Murdoch 1970: 70/357) or whether we think of it as perfection personified—in terms of *e.g.*, the Aristotelian idea of the *phronimos* (the practically wise person) or the Stoic *sophos* (Sage)—is obviously an important issue but this (partly theoretical) choice does not change the general understanding of its function. What is important is that this regulative idea is such that our grasp of this 'second nature' (McDowell 1995a) is 'infinitely perfectible' (Murdoch 1970: 23/317).

Given the above we can also see one reason why tragedy—especially *King Lear*—takes on such an important role for Murdoch. Lear's *hamartia* (Lit. 'missing the mark'; *cf.* Arist. *Poet.* 13 esp. 1453^a7-16; *cf.* Arist. *NE*1110^b17-1111^a20; *e.g.*, his perception of Cordelia as unlovingly ungrateful rather than as truthful) are both occasioned by and exacerbating his *tragic* flaws (*e.g.*, obsessive egoism).⁵¹ Lear's inability to transcend his ego occasions flawed perception of the other, leading to rash and wrongful behaviour that ultimately leads to his tragic downfall (*cf.* the structure outlined in Arist. *Poet.* Ch. 14 (1453^b1-1454^a1).

⁵¹ I here use *tragic flaw* to denote *hamartia* as a disposition (or underlying character-flaw) as distinguished from a particular act or instance of mistaken perception for which the original term is retained. Given that Aristotle foregoes his usual explication upon introducing the term *hamartia* scholarly interpretations range from seeing it as mere ignorance of fact to moral defect. For a useful list of central works in the debate *see* Kim 2010:33n1. *See also* Brody 2014: esp. 23; Glassberg 2017. If we, as I think we should, agree with Murdoch in taking such mistaken perceptions to be morally infused and salient there is little room for non-normative instances of *hamartia*. *Cf.* Murdoch 1959a: 52/216, 1961: 20/295; Weil 2002: 1-4 esp. 2.

2.7 Motivation

Murdoch's understanding of moral concepts allows her to defend a version of the thesis that our conceptualisation of a situation can, in and of itself, motivate action. That is, 'moral judgement', to use a slogan-form borrowed from Michael Smith, 'brings motivation with it *simpliciter*' (1994 61, emphasis in original)⁵²:

I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. [...] One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see (Murdoch 1970: 37/329).

Murdoch aversion to simplifying models fuels a restriction:

[T]he image which I am offering should be thought of as a general metaphysical background to morals and not as a formula which can be illuminatingly introduced into any and every moral act. There exists, so far as I know, no formula of the latter kind. We are not always the individual in pursuit of the individual, we are not always responding to the magnetic pull of the idea of perfection. Often, for instance when we pay our bills or perform other small everyday acts, we are just 'anybody' doing what is proper or making simple choices for ordinary public reasons (Murdoch 1970: 41/334; cf. Murdoch 1992: 495; see Setiya 2013: 8; Mulhall 1997).

Murdoch's understanding of concepts blocks what is often taken to be the most compelling argument against the thesis that our conceptualisation of a situation can, in and of itself, motivate action—*i.e.* that it is 'manifestly implausible' (Smith 1994: 61) to deny that one's motivation can vane, or disappear altogether, whilst one's (evaluative) outlook (or understanding of the facts) remains the same. John McDowell puts the objection thus:

There may seem to be a difficulty: might not another person have exactly the same conception of the circumstances, but see no reason to act as the virtuous person does? If so, adverting to that conception of the situation cannot, after all, suffice to show us the favourable light in which the virtuous person saw his action. Our specification of his reason must, after all, have been elliptical; a full specification

⁵² This thesis is sometimes referred to as *internalism* but as this label has been used in a myriad of contexts and with widely differing meanings I refrain from utilizing that label here.

would need to add an extra psychological state to account for the action's attractiveness to him in particular—namely, surely, a desire (McDowell 1978: 16).

What is more, McDowell adds, our willingness to ascribe a desire to the agent in these circumstances is 'explicable, like the difference in respect of action, in terms of a more fundamental difference in respect of how they conceive the facts' since '[t]he desire is ascribable to the prudent person simply in recognition of the fact that his conception of the likely effects of his action [...] casts a favorable light on his acting as he does' (McDowell 1978: 17). Given this understanding of conceptualisations as private, McDowell argues, '[w]e can evade this argument by denying its premise: that is, by taking a special view of the virtuous person's conception of the circumstances, according to which it cannot be shared by someone who sees no reason to act as the virtuous person does' (McDowell 1978: 16). Thus, if we allow, as we should, given Murdoch's understanding of concepts, that the virtuous person's conception of the circumstances includes the reasons for which he acts—that the relevant conception of the situation at hand is cashed out, at least in part, using 'normative-descriptive' (Murdoch 1970: 41/333) concepts—then the (practical) world in question cannot be seen as motivationally inert and a conception of a set of circumstances can, on its own, suffice to explain action.⁵³

What we get here is a picture of practical deliberation, centring on *moral perception*, which places Murdoch as one of the fore-runners of what is now a movement in contemporary moral philosophy.⁵⁴ Murdoch further sees perception as bound up more with *attention* (understood in a manner picked up from Simone Weil) as 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (Murdoch 1970: 34/327) and *vision* than with *choice*.

The contrast here, embedded in the very title of 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956a), is with an understanding of rationality—either in its (neo-)Kantian or (neo-)Humean guise (on this see Broackes 2012: 8 esp. n23)—as operating upon a given choice situation. 'On this view', Murdoch thinks

⁵³ As McDowell points out, the insistence on a motivationally inert world is simply 'the metaphysical counterpart' of the questionable thesis that 'states of will and cognitive states are distinct existences' (McDowell 1978: 19). As is pointed out by Kieran Setiya (2013: 7), the tightening of the connection between cognition and choice makes it easier to defend as it need not 'go through the metaphysics of the will'.

⁵⁴ For a treatment of this movement with special emphasis on its relation to the debate over the relation between philosophy and literature see Hämäläinen 2016a: esp. 25-28. Note, as Millgram (2005: 168-169 esp. n4, 175) does, that Murdoch and her contemporaries did not, as is sometimes done today, distinguish views concerning practical reasoning from substantive moral views.

one might say that morality is assimilated to a visit to a shop. I enter the shop in a condition of totally responsible freedom, I objectively estimate the features of the goods, and I choose. The greater my objectivity and discrimination the larger the number of products from which I can select. (A Marxist critique of this conception of bourgeois capitalist morals would be apt enough. Should we want many goods in the shop or just 'the right goods?') Both as act and reason, shopping is public. [...] Reason deals in neutral descriptions and aims at being the frequently mentioned ideal observer (1970: 8/305).

Part of what is going on in this passage is a build-up towards an attack upon Wittgenstein's controversial so-called 'Private Language Argument' (Wittgenstein 1953: §§243ff.). As was pointed out before, the intricacies of this argument, and whether or not Murdoch actually gets it right, need not detain us here. What matters for us and what grants Murdoch's attack upon it continued relevance, is that the underlying picture of rationality as operating upon a given choice situation is very much alive today. Murdoch sees the emphasis on choice at the expense of attention as potentially devastating:

If we ignore the prior work of attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify it with. But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. This does not imply that we are not free; certainly not. But it implies that the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices (Murdoch 1970: 37/329).

The picture that emerges here refuses to see practical reasoning as simply proceeding from a description of a decision situation treated simply as given and instead locates a (or perhaps *the*) main difficulty in the description of said situation. The real trouble for the practical agent is to arrive at the right conceptualisation of the situation and the alternatives through a process of honing one's inner vision through a process of coming to apply increasingly more apt concepts and metaphors that focus our attention until it, if we do our job properly and successfully, becomes 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (Murdoch 1970: 34/327). On Murdoch's picture the tricky part of practical reasoning is thus (often) getting the description of the initial situation right in the first place, and this process of understanding the situation at hand

begins well before anything like a demarcated action or choice situation can be discerned. While Millgram 2005: 175-176 notes that this sort of picture is applicable to theoretical reasoning as well it might seem like a timely objection at this stage to point out that ‘getting the description of the initial situation right’ is a matter of getting the *facts* straight and thus a matter of theoretical rather than practical reasoning, but insisting on this, Murdoch would object, would just be insisting on a distinction between fact and value in a way that is itself an expression of a substantial ‘roughly a Protestant, liberal, empiricist, way, of conceiving morality’ (Murdoch 1957a: 115/69; *cf.* Murdoch 1956a, 1970: esp. 24-27/318-320; on these see Diamond 1996; Millgram 2005: 176ff.).

3. Benefits of Murdoch's Stance

Murdoch's understanding of several central issues in moral philosophy, such as *e.g.*, practical reasoning, the relation between fact and value, freedom, and the metaphysics of the person, puts her at odds with much of (then-)contemporary debate on these issues but it also comes with a number of what I believe to be interesting advantages. For example, Murdoch, like Bradley before and McDowell after her, manages to say something informative about the mind's place in the world without resorting to either projectivism or absurdity by stressing the mind-dependence of our practical worlds. In addition to this, she is also capable, through her stressing of the increasing idiosyncrasy of our practical worlds as they progress towards infinite perfectibility, of naturally accounting for variety and diversity in human goodness and excellence of character, something that poses a problem for some accounts of human virtue. Apart from the above mentioned advantages, there are several others that I think deserve special mention due to *e.g.*, their centrality to contemporary debates on these issues, and I will go through some of these, in varying degrees of detail and in no particular order, in this chapter.

3.1 The Virtuous Peasant

Murdoch arguably keeps her promise to offer an account on which 'an unexamined life can be virtuous and [...] love is a central concept in morals' thus 'doing justice to both Socrates and the virtuous peasant' (Murdoch 1970: 2/300). Much moral philosophy has emphasised the rational side of moral *exempla* at the expense of naïve benevolence (see Brännmark 2008). Not only does Murdoch's approach steer clear of over-rationalizing the moral life but she also avoids the opposing danger of portraying the virtuous person as a kind of good-hearted simpleton that can easily be taken advantage of.

Perhaps it could be objected at this stage that on the view provided by Murdoch, and by extension McDowell, the virtuous person is still portrayed in a

manner that is unacceptably simple and lacking in understanding. The thought would go something like this: if the development of virtue is a matter of honing one's conceptions and thereby reworking one's intrinsically motivating conceptions of others, the world, and the situations one finds oneself in, then it would seem that the virtuous person runs the risk of becoming blind-sighted and utterly incapable of understanding the appeal, or even possibility, of less than virtuous behaviour. Some examples might help to illustrate. Imagine a virtuous individual that finds someone's lost wallet lying in the street. On the picture painted by Murdoch, could such a virtuous person even understand the appeal of keeping some of the money the wallet contains before turning it in to the authorities (or, for that matter, attempt to locate the wallet's owner by one's own accord)? In a similar manner, would a virtuous person be at all tempted, or even understand what it would be like to be tempted to sleep with someone with whom he ought not to?⁵⁵ That is, wouldn't such reasons—*i.e.* reasons for keeping the money or sleeping with someone unsuitable—be, to adopt a vocabulary gathered from McDowell (1978, 1979, 1980), 'silenced' rather than outweighed so that a virtuous agent will be neither tempted by nor see as genuine, such reasons? McDowell argues that:

Fully fledged practical wisdom is a 'situational appreciation' that not only singles out just the right one of the potentially action-inviting features of a predicament, but does so in such a way that none of the agent's motivational energy is enticed into operation by any of the others: he has no errant impulses that threaten to lead him astray (McDowell 2000: 102).

This is further explicated in connection to happiness (*eudaimonia*):

To embrace a specific conception of *eudaimonia* is to see the relevant reasons for acting, on occasions when they co-exist with considerations that on their own would be reasons for acting otherwise, as, not overriding, but silencing those other considerations—as bringing it about that, in the circumstances, they are not reasons at all (McDowell 1980: 370, italics in original).

Now, there is certainly something nice about a person that is utterly incapable of even entertaining the thought of keeping some of the money for herself (because she cannot see what reason there would be to do so), but, I for one cannot help thinking that such a person also comes across as aloof and uncomprehending.

⁵⁵ I gather this example from Seidman 2005. I find Seidman's distinction between 'motivational' and 'rational silencing' problematic on the grounds that it seems to sit ill with Murdoch's (and I take it McDowell's) understanding of motivation.

Should we not require of any account of virtue, and of the virtuous person, that it keep such aloofness at bay both because if it could not it would place unreasonable demands upon us to aspire to this ideal and because we would want an account of the virtuous person as someone who is capable of understanding the less-than-virtuous. Furthermore, on such a picture, the argument could continue, it might be possible to see the virtuous person's prior struggle with herself as something commendable but there is nothing truly impressive in her behaviour once the state of full virtue is achieved since her behaviour at that point takes on the form of unreflective mechanistic responses resulting from her world-view. I believe, however, that this criticism misconstrues Murdoch's understanding of the struggle for perfection in that it ignores her idea of this struggle as an *endless* endeavour. Furthermore, the central place afforded to our understanding of others by Murdoch goes some way towards mitigating the appeal of this criticism since a proper understanding of others is scarcely possible without extensive understanding of their motivations and understanding of the world around them. It thus seems that the notion of 'silencing' is best understood not as completely blocking from view the silenced elements but rather as transforming their nature in the agent's immediate motivational circumstances.

3.2 Humility

Murdoch, in spite of her demanding construal of perfection as an endless process towards an ideal limit, manages to place reasonable demands on us as moral agents while also providing a sense of direction:

The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are. [...] Simone Weil tells us that the exposure of the soul to God condemns the selfish part of it not to suffering but to death. The humble man perceives the distance between suffering and death. And although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good (Murdoch 1970: 101/385).

These, the last lines of 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', and therefore of *The Sovereignty of Good* as a whole, convey a whole package of messages; the emphasis on perception is made clear at the very start, Murdoch's debt to Weil is fully acknowledged, the metaphorical language (*e.g.*, 'the distance between suffering and death') hints at her understanding of metaphysics as a

picturing activity, and, most importantly for present purposes it is made clear that humility is a central virtue in connection to moral progress.

While it is true, as Tony Milligan (2007: 217) points out, that since Murdoch, as is usual in her talk of moral progress, favours exemplary—*i.e.* virtuous—individuals over straightforward enumeration and explication of the individual virtues these individuals possess, she is not entirely clear on how we are to understand her account of humility in more detail.⁵⁶ She does, however, provide a short characterisation:

Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement⁵⁷, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central virtues (Murdoch 1970: 95/378).

This short characterisation of humility tells us three things:

- (i) Murdoch does not accept, without modification, Simone Weil's account of the virtue in question.
- (ii) Humility, as Murdoch understands it, has, in virtue of constituting respect for reality, an epistemic component.
- (iii) Murdoch considers it a central virtue.⁵⁸

Let us start by looking at what Simone Weil has to say about humility:

Humility is the refusal to exist outside God. It is the queen of the virtues. [...] If I knew how to withdraw from my own soul it would be enough to enable this table in front of me to have the incomparable good fortune of being seen by God. God can love in only this consent to withdraw in order to make way for him, just as he himself, our creator, withdrew in order that we might come into being. This double operation has no other meaning than love [...] God who is no other thing but love has not created anything other than love. [...] I cannot conceive the necessity for God to love me, when I feel so clearly that even with human beings affection for me can only be a mistake. But I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am. But I act as a screen.

⁵⁶ For examples of Murdoch's tendency to talk in terms of exemplars see *e.g.*, the mentions of Christ, Socrates, and 'certain saints' at Murdoch 1970: 51-52/342 *cf.* Murdoch 1992: 429. For more on Murdoch's take on moral progress see below.

⁵⁷ Murdoch's choice of words here is, I take it, a nod to Weil's treatment of humility in her *Gravity and Grace* (Weil 2002: 40-42) entitled 'Self-effacement' quoted in part below.

⁵⁸ Milligan 2007: 217-219 identifies a tension between Murdoch's reliance on Weil and her understanding of humility as epistemic which leads to a development of an account that anticipates some of what follows here.

I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves (Weil 2002: 40-41).

Here is how Weil understands the idea of ‘self-emptying’:

‘He emptied himself of his divinity.’ To empty ourselves of the world. To take the form of a slave. To reduce ourselves to the point we occupy in space and time—that is to say, to nothing.

To strip ourselves of the imaginary royalty of the world. Absolute solitude. Then we possess the truth of the world (Weil 2002: 12).

Weil here provides us with a radical *kénōsis*-centered⁵⁹ account that stresses self-emptying, -abnegation, or, -effacement to such a degree that Murdoch seemingly takes issue with it even though she agrees that humility is central and can be regarded as ‘the queen of the virtues’. I take it that Murdoch is more reserved than usual towards Weil in this instance partly because it seems difficult to square an understanding of humility as the dissolution of the self with Murdoch’s (semi-Freudian) diagnosis of the modern, secular, equivalent of sin (*i.e.* the understanding of ‘the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy’ (Murdoch 1970: 51/341)). This is so since Weil sees the ego as something that is to be eradicated whereas Murdoch wants merely to purify and reorient its naturally selfish energy (Murdoch 1970: 54/344). In short, while Weil asserts that ‘[h]umility consists in knowing that in what we call “I” there is no source of energy by which we can rise’ (Weil 2002: 31) Murdoch believes there to be such energy capable of being reoriented towards the ‘Good’ (*cf.* Murdoch 1992: 498-503, esp. 503).

The placing of humility as a central virtue for moral life is common to Confucian, Christian, and Jewish ethics.⁶⁰ When seen from the perspective of

⁵⁹ *Kénōsis* ((lit. ‘emptying’, ‘depletion’, ‘emptiness’), is, in Christian theology, the self-emptying (*cf.* Phil. 2:7) that makes one receptive to God (*cf.* Ro.4:14; 1Co.1:17, 9:15; 2Co.9:3; Phil.2:7). The idea has Platonic roots (see Pl. *R* 585b; *Phlb.* 35b; see also *e.g.* August. *Conf.* 7.9.13). For a useful account of the contemporary debate see Pardue 2012.

⁶⁰ See Confucius *Analects* 1.1, 1.16, 4.14, 15.19; August. *Ep.* 118.3.22; Green 1973. Confucian ethics share many common traits with Ancient Greek moral theory. Most striking, perhaps is how the Aristotelian emphasis on practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—with its resistance to algorithmic systematization—finds a corresponding functional equivalent in Confucius’s accounts of appropriateness (*yí*; the virtue of acting appropriately in various situations) and how the Stoic notion of *oikeiosis* (lit. ‘homification’ or ‘familiarization’; see Cic. *Fin.* 3.16; DL. 7.84-131; on this see *e.g.*, Annas 1993: Ch. 5, Ch. 12 esp. 262-276; Engberg-Pedersen 1990) is mirrored by ‘humaneness’ (*ren*) the highest Confucian virtue in which one’s love for one’s family members is

systematic moral philosophy, however, the strategy of making humility a central (master) virtue is but one instance of a familiar way of preserving and lending credibility to the doctrine of the unity of the virtues—*i.e.* the thesis that to have any individual virtue is somehow to have them all—and thereby unifying one’s moral philosophy.⁶¹ While Murdoch warns us that false belief in unity can certainly be dangerous—*i.e.* we should be watchful not to let this search for unification to get carried away in such a manner that we misrepresent the *phainomena* in question as more unified than they in fact are (Murdoch 1970: 56-57/345-346)—she approves of the strategy in question:

The concepts of the virtues, and the familiar words which name them, are important since they help to make certain potentially nebulous areas of experience more open to inspection. If we reflect upon the nature of the virtues we are constantly led to consider their relation to each other. The idea of an ‘order’ of virtues suggests itself, although it might of course be difficult to state this in any systematic form. [...] All I suggest here is that reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity (Murdoch 1970: 57/346-347; See also Murdoch 1970: 86-90/370-371).

In order for this strategy—*i.e.* creating unity by tying the moral domain together under a single unifying central virtue—to yield satisfactory results the virtue in question must unite both practical, broadly prudential, moral, and epistemic concerns. In addition, it is profitable if the virtue in question concerns or touches upon what I above called ‘practical metaphysics’ (*i.e.* a metaphysical inquiry and systematisation that arise from needs within ethics and which is tailored to fit practical concerns). Such a virtue, in order for it to perform its unifying function, must also be wide-ranging in scope. Such a wide span of concerns and such a broad scope are needed in order for the virtue in question to function as a unifier of our practical world. Given such constrains the list of possible candidates is rather limited.⁶²

gradually extended to one’s fellow human beings in the wider community. On this see *e.g.*, Sim 2012, 2007; Yu 2007.

⁶¹ The unity of the virtues is defended by a long line of thinkers throughout history such as *e.g.*, Socrates (at *e.g.*, *Pl. Prt.* 33b, *La.* 190c8-d5, 199e6-7, *Euthphr.* 11e7-12e2; on this see *e.g.*, Brickhouse and Smith 1997; Irwin 2007: §12; Devereux 2006), Aristotle of Chios (see Schofield 1984), and Aquinas (*e.g.*, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2 q65 a1, 1-2 q58 a4; *Quaestiones Disputatae de Virtutibus* 2; on this see *e.g.*, Irwin 2007: §325). Widespread agreement only runs surface deep however, since the dependency in question can be cashed out in a multitude of ways.

⁶² It should be pointed out that it is possible to postulate several unifying virtues and that therefore the suggestions to be discussed in what follows are not exclusive (although it might be that the theoretical usefulness of each individual member of a pluralistic set diminishes with each addition

The, nowadays, most familiar version of this unifying strategy is the Aristotelian stressing of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as an overarching master-virtue. What is, from our current perspective, most striking about this strategy is that it is upfront with being a theoretical postulation of sorts.⁶³ Practical wisdom, or good sense, is unlike most other virtues in that it lacks a delimited sphere of concern, which is of course why it seems such a promising candidate in this context. But this feature also, it could be argued, raises doubt in that it lacks an easily distinguishable profile, which, among other things, diminishes its value in terms of action guidance.

Humility thus, in comparison with practical wisdom, seems like a promising candidate for a unifying virtue, especially if we grant that its postulation as such is not incompatible with the Aristotelian strategy just outlined.⁶⁴ It is also far from surprising that Murdoch should find it an attractive candidate since it plays a central role in both the Christian mystic tradition that influenced Simone Weil as well as in Hegel's moral philosophy.

Hegel, presumably following Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible, renders 'humility' as *Entäußerung*.⁶⁵ On Hegel's account *Entäußerung* (henceforth 'humility') is an epistemic and practical stance taken when one does not relinquish one's epistemic authority but rather recognizes that this authority is not self-sufficient but co-dependent. Thus, those that have 'emptied themselves' of false claims to self-sufficiency and dominating power recognize one-another as mutually authoritative and accountable (Farneth 2017: 159-160).

of a new member). As we shall see shortly, Murdoch operates with just such a combination account that draws both on humility and justice.

⁶³ I do not wish to suggest that the virtue (*phronesis*), or something close to it, does not have a strong basis in (Greek) common sense, it surely does (see e.g., *S. Ant.* 1348-53, *OT* 664, *Ph.* 1078; *Sol. fr.* 6.4-5, *fr.* 739) but it is, in virtue of its nature as akin to a place-holder, much more common in technical debates (see e.g., *Pl. Smp.* 202a, 209a, *Phlb.* 63a; *Arist. NE* 1140^b24, 1141^b23; *Isoc.* 14.61; 12.204; *Emp.* 110.10; *Plu.* 2.97e; *Epicur. Ep.* 3p.64U). Much the same can be said about *sophrosyne* (prudence; self-control; moderation; temperance) which has a prominent placing in in Greek thought (*cf. e.g.*, *Heraclit. Fr.* 112) and is often seen as in opposition to *hubris* (*cf. e.g.*, *Hom. Od.* 23.23).

⁶⁴ *I.e.* it seems perfectly plausible to argue that both humility and practical wisdom work alongside each other in fulfilling a unifying role. That this does not seem to be the case in Aristotle can, I think, be explained as an oversight fueled by his keen interest in magnanimity (*megalopsuchia*), and, potentially, a tendency to understand humility along the lines of low self-estimate. We shall return to this in § 6.8.

⁶⁵ On this see Farneth 2017: 158-159. Luther used a form of this word to capture *kenosis* in *Phil.* 2:5-7. *Entäußerung* also occupies a central place in modern German theology and philosophy. It is, for example, closely connected to *Verdinglichung* and *Entfremdung* signifying the Marxist notions usually rendered into English as 'reification' and 'alienation'.

Murdoch's account of humility, which draws both on Hegel and the (Augustinian) Christian tradition in its modification of Weil, is especially fruitful in that it avoids pitfalls associated with the rather common way of accounting for the virtue in terms of low self-estimate (See *e.g.*, Richards 1988: 253; Driver 1989; Statman 1992: 432; Hare 1996: 235; Schueler 1997: 470; on these see Dunnington 2016). Since low self-estimate is by definition a kind of self-deception its proponents must deny the rather plausible Socratic-Aristotelian thesis that virtues are or involve states of knowledge (see Driver 1989: 373), which also has the effect of rendering humility as a poor candidate to fulfil a unifying function (since the epistemic element we outlined earlier is missing). Even if one bites this bullet one is still left with a hard time explaining why humility seems so central to moral development.⁶⁶ Murdoch's account draws on, but, I think, also improves upon, Simone Weil's account not only because Murdoch's (naturalised)

⁶⁶ Dunnington 2016: 20 reconstructs—using Richards 1988 and 1992—three narratives thought to legitimize the low self-estimate account as following from the basic tenets of Christianity: *The Divine Perspective Story* has it that humility as low self-estimate is warranted given that all our doings come to nothing in comparison to the glory of God whereas *The Sin Story* has it that a low self-estimate warranted given the corruption inherited through original sin. Finally, *The Grace Story* has it that a low self-estimate is warranted because our virtues depend upon the grace of God. While there is arguably theological basis for some form of all three of these narratives they are also deeply problematic in that they might lead to crippling passivity, require a strong and demanding doctrine of original sin, and, places serious limitations on free will, respectively. In addition, as is pointed out by Green 1973: 56, the low self-estimate account has the consequence that humility cannot be predicated of God, the moral exemplar (*cf. e.g.* Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 2-2 q161 a1 ad 4). The secular analogues of these motivating stories—*i.e.* that our efforts seem unimportant *sub specie aeternitatis* (Flannagan 1990: esp. 425), that human limitations warrant responses of the kind 'He is only human' (Richards 1988: 257), and that most of our success is due to communal assistance and luck (Nuyen 1998: 107), respectively—seem to me equally problematic. Firstly, to try to anchor humility in a third-person perspective is problematic due to the fact that, as is noted by Brännmark 2008: 9-10 quoted above, from that perspective things simply look petty. Secondly, appeals to limitations due to human nature, although they have an important role to play in moral theorizing, do not take us nearly as far as a low self-estimate account would seem to require. It is also doubtful why meditation on such limitations should result in humility rather than, say, a *laissez-faire* attitude (which would simply limit accountability-ascriptions, and the like). Thirdly, appeals to communal assistance and luck simply re-emphasize that morality is, at least in part, a social phenomenon and re-actualizes the problem of moral luck. Note also, as Dunnington 2016: 24 does, that all of the three secular versions of the motivating stories figure in Aristotle (*e.g.*, Arist. *NE* 1101^a21-1101^b7, 1106^a35-1106^b8, 1095^a31-1095^b14) which opens up for the possibility that low self-estimate accounts should rather be seen as accounts of magnanimity (see §6.8). For the view that humility should be abandoned as a secular virtue since it cannot be made coherent in the absence of a religious context, see Taylor 1985. For an argument to the effect that pagans cannot be genuinely virtuous because they cannot be humble, see August. *De civ. D.* 5.12, although see also Dodaro 2003: 87.

Platonism circumvents dependence upon specific Christian commitments but also because it avoids the (potentially lethal) elements of proud abnegation that is to be found in the likes of *e.g.*, Weil and St. Catherine of Sienna (on this see McCloskey 2006:186-187). Thomas Merton puts the point thus:

A humility that freezes our being and frustrates all healthy activity is not humility at all, but a disguised form of pride (Merton 1956: 55).

Murdoch manages, through her interpretation of Plato—which in essence amounts to a sort of naturalised, or conceptualised, realism which does not have to resort to the postulation of Platonic-Fregean super-sensible entities—to retain central elements of Christian mysticism:

One might say that true morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsolated love of the Good (Murdoch 1970: 92/375-376).

This naturalised mysticism shares enough elements with both Hegelianism and Christian mysticism for Murdoch's project to get off the ground since '[t]he "ordinary" good man, aware of the magnetism of good as well as the role of duty, is thus connected to a mystical ideal whether or not he is, in the traditional sense, religious' (Murdoch 1992: 355). And while it might be that there is nothing ostentatious about this ideal—'The good man is humble; he is very much unlike the big neo-Kantian Lucifer. He is much more like Kierkegaard's tax collector (Murdoch 1970: 103/385; on this see Seland 2016: Ch. 2)—it is still a remarkable feat to cast aside our own self-interest in the manner required. Perfection, as Murdoch sees it, is in a sense unreachable. Still, through acceptance of our finitude it is possible, Murdoch argues, to foster concern for what is not ourselves (Murdoch 1970: 103/385).

3.3 Evil, Objectification, and Recognition

Murdoch's ability to give a sympathetic account of humility as 'the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self' (Murdoch 1970: 103/385) also brings with it important lessons regarding our relations to others. Johan Brännmark (2008) extrapolates on this feature of Murdoch's approach in a way that makes our relation to others come into focus:

Humility does not come from considering things from, so to speak, above; from there things will only look petty. Instead, humility has to do with seeing others with the kind of awe that is connected with standing before something enormous, something grand.⁶⁷ Thus it must be cultivated in our meetings with concrete individuals, in a gradual coming to see the immensity of each and every one of them, in a coming to see how each individual is in a sense a world entire (Brännmark 2008: 9-10).

A further upshot of Murdoch's ability to lend a place to nuanced simplicity of this kind is an adjacent ability to give (by simple opposition) an account of evil, a task that might prove difficult for other rationalistic approaches given that it seems problematic at best to understand human evil as (merely) a kind of rational defect (on this see *e.g.*, Brännmark 2008; Blackburn 1984: 217-223⁶⁸). An account of evil along Murdoch's lines avoids two common pitfalls. Firstly, it does not reduce the evil man to 'your average rouse, cheat, or traitor—someone with something to gain from his misdeeds' (McGinn 1997: 64) and, secondly, it does not reduce evil to mere malicious intent absent personal gain.⁶⁹ Rather, 'motiveless malevolent action' (McGinn 1997: 64) must, on this account, be coupled with, indeed fed by, a twisted recognition of and reliance on the other; true evil is the inverse of humility in that it requires a recognition of the other as real coupled not with awe but rather with wanton disregard for the personhood of the other. This also explains why true evil must be considered a feat of sorts in that it overcomes what Murdoch sees as our natural impulse upon the recognition of the other:

The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing (Murdoch 1970: 66/353-354).

While it might seem here that Murdoch would provide an account of evil simply in terms of dehumanisation, I do not think that that is all her account has to offer (recall that reality, for Murdoch, is a moralized notion). One of the most troubling aspect of evil is thus that it too latches on to the 'separateness and differentness of other people' but that it, in a manner that mirrors the goodness that can arise

⁶⁷ Cf Murdoch's (1959a) reflections on the sublime in relation to this.

⁶⁸ Note that Blackburn's chief objective here is to argue for quasi-realism, or projectivism, a project Murdoch would reject as being all too Humean.

⁶⁹ McGinn's (1997: 61-65) perceptive readings of John Claggart, the malicious naval master-at-arms from Melville's *Billy Budd*, and Iago from Shakespeare's *Othello* constitute compelling evidence for the plausibility of an account along these lines.

from the realization of such otherness, turns the particularity of the other into a source for gratification of the 'anxious avaricious tentacles of the self'. Construing evil in this way does not in any way conflict with accounts of dehumanisation (which is another horrible aspect of our lives that we might, in the common vernacular, designate as evil).

To illustrate this point, consider the fifth episode of the third series of *Black Mirror*—a British science fiction television anthology series created by Charlie Brooker for Channel 4—entitled 'Men Against Fire'.⁷⁰ The episode, which is set in a dystopian (post-apocalyptic) future, tells the story of 'Stripe' Koinange; a soldier working for an unnamed private American military organisation operating on Danish soil hunting and exterminating hideous humanoids known as 'roaches'. The soldiers in Stripe's unit are all equipped with a neural implant called MASS which augments sensory processing and creates comforting dreams at night. During a mission to interrogate a devout Christian farmhouse owner suspected to harbour 'roaches' Stripe comes upon a nest of 'roaches' and one of them attempts to shine a LED-device in his eyes. Stripe manages to kill the 'roaches' but accidentally flashes himself in the eye with the device, which causes his neural implant to malfunction during training exercises the following day. Stripe undergoes both a physical and a psychological examination but no medical problems are discovered. In a fire-fight the following day it becomes clear that where his fellow squad-members perceive their targets as 'roaches' Stripe sees ordinary human beings. It is subsequently revealed that the neural implants alter the soldiers' senses and that what they, due to the implants, perceive as squeaking 'roaches' in fact are ordinary humans pleading for mercy that are the victims of a genocide forming part of a global eugenics program aiming to protect the 'bloodline of humanity'. Ordinary civilians have not been equipped with MASS implants, instead they simply hate the 'roaches' due to propaganda and prejudice. Stripe's psychologist subsequently reveals that the true purpose of the neural implants is to make the persecuted humans appear monstrous and to selectively erase certain memories in order to make the soldiers more effective by dehumanising their targets and erase remorse. Stripe, who wants out of his engagement with the military organisation, is faced with the choice of either going to prison (for breaking the contract he signed with the organisation) where he will endlessly relive his experiences during the farmhouse mission without his sensory

⁷⁰ The episode's title is a reference to Marshall (1947) in which it is controversially claimed that in World War II less than 25 percent of American combat infantrymen in battle fired their weapon even under immediate threat (and that many who did fire aimed above the head of their enemies). I want to thank Andrés Garcia for useful discussions and comments on the issues concerning evil and dehumanization discussed here.

input distorted (so that he will be aware that he is killing innocent humans) or have his memory of the last couple of days wiped and, his MASS implant reset, return to active service. The episode ends with Stripe being honourably discharged (implying he choose the second horn of the dilemma) and returning to a, what he perceives as picturesque, house and a waiting woman but that in reality is a derelict shack and solitude.

The central moral of ‘Men Against Fire’ could easily be interpreted as ‘acts such as genocide happen when one fails to appreciate the humanity of others’⁷¹ but I believe that there is more to it than that.

There is, it seems to me, an intuitive and important difference between, on the one hand, the soldiers (who are—at least post-implant—unconsciously dehumanising their victims) and the civilians (who, (partly) as a result of propaganda and mass hysteria simply hate the ‘roaches’), and on the other hand the doctors and elusive leaders of the organisation who either consciously aids in the dehumanisation of the victims or consciously and maliciously wants to see their victims exterminated while all the while being aware of their humanity. The difference comes down to whether one sees the other. Dehumanization is certainly horrible, but what is even worse—what is indeed truly evil—is seeing others but wantonly disregarding their humanity (in the interest of personal gratification).

Murdoch’s understanding of evil can readily give an account of the intuitive difference between soldiers and civilians on the one hand and doctors and leaders on the other given that the latter two knowingly use the particularity of the other by turning their victims into a source for personal gain and gratification of the ‘anxious avaricious tentacles of the self’ in what is one of the most horrible ways imaginable.

What is more, Murdoch can give a compelling analysis both of the role of the civilians and of the final scenes of the episode. It seems to me plausible to read the final scenes of the episode as an illustration of how easy it is to turn to what Murdoch terms ‘fantasy’ when faced with reality. The civilians, on the other hand, seem like prime examples of people who turn to social convention, Murdoch’s other prime enemy of morals.

Sadly, heinous acts stemming from a recognition of the other are—our natural impulse withstanding—all too common which is why we must strive to make our vision not only true but also just and loving.

⁷¹ Bloom (2017) understands the episode in just this manner in a critical review of Livingstone Smith (2011). Bloom’s criticism is, as far as I understand it correctly, in line with what I have to say here. On Livingstone Smith 2011 see also Swirski 2012.

3.4 Genuine Other-concern

A longstanding problem for classic perfectionism due to its preoccupation with and focus on the telic component is its alleged inability to account for genuine other-concern. The allegation rests on a legitimate worry; how can such theories express genuine concern for others given that they insist that morality is not essentially demanding, punitive, or, corrective, but rather ultimately a matter of the agent's own good?⁷²

While I believe that this problem, although by no means unimportant, has been over-emphasized in the literature (on this see *e.g.*, Campbell 1967:107-143; Annas 2011: 152-163) its complexity makes it so that a rather extensive discussion of it is necessary before we get to how Murdoch is capable of handling it.

If the charge is understood as amounting to the claim that classic perfectionism, in virtue of concerning itself from the outset throughout with the agent's own good, is egotistic in the sense of advocating constant (purely) self-serving behaviour the charge can readily be dismissed on the grounds that such theories typically advocate that we ought to care for *e.g.*, our friends for their own sakes, *i.e.* not just for ours (*cf. e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1156^a1-5, 1156^b9-11). The general charge thus only holds provided that we construe it as a desideratum on ethical theory that it advocates acting on reasons wholly disconnected from our own good, *e.g.*, by advocating genuine self-sacrifice, and this is a highly contentious claim. Classic perfectionism is at most formally self-centred or egotistical; its substance and content is not, or at least need not be (see Williams 1985: 32). As Julia Annas puts it, 'the good of others matter to me because it is the good of others. And it is part of my own [ultimate] good. It is quite unwarranted to think that the second thought must undermine the first' (Annas 1993: 127-128).

The second thought does, however, postulate a link between our ultimate end and things that we value further down in the hierarchy. Sarah Broadie expresses a rather strong reading of this connection:

⁷² Sidgwick (1907: 105) is, to my knowledge, the first to construe it as a defining characteristic of modern ethics to embrace the corrective view in contrast to the ancients' embrace of a notion of morality as 'attractive rather than imperative' (op. cit.; see also *e.g.*, Bradley 1927: 215; Annas, 1993: 4-7; LeBar, 2013:12). That is, this worry subsists even if we grant that there is reason to take seriously the 'entry point' (Annas 1993) of ethical reflection and the focus on one's life as a whole that is central to classic perfectionism since the worry is not lessened by accepting that we should perhaps focus less on duty and obligation and more on the, for morality broadly construed, central notion of character (whether we thereby wish to grant legitimacy to an oft made contrast between classic and modern ethics or not).

Aristotle does not explain how we are to take the crucial expression ‘for the sake of (*heneka*) happiness’. To make his claims plausible, we have to stretch this to mean ‘having regard to happiness’. Thus the central good functions sometimes as a constraint rather than a goal in the ordinary sense of a positively aimed for objective. I would stop doing what might adversely affect it, even if I was not doing that thing *in order to* obtain it. But even with this allowance, it might seem intolerably artificial to hold that, if we make one good central in our lives, then *every* other is viewed in relation to it. However, the position does not imply that we can never, for instance, admire, delight in, love, take an interest in, something else just for what it is. (This would be as much as to say that everything in life but the central value would or should be flat and insipid. But Aristotle wants people to be brought up from youth delighting in many good things for themselves, so can hardly expect that when a well-brought-up agent makes one of them central, which comes about only when a person can organise his life, the others will lose their charm.) Although attitudes of love, admiration, and so on may lead to action, they are not themselves activities of practical pursuit. Aristotle only means that when we take *practical* steps towards any object, we should do so having regard to the [ultimate] good (Broadie 1991: 31-32, italics in original).

While this reconciles the postulated connection with Aristotle’s recognition of final value accruing to things other than our ultimate end, it, through the assertion in the last sentence, opens up for the objection that practical strivings would be rendered utterly meaningless for someone that, for some reason or other, is barred from ever realising her ultimate end.⁷³ This might be an acceptable consequence but a proponent of classic perfectionism need not bite this bullet. The famous Stoic doctrine of ‘preferred indifferents’ offer the most extreme version of a generally strategy of dealing with the predicament: while some normative force pertaining to ends can indeed be traced back to our ultimate end this does not mean that all such force necessarily does as these ends might indeed (and are generally taken to) be valuable for their own sake.⁷⁴

⁷³ I am grateful to Thérèse Söderström for stimulating discussions on this issue.

⁷⁴ The Stoics claim, in line with Aristotle’s formal requirements, that the good must benefit its possessor at all times and under all circumstances. Thus, ‘external goods’ are simply not good, in contrast to common opinion, they are ‘indifferents’ (DL 58A)—*i.e.* neither good nor bad. The only things that are good are the virtues. These are the first two of the ‘Stoic paradoxes’ discussed by Cicero (in his *Stoic Paradoxes*): only what is noble (*kalon*) is good, and that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for happiness. My choosing relative wealth over poverty is, however, not groundless; the Stoics distinguish between the good and that which have value (*axia*). Some indifferent things, like health or wealth, have value and therefore are to be preferred, even if they are not good, because they are typically appropriate, fitting or suitable (*oikeion*) for us.

It might still be thought that the general framework is unable to account for why we ought to do what is right in itself regardless of how it might serve us. This misapprehension is common and has been held by some of the most prominent scholars in the field. W. D. Ross writes:

Aristotle's ethics is definitely teleological: morality for him consists in doing certain actions not because we see them to be right in themselves but because we see them to be such as will bring us nearer to the 'good for man' (Ross 1923: 188).

Gregory Vlastos rightly rebuts:

To get truth instead of falsehood from this statement delete 'not' and substitute 'and' for 'but' (Vlastos 1991: Ch. 8n27).

We are thus supposed to do what is right precisely because it is right in itself and this is how the choice-option ought to manifest itself for the agent in question at the moment of choice. As it happens such deliberation, choices, and their resulting actions are also, according to Aristotle, constitutive of the well-lived life since they are the targets of the (character-)virtues that, when properly related to practical wisdom (*phronesis*), make up practical rationality properly conceived. Structurally similar responses are available to classic perfectionists in general: We are to do what is right precisely because it is right in itself and this is how the choice-option ought to manifest itself for the agent in question at the moment of choice. Such actions are also means to, conducive of, constitutive of, *etc.* our ultimate end since they are the proper targets of, means to, conducive of, constitutive of, *etc.* practically rationality properly conceived.

There is also an axiological version of our worry. This might seem odd given that classic perfectionism, understood as a thesis about how ends relate to practical rationality, is not a thesis about value. However, it would be somewhat strange to wholeheartedly embrace an end that one attaches no value to whatsoever and thus something must be said regarding this axiological version. Classic perfectionists are often assumed to understand intentional action as 'directed at outcomes regarded *sub specie boni*: under the guise of the good' (Velleman 1992: 3) and as construing the good in a way that makes it essentially tied to persons. That is, things are not simply good, they must always be good for someone. It is easy to see how these two claims taken jointly can give rise to a suspicion of egoism since it seems natural to understand the relevant person to be the agent herself. Classic perfectionism is not committed to anything of the sort. Proponents of classic perfectionism are free to dispute any and all of the abovementioned claims. Perfectionists can, and typically will, deny that intentional action is always

directed at outcomes regarded in the light of some axiological representation. Rather (rational) intentional action is directed at outcomes accepted, desired, preferred, sought, wanted, chosen or embraced as ends (be they instrumental, final, or ultimate). Classical perfectionism is not committed to any form of axiological monism although the misapprehension (that can be traced at least to Sidgwick 1907: 120-121, 403-405) is understandable given the accepted convention of rendering *telos* into the axiological terms *summum bonum* in Latin and 'greatest good' in English. Even if a proponent of classic perfectionism would subscribe to both the idea that we always 'act under the guise of the good' and the idea that what is good is essentially person-affecting said proponent could still resist the charge of egoism by simply denying that the person in question ought (in all cases) to be understood as the agent herself.

Murdoch, as we have seen in §1.3, accepts that although we often enough, when in a reflective mode, act under the guise of the good, this is not always the case. Furthermore, her Platonism makes her reject that the Good must always be person-affecting or related to persons in the way needed to get the objection off the ground, and she would, because the central place filled by concern for the other in her theory, go against the kind of self-directed concern that is at the heart of the objection even in its axiological formulation. In fact, Murdoch's construal of just and loving attention as intimately connected to a process of unselfing understood as a means to transcend the 'fat relentless ego' by seeing the particular other probably comes as far from the kind of objectionable self-regard that has been our main concern here as the classical perfectionist tradition is ever likely to get.

It might be that the charge of egoism stems from classic perfectionism's broad and inclusive understanding of the good life. Many things, such as *e.g.* helping a friend move house when one does not really feel up to it and would rather spend a day in bed binge-watching cat-videos on the internet, that a narrower understanding of the agent's good, such as *e.g.* hedonism, would construe as failing to contribute to the good life would fall out as so contributing given classic perfectionism. While your own good need not, indeed in most cases should not, form part of your motivation for helping your friend under such circumstances it is still true (on most accounts) that friendship is a part of the good life and helping your friend move house helps realise and maintain this friendship and so contributes to your good life. This construal of events might be thought odd in that it makes something that seems like straightforwardly self-sacrificing behaviour come out as actually benefiting the agent. Moreover, matters are even worse in that the binge-watching (as long as it is not of something appropriately character-developing, educational, *etc.*) that we intuitively would want to say is

egoistic or at any rate purely self-beneficial, actually turns out not to be (potentially, it is even harmful). I must confess that I fail to see how this supposed oddity is in any way objectionable.

Just to reiterate, all of the above discussion applies to Murdoch's case and, it seems to me to be the case that all the strategies discussed above are readily available to her. In addition, it would seem that Murdoch's focusing on attention and the battle against the 'fat relentless ego' makes her approach even more apt at avoiding the kind of self-centredness that classical perfectionism has been accused of. Recall that just and loving attention works—through *unselfing*—towards transcending the 'fat relentless ego' (Murdoch 1970: 52/342) in a 'progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly' (Murdoch 1970: 23/317). The particular object in question is in the typical case another person and while the process involves letting oneself be seen as much as it is a matter of seeing it is still the case that other people, and their nature and needs, plays a prominent role on Murdoch's account that is more emphasised than what is perhaps usually the case with perfectionist ethical systems. Thus, I take it, Murdoch is better equipped than most when it comes to responding to the charge of egoism.

3.5 Moral Deference

There is a much-debated tension in common sense moral epistemology between moral cognitivism and our reluctance to defer to moral testimony; '[i]f moral truths are knowable, shouldn't it be possible for others to know moral truths you don't know, so that it is wise for you to defer to what they say?' (Wiland 2014: 159). On the one hand we are, I think, inclined to agree with Bernard Williams' statement that:

There are, notoriously, no ethical experts ... Anyone who is tempted to take up the idea of there being a theoretical science of ethics should be discouraged by reflecting on what would be involved in taking seriously the idea that there were experts in it. It would imply, for instance, that a student who had not followed the professor's reasoning but had understood his moral conclusion might have some reason, on the strength of his professional authority, to accept it [...] these Platonic implications are presumably not accepted by anyone (Williams 1995: 205).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Obviously, Williams overstates his case here. For an explicit rejection of the passage just quoted see Enoch 2014.

Yet, we hope that moral progress is possible and do indeed respect the judgments of people around us that we intuitively deem more capable and knowledgeable with regards to such matters.

As should be evident in light of the remarks just made, care must be taken in formulating the problem at hand, especially since there seems to be an interesting ambiguity to the notion of ‘reluctance’. Sometimes the problem is coached in terms such that it seems as if the problem stems from a deeply embedded universally shared intuition amounting to the thesis that it is never, under any circumstances, so that we are open to even the possibility of deferring to moral testimony. I think that such hard-line formulations of the problem with moral deference misconstrues the issue, the *phainomenon*, at hand. Rather, it seems, we are indeed rather reluctant to defer moral judgment to testimony in many cases but we are not universally and wholeheartedly against the idea.⁷⁶ This is not to say, of course, that common sense is necessarily free from contradiction and conflict in this case. Rather, just the opposite seems to be the case; we are dealing with a true puzzle (*aporia*) in the Aristotelian sense.

A range of explanations has been offered in the literature but there is no need to go through these here.⁷⁷ What is important for present purposes is that Murdoch’s approach to moral progress incorporates a straightforward way of accounting for our reluctance. Perfectionist approaches in general can maintain that knowledge and expertise is possible when it comes to the more formal features of morality. Furthermore, some people have gotten further in the laborious process of honing their conceptions of practical rationality and their end. These features make them more knowledgeable than we are and can rightly be considered experts of sorts. However, this progress is constituted by choices and ways of looking at the world that cannot be straightforwardly presented to us and therefore there are clear limits as to what they can help us with and what we can learn from them because it is, these theories maintain, essential that we come to terms with these issues in our own way and by our own efforts.

⁷⁶ Note that our reluctance, so understood, is problematic for non-cognitivist accounts of morality as well; it might be thought that if moral judgments simply express our non-cognitive attitudes (however we are to understand these notoriously problematic notions) then there would be no point in deferring to another’s judgments, but this generates a problem in reverse as the reasonable attitude to take towards deference in such a case would be outright rejection rather than reluctance. It might be, *e.g.*, that this observation simply piggy-backs on common sense realist intuitions or that moral judgment fulfills some other function that explains our reluctance, at any rate it seems that even the non-cognitivist owes an explanation of our reluctance with regards to deference.

⁷⁷ For a run-through of some interesting responses see Wiland 2014: 163-168.

Murdoch's distinctive brand of perfectionism adds to this picture a powerful and plausible account of why it is not only important but indeed necessary that we hone our own practical world through the laborious process of conception-revision.

3.6 Moral Exemplars

At least since James Opie Urmson, in his seminal 'Saints and Heroes' (1958), criticised the standard 'trichotomy of duties, indifferent actions, and wrongdoing' (Urmson 1958: 215) for not recognizing what is now referred to as 'supererogatory' acts—*i.e.* acts that go beyond what we can 'expect and demand from others' (Urmson 1958: 213) (and so are good but not (strictly speaking) required)—there has been a growing suspicion that much of contemporary secular moral philosophy has not concerned itself enough with ideals.⁷⁸ I believe that much such criticism directed at traditional moral theories is unfairly harsh. It is not obvious that *e.g.*, a Kantian cannot accept the supererogatory as a category (see Hill 1971), account for the phenomena without accepting the category in question (see Baron 1987; 2016) or give due consideration to the importance of the notion of character (Herman 1983). Still, we ought to look into how Murdoch's understanding of moral ideals fares by comparison in this regard.

Lawrence A. Blum (1988: 196) identifies two strands of further criticism. One strand of criticism can be understood as questioning the idea that moral considerations—understood as 'generally associated with an impersonal, impartial, and universal point of view' Blum 1988: 196)—take precedence over other (action-guiding) considerations.⁷⁹

Another strand of critique questions the supreme value of the morally excellent life, again understood as impersonal, impartial, universal, *etc.*⁸⁰ This second form

⁷⁸ The term comes from the lat. *supererogare* (see *e.g.*, Luke 10:35; 1 Cor. 7) meaning 'to over-extend', or 'spend in addition'.

⁷⁹ Important voicings of critique along these lines identified by Blum include Bernard Williams (1973 ;1981), Philippa Foot (1978; on this see McDowell 1978), and Susan Wolf (1982). We are thus, it seems, dealing with a common theme investigated by the Somerville School and its descendants.

⁸⁰ Blum (1988: 196) identifies two forms of this kind of attack. A weaker form has it that if many human goods—*e.g.*, aesthetic, athletic, scientific, *etc.*—are taken to lie outside of morality then lives devoted to them must plausibly be seen as on a par with lives devoted to morality. A stronger form of attack questions the worth of a life devoted to moral concerns itself on the grounds that

of criticism has been extended, most famously by Susan Wolf, to cover not only dominant forms of ethical theorising but common-sense morality as well. Wolf, on whom Murdoch was considerable influence (see *e.g.*, Wolf 2014), famously argued in her ‘Moral Saints’ (Wolf 1982) that the ‘moral saints’—*i.e.* exemplary individuals—that result from contemporary common-sense morality as well as the dominant forms of ethical theorising fail to be perfect, or indeed even appealing.

Blum (1988) and Roger Crisp (2012) have both argued that Murdoch’s approach does not fall prey to the abovementioned difficulties to the same extent as other ethical theories.

Blum (1988) provides a typology of moral exemplars: the ‘moral hero’, the ‘idealist’, the ‘responder’, and the ‘Murdochian exemplar’. The list is not meant to be exhaustive and the items on it are not meant to be mutually exclusive.⁸¹ The ‘moral hero’, the Oskar Schindler’s of the world, bring about great good or prevent great evil in the face of danger out of morally worthy motives embedded in their moral psychology (see Blum 1988: 197–203). The ‘idealist’ consciously adopts high general values and principles and seeks to live up to those whereas the ‘responder’ is someone who, prior to the situation(s) in which she manifests her moral excellence, had not embraced a clearly worked out set of moral values or principles. Blum goes on to argue that none of the archetypes he has outlined are touched by Wolf’s criticism of the lives of ‘moral saints’ as dismally grey and unattractive.

Blum sees what he calls ‘Murdochian moral exemplars’ as occupying an important place in ‘the history of moral thought’ (Blum 1988: 203). Blum rightly sees the good, selfless, and humble Murdochian exemplar as an ‘inheritor of a familiar Christian conception’ (Blum 1988: 203) without (necessarily) sharing in the religious setting of its forebears. Blum exemplifies this ideal using the character of Ed Corchoran in Mary Gordon’s *Men and Angels* (1985). Ed’s wife Mary contracted a terrible disease while pregnant with the couple’s son and the disease has left her disfigured, unable to care for herself, and mentally unbalanced in a way that makes her a terrible trial to live with. Ed still cares for her without resentment or bitterness and while he is under no illusion as to his wife’s state he chooses to focus on the progress she is making. As Blum puts it, ‘Ed has managed

such a life—at least if it is understood as centering of a specific domain of human conduct— involves important deficiencies.

⁸¹ The distinction between *e.g.*, the ‘moral hero’ and the ‘Murdochian moral exemplar’ is not meant to be exclusive since ‘[t]he positive features of the saint and hero can be combined in one individual’ who meets the Murdochian’s standard of faultlessness, yet who also brings about a great good’ (Blum 1988: 205). Blum uses the case of Magda Trocmé, which we will get back to shortly, to exemplify just such a combination of the two ideals.

through his love and understanding of his wife and his child to shield the boy, at least to some extent, from his mother's terrible behaviour and to help him be reasonably happy' (Blum 1988: 203). Being responsible, conscientious, and leading an admirable life in the face of great tribulation Ed seems to lack 'the avaricious tentacles of the self' since he seems to lack 'self-pity, envy, overconcern with the opinions of others, self-absorption, [and] concern for power' (Blum 1988: 204). The Murdochian exemplar is thus, in contrast to the 'moral hero', not necessarily engaged in a moral project narrowly construed.⁸² More importantly, it would appear that the ideal of the Murdochian exemplar is indeed a proper and attractive target of emulation in our struggle to better ourselves.

It is hardly surprising that Murdoch would do so well in this regard since large parts of the constructive portions of *The Sovereignty of Good*—i.e. those parts not directly engaged in attacking the metaphysics of the person underlying 'modern moral philosophy' but rather engaged in formulating an alternative—are attempting to lay the foundations for a moral psychology of just such a moral exemplar and to do so in a manner that results in an ideal that is both 'realistic' and 'worthy' (Murdoch 1970: 78/364).

Roger Crisp argues that Murdoch's approach is 'better able than the dominant forms of contemporary ethical theory to make room for and offer an account of a certain kind of paradigmatic moral value' (Crisp 2012: 275). This value, that Crisp terms '*nobility*', is 'a kind of admirable "moral goodness" or "moral value"' (Crisp 2012: 277) exemplified by Magda and Pastor André Trocmé of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon—a Huguenot village in Vichy France—who, together with their congregation, at great risk to themselves, protected around 3000 refugees from the Nazi occupying forces (Hallie 1979).

Utilitarianism as standardly conceived (while it approves or even requires Magda Trocmé's actions), Crisp (2012: 277-278) points out, runs into trouble

⁸² Blum 1988: 204, drawing on Robert Adams' (1984: esp. 393) review of Wolf 1982, points out that Wolf's (1982) characterization of moral sainthood is problematic in that the different characterizations given by Wolf are not necessarily, or even perhaps plausibly, coextensive. Adams (1984: 393) writes: 'Wolf states three criteria for moral sainthood; and they are not equivalent. (1) In her third sentence she says, "By moral saint I mean a person whose every action is as morally good as possible." (2) Immediately she adds: "a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be" [Wolf 1982: 419]. Her words imply that these two characterizations amount to the same thing, but it seems to me that the first expresses at most a very questionable test for the satisfaction of the second. [...] (3) On the next page we get a third criterion: "A necessary condition of moral sainthood would be that one's life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole" (420). Here again, while it might be claimed that this is a necessary condition of a person's, or her acts', being as morally worthy as possible, the claim is controversial'. The main difficulty lies in Wolf's third characterization, and her argument crucially depends upon it.

simply in virtue of the rather obvious fact that anyone earning above minimum wage seems able to do more good (however this is conceived on the version of the theory in question) with the use of a credit card and the banking details of any properly run charitable organisation with a worthy cause than the Trocmés did. What utilitarianism lacks, Crisp (2012: 277) suggests using Murdoch's (1992: 47) words 'is a positive conception of virtue' (*i.e.* a conception that is not, in virtue of being 'evaluatively reductive' (Crisp 2012: 278)), forced to locate the value of Magda Trocmé's actions in their resulting well-being (however that is to be understood) and cannot assign non-derivative final value to her 'virtuous action, or the character to which it points' (Crisp 2012: 278). The same problem—stemming from evaluative reductionism and thus, I take it Crisp means to imply, applicable to all evaluative reductionists—presents itself in connection with *e.g.*, our experiences of art since 'it might seem that one can make sense of the content of aesthetic experience only on the assumption that art confronts us with a value independent of our own well-being' (Crisp 2012: 278; *cf.* Crisp 2000). The utilitarian could indeed allow for whatever (non-welfarist) value that causes trouble but insist that the criterion of right action is nevertheless strictly tied to welfare, but this would deprive 'utilitarianism of some of its immediate attractiveness' (Crisp 2012: 278). Another strategy would be to insist that the value Crisp terms 'nobility' is a constituent of well-being, but this strategy seems doubtful since the Trocmés willingness to sacrifice themselves forms at least part of the grounds for our admiration of them.

While utilitarianism has problems accounting for the value of 'nobility' Kantianism has—Kant's focus on the inner moral life (see *e.g.*, Kant *Ak.* 740) notwithstanding—a hard time giving a satisfactory account of Magda Trocmé:

[H]er husband [...] believed that something is evil both because it hurts somebody and because it violates an imperative, a commandment given us by God [...] she recognized no imperatives from above: she saw only another's need, and felt only a need to satisfy that need as best she could (Hallie 1979: 161).

While they can easily handle the reaction of André—whose moral thinking seems principled enough—Kantians are faced with a challenge in accounting for Magda's motivation.

Sure enough, as Robjant (2012: 622-623) points out, two responses seem possible for the Kantian in this case.

The Kantian can insist that Magda Trocmé would, if asked, be able to articulate the maxim of her action (or else rightly be construed as a kind of moral idiot). This response seems problematic in that it seems to require, as Bernard

Williams famously put it, ‘one thought to many’ (Williams 1981: 214; on this see Wolf 2012). Why should we agree with the Kantian that such an additional motivating force must be present? In addition, what has the fact, if it is a fact, that Magda Trocmé’s actions satisfies some acceptable maxim to do with whether she is in fact acting upon such a maxim? The Kantian rebuttal that barring that such a maxim is indeed motivationally operational Magda Trochmé ought not to be seen as a rational autonomous moral agent might have something to it (more on this shortly) but it seems if not morally objectionable then at least a bit tasteless.

The Kantian can also, Robjant (2012: 622) observes, try ‘to slip out through Kant’s transcendental back door’ by suggesting that Magda Trochmé has a holy—as opposed to a human—will and get out from under Crisp’s criticism by the postulation of a holy will for which no imperatives hold. The trouble with this response, besides it being contrary to Kant’s belief that it is impossible *a priori* for any active embodied will to be holy, is that it relies heavily on ‘a dubious epistemology distinguishing “the world of sense” from “the world of the understanding”’ (Robjant 2012: 622).

Crisp’s criticism of Kantian ethics echoes, as he acknowledges (Crisp 2012: 283), general criticism directed at Kantian ethics by *e.g.*, Anscombe (1958a) and Williams (1985: Ch. 10), who are themselves drawing on Schopenhauer (1995; on this see Crisp 2004). Murdoch is obviously indebted to Schopenhauer—he is one source for the idea that our capacity for compassion and seeing the other can weaken egoistic energies (Murdoch 1992: 52-53)—although she does, unlike *e.g.*, Schopenhauer and Weil, postulate a place for duty in morality.

Furthermore, some (neo-)Kantians, such as *e.g.*, Christine Korsgaard (2008; 2009) and Barbara Herman (1981; 1983; 2007), have done a lot to develop Kantian motivation theory. These and other thinkers have also done a lot to bring Aristotle and Kant closer together on a number of issues including motivation which helps a lot with our current predicament (see *e.g.*, Korsgaard 2008; Engstrom and Whiting 1996). Even more interesting, for present purposes, is the way in which Korsgaard seems to see no real difference, when it comes to motivation, between her understanding of Kantianism and Plato (Korsgaard 2009). If she is right in this, and I think that there is a lot going for her attempted fusion in this case, and consequently the Korsgaardian constitutivist should have almost as easy a time accounting for Magda’s motivation as Murdoch has. In addition, Marcia Baron’s (1987; 2016) stressing of Kantian imperfect duties as such that ‘the question “When have I fulfilled them?”’ (Baron 1987: 262) is nigh impossible to answer comes rather close to Murdoch’s idea of morality as an endless strive for perfection.

Crisp (2012: 284-287) further argues that Aristotle also has trouble accounting for the special value exemplified by Magda Trocmé. While, as we have seen (in §3.4), eudaimonists are capable of accounting for genuine other-concern it is still the case that they have trouble accounting for genuine self-sacrifice given that their central ethical project revolves around closing the gap between virtue and happiness as a way of filling out the perfectionist schema. According to Aristotle, there is, Crisp (2012: 284) points out, ‘no such thing as rational or admirable self-sacrifice’:

It is true also of the good person that he does a great deal for his friends and his country, and will die for them if he must; he will sacrifice money, honours, and in general the goods for which people compete, procuring for himself what is noble [...] In all praiseworthy actions, then, the good person is seen to assign himself the larger share of what is noble (Arist. *NE*1169^a18-1169^b1).

Eudaimonistic accounts can, and typically do, assign non-instrumental value to self-sacrifice but the above passage makes clear that such self-sacrifice cannot, if rational, constitute a sacrifice in happiness overall (at least as far as Aristotle is concerned). While I have always felt that there is something to this eudaimonistic constraint the predicament Aristotle finds himself in here still helps us pinpoint an advantage that Murdoch’s account of humility has over Aristotelian magnanimity (*megalopsuchia*). The Aristotelian *phronimos* (virtuous individual) acts, either consciously or unconsciously (see Arist. *Rhet.* 1366^b36-1367^a6.), ‘for the sake of the noble [*kalon*]’ (Arist. *NE*1115^b12-13) and with a view toward her conception of her end which is shaped, in no insignificant part, by her conception of the noble. In the motivational story Aristotle provides us with the virtuous agent has a kind of quasi-aesthetic concern for the responses of others as well as to their needs, and this many have found troubling.⁸³ Murdoch is aware of this general problem:

Imaginative reflection upon a moral choice can become too aesthetic, can tempt us to be stylish rather than to be right (Murdoch 1992: 335).

The virtuous agent as envisaged by Murdoch does away with this (potentially) troubling quasi-aesthetic concern for the self without losing sight of the fundamental insight that there is a close connection between aesthetics and ethics expressed by Aristotle in the passage quoted above. As should be evident by our

⁸³ Crisp’s criticism is even harsher given that he reads Aristotle’s virtuous person as concerned ‘about the responses of others, and *not* their needs’ (2012: 286, my emphasis).

discussion up to this point, Murdoch is able to do this through the ‘quasi-aesthetic imagery of vision’ (Murdoch 1970: 3/301) as directed toward the other.

I suspect that the reader might at this point be worried that by in effect somewhat reopening the gap between virtue and happiness closed by eudaimonism Murdoch is once again threatened by what has come to be known as ‘Prichard’s dilemma’ (see *e.g.*, Scanlon 1998: 148). In his ‘Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?’ (1912) Harold Arthur Prichard argued that moral theoreticians in the business of giving an account of moral motivation—*i.e.* answer to the question ‘why should I be moral?’—are faced with a dilemma arising from the fact that the answer given must be both explanatory and moral. Answers focusing on moral considerations risk being *ad hoc* or non-explanatory whereas answers focusing on non-moral considerations risk being trivial, or too external to be satisfactory.⁸⁴ While I think that the dilemma, at least partly, is a result of over-emphasising the similarities between moral scepticism and modern epistemological scepticism I also think that the worry in the case of Murdoch should be mitigated by the inherent attractiveness of the moral ideal she puts forth.

While it is clear that Murdoch’s moral exemplar looks outward rather than inward and so avoids the problematic self-concern that was hinted at in Aristotle’s remarks cited above the precise understanding of this re-actualises a difficulty of interpretation that we have already touched upon in our discussion of humility

⁸⁴ Two influential strategies for meeting this challenge—attempts to ground practical rationality in a prior understanding of our human nature (*cf. e.g.*, Foot 2001; Hursthouse 1999) and attempts to ground morality in what is taken to be constitutive of agency (*cf.* Korsgaard 2008; 2009), respectively—are susceptible, in various ways to a ‘set of problems’ (Rosati 2003: 491; *Cf. e.g.*, Moore 1903: §13; Scanlon 1998: 149-153; Broome 2005; 2008; Kolodny 2005) that boil down to the question why we should, upon reflection, care about, or abide by, the norms thus arrived at (see Watson 1997: § 15; Copp and Sobel 2004; Enoch 2006). *I.e.* are they really normative enough? It might be thought that a demand for a further grounding of normativity (as expressed by *e.g.*, Cokelet 2012) misses its mark, or amounts to simple question-begging, when directed against theories that take the demand as confused since ‘to ask for a reason for acting rationally is to ask for a reason where reasons must a priori have come to an end’ (Foot 2001: 65), or deny that there is a ‘position from which you can reject the government of instrumental reason: for if you reject it there is no you’ (Korsgaard 2008: 67). Nevertheless, a worry lingers in that, arguably, while Foot’s position succeeds in providing a substantial ground it nevertheless fails since it would appear that we can, in virtue of our rational nature, question this ground and its bearing upon us (McDowell 1995a) whereas Korsgaard’s attempt might be thought to succeed in making rationality binding in the required sense but fails, due to its formal nature, to generate anything substantial enough to constitute a ground in the required sense. Given this dialectical situation it seems promising for proponents of these kinds of theories to seek to converge.

above (§3.2). Crisp (2012: 288-290) notes that there are at least two ways in which we can interpret Murdoch on the issue.

On one interpretation ‘Murdoch’s position [...] bids us to focus on others not at the *expense* of the self, but, so to speak, without considering the self at all’ (Blum 1986: 362).

On the second interpretation, the agent sees that others have ‘needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own’ (Murdoch 1970: 66/353-354) but does not let her own self slide out of view entirely (it is rather seen in proper proportion to the needs of others).

While the first interpretation, as Blum (1986: 362) points out, allows for a ‘self-other asymmetry’ (Slote 1985) that sees value in self-sacrifice that does not result in a net gain it excludes self-regarding virtues and attaches value to self-abasement (Blum 1986: 367n37; Crisp 2012: 288-289). As should be evident from my discussion of humility above I prefer the second interpretation.

The considerations offered here should not, I think, be seen as anything like knock-down arguments. It is obvious that any moral theory worthy of serious consideration should have the resources to come up with some story to tell with regards to the nobility of the Trocmés. The point is rather that the case plays right into Murdoch’s hands in that she does not even have to come up with a story to begin with since the case of Magda Trocmé exhibit all the features we should expect from a case like this if Murdoch is right.

3.7 The Individual as an Object of Love

It might be thought that even though, as we have seen, the Murdochian exemplar constitutes an attractive moral ideal it might still be the case that Murdoch’s reliance on a Platonic understanding of love still leads her into trouble because such an understanding of love suffers from problematic implications because of its emphasis on ideals, transcendence, and abstractions.

In his rich and complicated essay ‘The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato’ Gregory Vlastos (1973: 3-42) famously argues, among many other things that the Platonic notion of ‘love’ is problematic because

the individual cannot be as loveable as the Idea: the Idea, and it alone, is to be loved for its own sake; the individual only in so far as in him and by him ideal perfection is copied fugitively in the flux (Vlastos 1973: 34).

Vlastos' potentially problematic appeal to a 'for its own sake'-attitude, its precise meaning and Kantian as well as Christian connotations need not detain us here. What is important is that Vlastos thus argues that Plato, in contrast to Aristotle and his construal of concern for the other as friendship (*philia*; on this see Ch. 6, esp. §6.7) and the unconditional love of the Hebraic and Christian tradition where the perfection of the deity empowers love of the imperfect (Vlastos 1973: 33; cf. Larson 2009: 157-160; Nussbaum 1986: Ch. 6; Dypedokk Johnsen 2014: Ch. 2, esp. §2.6), cannot make room for an understanding of love as directed at the other for her own sake. For Vlastos, the real object of Platonic love is the pure (cf. Pl. *Symp.* 211e) Form of beauty and not the impure individual herself. This is so since, due to Vlastos' tripartite division of the Platonic system along Fregean lines, he understands the individual to function as a mere 'placeholder' for predicates (Vlastos 1973: 26) which abstracts the valuable quality, e.g., beauty, from the individuality of the human being and make individuals into mere steps on the way towards loving something more valuable. Given such an understanding of the 'ladder of love' metaphor of Pl. *Symp.* 210a-211b it is easy to see that one could construe the individual as a mere means to the appreciation, i.e. real love, of the Forms of 'Beauty' and the 'Good'.

It might be, as Aryeh Kosman suggests, that any theory of love, whether conditional or not, has a problem recognizing the individual *qua* individual as an object of love and that Vlastos' point thus generalises:

The individual frustrates our efforts by a maddening transparency. Insofar as I love him for his qualities, the qualities seem to constitute the proper object of my love; insofar as I love him irrespective of his particular qualities, it becomes unclear in what sense I may be said to love, specifically, *him* (Kosman 1976: 57; on this see Larson 2009: 163ff.).

Even if this is so we might still wonder whether the issue isn't more pressing for Plato, and, by extension, Weil and Murdoch. What is important here is that, for Vlastos, the object of the Platonic lover's art (*ta erotica* (Pl. *Symp.* 198d1-2) or *erôtikê technê* (Pl. *Phdr.* 257a7-8)) will not be individual persons but rather their qualities understood as imperfect instantiations of the Forms (and especially the Forms of 'Beauty' and the 'Good'). For Vlastos, then, the Platonic ontology—which he sees as a tripartite (Vlastos 1973: 23) distinction between the transcendent Form, the particular things, and the instantiated imperfect character of the particular things so that the e.g., beauty of a particular thing, if it is beautiful, participates in the Form—has severe implications for the theory of love presented in the dialogues. It is obviously right that Plato's metaphysics has a central role to play in the theory of love and its adjacent notion of recognition

(*anamnesis*; Pl. *Phdr.* 249c; *i.e.* the idea that we upon recognizing value in several *e.g.*, beautiful particular things gather them under the single concept of ‘beauty’), but how we understand this metaphysical system will, as we shall see shortly, have repercussions for how damaging Vlastos’ objection turns out to be.

It is, as Nussbaum (1986: 167) points out, problematic that Vlastos by and large equates Plato’s position with Diotima’s speech as presented by Socrates given the multiplicity of voices at work in the *Symposium*. Building on this insight Nussbaum goes on to argue that Alcibiades’s speech (Pl. *Symp.* 216c-223d)

suggests that the lover’s knowledge of the particular other, gained through an intimacy both bodily and intellectual, is itself a unique and uniquely valuable *kind* of practical understanding, and one that we risk losing if we take the first step up the Socratic ladder (Nussbaum: 1986: 190).

Ultimately, however, Nussbaum sees this Alcibiadean love as too bound up in the particular personal passion which puts too much emphasis on the external. What we would seem to want, then, is an understanding of Platonic love which navigates the two extremes of abstract love of forms, which tends to do away with the particular, and Alcibiadean love, which is too bound up in the particular to make room for any kind of progress.

Whatever the merits of Vlastos’ reading of Plato, the understanding of love developed by Murdoch through Weil’s influence stands a decent chance of avoiding the two flaws outlined above. This—*i.e.* if I have read her rather dense and difficult treatment of the matter—is more or less exactly what Kate Larson (2009: 157-170) argues. On Murdoch’s understanding, Larson argues, the perceived qualities of the other ‘are not to be met with elsewhere than in the encounter with the individual beloved. The qualities are not seen or met with on the surface of the beloved, shadowing her individual qualities; they are seen only through the beloved’ (Larson 2009: 170). In her treatment of Plato’s view of Art, *The Fire and the Sun* (1977), Murdoch continually stresses the returning decent to the cave and this stressing of the retracing of the path by ‘moving only through the forms or true conception of that which it [the soul] previously understood only in part (*Republic* 510-11)’ (Murdoch 1977: 95/377) is also stressed in *The Sovereignty of Good*. ‘The just and loving gaze upon the individual’, Larson concludes, ‘is at the same time the recognition of the universal condition of the frailty of human reality and the love of its inexhaustible uniqueness’ (Larson 2009: 170). This is so, firstly because of the role played by the recognition of the particular other, painful as it might be, that Murdoch extracts from Weil and elaborates upon. What is seen through the other by a just and loving gaze is not just her particular qualities as they are, nor is it an abstract perfection of these

qualities dislodged, as it were, from their particular manifestation. What is seen is rather the particular qualities of the other and in oneself (because love is, to a certain extent self-reflexive) as they could be, if fully, lovingly, and justly developed. What makes this manoeuvre on Murdoch's behalf credible is that Vlastos' original critique is, at least partly, dependent upon a Fregean ontological separation of Forms from particulars that goes against Murdoch's naturalised reading of Plato.

4. The Place for Theory

If we agree with Murdoch in thinking that morality exhibits features that make our relation to it practical, personal, and particular, this raises the question of what role could really be filled by ethical theory, which, arguably, has a drive towards the theoretical, impersonal, and universal.⁸⁵ Given the emphasis on increasingly idiosyncratic practical worlds, practicality, and particularity, it is deceptively easy to read Murdoch, especially in light of her Wittgensteinian influences and abjection to simplifying models, as advocating an anti-theoretical stance. As we have already seen (in §2.2), I do believe a radically anti-theoretic reading of Murdoch to be questionable. At any rate, the question must be posed whether ethical theory, as standardly conceived, has anything to contribute to a Murdochian philosophical project and if so what? Just to anticipate; I do not

⁸⁵ It is of course possible to extend a practical constraint to philosophy as a whole. Famous examples of such an extension amounting to a view of philosophy include *e.g.*, Willfrid Sellars' idea that deliberate action—the conscious adoption of a course of action grounded in a responsiveness to reasons against a backdrop of firmly held convictions—requires orientation and it is, or at least ought to be, the business of philosophy to supply the foundations of such an orientation, thus giving ultimate precedence of 'knowing-how' over 'knowing-that' (see Sellars 1962; for an excellent discussion concerning the knowing-how-'knowing-that' distinction, originating with Ryle 1949: 26-60, see *e.g.*, Felix 2015). Sellars' conception can be seen as occupying a middle ground between, on the one hand, *e.g.*, Hegel's conception of philosophy as an abstract system of universal thought directed at truth (Hegel 1896: 7-8, 11, 27, 90) and a conception of philosophy as practical guide to life, consisting in a process of habituation, unconcerned with truth or the development of any kind of rational understanding of what is being learned on the other. Nussbaum (1994: 5, 353-354), probably mistakenly (on this see Sellars 2009: Ch. 5), reads Michael Foucault—and by implication Pierre Hadot (1995)—as ascribing a conception of philosophy of the latter sort to the Hellenistic schools. Both these examples have been discussed in a very similar way by Sellars 2009 but Sellars, given that his primary interest is to explicate a distinctively Stoic conception of philosophy, runs together two issues—the conception of philosophy as an abstract system void of practical implications *versus* a conception of the aim of philosophy as ultimately somehow practical on the one hand and the issue of whether or not engagement with philosophy ought to be what Sellars terms 'biographical', *i.e.* involve some kind of change of one's way of life on the other—that I here want to keep separate even though Murdoch—in part through her Socratic understanding of the virtues as akin to practical skills (see §4.3)—accepts both ideas.

believe that Murdoch's approach commits us to anything like an anti-theoretical stance (although such a development is demonstrably a possibility as much of Bernard Williams's and some of Cora Diamond's work can be said to constitute advocacy for anti-theoretical conclusions based on central insights derived from Murdoch). Rather, I believe, Murdoch's stance marries best with an understanding of ethical theory as supplying us with a kind of framework from which our own idiosyncratic world-views can be developed more clearly. Thus, I argue that rather than forcing us into an anti-theoretical or particularist stance such an understanding of morality and our relation to it makes it attractive to see moral theory as providing a sort of outline or framework serving as the basis for further individual progress towards the attainment of moral maturity aiming at perfection. This practical (see §4.1) striving for perfection is made possible, Murdoch maintains, through our ability to apprehend the Good through beauty (see §4.2), which can be honed by the development of, and reflection on, the virtues, art, and other practical skills (see §4.3). The emphasis on the so-called 'skill-analogy' of virtue has implications both for our understanding of ethical theory and for what role a criterion of rightness ought to play in theoretical reflections on morality (see 4.4). The practical nature of ethics so conceived also raises questions concerning the respective importance of situational mastery over long-time planning (see §4.5).

4.1 Theory and Practicality

It is clear that the role that Murdoch envisages for moral philosophy, and with it ethical theory more narrowly construed, is decidedly practical. Her introductory remarks concerning 'a void in [then] present-day moral philosophy' (Murdoch 1970: 45/337) in 'On "God" and "Good"'—the contribution to *The Sovereignty of Good* that most explicitly addresses the role of moral philosophy and ethical theory in contemporary society—speak clearly to this fact:

A working philosophical psychology is needed which can at least attempt to connect modern psychological terminology with a terminology concerned with virtue. We need a moral philosophy which can speak significantly of Freud and Marx, and out of which aesthetic and political views can be generated. We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central (Murdoch 1970: 45/337).

The quote reads, I think intentionally, like a manifesto for the urgent need of philosophy in everyday life and the consequent demand upon ethical theory to cater to this need (which is also echoed at the very end of the essay (Murdoch 1970: 76/362)). Ethics is thus, on Murdoch's view of the matter, a practical endeavour. Seeing ethics as practical endeavour that does not seek theoretical knowledge—*e.g.*, apprehension of principles—for its own sake means that philosophical analysis pertaining to it is (or at least ought to be) constrained by its subject matter (Arist. *NE*1094^b11-27, 1095^a5, 1103^b27, 1104^a1-9, 1179^a35, *EE*1216^b11-25, *MM*1182^a1-7).⁸⁶ This practical constraint can be elucidated, explicated, and investigated by reference to the nature of the questions asked (*e.g.*, *Pl. Rep.* 352d, Williams 1985: Ch. 1; Annas 1993: 27-29, 2011: 120ff.; Long 2001; Goldberg 1993: esp. xii), the distinctive outlook assumed (*e.g.*, Bradley 1927; Kierkegaard 1843⁸⁷; Sidgwick 1907: 382⁸⁸), or the aims of the discipline (Arist. *Top.* 145^a13-18; *Metaph.* vi.i). These different modes of elucidation and points of departure are not necessarily in conflict and can often be fruitfully combined.⁸⁹ What they all highlight is the practical nature of ethics. Murdoch's

⁸⁶ The dependency that holds in the other direction—*i.e.* the way(s) our theoretical preconceptions colour our conception of the subject matter—is both regrettable and unavoidable. On this see *e.g.*, Williams 1985: 71-74. This dependency is another reason—distinct from those to be discussed below—for bearing in mind that any results reached are to be taken as preliminary and subject to revision. In saying this I do not want to suggest that normative phenomena could or should not be investigated in a manner distinctive of theoretical sciences. Such investigations are often very fruitful. One should, however, be careful when transferring results from one kind of investigation to another as the standards and rules of inquiry are rather different.

⁸⁷ Focusing on the 'ethical' and 'aesthetic' perspectives is the by now conventional way of introducing Kierkegaard's thought and under such a description he comes out as a clear exponent of what I here call a 'distinctive outlook'. For such an exposition see *e.g.*, Irwin 2009. Some, like *e.g.*, Stewart 2015, have argued for a different manner of exposition that focuses on Kierkegaard's use of Socratic irony in a manner that makes him rather belong to the group of thinkers focusing on the nature of the questions asked. This controversy in Kierkegaard scholarship I think highlights (i) the importance this choice of manner of elucidation, explication, and investigation, (ii) its role when it comes to the interpretation of thinkers, (iii) how closely related these different modes of exposition are, (iv) how much these modes can inform each other (v) and how fruitful it can be to combine them (since it seems, to me at least, that a fruitful exposition of Kierkegaard ought to make use of both Socratic irony and differences in outlook embedded in the ethical and aesthetic perspectives on life).

⁸⁸ This aspect of Sidgwick's thought is, as is noted by *e.g.*, Irwin 2009: §1116, anticipated by Godwin 1793: iv 10, 436-437.

⁸⁹ Adopting only one of the here suggested modes of elucidation even comes at a theoretical cost in so far as pursuing the matter with reference to *e.g.*, the questions asked puts rather a lot of weight on said questions and their particular interpretations, formulations, *etc.*

treatment of this aspect of ethical theory comes most clearly to the fore in ‘On “God” and “Good”’, to which we shall now turn.

‘On “God” and “Good”’ was originally published as a contribution to the ‘Study Group on the foundations of Cultural Unity’ (in Grene 1969) and cultural unity is, as Broackes 2012: 55 points out, ‘in a way, its main topic’ since it is concerned with the role of moral philosophy in the general culture of the times and scrutinizes the appeal and dangers of faith in unity. In saying that the essay is concerned with matters pertaining to ethical theory I do in no way wish to go against a reading of the essay as aiming at establishing Murdoch as a Platonist as this is most certainly one aim of the essay. Plato here forms a constant point of reference (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1970: 50/341, 53/344, 58/357, 63/358, 68/361, 60/370, 73/372-372) and while Platonic leanings were evident already in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ (see *e.g.*, Murdoch 1970: 28/322), it is with ‘On “God” and “Good”’ that Murdoch’s Platonism is first and perhaps most illuminatingly brought to the fore (on this see Broackes 2012: 61-62).

The aim of ‘On “God” and “Good”’ is largely diagnostic in that Murdoch here seeks to establish that the failure of (then-)contemporary moral philosophy to live up to the demands just outlined is grounded in a distorted picture of man. ‘On “God” and “Good”’ thus, as we saw earlier, reiterates conclusions already reached in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ (see Murdoch 1970: 1-44/299-336, esp. 39-44/331-336). The main aim of ‘The Idea of Perfection’ is to issue a sustained attack on the moral psychology that predominated—and still heavily influences—‘modern moral philosophy’ (Murdoch 1970: 4/302) and issue in a ‘certain picture of the soul’ (Murdoch 1970: 2/300) as well as ‘to produce, if not a comprehensive analysis, at least a rival soul-picture’ (Murdoch 1970: 2/300). It is characteristic of Murdoch’s way of dealing with ethical theory that she does so through an analysis of the then-current orthodox metaphysics of the person. This both sits well with her understanding of philosophy as an exploration of ‘one’s own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth’ (Murdoch 1970: 46/337) and her appropriation of a tradition—going back, as we shall see in §4.3, at least to Plato, via Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicureans in the ancient world and which is later taken up by *e.g.*, Kierkegaard—that sees philosophy as an edifying discourse that forms the soul not only through cognitive or intellectual activity but which also involves a moral and spiritual pilgrimage tightly bound up with spiritual exercises (on this see Antonaccio 2012a). Focusing on the metaphysics of the person thus allows Murdoch to approach philosophy not only as academic discourse but as the transformation of perception and consciousness in line with this ancient tradition (*cf.* Antonaccio 2012a; Hadot 1995; Sellars 2003; Nussbaum 1994a). Murdoch provides a characterisation of the ‘soul-

picture’, or a ‘picture of “the man”’ (Murdoch 1970: 4/302) adhered to by the then-contemporary orthodoxy already in ‘The Idea of Perfection’:

The very powerful image with which we are here presented is behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian in a sense which unites these three conceptions. It is Behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts. It is also incidentally what may be called a democratic view, in that it suggests that morality is not an esoteric achievement but a natural function of any normal man. [...] I find the image of man which I have sketched above both alien and implausible. That is, more precisely: I have simple empirical objections (I do not think people are necessarily or essentially ‘like that’), I have philosophical objections (I do not find the arguments convincing), and I have moral objections (I do not think people *ought* to picture themselves in this way). [...] One’s initial reaction to this theory is likely to be a strong instinctive one: either one will be content with the emphasis on the reality of the outer, the absence of the inner, or one will feel (as I do) it cannot be so, something vital is missing (Murdoch 1970: 8-9/305-306, emphasis in original).⁹⁰

The origins of this picture of the moral agent Murdoch sees—I think rightly—as stemming from a mixture of Humean empiricism (*cf.* Murdoch 1970: 11/307, 15/311, 23-25/318-319, 79/366) and Kantian rationalism that ignores central Hegelian historicist insights:

The *raison d'être* of this attractive but misleading creature is not far to seek. He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal; and since he is not Hegelian (Kant, not Hegel, has provided Western ethics with its dominating image) his alienation is without cure. [...] [I]t is not such a very long step from Kant to Nietzsche, and from Nietzsche to existentialism and the Anglo-Saxon ethical doctrines which in some ways closely resemble it. In fact Kant’s man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer (Murdoch 1970: 78/365-366).

It is of course the case—as shown by discussions on *e.g.*, implicit bias (see *e.g.*, Jönsson and Sjöhdal 2016), choice-blindness, and a host of other matters—that there is much to be discovered from scientific engagement with things relating to

⁹⁰ Despite how it might appear here Murdoch is rather open to the central insight of utilitarianism (it is after all benevolence writ large); see Murdoch 1992: 4, 47, 168, 229, 322, 365, 493.

moral concerns and there is nothing in Murdoch that even comes close to questioning that fact⁹¹:

Science can instruct morality at certain points and can change its direction, but it cannot contain morality, nor ergo moral philosophy. The importance of this issue can more easily be ignored by a philosophy which divorces freedom and knowledge, and leaves knowledge (via an uncriticized idea of ‘impersonal reasons’) in the domain of science. But M’s independence of science and of the ‘world of facts’ which empiricist philosophy has created in the scientific image rests not simply in her moving will but in her seeing knowing mind (Murdoch 1970: 29/321).

What is at issue is rather that single-minded dogmatism is fuelled by our tendency to latch on to the most dramatic parts of any given doctrine since these are, as Mary Midgley points out, ‘both the most exciting and the easiest to remember’ (Midgley 2005a: 127). When this tendency remains unchecked in connection to a distorted picture of science it is all too easy to arrive at a picture of man as ‘an indiscernible balance between a pure rational agent and an impersonal mechanism’ (Murdoch 1970: 54/343). This conception remains familiar, and is, as Murdoch points out, a staple of both fiction and non-fiction in western thought:

How recognizable, how familiar to us, is the man so beautifully portrayed in the *Grundlegung*, who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy (Murdoch 1970: 78/365).

Given this diagnosis Murdoch is left with two tasks: to establish a place for moral philosophy (conceived of in such a way as to retain its characteristic emphasis on

⁹¹ In choice blindness experiments a test-subject is presented with a choice and asked to justify her preference for the choice made over the alternatives, but in the experimental manipulations the test-subject is presented with an alternative she did in fact not choose as if she had in fact chosen it. The choice blindness effect—which has demonstrated in different sensory modalities and across a myriad of social domains—is that test-subjects rarely detect the manipulation but rather confabulate reasons preferring the option they did not in fact choose. see *e.g.*, Johansson, Hall, Sikström and Olsson 2005; Johansson, Hall, Sikström, Tärning, Lind 2006; Hall, Johansson, Tärning, Sikström and Deutgen 2010; Hall, Johansson and Strandberg 2012; Hall, Strandberg, Pärnamets, Lind, Tärning and Johansson 2013; Kirkeby-Hinrup 2014, 2015, 2017; Gävertsson 2016.

abstract reflection and argument but also incorporating the ancient idea of spiritual exercises) such that it is not swallowed up completely by ‘scientifically minded empiricism’ (Murdoch 1970: 69/358), and to lay the foundations for a research program that seeks to answer what she considers the most pressing questions in moral philosophy, *i.e.* ‘What is a good man like?’ and ‘How can we make ourselves morally better?’ (Murdoch 1970: 52/342).

Note that it is not science but inexact ideas of science that is the problem here:

This is a *moral* question; and what is at stake here is the liberation of morality, and philosophy as a study of human nature, from the domination of science: or rather from the domination of inexact ideas of science which haunt philosophers and other thinkers (Murdoch 1970: 27/320).

The fact that Murdoch italicizes the word ‘moral’ in the quote above, I think, is meant to stress that what is at issue here, and what constitutes the (primary) objects of investigation, are moral ideals. Since these ideals are normative—*i.e.* expressed with, and contemplated in a setting consisting of, ‘normative-descriptive’ concepts which defy bifurcation into purely non-evaluative and evaluative components—they cannot be thoroughly investigated by either the natural sciences, empirically oriented psychology (on this see Murdoch 1970: 26-27/320), or moral philosophy which refuses to take sides. It is the purpose of philosophy to formulate and scrutinize these ideals. This is also why, I take it, that the insights into these ideals and their attainment that is to be gathered from great art (on this see Chapter 5) cannot be investigated solely (or even chiefly) by experimental (psychological) methods.

The first task outlined above—*i.e.* to establish a place for moral philosophy as distinct from ‘scientifically minded empiricism’—is met by the central argument of ‘On “God” and “Good”’: *if*—as is argued at Murdoch 1970: 55-66/345-354—the Good is to be conceived as ‘*a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*’ (Murdoch 1970: 54/344, italics in original) then the (proper) object of moral philosophy eludes ‘scientifically minded empiricism’ (on this see Broackes 2012: 57).⁹² That is, ideals cannot be thoroughly and properly investigated, clarified, and scrutinized by the means available to a

⁹² Note that, for Murdoch, ‘scientifically minded empiricism’, or, alternatively ‘mechanistic empiricism’ (see Murdoch 1952a: 131), with its (broadly) Humean understanding of (the scope of) concept and knowledge acquisition is importantly distinct from ‘dialectical’ (Murdoch 1952a: 131), or Hegelian (and, I have argued above, Aristotelian) empiricism that recognizes phenomena as presented in all their complexity. Similar distinctions can also be found in Midgley 2005a: 117-123, esp. 120; Nussbaum 1986: 240-263; Sellars 1956; James 1896 (on the latter see again Midgley 2005a: 121- 122).

‘scientifically minded empiricism’. This is so even if Murdoch’s philosophical project is naturalistic through-and-through (although not confined to the terminology and methodology of natural science). The world she is investigating is ‘a world without God’ (Murdoch 1970: 55/344), and, it is assumed, without super-sensible Fregean entities (Murdoch warns against ‘any heavy material connotations of the misleading word “exists”’ (Murdoch 1970: 64/351)). As David Robjant (2012b: 43) observes, ‘[m]uch literature on Iris Murdoch projects on to her whatever the author understands to be Plato’s metaphysics’, and maybe I am guilty of this mistake here but I think that we should not, in light of remarks such as the following, read Murdoch as postulating anything like a Fregean third realm:

It must be kept in mind that Plato is talking in metaphysical metaphors, myths, images; there is no Platonic ‘elsewhere’, similar to the Christian ‘elsewhere’ (Murdoch 1992: 339).

Instead of keeping ‘scientifically minded empiricism’ (Murdoch 1970: 69/358) at bay by the postulation of a super-sensible domain, Murdoch’s strategy for doing so focuses on the need for a philosophically informed moral psychology—‘philosophers must try to invent a terminology’ (Murdoch 71/358)—that cannot be captured by ‘the behaviourist view with its genetic explanation of mental phenomena’ (Murdoch 1970: 28/322).

The second, practical, task—*i.e.* giving a portrayal of moral exemplars and outlining a strategy for how we are to approach this ideal—is begun in ‘On “God” and “Good”’ and continued in ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’. Murdoch provides us with the following outline of her project:

If a scientifically minded empiricism is not to swallow up the study of ethics completely, philosophers must try to invent a terminology which shows how our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range. It seems to me that the Platonic metaphor of the idea of the Good provides a suitable picture here. With this picture must of course be joined a realistic conception of natural psychology [...] and also an acceptance of the utter lack of finality in human life. The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. ‘All is vanity’ is the beginning and the end of ethics. 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 experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself (Murdoch 1970:71/358).

In this quote, appearing towards the end of ‘On “God” and “Good”’, Murdoch first reiterates the need for an alternative to ‘modern moral philosophy’ that is both practically oriented and based on a sound ‘moral psychology’. She then goes on to suggest that a suitable ‘picture’—Murdoch’s term, I take it, for what someone more adverse to metaphorical talk and metaphysics would call a framework—is to be found in the Platonic image of the Good. Next, she demands that this investigation be conducted without the postulation of anything like an external point or *telos* of human life (a presupposition to be reiterated at Murdoch 1970: 78/364). The whole paragraph reads like a blueprint, or mission-statement, for ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’ that is to follow. We have already looked at Murdoch’s vision of the moral exemplar (§ 3.6) and concluded that it is an attractive conceptualisation of the virtuous agent. What remains, then, is a closer look at how Murdoch envisages the strategies that are to take us nearer to this, in a sense unattainable, ideal. What we are looking for is a way of describing—in a more systematic philosophical way (Murdoch 1970: 54/344)—techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that ‘when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly’ (Murdoch 1970: 54/344) that ‘already exists in traditional philosophy and theology’ (Murdoch 1970: 54/344). We are thus looking to naturalizing (that is giving a naturalistic and realistic interpretation and description of) the way *e.g.*, prayer—properly thought of as ‘an attention to God which is a form of love’ (Murdoch 1970: 55/344)—and grace—*i.e.* ‘supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality’ (Murdoch 1970: 55/344)—is sometimes thought to function in Christian theology. Murdoch’s attempt at achieving this is through a supplanting of overtly religious notions with Platonic ones (where the latter is understood as falling within the domain of a more inclusive empiricism). On this Platonic model, we are supposed to move from an appreciation of beauty through deepened understanding of skills to a better understanding of moral virtue. This, in turn, ultimately leads to a better apprehension of the good, and therefore things as they really are (‘morality, goodness, is a form of *realism*’ (Murdoch 1970: 59/347)). This ‘seeing things as they really are’ forms the basis for right action—since ‘true vision occasions right conduct’ (Murdoch 1970: 66/353)—and proper understanding of the claims of others:

The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course a good man may be infinitely 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 (Murdoch 1970: 59/347-348).

4.2 Beauty and the ‘Good’

The reason that Murdoch thinks that our apprehension of the good ought to go through beauty is that ‘we can see beauty itself in a way in which we cannot see goodness itself (Plato says this at *Phaedrus* 250e)’ (Murdoch 1970: 60/348). Art thus becomes ‘an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed [...] in this respect a case of morals’ (Murdoch 1970: 59/348) since we are, when art is great and not subject to the intrusion of fantasy, through it capable to ‘cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need’ (Murdoch 1970: 59/348). We will get back to Murdoch’s views on art and its moral function in Chapter 5, but it is, because of the way that art, beauty, and the good, function in Murdoch’s understanding of virtue as a skill, necessary to provide some preliminary remarks at this stage.

The experience of beauty (in art) has a kind of transcendence:

It may be agreed that the direction of attention should properly be outward, away from self, but it will be said that it is a long step from the idea of realism to the idea of transcendence. I think, however, that these two ideas are related, and that one can see their relation particularly in the case of our apprehension of beauty. The link here is the concept of indestructibility or incorruptibility. What is truly beautiful is ‘inaccessible’ and cannot be possessed or destroyed. The statue is broken, the flower fades, the experience ceases, but something has not suffered from decay and mortality (Murdoch 1970: 59/348).

We can, Murdoch thinks, experience the transcendence—which is connected to ‘two separate ideas [...]: *perfection* and *certainly*’ (Murdoch 1970: 60/349)—of the beautiful but not the transcendence of the good (Murdoch 1970: 60/348).⁹³ The transcendence in question here—due to the nature of the good which ‘lies always *beyond*, and it is from this beyond that it exercises its authority’ (Murdoch 1970: 62/350)—is, in accordance with Murdoch’s larger naturalist project, I think nothing strange. Or at least nothing stranger than the psychological thesis that in accurate perception we see the good, and since our perception is infinitely

⁹³ I must confess that this disanalogy is not obvious to me. Why is not the magnetic pull of the idea of perfection as evident in good deeds as it is in great art?

perfectible the good is thus beyond our ever-provisional grasp of it. Murdoch does not seem entirely sure herself as to the status of her argument as either metaphysical or psychological:

All that has been said so far could be said without the benefit of metaphysics. But now it may be asked: are you speaking of a transcendent authority or of a psychological device? 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. [...] Is there, however, any true transcendence, or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need on to an empty sky (Murdoch 1970: 58/347)?

Still, Murdoch maintains that ‘the authority of the good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self’ (Murdoch 1970: 66/353). What Murdoch has provided us with is an explication of what is integral to our experience but, even though we must avoid ‘any heavy material connotation of the misleading word “exist”’ (Murdoch 1970: 64/351), we are still left with the feeling that ‘a purely subjective conviction of certainty [of the existence of Good], which could receive a ready psychological explanation, seems less than enough’ (Murdoch 1970: 64/351-352). In this there is an undeniable element of certainty but it is a certainty that will not win over neither the sceptic, who requires more, nor the pragmatist, who is inclined towards a deflationary account in terms of “‘this works” or “it is as if this were so”’ (Murdoch 1970: 63/351).⁹⁴

We can, Murdoch (1970: 62-63/350-352) suggests, see the intuitive appeal of (or, the sceptic will retort, our desperate need for) the Good when reflecting upon any human activity such as *e.g.*, writing, since it requires degrees of goodness related to an absolute ideal standard (and not just a matter of better or worse):

The true artist is obedient to a conception of perfection to which his work is constantly related and re-related in what seems an external manner. One may of course try to ‘incarnate’ the idea of perfection by saying to oneself ‘I want to write like Shakespeare’ or ‘I want to paint like Piero’. But of course one knows that Shakespeare and Piero, though almost gods, are not gods, and that one has got to do the thing oneself and differently, and that beyond the details of craft and criticism there is only the magnetic non-representable idea of the good which

⁹⁴ Murdoch likens the dialectical situation to that pertaining to the ontological proof of God, which she sees ‘not exactly a proof but rather a clear assertion of faith (it is often admitted to be appropriate only for those already convinced)’ (Murdoch 1970: 63/351). In this she draws on both Simone Weil and Heidegger. On this see Broackes 2012: 21n57.

remains not 'empty' so much as mysterious. And thus too in the sphere of human conduct (Murdoch 1970: 62-63/350-351).

While art in general 'presents the most comprehensible examples of the almost irresistible human tendency to seek consolation from fantasy' (Murdoch 1970: 64/352), great art constitutes a true vision of reality and can, I take it, amount to an investigation, or 'consideration of what the effort to face reality is like' (Murdoch 1970: 64/352). As such, both the production and consumption of art—while it can be and indeed most often is mere aggrandizement of the self, projection of personal obsessions (on behalf of its creator), and easy resort to fantasy-consolation (for its consumer)—can take the form of a spiritual and moral exercise. For the artist the production of art can be a moral exercise, *i.e.* in setting aside the self and to contemplate and delineate nature in a way that 'serve both to illuminate the necessity or certainty which seems to attach to "the Good"' (Murdoch 1970: 64/352). For the consumer, the contemplation of art carries an analogous task: 'to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it, and not to "use it as magic"' (Murdoch 1970: 64/352). Thus:

The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it *is* the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real (Murdoch 1970: 64-65/352, emphasis in original).

Murdoch here provides us with a plausible and useful, *i.e.* practically oriented, way of accounting for the seemingly close connection between art, beauty, and morals. Moreover, she does so while staying close to the phenomena at hand since the account is based on our everyday experiences.

What Murdoch provides is thus not just a plausible explication of our experience of value but also a way to make sense of the intuitive difference between mediocre and great art in a way that is not reliant on trends or any kind of snobbishness. The account of (the function of) great art is also quite general and thus not biased in favour of, or reliant upon, any particular art, art form, or set thereof understood as somehow central or otherwise privileged, although Murdoch does award a prominent position to tragedy. The account is, in a sense, biased towards realism but due to Murdoch's special philosophical understanding of 'realism' it is not biased towards aesthetic realism as this is conventionally understood, since any kind of mode of presentation *etc.* including *e.g.*, abstract painting can easily be seen as servicing Murdoch's postulated aim of making us see the particular, and through it 'the Good', more clearly.

Murdoch's understanding of art (pursued already in Murdoch 1959a; 1959b; 1961) is thus a kind of functionalist exemplar theory that shares much—due to an influence, no doubt, of Heidegger and Hegel (on this see §5.3)—with hermeneutic approaches in that it is much more concerned with the role of art in society and moral life than it is with classification or conceptual analysis.⁹⁵

Great art, if properly contemplated, can serve as a guide to the realisation that reality, in all its particularity, exhibits 'a sense of unity and form' (Murdoch 1970: 86/ 371).⁹⁶ Great art can also, through the 'clear realistic vision' of the artist, reveal the human condition in a way that transcends photographic realism and can also exhibit 'both pity and justice' (Murdoch 1970: 87/371). Great art can also, Murdoch maintains, express the finality of our human condition in a way that does not resort to false consolation—*i.e.* fantasy (Murdoch 1970: 87/371-372).

4.3 The Skill-Model of Virtue

After having diagnosed the void in then-contemporary 'unambitious and optimistic' (Murdoch 1970: 50/340) moral philosophy as stemming from a faulty conception of the self, Murdoch reaffirms her commitment to ethics as a practical endeavour that needs to take a stance on matters of substance. In the process of doing so she makes a remark that clearly aligns her understanding of the proper aims of moral philosophy with the ancient tradition's understanding of ethics as concerned with techniques aiming at the well-lived life and therapy of the soul:

In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat. In this respect moral philosophy has shared some aims with religion. To say this is of course also to deny that moral philosophy should aim at being neutral (Murdoch 1970: 52/342).

⁹⁵ While Murdoch does not seem quite as militant in her critique of an aesthetic approach to art (although there are similarities in her critique of romanticism) she would, I think, agree with Heidegger that a proper understanding of art requires us to see how it shapes us—through shaping our historical practical worlds—and attempts to overcome selfishness and convention in order to see 'beyond' towards what is 'real' (or 'ontic' in Heideggerian terminology). The relevant aspects of Heidegger's theory of art are clearly accounted for by Thomson 2015.

⁹⁶ Murdoch wants to allow that 'even a shallow experience' (Murdoch 1970: 85/370) can have a, I presume, lasting, significant effect.

The techniques hinted at here are quite literally just that, since what Murdoch has in mind (as will become clear at Murdoch 1970: 88-90/372-374) is the ancient idea that the virtues are, or at least are structurally similar to, practical skills or techniques (*technai*). It is thus not only the picture of the ‘soul’ and a theory of concept-possession that Murdoch takes from Plato. Her understanding of virtue also, it turns out, has Platonic roots.

The so-called skill-model of virtue (‘skill’ being the by now commonly accepted rendition of ‘*technê*’) can be traced back at least to the Socratic assumption that attention to different skills or crafts can tell us something about the virtues.⁹⁷ This thesis has garnered attention (see *e.g.*, Annas 1993, 1995, 2011; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 2004; Stichter 2007; on this in relation to Murdoch see Antonacchio 2012a) as a, or perhaps *the*, main rival of dispositional accounts of virtue due to its perceived theoretical benefits as well as phenomenological and pedagogical resources. Much of the recent literature has focused on the perceived theoretical benefits relating to ethical theory—such as *e.g.*, conceptual clarification (Stichter 2007), moral epistemology (Jacobson 2005) and criteria of rightness (Stichter 2011; Annas 2004)—while restricting the phenomenological resources of the model to providing initial intuitive support. This is unfortunate not only because of the tendency to neglect the phenomenology of virtue but also because many of the benefits of utilizing the model as a stepping-stone for an enriched understanding of the phenomenology of the acquisition and exercise of moral virtue are quite independent of its debated theoretical benefits and implications, the latter of which require a firmer commitment to the model than does the former.

The necessary components for conceiving of philosophy as an art (*technê*) of life (*bios*) encompassing rational principles/reason (*logoi*) and training (*askesis*) can be said to be in place already in Plato’s *Apology* (Pl. *Ap.* 28e, 38a, 39c) but the most systematic discussion concerning *technê* in the platonic *corpus* is to be found in the *Gorgias*.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Cooper (1998: 31-32) argues that the Socrates of the *Gorgias*—where we find the most systematic presentation of the analogy in the early dialogues—cannot be straightforwardly taken to be Plato’s mouthpiece. The attribution of the analogy to Socrates is further corroborated by its occurrence in Xenophon (*e.g. Mem.* 1.2.51, 1.2.54, 2.4.3, 2.10.2, 3.1.4). For a complete listing of occurrences of *technê* in the early dialogues see Roochnik 1986: 253-264. On this see Sellars 2009: Ch.2. The roots of the analogy can, Nussbaum (1994: 49-51) argues, be traced as far back as Homer (*e.g.*, *Hom. Il.* 9.946) and Pindar (*Pi. N.* 8.49ff., *P.* 3.51, 4.217) and Democritus (see *e.g.*, Vegetti 1999; Wilson Nightingale 2007; Lloyd 1989: 83ff.; Xenophanes *fr.* 2; Fowler 1996; Hartog 1988; Thomas 2000: esp. 153-161; Nussbaum 1994a: 94ff.: esp. 153-161).

⁹⁸ These passages arguably establish the search for knowledge (*sophia*) and the ensuing cross-examinations (*elenchus*) as subordinate to the interest in life (*bios*), thus telling against Socratic

Socrates' main concern in the relevant passage of the *Gorgias* is to argue that rhetoric, of which poetry is classified as a species (Pl. *Grg.* 502c-d.), is not to be considered a proper art but rather 'a knack or a routine' (Pl. *Grg.* 463b). Proper arts, we are told, aim at what is best whereas pseudo-arts aim at the most pleasant (Pl. *Grg.* 464d). In addition, it is possible to give a rational account of the nature of the respective fields of real arts whereas the pseudo-arts seem to proceed by unmediated guesswork. Within the dialogue Socrates suggests that there exists for both soul and body such a thing as a good condition (*energeia*) for each and that there are two skills (*technai*) concerned with each of these which in turn have two parts, one preservative and one restorative, making a total of four genuine arts aiming for what is best. 'Gymnastics' is preservative of the good energy of the body whereas medicine fulfils the restorative function. 'Legislation' and 'justice' are respectively preservative and restorative of the good energy of the soul (Dodds 1958: 226; Sellars 2009: 40-41).

The analysis given in the *Gorgias* corresponds to discussions in the *Hippocratic corpus* and is famously expanded upon in the opening discussion of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Arist. *Met.* 980^a21-982^a1; Nussbaum 1986: 95-96, 89n2). Aristotle tells us that man, unlike the other animals that live by appearances and sometimes additionally by memories, live also by art (*technê*) and reasonings (*logos*; Arist. *Metaph.* 980^b26). The discussion goes on to delineate the connections between science, art, and, experience arguing that 'science and art come to men *through* experience' (Arist. *Metaph.* 981^a1) while still stressing the universality of *technê*.⁹⁹ In the *Nicomachean Ethics* we come across a similar account with regards to virtue

Intellectualism. *Ap.* purports to be an account of a public affair presumably under external constraints in order to seem convincing to a contemporary audience and arguably constitutes our most reliable account of the historical Socrates. The problem of determining to what extent Plato's, Xenophon's, and Aristophanes' literary characters named 'Socrates' correspond to or represent the historical figure is a complex issue that may well be insoluble (in part because of the wide-spread practise among ancient philosophers to present themselves as carrying on a Socratic legacy (on this see *e.g.*, Long 1988)). With regards to the *Corpus Platonicum* the following extremes can be delineated: (a) Everything said by Plato's Socrates may be attributed to the historical figure (*e.g.*, Burnet 1961) (b) The dialogues can be arranged in chronological order on stylistic grounds thus enabling us to discern a set of opinions peculiar to the earliest group that can be attributed to the historical figure (*e.g.*, Vlastos 1991), (c) All and only those ideas proposed by Plato's Socrates that are corroborated by both Xenophon and Aristotle may be attributed to the historical Socrates (*e.g.*, Gulley 1968), and (d) The account of *Apology* is unique for the reason given above (*e.g.*, Kahn 1996). Socrates' use of the so-called skill-analogy (in *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, and *Protagoras*) is primarily negative in the sense that the analogy is used as a means to defeat or cast doubt upon claims of genuine knowledge (in line with *aphoretic* nature of the early dialogues) rather than as a means to aid systematic ethical theory.

⁹⁹ Note the reference to Polus (at 981^a5), and Callias (at 981^a7), interlocutors of the *Gorgias*.

(*arête*) with the added distinction between intellectual virtues—which are learnt by teaching and hence requiring experience and time—and character virtues resulting from habit (Arist. *NE* 1103^a15-18).¹⁰⁰ Aristotle goes on to stress the practicality of ethics with the need for practice and habituation as well as to link these ideas with nature so that ‘virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but nature gives us the capacity to acquire them, and completion comes through habituation’ (Arist. *NE* 1103^a25, trans. Crisp) and ends with a (partial) affirmation of the skill-analogy¹⁰¹:

Virtues [...] we acquire by first exercising them. The same is true with skills, since what we need to learn before doing, we learn by doing; for example, we become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by temperate actions, and courageous by courageous actions (Arist. *NE* 1103a30- 1103b2; cf. 1103^a32-b²).

These remarks hint at a distinction to be made between three uses of the medical analogy and the accompanying idea that virtue, in important aspects behaves like a skill. Firstly, we get a conception of philosophy as analogous to medicine on a general level that is common among all the Hellenistic Schools including the Academic Sceptics that holds that ‘philosophy is an activity which procures the happy life by arguments and debates’ (Epicurus *apud* S. E. *M.* XI.169=Us. 219). At this level of agreement all that is implied by the medical analogy is a

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle’s wordplay concerning the similarities between character and habit and the accompanying etymological speculation in this passage with its appeal to ordinary language connects to Aristotle’s appeal to the phenomena.

¹⁰¹ This partial affirmation on Aristotle’s behalf is due to a number of interesting reasons. Firstly, it seems that Aristotle has in mind a narrower account that takes *technê* to include an external and individually specifiable end or product as part of the notion (much like the English ‘craft’). Skills are thus, on this picture concerned with making things whereas virtue is concerned with action and that the aims subsequently are different ‘because action and production belong to different kinds’ (Arist. *NE* 1140^b6-7; on this see Irwin 1977: esp. 73-74; 1999: 321; Nussbaum 1986: 97ff.; Annas 1993: 68). Furthermore, Aristotle seems impressed with the motivational differences that hold between craftsmen and moral agents (Arist. *NE* 1105^a26-b5) and links this to a critique of the Socratic position. Aristotle accuses Socrates for exaggerating the importance of knowledge in virtue—such as the identification of courage with knowledge (Arist. *NE* 1116^b3-5; *EE* 1229^a14-16, 1230^a6-8. Cf Pl. *Prt.* 360d), defining all virtues as instances thereof (Arist. *NE* 1144^b17-30; *EE* 1246^b32-37; *MM* 1198^a10-15), and generally exaggerating the role of knowledge (*episteme*) in ethics (Arist. *EE* 1216^b3-10; *MM* 1183^b8-11)—, a fact that arguably can be explained by Aristotle’s insistence upon the introduction of the further theoretical notion of *phronesis* (prudence; practical wisdom) which enables a distinction to be made between practical (knowing-how) and theoretical (knowing-that) knowledge (e.g., Arist. *EE* 1216^b2-20) spawning further debate over the possibility of weakness of will that is in its own right a huge exegetical and philosophical problem.

requirement that ethical theory be practical in the sense outlined above. We can further divide the field between those who—like the Peripatetics and Academic Sceptics—take the analogy to be just that, an informative analogy that pinpoints a way of understanding the role of philosophy but that nevertheless is limited in its application, and those—like the Stoics—that take the analogy at face value and claim that “[a]ll the virtues which are sciences and expertises share their theorems, as already mentioned¹⁰², the same end’ (Arius *apud* Stob. *Eclogae* 63.6-7=LS 61D, trans. LS).

The skill-analogy gains common acceptance and influence in Hellenistic times. With this common acceptance comes further underscoring of the need for ethics to be practical. Epicurus asserts:

Vain is the word [*logos*] of that philosopher who can ease no mortal trouble [*páthos*]. As there is no profit in the physician’s art [*technê*] unless it cure the diseases of the body, so there is none in philosophy, unless it expel the troubles [*páthos*] of the soul (Epicur. *apud* Porph. *Marc.*, Us. 221=LS 25 C, trans. Zimmern 1910).

Chrysippus of Soli, 3rd Scholarch of the Stoa, provides a concise statement of the skill-analogy and its close relation to the medical analogy:

It is not true that whereas there is an art [*technê*], called medicine, concerned with the diseased body, there is no art concerned with the diseased soul, or that the latter should be inferior to the former in the theory and treatment of individual cases (Chrysipp. *Stoic. apud* Gal. PHP 5.2.22=SVF III.471. *Cf.* Cic. *TD* 3.6).

The analogy gains such acceptance that the phrase ‘an art of life’, ‘an art of living’ (*technê peri tôn bion*), or variations upon it, become something of a commonplace even though the notion is primarily associated with the Stoics in the ancient sources.¹⁰³ For example Sextus Empiricus tells us:

For they promise to impart a certain skill relating to life [*technê bion*], and for this reason Epicurus said that philosophy is an activity which procures the happy life

¹⁰² *I.e.* ‘to live consistently with nature’ at Arius *apud* Stobaeus *Eclogae* 62.18. For an expansion see Arius *apud* Stobaeus *Eclogae* 75.25ff.=LS63B part. For a commentary on this active way of defining the telic component as opposed to the standard definitions of *eudaimonia* as a fixed state (*hexis*) see LS 1:398-399.

¹⁰³ According to Sellars 2009: 9n27 variations of the phrase appear in ancient Greek literature 41 times, with the majority (34 occurrences) appearing in Sextus Empiricus. The Latin equivalences *ars vitae* (*e.g.*, Cic. *Fin.* 3.4, 4.19, 5.18, Cic. *TD* 2.12, Seneca, *Epistulae* 95.7, 95.8) and *ars vivendi* (*e.g.*, Cic. *Fin.* 1.42, 1.72, 5.16, Seneca, *Epistulae* 95.9) are less frequent.

by arguments and debates, while the Stoics say straight out that practical wisdom [*phronesis*], which is the science of things which are good and bad and neither, is a skill relating to life [*téchnè peri tòn bíon*], and that those who have gained this are the only ones who are beautiful, the only ones who are rich, the only ones who are sage (Sextus Empiricus M 11.169-170=SVF 3.598).

The acceptance of the skill-model at face value has a series of important implications for ethical theory. Firstly, it invites a kind of intellectualism—most pronounced in the Stoa—that emphasises the intellectual side of virtue in line with the Socratic tradition. Secondly, this intellectualism inherent in the skill-model invites a stance towards ethical theory that is prone to utopic assumptions.

Taking the analogy between philosophy and medicine as informative but nevertheless limited in scope in line with the first group outlined above is perhaps less forceful but not merely decorative. It is important for purposes of justification in the sense that appeals can be made to the analogy to justify experimental procedures as appropriate. The analogy can also be used as a directional guide in the sense that one can appeal to a general understanding of medical practise to guide one's philosophical explorations. The analogy is also employed as a way of organizing the discourse and establishing a common terminology. Hence much of the debate between different schools in the Hellenistic period is best understood through the frameworks established by the common acceptance of this analogy.

Most importantly however, the analogy suggests a distinctively practical attitude towards the nature and function of moral philosophy.

Murdoch draws on all of these features when she (at Murdoch 1970: 88-90/372-374) discusses her take on the skill-analogy. She introduces the topic thus:

Another starting-point [*i.e.* than contemplation of beauty in art and nature], or road, which Plato speaks of more often however is the way of the τέχνηαι, the sciences, crafts, and intellectual disciplines excluding the arts. I think there is a way of the intellect, a sense in which intellectual disciplines are moral disciplines, and this is not too difficult to discern (Murdoch 1970: 88-89/373).

Murdoch here, I think, alludes both to the analogy's intuitive plausibility and how this starting-point suits her methodology of basing inquiry in 'simple and obvious facts' (Murdoch 1970: 1/299). The remark that 'intellectual disciplines are moral disciplines' should not, however, be read as an embracement of the idea that the moral virtues in fact *are* skills (Murdoch, it would seem, rejects the stronger thesis in favour of a reading in terms of informative analogy). That is, though attention to skills can serve as an exercise in virtue and are to be thought of as 'introductory images of the spiritual life' they are 'not the spiritual life itself and the mind which

has ascended no farther has not achieved the whole of virtue' (Murdoch 1970: 90/374).

Rather, as Murdoch goes on to tell us, she sees the *technai* as particularly clear illustrations of 'bridge ideas between morality and other at first sight different human activities' (Murdoch 1970: 89/373). Murdoch thus suggests that just as art can function as an object of reflection that sheds light on beauty (and through it therefore the Good), reflection on the nature of skills can illuminate central moral 'concepts such as justice, accuracy, truthfulness, realism, humility, courage as the ability to sustain clear vision, love as attachment or even passion without sentiment or self' (Murdoch 1970: 89/373). Contemplation of and engagement in art and skills thus fulfil, Murdoch maintains, parallel functions in that they both reveal to us an external authoritative structure. To illustrate her point Murdoch uses the learning of a foreign language (in her case Russian; Murdoch 1970: 89/373). Developing linguistic competence (*e.g.*, a command of grammatical rules) and sensitivity (*e.g.*, awareness of word-connotation) is a difficult task which goal might be impossible to fully attain. Even if we should reach—or indeed pass beyond—the level of a native speaker of the language in question, it still seems to be the case that we could indeed perfect our ability endlessly. The same goes, I take Murdoch to suggest, with most other skills also. Our grasp of the underlying principles and practical application of any skill is thus just as our grasp of morality in being endlessly perfectible. The process of learning a skill also, in virtue of relying both on principles and training, reveals an external authoritative reality. In this way attention to skills 'shows us a fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world' (Murdoch 1970: 89/373). Attending to skills also shows the interconnectedness of 'concepts very central to morality' since attentive study of *e.g.*, a foreign language requires *e.g.*, honesty and humility since in order to do it properly one needs 'not to pretend to know what one does not know' (Murdoch 1970: 89/373).

Murdoch thus holds that any activity which brings us closer to how things really are can effect a moral or spiritual transformation. Thus, attention to skills can contribute to purifying our consciousness since mastery of them depends upon recognising constraints placed upon us by what is real. Proper exercise of skills amounts to a disciplining of the self which leads away from fantasy and self-deception.

4.4 Rightness and Practicality

Utilising the skill-analogy of virtue in order to further systematize ethical theory and to provide action guidance is an attractive strategy for Murdoch not only because it is in line with her Platonic convictions, but also because she is sceptical with regards to the possibilities of a criterion of rightness formulated in terms of what the virtuous agent would do in the relevant circumstances to fulfil these roles:

[I]mitatio *Christi* does not work simply by suggesting that everyone should give away his money, or wondering how Christ would vote. The Demiurge (mythical creator) in Plato's *Timaeus*, 'copying' the forms (spiritual ideas) in order to create the world, interprets them into an entirely different medium (Murdoch 1992: 11).

A criterion of this sort was most famously formulated by Rosalind Hursthouse:

An action is right *iff* it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (*i.e.* acting in character) do in the circumstances (Hursthouse 1999, 28, my emphasis; *cf.* Hursthouse 1991; Swanton 2003; Simon 1986).¹⁰⁴

Hursthouse formulated her criterion in an attempt to show that an ethical theory based on, or centred around, 'the virtues' is no worse off (Hursthouse 1999: 25-32; Hursthouse 1991: 217-222) with regards to providing 'action guidance'—a methodology providing an organized and systematic way of telling us what to do (*i.e.* what is right)—than familiar consequentialist or deontological efforts. In fact, Hursthouse argued (Hursthouse 1999: 35-39, 80-87), not only is an ethical theory utilising her criterion capable of generating rules (virtue rules, or 'v-rules' in Hursthouse's terminology) governing behaviour (by indicating what kind of virtue that is called for in the circumstances, *e.g.*, 'be honest' *etc.*) but these rules, because they are formulated using familiar thick aretaic notions, are more informative than their thin deontic counterparts. Aretaic rules such as *e.g.*, 'be honest' give us specific information, the thought goes, because we already know about honest actions and what it is to be an honest person *etc.* since honesty is more than a mere disposition. This is so because, as Aristotle points out (at Arist. *NE* 1103a30- 1103b2, quoted in the previous section; *cf.* Annas 2014: 14 esp. n5), when we come to reflect on the virtues we are already on our way towards developing them.

¹⁰⁴ There are many ways to interpret the basic schema. Little of what I say in what follows depends upon precise interpretations.

Hursthouse's account and those similar to it—so-called 'qualified agent'-accounts (Swinton 2003: 227n1) such as *e.g.*, Simon (1986: 112; Zagzebski 1996: 135)—face a number of more or less technical difficulties that boil down to suspicions that the account might be uninformative or extensionally inadequate; For example, if the ideal of the virtuous agent must be spelt out in terms of right action then the account is threatened by a potentially vicious circularity, and we might wonder if 'virtue' and 'rightness' really are close enough for an identity claim of this sort to hold, or perhaps it might not be the case that virtue explains rightness in all cases, *etc.* Murdoch's objection above could simply be read as a version of the second suspicion—*i.e.* that it might be that there are cases where what would be right for a less than fully virtuous person to do is not what 'a virtuous agent would characteristically (*i.e.* acting in character) do in the circumstances' (on such cases see Svensson 2010). Although such concerns are certainly part of what is going on here I think that there is more to Murdoch's remark than this. What Murdoch seems worried about in the quote above, I think, has rather to do with the usefulness of the account in question. It is clear that, on her view, ethical enquiry cannot simply amount to the establishment of a criterion of right action:

Of course right action is important in itself, with an importance which is not difficult to understand. But it should provide the starting-point of reflection and not its conclusion. Right action, together with the steady extension of the area of strict obligation, is a proper criterion of virtue. Action also tends to confirm, for better or worse, the background of attachment from which it issues. Action is an occasion for grace, or for its opposite. However, the aim of morality cannot be simply action. Without some more positive conception of the soul as a substantial and continually developing mechanism of attachments, the purification and reorientation of which must be the task of morals, 'freedom' is readily corrupted into self-assertion and 'right action' into some sort of *ad hoc* utilitarianism (Murdoch 1970: 70-71/357-358).

It should be noted that most theoreticians that have favoured qualified agent accounts have done so while agreeing with Murdoch that the establishment of a criterion of right action is not all that moral philosophy should supply us with. Those who think that it is, however, can attempt to sidestep a lot of rather common criticism from those that see ethical theory as essentially practical by insisting that the theories that they offer are essentially not theories about virtuous individuals and how we should strive to become virtuous or other such practical

matters since their central or only concern is to provide an answer to the rather different question ‘what makes right acts right?’.¹⁰⁵

On such an approach, the tasks of moral philosophy naturally seem, first and foremost, to be the systematic division of the moral realm into categories differentiated by deontic (right, wrong, supererogatory, *etc.*) and axiological (good, bad, *etc.*) status from which verdicts—in the form of what David Wiggins (1987: 95-96) calls ‘valuations’ (of the form ‘*x* is *F*’ with no restrictions at all on *x*, requiring only that *F* be a ‘normative’ term)—can be extracted.¹⁰⁶ A rationale for this division must also be provided in terms of an answer to questions of the form ‘what makes *x F*?’ This might lead to the study of metaphysics of morals as a metaphysic of the (fabric of the) world; an inquiry into what entities and relations exists, are fundamental, and so on (see *e.g.*, Schaffer 2009).¹⁰⁷ It is only

¹⁰⁵ ‘What makes right acts right?’ is the title, and driving question, of chapter two of W. D. Ross’s *The Right and The Good* (1930)—a work that sets out to ‘examine the nature, relations, and implications of three conceptions which appear to be fundamental in ethics; those of “right”, “good” in general, and “morally good”’ (1930:1)—, as clear an example of this kind of approach as ever there was.

¹⁰⁶ How systematic this division could be hinges on one’s convictions regarding the applicability of moral principles, thus actualising the debate between particularists and generalists about morality. This could, but need not be, a (full) partitioning, as we might also want to leave room for (voluntary) actions that are indifferent—*i.e.* lack deontic status. *Cf. e.g.*, Scotus *Ord.* 2, d. 41, q. un., n. 8 for arguments to the effect that some actions of the virtuous agent, and *Ord.* 2, d.41, q. un., n. 7 for arguments to the effect that actions developing but not yet resulting from virtue must be classified as indifferent. For the thesis that actions resulting from deliberation can never be indifferent see Thomas *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae. 18, 8; *De Malo*, q. 2, a. 4-5; 1-2, q. 18, a. 9. I believe the postulation of indifferent actions to be a mistake resulting from a misapprehension of the nature of our end akin to that plausibly ascribed to Kant in Irwin 2009: §970ff; *i.e.* in supposing that our conception of the highest good must be derived from a prior account of morality, it might be natural to suppose that we can act on ends that fall outside the moral sphere. Nothing of what follows does, I believe, hinge on this conviction or my resulting siding with St. Thomas on this particular issue. Thanks are due to David Alm for valuable discussions on this point. The realm of the ‘moral’—and thereby the class of actions, *etc.* to be evaluated from the perspective of the judge—can be demarcated by means of *e.g.*, a characterization (*e.g.*, ‘our duties to other people, including such things as requirements to aid them, and prohibitions against harming, killing, coercion, and deception’ (Scanlon 1998: 6, 171-188), ‘the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which [a happy existence] might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured’ (Mill 1861: 12)) or some sort of criterion. It is common to distinguish between different spheres within this broader domain (See *e.g.*, Scanlon 1998: 171-188; Mackie 1977: 106-107).

¹⁰⁷ There is nothing that says that such an approach could not (*pace e.g.*, Broad 1930: 285; Ayer 1946: 102-120) adhere to some kind of practicality requirement. In this case one would also want to couple the partitioning principle(s) with (a) decision procedure(s) or other means of action guidance in particular situations that need not, but could, be fully codified and algorithmic. Since

all too natural to pursue such an investigation from a detached perspective treating reasons as facts and practical rationality as constituting compliance to requirements that can be weighted independently of the agent's character, prior plans and commitments.

Influential statements of the perspective in question include Sidgwick (1907: 382) and Nagel (1986). Fritzson (2014: 65-67) offers a discussion on Sidgwick, Nagel, and other relevant passages. This perspective is more or less, I take it, what writers working in the existentialist tradition call 'facticity' (see *e.g.* Sartre 1956: Part 2 Ch. 2 §II) as opposed to 'transcendence' (see *e.g.* Sartre 1956: Part 2 Ch. 3). It might be that this perspective is impossible to reach (or at least always comes to us distorted or mediated).

This stance also suggests a methodology in so far as it seems reasonable to develop, test, and criticise moral theories using difficult cases under the presupposition that a theory capable of handling—in the sense of either providing action guidance or reaching a definitive and reasonable verdict—in such difficult cases surely must be able to handle more mundane situations with ease.

This line of response takes moral philosophy to be a chiefly theoretical rather than a fundamentally practical endeavour. Such a stance is famously articulated by Charlie Dunbar Broad—who, for a brief time, functioned as Murdoch's supervisor at Cambridge (see Broackes 2012: 4)—in the very last paragraph of his *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (1930):

It might be retorted that we have gone to the other extreme and made the fact of right action inexplicable. Quite simple people, there is no reason to doubt, often act rightly in quite complicated situations. How could they possibly do so if the problem is so involved as we have made it out to be? The answer to this objection is to compare right action with playing a ball rightly at tennis or cricket, and to compare the theory of right action to the mechanical and hydrodynamical theory of the action of the racket or bat and the flight of the ball. The good player responds, without explicit analysis or calculation, to a highly complex situation by actions which an observer possessed of superhuman powers of analysis or calculation would deduce as the solution of his equations. We can no more learn to act rightly by appealing to the ethical theory of right action than we can play golf well by appealing to the mathematical theory of the flight of the golf-ball. The interest of ethics is thus almost wholly theoretical, as is the interest of the mathematical theory of golf or of billiards. And yet it may have a certain slight practical application. It may lead us to look out for certain systematic faults which we should not otherwise have suspected; and, once we are on the look out for them,

this manoeuvre would make said theory open to the critique dealt with in the previous section I will henceforth forego mentions of modifications to this effect.

we may learn to correct them. But in the main the old saying is true: *Non in dialectica complacuit Deo Salvum facere populum suum* [It is not the will of God to save his people through dialectics].¹⁰⁸ Not that this is any objection to dialectic. For salvation is not everything; and to try to understand in outline what one solves *ambulando* in detail is quite good fun for those people who like that sort of thing (Broad 1930: 284-285).¹⁰⁹

This lengthy quotation is, besides being witty—and for supplying the best excuse anyone can provide for doing pretty much any kind of theoretical work; that it is fun—, useful for our purposes in that it pinpoints several characteristics of this understanding of ethical theory. To be sure, Broad's position is in a sense extreme and there are naturally a host of other theoreticians that have attempted to soften their position by supplying their accounts with various kinds of bridging principles. Still, Broad's stance is useful for illustrative purposes since I do not think that the added complexity of such as a system of bridging principles or other means of connecting the practical and theoretical spheres has any effect on the fundamental assumptions about ethical theory that are the issue here. What is central is that this approach to ethical theory—narrowly construed as a search for a criterion of right action—is to be construed as a theoretical science in Aristotle's sense.

Aristotle divides the sciences (*epistêmai*) on the basis of subject matter, aims, methods, and appropriate level of precision. The practical sciences—*i.e.* ethics, politics, and, household management (*oikonomia*)—have their principles in us, the practical aim of good choices and appropriate passions for a happy life (Arist. *NE*1095^a2-11), utilize the endoxic method (Arist. *NE*1145^b2-7), and should (or could) not be made into exact sciences (Arist. *NE*1098^a26-30). The theoretical sciences include prominently 'first philosophy'—*i.e.* metaphysics in the modern sense—but also mathematics, physics and the special sciences such as *e.g.*, biology.

What is of interest to us here is that it could be that different demands are applicable to different sciences depending on where they fall along the divide between the practical and the theoretical. While we cannot accuse a mathematician—occupied with a theoretical endeavour—that takes no interest in concrete applications of missing the point of said discipline, an investigation into ethical matters purely for the sake of intellectual exercise would arguably

¹⁰⁸ The quote is from St. Ambrose *De Fide* [*On the Faith*] I:5, 42.

¹⁰⁹ This quote has been used by Sellars (2009: 2) and Sandbach (1989: 11) to make a similar point to the one I am making here concerning differences between ancient and modern philosophy in general and about the Stoics in particular.

constitute a kind of perversion (Broadie 1991: 18; see also Williams 1972: xvii-xxi; 1985).

Whether we think that ethics properly understood should indeed be practical in this sense or if it could constitute a kind of metaphysics of the normative domain comes down to deeply held convictions concerning the discipline of ethics itself. While I do not believe that there is necessarily anything wrong with thinking of ethics as a, more or less, purely theoretical endeavour I do think that so doing gets away from the criticism discussed above at the cost of dramatically changing the subject under discussion. Just to anticipate; Murdoch, like Aristotle before her, thinks that such a view of moral philosophy—which she sees as thoroughly practical—is fundamentally mistaken.

Several things that have been the topic of our earlier discussion, such as *e.g.*, the need for an adequate moral psychology, are here re-actualised but what is most important for present purposes is Murdoch's remark that right action is merely 'the starting-point of reflection' that can be 'readily corrupted into [...] some sort of *ad hoc* utilitarianism'. The main issue, I think, that Murdoch has not just with 'qualified agent'-accounts but with practical moral theories that take a criterion of right action as central is that this approach is fundamentally mistaken in that it gives the wrong account of how we are to better ourselves. At the very least, we ought not to aim directly at right action:

I think it is more than a verbal point to say that what should be aimed at is goodness, and not freedom or right action, although right action, and freedom in the sense of humility, are natural products of attention to the good (Murdoch 1970: 70/357).

Murdoch's idea that what we ought to aim at is attention to the good (understood in her special sense) rather than at what is right in a particular situation is something that re-occurs in McDowell's discussion of the unity of the virtues. '[T]he specialized sensitivities that are to be equated with particular virtues', McDowell argues, 'are actually not available one by one for a series of separate identifications' (McDowell 1979: 332) because the individual virtue-notions are used 'to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity' (McDowell 1979: 333). This is so because 'a simple propensity to be gentle cannot be identified with the virtue of kindness' given that there are cases where 'a straightforward propensity to be gentle to others' feelings would not lead to right conduct' (McDowell 1979: 333). A central supporting assumption of this argument is 'the attractive idea that a virtue issues in nothing but right conduct' (McDowell 1979: 332). This last remark has sometimes been read as an

endorsement of something like Hursthouse's criterion of right action, but as Frans Svensson (2010: 256n1) notes, the idea that 'virtue issues in nothing but right conduct' only expresses a sufficient and not a jointly necessary and sufficient condition whereas Hursthouse's thesis is formulated as a bi-conditional. While this could be interpreted as simply a worry over extensional inadequacy on McDowell's part, *i.e.* that he simply wants to leave room for the possibility that there are actions which are right even if no virtuous agent would characteristically do them, I think that there is more to it than that. At its heart, the problem that I think McDowell is after and that it seems that Murdoch has in mind is a practical one related to moral progress and our striving to better ourselves.

The worry is, I think, that if we were to focus on what the 'virtuous agent would characteristically (*i.e.* acting in character) do in the circumstances', the circumstances might be such that only a specific aspect of the general sensitivity that is virtue would be called for, and we would run the risk of not recognising how this aspect interconnects with a host of other such aspects not triggered in the specific case. If we instead attend to the good we run no such risk of simplifying and over-compartmentalising. One reason that Murdoch has, then, for being sceptical towards criteria of right action as a central component of a practical moral theory is that focusing on this, or on exemplars that reliably get it right, is that by doing so we run the risk of not appreciating the interconnectedness of our moral reality. Relatedly it is also the case, as Murdoch mentions in passing, that '[a]ction also tends to confirm, for better or worse, the background of attachment from which it issues' (Murdoch 1970: 71/357), meaning not only that behaviour tends to reinforce and replicate itself through habit but also that a narrow focus on (overt) actions misses, and diverts our attention from, the inner struggle of perfecting our grasp of our moral reality.

Another reason Murdoch has for being sceptical—that might be what is hinted at in the cryptic remarks concerning the Demiurge's reinterpretation of the forms into an entirely different medium (Murdoch 1992: 11) in the quote that began this section—is the idea that moral theory conceived of as a criterion of rightness coupled with a decision procedure leaves insufficient room for the private and personal aspects of ethics. In order to see this, it is illustrative to take a look at a crucial early stage of the development of ethical theories of this kind. In §1.4 I said that Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* (1907 [1874]) constituted an important shift in the history of ethical thought. F. H. Bradley—in a lengthy critical review essay of *The Methods of Ethics* that we shall have reason to return to in what follows—puts the point thus:

No book, it is safe to say, has been published for years which has done so much to stimulate ethical speculation amongst us, and in more senses than one to point to a reform in our moral philosophy (Bradley 1877a: 59).

The ‘issue at stake’ in the debate between Sidgwick and Bradley is, as John H. Muirhead puts it, ‘none other than the possibility of making any general statements as to what makes life worth living and so of having anything that can be rightly called a Moral Philosophy at all’ (Muirhead 1932).¹¹⁰ Muirhead’s point, I take it, is that if then-recent tendencies in ethical theorising are allowed to continue to develop unchecked we run the risk of neglecting central perfectionist insights concerning the good life to the point that it would threaten moral philosophy at its core. Muirhead is not wholly critical to the developments he discusses. In fact, he seeks—true to his Hegelian leanings—a synthesis between ‘rule’ and ‘end’ in moral theory (Muirhead 1932: esp. 99ff.).

We have now reached a point in our discussion where Sidgwick’s influence is remarkably keenly felt. This issue is brought to the fore with the very first sentence of *The Methods of Ethics*:

The boundaries of the study called Ethics are variously and often vaguely conceived: but they will perhaps be sufficiently defined, at the outset, for the purposes of the present treatise, if a ‘Method of Ethics’ is explained to mean any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ‘ought’—or what is ‘right’ for them—to do, or to seek to realise by voluntary action (Sidgwick 1907: 1).

From the very outset Sidgwick, if I read him correctly, thus defines his endeavour, and thus moral philosophy as such, as a search for what I above called a criterion of rightness combined with a decision procedure.¹¹¹ He thinks that a proper ethical theory should constitute ‘a complete method for determining right

¹¹⁰ This quote—taken from a comment on a series of informal symposia on the idea of right in morals held in Oxford and attended by figures such as W. D. Ross, H. D. Prichard, E. F. Carrick and others—was written at a time when the transition from Mill to Moore that Elizabeth Anscombe (1958a: 9) identified had begun to cement (Muirhead 1932: 10 makes a similar remark which also attributes the impetus to change to Sidgwick). While it is true that Sidgwick’s ethics is practical in the sense here discussed whereas much of the discussion that Muirhead reacts to is not, I still think that it is reasonable to attribute the fundamental shift to Sidgwick in the way that Anscombe and Muirhead does.

¹¹¹ If Sidgwick is instead to be read as distinguishing sharply between a criterion of rightness and a decision-procedure (a distinction which is, as far as I know, first clearly drawn by Bales (1971)) and offering only the former, then it seems to me that he would fall prey to much the same problems that affected Broad’s position.

conduct' (Sidgwick 1907: 217) where moral judgment is just 'a systematic deduction from rules' (Sidgwick 1907: 85). Sidgwick's conception of ethics is thus practical yet scientific enough to seek algorithmic procedures. Bradley, when describing this aspect of Sidgwick's thought, puts the point thus:

The object or scope of the 'science' is practical. It is to direct us to 'externally and objectively right' conduct (381). It is to tell us what to do, not merely in general, but in particular. It is to be no mere outline but a scientific code. [...] Briefly then we see Mr. Sidgwick's conception of ethics is wholly jurial (Bradley 1877a: 38-40).

Sidgwick thus demands from a satisfactory ethical theory that it generates unique normative prescriptions in every conceivable choice situation and that it does so through the formulation of a criterion of rightness. His methodology, which we have seen has had enormous influence on Anglo-American ethics, thus makes the idea of a criterion of rightness absolutely central to moral philosophy.

Bradley is critical of this 'jurial' conception of ethics on the grounds of two disanalogies between morality and law that he thinks are intuitively obvious:

First, no modern code [of law] makes the smallest attempt to regulate our whole life in accordance with a leading principle. And secondly, a most important point, all law abstracts and must abstract, while morality may not do so (Bradley 1877a: 40).

Murdoch would agree to both points of criticism.¹¹² As we have already seen (*e.g.*, § 2.2), Murdoch shares a 'resistance to the idea that the content of morality must be statable in the form of universal principles' (Broackes 2012: 9) traceable to Aristotle (on the basis of *e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1104^a7-8) and Plato (see *e.g.*, *Pl. Rep.* 520c; *Plt.* 294-296). She would also agree to Bradley's claim that ethics is intimately bound up with recognition of the particular.

What, we might ask, does Sidgwick stand to gain from pressing the need for a criterion of rightness that is fully codifiable into a 'method' or decision procedure? I think that at least part of the answer stands to be found in his rivalry with

¹¹² Which is not to say that she would wholeheartedly agree to everything Bradley has to say about morality. She would, for instance, find Bradley's equating of the distinctive feature of morality with its relation to the will (Bradley 1927: 143, 228-230) problematic on the grounds that such an emphasis on the will invites a dualistic conception of the person as 'an indiscernible balance between a pure rational agent and an impersonal mechanism' (Murdoch 1970: 54/344). The extent to which Bradley is committed to a Kantian conception of agency is far from clear. (For a Kantian reading of Green, who has much in common with Bradley, see *e.g.*, Lewis 1948; for the contemporary relevance of this see Cokelet 2015).

Bradley.¹¹³ By insisting on action guidance conceived as unique normative prescriptions in every conceivable choice situation Sidgwick can highlight one advantage that his utilitarianism has over Bradley's self-realisationism. The dialectical move here is thus to find a single aspect, even if this has previously been thought of as somewhat peripheral, where your own favoured theory does better than your opponent's and convince everyone that that aspect constitutes the central or only thing that theories of the kind you are debating ought to be about.

Sidgwick has the following to say concerning perfectionist ethical methods that take the notions of 'self-realization' or 'happiness' as the central organizing concern for ethical theory:

On the whole, then, I conclude that the notion of Self-realisation is to be avoided in a treatise on ethical method, on account of its indefiniteness: and for similar reason we must discard a common account of Egoism which describes its ultimate end as the 'good' of the individual; for the term 'good' may cover all possible views of the ultimate end of rational conduct. Indeed it may be said that Egoism in this sense was assumed in the whole ethical controversy of ancient Greece; that is, it was assumed on all sides that a rational individual would make the pursuit of his own good his supreme aim: the controverted question was whether this Good was rightly conceived as Pleasure or Virtue, or any *tertium quid*. Nor is the ambiguity removed if we follow Aristotle in confining our attention to the Good attainable in human life, and call this Well-being (*εὐδαιμονία*) (Sidgwick 1907: 91-92).

Sidgwick thus demands from satisfactory ethical theories that they provide unique action guidance in particular situations and this is something that classical perfectionists as a rule are less concerned with. The ensuing disagreement (or misunderstanding) of what ethical theory is ultimately about is glaring in the following footnote that first appeared in the 2nd edition of *The Methods of Ethics* (1877):

I am fully sensible of the peculiar interest and value of the ethical thought of ancient Greece. Indeed through a large part of the present work the influence of Plato and Aristotle on my treatment of this subject has been greater than that of any modern writer.¹¹⁴ But I am here only considering the value of the general principles for determining what ought to be done, which the ancient systems profess to supply (Sidgwick 1907: 375n1).

¹¹³ The exchange conducted in Sidgwick 1876 and Bradley 1877b is a great example of this rivalry.

¹¹⁴ This is presumably a reference to the methodological discussion concerning 'common sense' at Sidgwick 1907: xxi-xxiii.

It is clear that Sidgwick is here working with an understanding of classical perfectionism as divided into the two main families of self-realisationism and eudaimonism and it is clear that he takes the charge of indefiniteness to apply to both equally. It is also clear, I think, that his primary targets are F. H. Bradley and T. H. Green. Both Bradley and Green agree that their respective versions of self-realisationism share many structural features with eudaimonism. While Bradley simply asserts that ‘for us (as it was for Hellas) the main question is: There being some end, what is that end’ (Bradley 1927: 81), Green explicitly and continuously draws on Greek ethics for support with the aim of bringing together the best of the ancient and modern traditions (see. *e.g.*, Green 1883: § 251). Green sees Greek eudaimonism, particularly in its Aristotelian incarnation, as essentially correct in grounding duty in an account of our ultimate end constrained by human nature (expressed by the virtues) and regulated by the common good (Green 1883: §§253,256, 263, 271, 279) although underdeveloped, particularly regarding the scope of the virtues and the common good (Green 1883: §§ 257, 261-262, 265-266, 270, 279-280). Indeed, David O. Brink (2014: 822) seems to me correct in describing Green as arguably the clearest exponent of what Terence Irwin (2007: §3) calls ‘Aristotelian naturalism’—a compound commitment to a teleological conception of a final good identified with the agent’s happiness (*eudaimonia*) constrained by human rational nature, an essential expression of which is (the exercise of) the virtues (Brink 2014: 814, 819-20)—in the modern era.

What, then, does Sidgwick mean when he accuses classical perfectionist accounts of being indefinite? I think, and in this I follow Irwin (2009), that he means (at least) three quite different things.

Firstly, he might mean that classical perfectionism is vacuous in the sense that any ethical system could be subsumed under its heading. Both Green and Bradley recognise that their respective approaches commit them to a teleological conception of morality (see Bradley 1927: 65-68; Green 1883: § 176). T. H. Green writes:

And hence the differentia of the virtuous life [...] is that it is governed by the consciousness of there being some perfection which has to be attained, some vocation which has to be fulfilled, some law which has to be obeyed, something absolutely desirable, whatever the individual may for the time desire; that it is in ministering to such an end that the agent seeks to satisfy himself (Green 1883: § 176).

While *telic monism* (see LeBar, 2013)—*i.e.* the thesis that all reasons for action devolve, are lent their normative force, and justification, from ends, any hierarchy

of which, if justified, has as its terminus an *ultimate end*—whether construed in terms of *e.g.*, self-realisation or happiness is certainly in need of both further specification and an adjacent theoretical framework to count as something like an ethical theory proper it is not completely vacuous nor indefinite in the sense outlined above.¹¹⁵ Apart from its implications for practical rationality broadly construed it clearly has implications for delineating the sphere of morality and for the plausibility of (grounding) self-regarding duties (see Hurka, 1996: 5) while still not collapsing into anything like an objectionable form of egoism (*cf.* Arist. *NE* 1168^a29-1169^b37; Green 1883: §232; Annas 1993: 223-328; Brink 1999). Furthermore, as is pointed out by *e.g.*, Terence Irwin (2009: § 1216), the claim that the ultimate end is self-realisation (if it is not to be obviously false) must afford non-instrumental value to actions (in so far as they realise a rational self and its aims) and consequently self-realisationism excludes any view such as *e.g.*, hedonism that hold that all non-derivative final value belongs to (states of) consciousness (*cf.* Green 1883: §§158-161, 253).

Secondly, Sidgwick can be read as arguing that classical perfectionist theories are tautological or viciously circular. It is true that classical perfectionist approaches tend not to be neither *hierarchical* (*i.e.* taking some set of notions as *basic* and derive other elements of the theory in terms of these basic ones) nor *reductive* in the sense of taking derived notions as *reducible*—either *conceptually* or in some weaker sense—to the basic ones without significant remainder. Furthermore, such structures tend not to be *complete* (*i.e.* they are not attempting to account for everything falling within the domain in question in terms of the basic concepts, or others derived from them (Annas 1993: 7ff.)). This structural feature of the theories under consideration could be thought to be mere uninformative circles. These ethical systems are structured using set of primary notions—virtue, happiness, and the soul respectively in the case of the Ancients whereas the self-realisationists prefer self-realisation to happiness and Bradley tends to talk in terms of duty rather than virtue—from which non-primary notions are granted a place within the larger framework without being derived from the primary ones. Given such a structure it is obviously an open question if

¹¹⁵ LeBar, 2013: 10 argues that the notion of an end can helpfully be explicated by following Kant (MM: 381, trans. Gregor) as ‘an object of the choice [...] through the representation of which choice is determined’. It is vital that this monism about *ultimate ends* (ends that derive none of their normative force from some further end) is not conflated with monism with regards to *final ends* (ends whose normative force does not derive entirely from further ends they serve) especially since the latter thesis is usually denied by proponents of classical perfectionism. (*Cf.* LeBar 2013: 19n14, Ch. 2; Arist. *NE* 1097^b1-5. On this passage *Cf.* McDowell 1998: 4-22, Kenny 1977, Ackrill 1975).

the theory under consideration generates a structure that manages to be informative (by accounting for the concepts involved and the postulated relations said to hold between these). A theory specifying virtue in terms of right conduct while at the same time providing an account of virtue exhausted by the claim that it issues in nothing but right conduct is obviously objectionably circular but there is nothing that forces theories of this kind to such blatant circularity.¹¹⁶

Thirdly, Sidgwick means to say that classical perfectionism cannot provide unique action guidance of the sort that he demands. The demand that a moral theory must offer unique action guidance excludes not only eudaimonism and self-realisationism. It denies the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, non-hedonistic egoism and even threatens Kantianism unless the notion of a ‘maxim’ is narrowly interpreted which seem implausible (*cf.* Hegel 1952 [1820]: §§135-141; Sedgwick 1988a; 1988b; O’Neill 1975; Irwin 2009: §1021). This demand seems to me not only too strong but to seriously misconstrue the purpose of ethical theory by assuming that said purpose is to tell us what to do through a decision procedure that does neither seem to be the proper business of ethical theory nor paint a plausible picture of the moral life in terms of development (Annas 2004; Hursthouse 1999; Irwin 2009: §1177, 1211). Demanding unique action guidance also misconstrues the aims of both Green and Bradley as they are, as a result of their ‘entry point of ethical reflection’, primarily concerned with understanding the moral perspective, ‘the consciousness of a moral ideal’ (Green 1883: § 8), or ‘the moral point of view’ (Bradley 1927: 58) and its relation to agents and (the logical structure of) deliberation and choice.

The, to my mind, most forceful contemporary critique directed against the understanding of ethical theory derived from Sidgwick is due to Julia Annas (2004). Annas likens the help sought from a theory of right action on the Sidgwickian picture of ethical theory to the help we seek, and stand to gather, from a technical manual in operating a technical device such as a computer. This way of describing the Sidgwickian tradition’s conception of the aims of ethical theory is, Annas argues (2004: 63), far from dismissive or reductive. Rather, it embodies the egalitarian nature of this project: a decision procedure is supposed to be equally available to everyone (who has had the opportunity for the required training), in much the same way as a technical manual.

Annas (2004: 64) observes—and in this she follows Rosalind Hursthouse (1999)—that on the technical manual model it ought to be possible for a young

¹¹⁶ Self-realisationism is interpreted along these lines by E. F. Carritt (1928: 50): ‘Asking what we are to do, we are told to realize ourselves. Asking what sort of acts achieve this, we are told, “The ones we ought to do”’. This passage is discussed in Muirhead 1932: 28ff.

person or a person with detestable character (since this is supposedly unconnected to the theory of right action) with brilliant technical understanding of the theory in question to function as reliable and sound sources of moral advice, which seems absurd.¹¹⁷ While it is possible to retort here that in properly applying the theory in question a great deal of factual knowledge and practical know-how in *e.g.*, reading people and situations is needed I still do not think that this gets at the heart of the issue with the technical manual-model.

Most importantly, Annas (2004: 64) observes, there is something disconcerting with the idea that a moral theory ought to tell us what to do in any given set of circumstances and provide adequate justification for the prescribed course of action. If this is the main feature of a moral theory are we not, Annas asks, 'losing an important sense in which we should be making our *own* decisions?' (Annas 2004: 65, emphasis in original). She elaborates as follows:

This point can be put vividly. Suppose (unrealistically!) someone always does what his mother tells him to do. He always follows her orders; if he fails to do so he feels guilt, regret and so on. We take this to be immature, a case of arrested development; at his age, we say, he should be making his own decisions. Now, why should this picture become all right when we replace Mom by a decision procedure? Presumably, a decision procedure, supported by a theory of right action, can be expected to be correct more often, and more reliably, than Mom can; but how could this remove the worry? (Annas 2004: 65-66).

The worry cannot be stilled by insisting that the theory is to be internalised since it would still be a matter of interpreting the theory correctly; 'whether the theory is pictured as outside me, like a manual, or inside me, like a set of directions as to how to think, it is still telling me what to do' (Annas 2004: 66).

Rather than treating this as an impasse Annas argues that a better way of understanding the roles played by virtue, virtuous persons and action in our moral lives is through the skill-analogy and the focus on moral development this brings. If acquiring virtue is like acquiring practical skills then the role of the virtuous person shifts from exemplar to imitate (as it is commonly understood by adherents of 'qualified agent'-accounts of right action) to expert from which to learn (Annas 2004: 69). The learner depends upon the expert to learn but the aim is not to produce 'clone-like disciples' (Annas 2004: 69) but to foster pupils who will become experts themselves by acquiring their own understanding of their subject.

¹¹⁷ Formulating a criterion of right action in terms of the virtuous agent helps with these problems ('at least we will not be getting our theory of right action from a precocious teenager, or somebody with loathsome values' (Annas 2004: 68) but it will not address the deeper problem discussed below.

In this way, the true expert is in important ways different from, rather than a successful copy of, his tutor.

It is at this stage that we can see what Murdoch was presumably after in the quote that began this section. The section immediately preceding that quote fills in the further background in such a way that it seems reasonable to think that Annas and Murdoch are, so to say, on the same page:

At *Republic* 484CD Plato uses the image of the painter to set forth the notion of the good man gazing at the model (or form or image or idea) of spiritual truth (or reality) in his soul and keeping his gaze steadily thereon as he sets about the business of practical life. [...] The notion of copying the model itself would be a 'category mistake', since the model is not a particular thing, like a particular command or picture (Murdoch 1992: 11).

Both Annas and Murdoch reject the idea of the virtuous person as an ideal to be imitated in favour of thinking of him as a guide that we must leave behind as we develop our own understanding of the practical world we inhabit. There are of course differences between the two, particularly since Murdoch's Platonic leanings emphasise the inner connection to the Good in a way that is rather removed from Annas' (at this point in her development) Aristotelian emphasis on the social aspects of the acquisition of virtue. Nevertheless, both authors emphasise the way in which attention to the development of intellectual work and skill serves as a better guide to moral progress than does focusing on a criterion of rightness.

4.5 Ends, Planning, and Situational Mastery

While it does not follow from the rough and ready nature of much of ordinary day-to-day practical thought and judgments that conclusions reached via philosophical analysis must share the variability of its subject matter it does follow that since philosophical ethics must arguably be pursued with the aim of making a practical difference that we have reason to believe that some of its premises and conclusions will resemble ordinary practical judgments in this regard (Broadie 1991: 18). Further evidence for this can be gathered from the observation (to be found in *e.g.*, Williams 1985: 2) that if philosophy is to provide answers to the basic (practical) questions in life then it would seem that these answers must be such that ordinary people—*i.e.* non-specialists—can recognize these answers as such that they could have given them themselves.

The fact that the answers we come up with to these questions are the results of elaboration on views held by earlier thinkers or embedded in everyday moral thought and practice makes it plausible that most of them are only roughly true in outline (Arist. *NE*1094b13-23), work as general rules true for the most part¹¹⁸, are subject to later qualification and revision (Arist. *NE*1098^a20-26; Broadie 1991: 18; McDowell 1995b; Hursthouse 1999: 165-166¹¹⁹) or constitute hedged generalisations—*i.e.* true ‘at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way’ (Arist. *NE*1106b21-22, trans. Crisp).

Secondly, this means that there are limits to the levels of generalisation and abstraction that can be deemed acceptable. This might lead us, in our interpretation of Murdoch, to a rejection of an articulated and reasoned vision as a model for ethical thought in favour of stressing situational mastery. Murdoch’s continual stressing of the importance of the particular certainly invites readings of this sort and John McDowell (1995b, 1996, 1998)—who is, as we have seen, heavily influenced by Murdoch—is frequently identified as one of the principal thinkers behind the contemporary stance known as particularism.¹²⁰

Aristotle argues that mature human beings—capable of choice, deliberation, calculation, and supplied with a ‘view about the reason why’ (*hypolēpsis tou dia ti*, Arist. *EE*1226^b21-30)—(ought to) live their lives under a conception of living finely (*kalon*; cf. Arist. *EE*1214^b6-10) consisting in a conception of doing well (*eu zēn*; cf. Arist. *NE*1095a18-20), where doing well is understood as acting in accordance with a conception of practical reason (*phronesis*). This thesis can be

¹¹⁸ The phrase ‘for the most part’ (*hōs epi tou polu*) is technical in Aristotle and subject to a great deal of debate.

¹¹⁹ McDowell and Hursthouse both make use of Otto Neurath’s image of a boat at sea (the simile is a reoccurring motif in Neurath’s work, used no less than five times in various writings (Neurath, 1983)) that was originally used as a metaphorical device to describe the non-foundational approach to conceptual scheme revision by W. v. O. Quine (*e.g.*, 1951, 1960).

¹²⁰ Another influential thinker that—like McDowell—presents her stressing of situational mastery over an articulated and reasoned vision both as a reading of Aristotle and as a reasonable normative stance is Sara Broadie (1991). It is, unfortunately, somewhat unclear where McDowell’s and Broadie’s respective positions are to be placed on this continuum since it is, in both cases, difficult to pinpoint exactly how far this situational stressing actually is meant to go. The theoretical differences that exist between these writers arguably come down to differences in perspectives and is thus to a large extent to be understood as differences in emphasis with Broadie primarily seeking to account for deliberation as a process in the moment where salient features point towards a course of action seeking to realize (a) restricted and determinate end(s) whereas McDowell is primarily interested in ‘the grounding and justification of deliberated choice’ (Broadie 1991: 235; cf. Price 2011: 230ff.). On the relation between Broadie and McDowell see Price 2011: 230ff.

read as ‘a logical truth, as an empirical observation [on the strength of *NE*1102^a2-3], or as a moral imperative [on the strength of *e.g.*, *EE*1214^b6ff.]’ (Kenny 1965: 93) where the first two alternatives can be lumped together as descriptive whereas the third is normative (see McDowell 1980: § 1). The two senses thus *prima facie* appear exclusive in that it makes no sense to demand what we (must) do anyway and the descriptive thesis might appear obviously false. Aristotle’s apparent commitment to both (*cf. e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1095^a17-28) thus seems at fault until we realize that this comes down to the level of specification of the end in question. All men can be said to plan, if this is understood as encompassing even a commitment ‘not to cross bridges in advance’ (Hardie 1965: §3), so that even a plan not to plan is a plan of sorts in which case even the normative thesis becomes defensible; given that we must plan the plan we choose should be a good one.

The requirement to plan well, so conceived, might be fulfilled by placing oneself on different points spanning a continuum from spontaneous situational mastery to requiring an articulate and reasoned vision—a kind of ‘blueprint’ (Price 2011: 200-201; Broadie 1991: 198; *cf.* Kraut 1993: 367-369) achieved by philosophical reflection—of an ultimate end. I believe positions on either end of the spectrum to be problematic. Overly emphasising situational mastery runs the risk of ignoring existential questions (since it seems plausible to view certain kinds of existential problems as a felt need for a ‘Grand End’) and has a hard time accounting for certain kinds of moral development whereas an excessive stressing of an articulated and substantially specified vision of the good life applicable to each and every human being ignores the importance of particulars and might lead to a too algorithmic understanding of moral decision-making.

Starting from a process-account of deliberation and rejecting the need for, or downplaying the role of, a ‘Grand End’ (Broadie 1991: 198) in practical deliberation has several appealing consequences. Such a strategy can easily make sense of the role of the particular situation in deliberation, since a plausible causal story of what goes on in deliberation on such an account is that circumstances brings to the fore one of one’s ordinary and rather specific ends—such as *e.g.*, ‘gaining a college degree, making a fortune, establishing useful contacts, moving to a place with good opportunities, getting one’s affairs into good order, successfully defending one’s reputation against libellous attack, winning a war’ (Broadie’s 1991: 234)—as attainable in the situation whereupon one proceeds to consider what would be involved in attaining it both in terms of means and in terms of whether this particular goal is worth going for in this situation in light of

one's other ends.¹²¹ The understanding of deliberation thus arrived at also goes some way towards accounting for the role recognition plays in moral and practical deliberation, since it makes practical wisdom out to be largely concerned with recognition of particulars.

By downplaying the role of philosophical ethics and its task of fleshing out an articulate and substantial conception of our end this position also avoids a certain kind of philosophical elitism that sees good people as necessarily being good philosophers of sorts (Broadie 1991: 200-202; *cf.* Kraut 1993 369-371). Less centrally, for our purposes, this position also has the advantage of explaining why the *NE* postulates such a tight fit between politics and ethics (it is concerned with the problems of the statesman who does have to concern himself with planning on a grand scale) whereas any such connection is lacking in the *EE* (which concerns itself more with the problems of ordinary agents (on this see Kraut 1993: 364-366)).

Murdoch's stressing of the need for a just and loving vision of particulars and particular others shares many features with a position of this kind (and in McDowell's case arguably seems to have directly inspired it). It could even be argued that in Murdoch we find a form of perfectionism that, in its stressing of a just and loving vision as the proper way to combat 'the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self' (Murdoch 1970: 103/385), completely does away with concern for one's own ends, self-perception, self-image, and personal strivings and ideals. Furthermore, this might lead us to think that what Murdoch has to say operates on a very particular level. Stanley Cavell reads Murdoch's example of M and D in just such a way:

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch presents as a central or working case of perfectionist perception that of a woman who comes to see her daughter-in-law in a new, more loving light. Without denying the interest of the case, or of Murdoch's treatment of it, I do not see it as exemplifying what I am calling Emersonian perfectionism. The principle reason for this, I think, is that I do not, from Murdoch's description, derive the sense that in the woman's change of perception she has come to see *herself*, and hence the possibilities of her world, in a transformed light. Without this sense, the case does not seem to generalize, but to

¹²¹ That the agent is required in such cases to seek ways of achieving the end in question in a manner that 'does justice to *all* that one cares about' (Broadie 1991: 250, italics in original) does not collapse into a version of the 'Grand End'-view since '*all* that one cares about' must be taken to mean all other ordinary and specific goals that we (typically) have rather than a worked out conception of happiness, since such an abstract and vague conception of happiness—*e.g.*, 'activity of the soul in accord with virtue' (Arist. NE1098a15-21, trans. Crisp)—hardly could serve as a guide in concrete situations (Kraut 1993: 363).

be confined as one of overcoming snobbery in a particular case (Cavell 1991: xv111-xix, italics in original).

Without getting into the thorny issues surrounding the proper understanding of Cavell's notion of 'Emersonian perfectionism' and its relation to his own philosophical stance (on this see *e.g.*, Guyer 2014; Gustafsson 2014) I think that we should grant that Niklas Forsberg (2017) has a point in seeing Cavell's remark as something of a misunderstanding of Murdoch's example. The simple reason for this is that M's change of vision does constitute a change—a transformation—of M's self-perception and thus a self-transformation. M does not, and certainly not solely of her own accord, simply choose to see D in a different light without changing herself. Rather she is, because she acknowledges her human fallibility ('M tells herself: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again"' (Murdoch 1970: 17/313)), responding to external demands in a way that changes her. The fact that M's change is dependent upon the acknowledgement of her own imperfections explains why M is engaged in an endless task' (Murdoch 1970: 28/321):

'Good is a transcendent reality' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful (Murdoch 1970: 93/376-377).

It might still be, of course that there are less dramatic changes that, as such, are not as obviously tied to a re-evaluation of the self and where Cavell's point holds, but the case of M and D is, I think, meant to illustrate just such a thoroughgoing change. This is so because M's reflections clearly mark out herself and her own shortcomings in a rather general light since M quite explicitly is concerned with her own character traits and ways of looking at the world rather than simply her particular judgment in the case at hand. Thus, it seems to me that M sees 'the possibilities of her world, in a transformed light' rather than 'just overcoming snobbery in a particular case' (Cavell 1991: xv111-xix, italics in original) even though Cavell is right that there might be cases where we might be doing so without anything like a thoroughgoing change. At any rate, it is clearly not, I think, those cases that are Murdoch's concern here.

Richard Kraut argues that the rejection of a 'Grand End' leads to a kind of passivity on behalf of the ideal deliberator:

Such a person notices something specific in his immediate surroundings or situation, and this activates a desire for an intermediate-level end. If this is the whole story, then the ideal deliberator is always reacting to this or that situation but has no general plan for shaping his environment. If nothing outside him prompted to act by stimulating a desire, he would do nothing. This is not our picture of life at its best, and we should not be eager to read it into Aristotle. If we agree that we should have a plan for initiating action, and should not merely wait for opportunities to present themselves, then it is hard to resist the idea that such a plan should begin with a conception of where our good lies. For in developing some sort of general plan, why should one rest content with intermediate goals (getting an education, having a family) and never seek a way of asserting the real worth of these ends by considering their relationship to one's good? (Kraut 1993: 366n2).

A range of related objections seem to be at work here. First is the idea that the ideal deliberator would, on occasion, be 'on hold' so to speak, since there is nothing in the agent's immediate situation that calls for a response. This objection loses some of its force once we recognise that we have good reason to suppose that such situations would be rare or even non-existent, since it could very well be that there is always an opportunity to take steps towards realising at least one of our intermediate goals. That is, there is always something that the agent has most reason to do, even if this is something as passive-seeming as reflecting on theoretical matters and *a priori* truths (things on which there would seem to be constant *pro-tanto* reasons for reflecting upon regardless of circumstances).¹²²

Secondly Kraut appears to invoke the way plans seemingly influence our activities. The reason that I, in the moment of writing this, have decided to act upon the goal of attaining a degree is not just the fact that that goal is the one most favourably achieved in the circumstances (what, given the situation, I have most reason to do). Rather, it also seems to matter that I planned to do this today, rather than, say, finish reading a collection of short-stories, ride my bike, attend Mass, or finally get around to listening to Nick Cave's new album (or some of my other intermediate goals that I could reasonably take steps toward realising at this very moment). It might be that given situational factors (I am at the office after all), what I do have most situational reason to do is to work on my dissertation (this certainly is the case), but this is not all that matters, it also matters that I had planned to do so. This role of planning is, Kraut seems to think, hard to account for if the stressing of particular situations is taken far enough by rejecting any role for a 'Grand End' in deliberation.

¹²² I owe this point to Jakob Green Werkmäster.

Thirdly there is the idea that the real worth of ends we have adopted cannot be adequately ascertained just in the moment and without a notion of how they fit together that goes beyond the particulars. Simply recognizing that this particular set of circumstances calls for the pursuit of career advancement over exercise, religious devotion and recreational activities is not enough, as what is needed seems to be an overarching understanding of how these fit together.

Another objection to the suggested rejection of a 'Grand end' can be derived from the intuitive idea that we are (or ought to be), at least to some extent the authors of our own lives. A life lived to the full cannot, it would seem, be entirely governed by circumstances and situational recognition. Such a life ought to be marked by resolve and steadfastness as well as situational mastery and the agent ought (within regrettable limitations placed on us by external circumstances) to be in charge of what unfolds.

The main idea here seems to be that if we emphasise the importance of situational mastery enough we get to a point where reflection on one's life as a whole ceases to be of real importance to moral philosophy because all activity is governed by said situational mastery. I am far from convinced that this kind of objection against the ideas of vision and situational understanding as having prime importance in our moral lives carries any weight. Be that as it may. More importantly, for our purposes, it seems clear that a kind of potentially problematic passivity can, at least occasionally, be attributed to Simone Weil. Take for example the following quote from Weil's notebooks:

The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting (Weil 1970: 335).

It might be thought that Murdoch, in light of Weil's considerable influence upon her, might inherit similar problems. Thinking so would be a mistake for two reasons.

Firstly, although Murdoch downplays the importance of overt choices, she does not completely do away with the notion. Hence there is still room in her theoretical framework for important choices that are the result of the agent's deliberation and not merely due to perception.

Secondly, Murdoch emphasises that our efforts to coming to see clearly are meant to be seen as a continuous endeavour:

The movement is not, by an occasional leap, into an external (empty) space of freedom, but patiently and continuously a change of one's whole being in all its contingent detail, through a world of appearance towards a world of reality (Murdoch 1992: 25).

5. Great Art (and its Moral Merits)

This chapter focuses on Murdoch's aesthetics and its connection to morality. Since much of the work that forms the foundation of Murdoch's aesthetics—*i.e.* 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959a), 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959b), and 'Against Dryness' (1961)—predates the essays that make up *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) the textual focus of this chapter is somewhat different from the ones preceding it. This is not to say that there is a lack of overlap. Rather the opposite is true since Murdoch sees aesthetics and morality as intimately connected to a point that can perhaps only be said to be matched by Plato and Tolstoy, the—besides Hegel and Kant—two most important influences on Murdoch's views on the matter. The idea, championed by Murdoch, that engagement with art, and above all literature, consists in a picturing activity that corresponds to depictive metaphysics issues in a promising research programme that is further explored in chapters 6-8 of the present work.

5.1 Aesthetics and Morality

The importance of literature is an omnipresent theme in Murdoch's (moral) philosophy. In addition, allusions to literary works are frequently used to emphasise and to clarify trains of thought (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1959a: 46/210, 49/213, 52-54/216-218, 1970: 66-68/354-355, 89/372), artistic movements service as interlocutors (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1959a: 52-54/216-218, 1970: 81-85/336-370), and beauty (in art) functions, due (paradoxically, it might seem (on this see §5.2 below)) to the influence of Plato, as a means to come closer to the Good (Murdoch 1959a, 1959b, 1961, 1970: 59ff./347ff., 75/361, 87-92/372-376, 97-100/380-382; Murdoch 1977: esp. 9ff./395ff., 17-18/401-402). Yet our encounters with (*e.g.*, the reading and study of) literature comes even more into focus when Murdoch singles in on the development of the 'normative-descriptive' conceptions that form our practical worlds and how these are constrained by larger societal convictions. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, engagement with

literature—like other activities that involve practicing and honing skills—functions as a way to explicate and investigate ideals in a way that has the potential to help reconfigure our normative-descriptive conceptions and the practical worlds that they make up in a way that can bring us nearer to the Good. Secondly, literature has the capacity to function as a Platonic interlocutor with whose aid we can scrutinise our normative descriptive conceptions. In addition, the thoroughgoing normative nature of this endeavour—recall that the normative-descriptive conceptions defy bifurcation—makes empirical studies of little importance here which makes engagement with art stand out as even more important.

The moral and the aesthetic are, for Murdoch, properly intertwined so that morality and aesthetics—‘art and morals’—form ‘two aspects of a single struggle’ (Murdoch 1970: 41/332). While the relationship between art and morals forms a thoroughgoing theme of *The Sovereignty of Good*, most of the work in honing Murdoch’s conception of the relationship between art (above all, literature) and morality was done prior to the writing and publication of its constituent essays. In fact, much of the work in elaborating an aesthetic theory seems to have been conducted in 1959—possibly heralded by a dissatisfaction with the lack of progress with her eventually abandoned novel *Jerusalem* which had been started early the year before (see Horner and Rowe 2015: 169)—and resulted in a trilogy of papers that shall be our main focus in what follows.

Murdoch’s philosophical writings reveal ‘a particularly synthetic world vision’ (Abernethy Ashdown 1974: 6) and it is therefore important that we do not see the developmental stages that are discernible in her output as disjunctive. Nevertheless, in a series of essays published from the early 1950’s to the first years of the 1960’s Murdoch moves from her early critique of behaviourism (‘Thinking and Language’ (1951) and ‘Nostalgia for the Particular’ (1952b)) via her more systematic early attempts at ethical theory (‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ (1956a) and ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’ (1957a)), and a sojourn into political theory (‘A House of Theory’ (1958b)) to a systematic examination of the relationship between aesthetics and morality in ‘The Sublime and the Good’ (1959a), its companion piece ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’ (1959b), and ‘Against Dryness’ (1961). This development ‘translates’, as one relatively early commentator puts it, ‘her moral theory into a full aesthetic’ (Abernethy Ashdown 1974: 6). It is important to realise, in light of the interconnectedness exhibited by Murdoch’s system, that the notion of ‘Great Art’ that issues from these works cannot be adequately assessed in isolation from the overarching project of which it forms part. Rather, Murdoch’s notion of ‘Great Art’ presupposes her distinct Platonic take on moral philosophy to such an extent that several debates that have

been central to the discussion concerning the relationship between ethics and aesthetics—such as *e.g.*, whether literature conveys true moral propositions, whether judgments of taste can be said to be objective, whether art *must* serve a moral purpose, *etc.* (on this see *e.g.*, Schellekens 2007; Davies 2007; Gaut 2013; and the contributions to Hagberg 2016)—either become peripheral or slide out of view entirely from a Murdochian perspective.¹²³ The reason why is the nature of Murdoch's central objectives. If we agree with Murdoch that the central objectives of moral philosophy are to formulate ideals and to make us better people (or at least formulate a sort of training-program aiming at this latter goal), then naturally the question of aesthetic influence on morality becomes one centred on the notions of character, progress, and ideals. Thus, the central questions turn out to be not about whether art conveys moral knowledge but whether our 'aesthetic aspirations reveal something about the moral agent we are or desire to become' (Schellekens 2007: 131) and if engagement with works of art can help us in our quest to better ourselves. Just to anticipate, Murdoch believes that good, or great, art can help us

lose our egotistic personal identity and overcome the divide between subject and object [and that] [t]he general notion of a spiritual liberation through art is accessible to common-sense as an account of our relationship to works of art when the walls of the ego fall, the noisy ego is silenced, we are freed from possessive selfish desires and anxieties and are one with what we contemplate, enjoying a unique unity with something which is itself unique (Murdoch 1992: 59; on this in a wider context see *e.g.*, Schellekens 2007: 131-134).

As an unpacking of 'common-sense' the latter part of the quote above might well appear as something of a stretch, but Murdoch nevertheless has a point in that we here seem to be dealing with a proper Aristotelian puzzle (*aporia*) in that common opinion (*endoxa*) and perceptual appearances (*phainomena*) appear conflicted on the matter of how morality connects to aesthetics and that this situation—*i.e.* 'the simple and obvious facts' (Murdoch 1970: 1/299)—therefore require a theoretical interpretation.

The idea that we value aesthetic character and experience, at least in part, because they seem capable to make us better people, seems well entrenched in common opinion, at least until controversial examples are mentioned or otherwise brought to the fore. Better still, the idea that the fostering of aesthetic competence forms part of a well-rounded education which in turn makes us more apt at

¹²³ This is not to say that Murdoch's stance is wholly silent on such issues; a form of literary cognitivism seems to be taken more or less for granted, for instance.

engaging with the moral world around us, seems rather plausible. ‘Subjecting oneself to aesthetic experience tends’, as Elisabeth Schellekens puts it, to ‘increase one’s field of interest, and render one more aware of some of the less immediately obvious features of the world’ (Schellekens 2007: 132). If this is right, it is easy to see how art could be thought to function as a central component in Murdoch’s project of unselfing. It might even be, as Schellekens goes on to suggest, that ‘developing the scope and depth of one’s aesthetic sensibility often seems to entail a greater awareness of the higher aims of our actions [...] that seems to encourage adopting a perspective on the world from which things such as the meaning of life and the pursuit of truth matter more’ (Schellekens 2007: 132). If this is indeed so, it seems to follow that art is well suited to investigating ideals of the kind that perfectionism sees as central, and to aid in a Murdochian never-ending journey towards the ‘Good’.

On the other hand, it seems easy enough to imagine aesthetic experts that are horrible people. Indeed, we do not have to imagine at all since examples seem readily available (at least as long as our notions of the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘expert’ remain pre-theoretical). The words of Ernest Hemingway’s third and youngest son Gregory—a lifelong transvestite also known as “Gigi”—in a letter to his father dated November 1952 might serve to illustrate this point:

When it’s all added up, papa, it will be: he wrote a few good stories, had a novel and fresh approach to reality and he destroyed five persons – Hadley, Pauline, Marty [Gellhorn], Patrick, and possibly myself. Which do you think is the most important, your self-centred shit, the stories or the people?

Aside from artists with questionable morals or other character-flaws there are also the aforementioned problematic examples of potentially corrupting works of art. Works such as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), Brett Easton Ellis’ *Less Than Zero* (1985), or *American Psycho* (1991), have caused controversy that seems to strike at the heart of common sense morality (on this see *e.g.*, Gaut 2007: 1-2). Indeed, this might arguably be taken to be an integral aspect of the appeal of art; that it fascinates by drawing on the entertaining capacity of the evil or wicked (*cf.* Pl. *Rep.* 604c-e). Murdoch, in discussing Plato’s criticism of art, puts the point thus:

Art fascinates us by exploring the meaner, more peculiar aspects of our being, in comparison with which goodness seems dull. (Artists are indeed unlikely to be good, goodness would silence them (Murdoch 1992: 12)).

So understood, art seems outright dangerous since it seems very well equipped to distract our attention from the 'Good'. These two seemingly conflicting strands of thought, anchored as they are in common sense, form the central concerns in Murdoch's treatment of aesthetics, and her notion of 'Great art', is meant to navigate between them in a way that gets us nearer to absolving this Aristotelian puzzle. We will get back to these issues when we discuss Murdoch's reading of Plato's aesthetics in her *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (1977) below.

How strong we take the connection between moral and aesthetic competence to be depends, among other things, upon how we understand the nature of the normative. If we persist in taking moral and aesthetic properties to belong to neatly separable (ontological or epistemic) kinds then the best we can hope to gain from honing our aesthetic abilities in the moral case is perhaps simply a kind of general competence pertaining to normativity. This is obviously not how Murdoch views the matter, and her denial of the 'fact-value' distinction opens up for a much tighter connection.

In construing the connection between aesthetics and morality as tight, Murdoch has a string of prominent forebears, only some of whom she explicitly mentions. In fact, a tight connection can be said to be more or less explicitly assumed through much of the history of western philosophy. Plato—despite his low view of the mimetic arts (on this see Murdoch 1977 and §6.5 below)—found a prominent place for beauty in his system. Aristotle's responses to Plato's challenges and Neo-Platonist thinkers accepted a similar connection between art and morality. It is not until the advent of modern aesthetics through Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750) and the segmentation of different aesthetic notions that followed in its wake that we see a serious challenge of the idea of a close connection. Murdoch is fully aware of where her attitudes leave her in this commonly accepted understanding of the development of aesthetics as a discipline:

Of course the Greeks lacked what Bosanquet [*i.e.* A. B. Bosanquet *A History of Aesthetic* (1892)] calls the 'distinctively aesthetic standpoint', as presumably everyone did with apparent impunity until 1750, and this being so, their attitude to art tended to be rather more moralistic than formalistic, and this is also true of Aristotle. Tolstoy exaggerates only slightly when he says (in *What Is Art?*), 'the Greeks (just like everybody else always and everywhere) simply considered art (like everything else) good only when it served goodness' (Murdoch 1977: 6-7/391).

Much of Murdoch's strategy for resolving the conflict in common sense described above took the form of an historical argument aimed at rectifying what she saw as

a fundamental conceptual error inherent in the development of aesthetics since Baumgarten. Retracing the development of modern aesthetics shows, Murdoch argues, that there is room for a close connection between morality and aesthetics (on this see §5.4), and, once Plato's challenges are met and overcome, between beauty, Great art, and the Good (on this see §5.2).

Most famously, perhaps, the aesthetic and the moral were firmly divided by Kant. Even he, however, saw parallels between *Achtung*—*i.e.* reverence for the moral law—and aesthetic experiences of the sublime (on this see Murdoch 1959a, 1959b, 1961 and the discussion below) and in the tradition after Kant, with thinkers such as Schiller, Tolstoy, Heidegger, and Gadamer, the connection between art and morality is once again thought of as importantly close. As Murdoch sees it '[t]he relation between art and truth and goodness must be the fundamental concern of any serious criticism of it. "Beauty" cannot be discussed "by itself". There is in this sense no "pure aesthetic" viewpoint' (Murdoch 1977: 72/449) and thus Murdoch affirms, as Plato does, what I take to be a version of the strongest possible connection between aesthetics and morals (that still keeps the two somewhat separate)—*i.e.* that appreciation of (true) beauty is essential for the development of virtue. This position assumes a close connection between art and beauty. We should not, I think, be misled into thinking that this should be equated with the rather simplistic view—that has been under sustained attack by various forms of *avant garde* movements during much of modernity—that all art ought to (strive to) be beautiful. Rather, the connection argued for by Murdoch is heavily dependent upon her Platonic metaphysics (where the Form of beauty is closely related to the Form of the Good) and where the important thing is the way that Great art can divert our attention from our own neurotic selves and put us into contact with what is real. Such a conception of Great art is fully compatible with said artworks not being (or striving to be) beautiful. Rather, on such a conception, it would seem to be a drawback in most cases for an artwork to be beautiful in the conventional sense (since this would seem to be at least a potential indicator that the artwork in question appeals to, and thereby potentially leads us towards, social conventions of a sort that tends to hinder unselfing and lead us away from the real and the Good). Thus, there is nothing in Murdoch's approach, so far as I understand it, that says that Great art necessarily must instantiate beauty. Rather, it is perfectly possible, indeed plausible, that a whole host of other aesthetic properties does a better job at directing our attention towards the real, the particular other, and the Good.

In the contemporary discussion the question of the relation between aesthetics and morality is often put in terms of the relation between aesthetic and moral values (for an opinionated investigation that comes with an informative typology

of positions see Gaut 2007), but it is obviously not necessary to frame the debate in those terms. If we try to do so with Murdoch's remarks cited above it is far from obvious how we are to understand her insistence on the close connection between art and morality and her argument for it. The idea that value is ubiquitous does not in and of itself give us such a close connection—even if it does, perhaps, make it more plausible—since it is perfectly possible to distinguish aesthetic and moral value under such conditions. The same goes for an appeal to the unifying function of 'the Good' since the underlying Platonic metaphysics, despite its drive for unity, in no way threatens to collapse our conceptualisations entirely. On the other hand, the stronger version of the ubiquity thesis, which holds that our encounter with the world is moralised through-and-through, renders moral and aesthetic value inseparable by default and is thus not much of an argument. Rather, it is better, I think, to read the posturing accounted for above as an instance of a general kind of historical argument to be found throughout Murdoch's writings. We will get back to the general structure of these arguments when we discuss 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' below (in §5.4), but for now it is enough to note that what goes on here is a tracing of underlying conceptualisations that ground the separation of aesthetics and morality in the (then-)current climate—*i.e.* the story that contemporary philosophers tell themselves about the paradigmatic shift in the debate that occurred with Baumgarten—in order to help us rethink those conceptualisations which Murdoch sees as problematic. I think that Murdoch is right in pointing out that there is something strange in the idea of a paradigmatic shift of such epic proportions concerning the relation between two things that are so central to human life, even if mere strangeness obviously does little to discredit the idea on its own.¹²⁴ The historical argument also serves to highlight the fact that our conceptualisations in this instance are historical contingencies that can be seriously flawed. By returning to the Greeks, Murdoch seems to suggest, the idea of an intimate conceptual connection between the moral and the aesthetic stands out as plausible almost to the point of being obvious (on this see *e.g.*, Gaut 2007: 7, 114-127; McGinn 1997). This manoeuvre thus clears the ground for the exposition of Plato's thought that is to follow. This is necessary because although Plato's arguments against poetry depend on his ontology and epistemology they

¹²⁴ Compare the shift in socio-political thinking that people like Reinhardt Koselleck think occurred roughly in the period comprising the timeframe following the enlightenment and the period before, during, and after the French revolution that is marked, among other things, by the emergence of key concepts in modern political theory and neologistic constructions that are symptomatic of, 'the experience of modern times [that] is simultaneously the experience of a new time' (Koselleck 1997: 16). See also *e.g.*, Kristeller 1952; Kivy 1997: Ch.1.

are still, at heart, ethical through and through.¹²⁵ In addition, this idea is further strengthened, or substantiated, by Murdoch's powerful Platonic argument to the effect that our relation to beauty is intimately connected to moral progress developed, in part, elsewhere.

One might think that Murdoch—even if she acknowledges that '[t]he written word can fall into the hands of any knave or fool' (Murdoch 1992: 87)—is unreasonably optimistic with regards to art's capacity to aid moral improvement but it is important to remember that she still considers most art to be dealing in self-consoling fantasy and neurosis and thus positively harmful. It is only truly great art that manages to live up to its potential, and such art is rare indeed:

Perhaps only Shakespeare manages to create at the highest level both images and people; and even *Hamlet* looks second-rate compared with *Lear*. Only the very greatest art invigorates without consoling, and defeats our attempts, in W. H. Auden's words, to use it as magic (Murdoch 1961: 20/295).

Murdoch's stance on this matter is informed by Plato's criticism of art and, I think, at least partly due to Hegel's influence and it is to Murdoch's treatment of these two thinkers that we must now turn.

5.2 What Plato said, and should have said, about Art

Although Plato did not offer an aesthetic theory in the conventional sense his writings play a foundational role in the history of aesthetics and he, as Murdoch puts it, 'supplies a good deal of the material for a complete aesthetic, a defence and a reasonable critique of art' (Murdoch 1977: 72/449) and does so in a manner that makes the arts a central concern that is deeply integrated with his metaphysics, ethics, and politics (Janaway 2013). Murdoch's treatment of Plato's aesthetics in her *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (1977) is both thorough and complex, going well beyond the often single-minded focusing on the second, third and tenth books of the *Republic* that marks many modern treatments of the issue. Her title speaks volumes as to the general strand of her argument. In short, Murdoch agrees that Plato's criticism of art is in many ways apt; the deceitful seductive tendencies of much art does revert our attention from

¹²⁵ This, as Nehamas 1988: 215 points out, does nothing to still the main worry since we could just as easily argue that all that this shows is that 'Plato is utterly blind to the real value of art'. Such a reaction fits neatly with a 'art for art's sake' attitude (see below) but it is not strictly dependent upon it.

the real (symbolised by the sun) by making us focus on the consolatory power of our own neurotic and conventionalist tendencies (as symbolised by the fire in the cave). But, she argues, this is not all that art is capable of for while bad, base, or mediocre art focuses in on these consolations, great art has the power to direct our attention away from ourselves and thus aids in the process of ‘unselfing’ by directing our attention towards the transcendent idea of ‘the Good’. Plato’s ultimate mistake is thus a failure to recognize the moral potential of great art.¹²⁶ In a sense then, Murdoch comes close to embracing Monroe Beardsley’s remark that ‘[s]trangely enough Diotima and Socrates do not assign a role to the arts in this process of reawakening to Beauty, though it is a short step to do so’ (Beardsley 1966: 41) and aims to set this mistake right although she avoids the blatantly anachronistic reaction of Beardsley (on this see Janaway 2013: 8-10) by treating the ‘step’ as far from short in that it requires active engagement with Plato’s arguments. In order to get a clearer grasp of these arguments and Murdoch’s treatment of them, we need to take a closer look at how beauty and art are treated in the dialogues.

Two things can be said to stand out in Plato’s treatment of art in the dialogues: the thoroughgoing contestation of the autonomous or final value of art—despite the apparent allowance of internal aesthetic principles such as form, composition, and coherence (Pl. *Phdr.* 268c-269-269e; *Rep.* 420c-d) and occasional, possibly ironic, talk of aesthetic ‘play’ (Pl. *Rep.* 396e)—and the connected idea that art can only have real value if it aids in uncovering of the metaphysical-ethical order of the world or helps us align with it. Because of Plato’s firm belief that beauty can fulfil such a function whereas art cannot, art and beauty are treated extensively and oppositely in the Platonic corpus. Art—and in particular poetry—is portrayed as a grave danger whereas beauty comes close to the greatest good, for the reason just outlined. Murdoch, whilst drawing a parallel to Kant, puts this point as follows:

Both Plato and Kant, because they are so well aware of the frightful devious egoism of the human soul, are anxious to build metaphysical barriers across certain well-worn tracks into depravity; and to keep apart certain ideas which are longing to merge (Murdoch 1977: 17/401).

¹²⁶ Although I shall not pursue the matter here, I do not think that it is mere coincidence that Murdoch’s strategy—*i.e.* arguing that (some) art has the capacity to put us in touch with the real, or absolute—has some affinity with Schopenhauer’s (1969 [1818-1819]: 191-295) treatment of aesthetics (and Plato’s challenge).

Thus, as Murdoch puts it, ‘Plato wants to cut art off from beauty, because he regards beauty as too serious a matter to be commandeered by art’ (Murdoch 1977: 17/401). Whereas our encounter with beauty begins with our contact with intelligible objects and draws the soul towards philosophical deliberation on absolute beauty (understood, I take it Murdoch would argue, as an ideal limit) as well as towards other concepts and engagement with our conceptualisations which aids moral progress, art fails both because it originates in appearance rather than reality (Pl. *Rep.* 603b) and because it directs our attention towards ourselves and away from proper objects of inquiry.

Beauty (*kalon*) is the object of Socratic dialectical definition in the *Hippas Major* and although the dialogue—in true Socratic fashion—ends with the issue unresolved, we still get a number of characteristics of beauty that correspond to the treatment of the notion in other dialogues (primarily the *Republic*, as that dialogue constitutes Plato’s other major investigation into beauty and art).¹²⁷ Beauty, which is not typically ascribed to artworks in the central cases (*cf. e.g.*, Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 290a–b, 297e–298a; *Phlb.* 51b–d, although see also Pl. *Rep.* 476b; Pl. *Laws* Bk. II; on this see Murdoch 1977: 77–78/454), behaves as a canonical Platonic Form (Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 286d, 287c, 289d, 292c, 294e, 297b; *Cra.* 439c; *Euthd.* 301a; *Laws* 655c; *Phd.* 65d, 75d, 100b; *Phdr.* 254b; *Prm.* 130b; *Phlb.* 15a; *Rep.* 476b, 493e, 507b) and is discovered in a similar dialectical maieutic fashion (Pl. *Rep.* 210a–211d), but also stands in a close relationship to the good (Pl. *Hp. Ma.* 296d) even though the two are distinct (Pl. *Hp.Ma.* 296e ff., 303e ff.). In the *Republic*, as we have already seen (§3.9), beauty is portrayed—in Socrates’ retelling of Diotima’s speech (Pl. *Rep.* 210a–211d)—as the object of every love’s yearning which allows the spelling out of the soul’s progress towards ever-purer beauty (from a particular body to all, via a love for beautiful souls, laws, and kinds of knowledge, to the Form of beauty itself).

Ignoring some deep-going interpretative issues and allowing us some simplifications, we can say that mimetic art (*mimesis*; imitation; representation; emulation; *cf.* Murdoch 1978a), in contrast to beauty, is seen in the dialogues as deeply problematic since it is, ultimately, neither good for individuals striving to become good (*e.g.*, Pl. *Rep.* 607b; Murdoch 1992: 13; 1977: 5–7/390–392, 421) nor useful for the state in attempting to maintain order (*e.g.*, Pl. *Rep.* 389a, *Phdr.* 245a; *Ti.* 47d–e; Murdoch 1977: 14–15/398–399)¹²⁸:

¹²⁷ I here treat ‘beauty’ and ‘*kalon*’ as synonyms, which is problematic at best. Although ‘beauty’ in many places works as a translation, ‘fine’ is in many places more apt. On this see *e.g.*, Kosman 2010; Lear 2010.

¹²⁸ The simplifications just mentioned bypass, for example, issues having to do with how we are to square the discussion about impersonation in Pl. *Rep.* bk. III with the different perspective of Pl.

In reflections upon art it is never as easy as it might seem at first sight to separate the aesthetic from non-aesthetic considerations. Much of what Plato says about art is concerned with the results of its consumption expressed in terms which are obviously moral or political rather than aesthetic [... but] it must be remembered that for him the aesthetic is the moral since it is of interest only in so far as it can provide therapy for the soul (Murdoch 1977: 12/396).

The two over-arching worries about individual improvement and societal order split up into five strands of critique that Murdoch recognize as important, but also hint at deeper lying issues that we shall return to below (*cf.* Murdoch 1978a: 245-246).

The two arguments—*i.e.* that art is irreverent (*e.g.*, *Pl. Rep.* 389a; Murdoch 1977: 5/390) and politically irresponsible (*e.g.*, *Pl. Phdr.* 245a; *Ti.* 47d-e; *Laws* 701a)—having to do with political and social instability are, although by no means unimportant, less central to Murdoch's immediate concerns which have to do with personal moral progress rather than public morality. Still, she sees that Plato's totalitarian tendencies might play a role here since '[a]rt is feared by tyrants because it gives weight and interest to what is various, obvious and ordinary' but that it is also true that '[b]ad artists are useful to tyrants, whose policies they can simplify and romanticise' (Murdoch 1992: 90). As worrying as Murdoch might regard these political strands of Plato's criticism she still thinks that his general critique rings true:

The politically motivated hostility to a free art, which Plato shares with modern dictators, is separable from the more refined objections which are both more philosophical and temperamental; and although we may want to defend art against Plato's charges we may also recognise, in the context of the highest concern, how worthy of consideration some of these charges are (Murdoch 1977: 72/449).

Plato sees (mimetic) art as both exalting irrational emotive responses and as crippling genuine knowledge. The group of arguments aiming to show art's non-existent value with regards to personal moral progress therefore comprises two main strands. Firstly, art perverts its audience because it is essentially suited to the representation of inferior characters and vulgar subjects (*e.g.*, *Pl. Rep.* 604e) which caters to the lowest, appetitive, part of the soul (*e.g.*, *Pl. Rep.* 606d; *cf.* Murdoch 1992: 13; 1977: 6/391) which thereby causes 'cumulative psychological harm'

Rep. bk. X (on this see Pappas 2017 and its extensive bibliography). These simplifications will not, I hope, have any bearing on Murdoch's treatment of these issues, which are, of course, our main concern.

(Murdoch 1977: 5/390).¹²⁹ Secondly, art is ontologically and epistemologically problematic due to its mimetic nature which presents distorted images that divert our attention from the Forms of Goodness and Beauty because mimesis does not require knowledge of the thing represented (*e.g.*, Pl. *Rep.* 597e):

Art and the artists are condemned by Plato to exhibit the lowest and most irrational kind of awareness, *eikasia*, a state of vague image-ridden illusion; in terms of the cave myth this is the condition of the prisoners who face the back wall and see only shadows cast by the fire. Plato does not actually say that the artist is in a state of *eikasia*, but he clearly implies it, and indeed his whole criticism of art extends and illuminates the conception of the shadow-bound consciousness (Murdoch 1977: 5/389-390).

On Murdoch's reading there is a deeper reason behind Plato's critique of art as metaphysically-cum-epistemologically suspect and (supposedly) harmful in terms of instigating societal unruliness. The underlying reason to Plato's aversion to (the mimetic) arts, as Murdoch reads him, is that Plato wanted to propagate for a religious conception of art that he deemed to be incompatible with art (Murdoch 1977: 65-72/443-449; see also Broackes 2012: 83):

We are now in a position to see the fundamentally religious nature of Plato's objections to art, and why he so firmly relegated it to the mental level of *eikasia*. Art is dangerous chiefly because it apes the spiritual and subtly disguises and trivialises it (Murdoch 1977: 65/443).

The fundamental problem, then, is that 'the separateness, the otherness of art is a sham, a false transcendence, a false imitation of another world' (Murdoch 1977: 67/444), *i.e.* art, with its images (Murdoch 1977: 69-71/446-448) and claim to power and truth, blurs the distinction between the real and subjective fantasy.

In meeting Plato's criticism, Murdoch's chief concern is thus to overcome his claim that all art 'practises a false degenerate *anamnesis* where the veiled something which is sought and found is no more than a shadow out of the private storeroom of the personal unconscious' (Murdoch 1977: 67/444). That is, Murdoch must show that art is able, at least on some occasions, to aid (personal) moral progress, *i.e.* that art is not always 'dangerous chiefly because it apes the spiritual and subtly disguises and trivialises it' (Murdoch 1977: 65/443).

¹²⁹ This argument, because of the parallelism that holds between state (*polis*) and mind (*psyche*), also comes in a version concerned with societal order (*cf.* Pl. *Rep.* 580d-581a; 605b).

In discussing the *Ion*—which Murdoch (1977: 8/392) describes as ‘a trial run’ of the argumentation in the *Republic*—Murdoch gives a first attempt at an answer to Plato’s criticism along familiar Aristotelian lines:

Ion, looking for something to be expert on, might more fruitfully have answered: a general knowledge of human life, together of course with a technical knowledge of poetry. But Plato does not allow him to pursue this reasonable line. The humane judgment of the experienced literary man is excluded from consideration by Socrates’ sharp distinction between technical knowledge and ‘divine intuition’ (Murdoch 1977: 9/393).

We have, already in this brief response with its allowance of a glimmer of understanding and contact with the real, Murdoch seems to think, a way in by which we can reconnect beauty and art and thereby make the case that at least some art can aid moral understanding:

Hence Plato’s insight reaches to the deepest levels of our judgment of worth in art. And since philosophy is largely concerned with how the attractiveness of beauty turns out to be the moral pull of reality, we might expect to be able to extract, in spite of Plato’s own negative and often contemptuous attitudes, some positive aesthetic touchstone from his writings (Murdoch 1977: 72-73/499).

This quote gives us the essence of Murdoch’s strategy: to answer Plato’s criticism on his own terms by re-forging the connection between beauty and art in a way that does not reduce all art to shadow-play but that rather leaves room for some, *i.e.* great, art to fulfil a similar function as beauty in our journey towards perfection.

All of Plato’s objections obviously build upon the rather controversial assumption that the way we live our lives is somehow influenced by our reactions to art or that art somehow leads us astray (and thus interferes with our journey towards the Good). While it might seem that this assumption is easily refuted, many of us would grant something like this in connection to children, and Aristotle—ever the voice of common sense—agrees (Arist. *Pol.* 1336^b14-12), but he also extends this view:

[A]s we know from our own experience for in listening to such strains our souls undergo a change. The habit of feeling pleasure or pain at mere representations is not far removed from the same feeling about realities (Arist. *Pol.* 1340^a21-25).

The idea that mimetic expression is necessarily superficially identical in appearance to its real-life counterpart, and that it therefore can have a lasting

influence upon us is obviously questionable, but it is not, I think, far-fetched. Murdoch recognizes that Plato's criticism might, in sharp contrast to Aristotle's treatment of poetry, seem overstated and far removed from common sense:

[T]o regard art as simple reduplication (like dull photography) seems to beg the whole question of what art is to an extent which seems to demand comment, even granted the lack of the 'aesthetic standpoint'. By contrast, Aristotle's remarks appear like luminous common sense. Surely art transforms, is creation rather than imitation, as Plato's own praise of the 'divine frenzy' must imply. To revert to the case of the bed, the painter can reveal far more than the 'one viewpoint' of the ordinary observer. The painter and the writer are not just copyists or even illusionists, but through some deeper vision of their subject matter may become privileged truth-tellers (Murdoch 1977: 7/392).

Even if we think, Murdoch argues, that Plato's criticism is simply overstated—a kind of doctrinarian narrowmindedness fuelled by what sometimes looks like a kind of panic that is all too familiar to contemporary cultural debate—it still holds true for much of what we worry about concerning the increasing power of mass media in contemporary society (on this see Nehamas 1988). This is so, I think at least partly, because much of the formal constraints that *e.g.*, ordinary television programming is subject to (*e.g.*, the 20-minute episode, *etc.*) lead it to comply with what is essentially a Platonic understanding of representation and to work in a way that comes close to Plato's understanding of drama with its focus on personal dilemmas and action driven plot (on this see Nehamas 1988: 220-222). Now, needless to say much of modern media does not obviously fit so nicely into Plato's worldview as this but there is, I think, an increasing worry over media's ability to influence our way of looking at the world in a way that is mostly imperceptible and that can cause, among other things, lasting emotional damage. This worry is greater still when combined with Plato's critique of democracy and detailed account of how democracy can more or less seamlessly transform into tyranny given its own inherent flaws. Murdoch picks up on exactly this feature of Plato's criticism when she argues, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) that:

Plato is a great artist attacking what he sees as bad and dangerous in art. His warnings are apt today. Popular literature and film argue the dullness of the good, the charm of the bad. The violent man is the hero of our time. The technical excellence of television (the Cave) leads us to accept vividly scrappy images and disconnected oddments of information as insight into truth. W. H. Auden observed that 'no poet can prevent his work being used as magic'; even good art can be taken over by its client as fantasy and pornography, a process facilitated by

the ready made ‘magic’ of vulgar entertainment which makes what is good increasingly difficult to hold in the mind (Murdoch 1992: 13-14).

As we have seen, the functional role that art plays in Murdoch’s system is similar to the one Plato ascribed to beauty in that it forms an object of attention which can serve as a starting point for moral development. Murdoch is more than aware of the connection here (see *e.g.*, Murdoch 1970: 84/369) and in order to argue for the claim that art can fulfil a similar function as beauty she must engage with Plato’s criticism of art in order to argue that although she agrees with much of said criticism it does not apply to all art, but only to bad art, which provides false consolations:

[M]uch art, perhaps most art, perhaps all art is connected with sex, in some extremely general sense. (This may be a metaphysical statement.) Art is close dangerous play with unconscious forces. We enjoy art, even simple art, because it disturbs us in deep often incomprehensible ways; and this is one reason why it is good for us when it is good and bad for us when it is bad (Murdoch 1978a: 10).

Murdoch’s strategy is thus to accept much of Plato’s criticism of art as genuinely worrying—‘[t]he ferocity of the attack is startling, though of course it is urbane uttered. One can scarcely regard it as “naïve”’ (Murdoch 1977: 6/391)—and reasonable, but to argue that it does not hold for all art:

It is tempting to ‘refute’ Plato simply by pointing to the existence of great works of art, and in so doing to describe their genesis and their merits in Platonic terms. Kant, though suspicious of beauty because of its possible lapse into charm, was prepared to treat it as a symbol of the good (*Critique of Judgment* II.59); and could not art at least be so regarded, even if we take Plato’s objections seriously? Good art, thought of as symbolic force rather than statement, provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest *experience* of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention. Good art which we love can seem holy and attending to it can be like praying (Murdoch 1977: 76-77/453; italics in original).

The connection between art and other techniques such as prayer and language acquisition already explored in ‘On “God” and “Good”’ are here explicitly tied to Plato’s criticism of art. Given this manoeuvre the distinction between bad, or base, art (which is harmful precisely because it falls prey to Plato’s objections) and great art (which does not and which is able to fulfil much the same functional role as

that fulfilled by beauty) thus becomes central. We might at this point feel rather unsatisfied with Murdoch's manoeuvre since, as Heather Widdows points out:

The method Murdoch uses to divide good art from bad art is almost tautological in that bad art is art that fulfils the role that Plato outlined (it is egotistical self-consoling fantasy that imitates moral and spiritual achievement) whereas good art performs the opposite function: it draws attention away from the selfish ego, towards the good and the real and so actively aids the moral life (Widdows 2005: 122).

As we shall see later (in §5.4) and as Widdows (2005: 122-123) acknowledges, Murdoch proposes alternative means to defining art more suited to her needs. She singles in on great art specifically and leaves definitional attempts to cover all and only art objects to the side. In short, what Murdoch proposes is that '[o]ur aesthetic must stand to be judged by great works of art which we know to be such independently' (Murdoch 1959a: 43/206) which gives us a definition of art in its highest manifestations. Murdoch concludes:

The importance Plato attaches to studying, whether intellectual work or craft, is an instance and image of virtuous truth-seeking activity; and here, in Plato's system, though not by Plato, art too can be saved. (If he who makes the bed or the shield can thereby make himself a just man, why cannot he who decorates them?) There are innumerable points at which we have to detach ourselves, to change our orientation, to redirect our desire and refresh and purify our energy, to keep on looking in the right direction: to attend upon the grace that comes through faith (Murdoch 1992: 25).

The essence of Murdoch's reply to Plato's critique of art is therefore that even by his own standards good art ought to be valued for its role in connecting us with truth and reality (Murdoch 1970: 87-88/371-372; 1977: 76-89/453-463). Great art both inspires us to begin and continue the search for moral perfection, as well as helps us to escape the ego by revealing reality and thereby the good. Murdoch offers no less than seven distinct considerations in favour of her claim that Plato ought, by his own standards, see art being of central moral importance.

Firstly, attending to good art can, Murdoch argues, be like praying. Although great art is perhaps never entirely pure, it is still 'markedly unselfish' (Murdoch 1977: 77/453) since proper engagement with it requires skilful attention to something other as particular and real. Such attention provides 'work for the spirit' (Murdoch 1977: 77/453) and—like any other activity involving a skill or serious study—it 'demands moral effort and teaches quiet attention' (Murdoch 1977: 77/453).

Secondly, while art—unlike morality—is, arguably, not strictly speaking essential to human life, it still has the capacity to point towards the good since ‘form in art, as form in philosophy, is designed to communicate and reveal’ (Murdoch 1977: 78/454). While aesthetic form has ‘essential elements of trickery and magic’ (Murdoch 1977: 78/454), good art still has the ability to produce in us a chock of joy in response to a revelation of reality as we were never able to clearly see it before.

Thirdly, great art must, against a Platonic framework, be seen as truthful since it refuses to be part of the self-consoling, self-promoting fantasies of the obsessive ego (Murdoch 1977: 79/455). In part, great art is able to resist becoming fantasy since its subject is ‘[w]hat is hard and necessary and unavoidable in human fate’ (Murdoch 1977: 79/455).

Fourthly, great art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality—the subject, Murdoch adds, ‘of every good play and novel’ (Murdoch 1977: 80/456)—and thus, *pace* Plato, exemplifies what philosophy teaches about the therapy of the soul.

Fifthly, great art has the capacity to complement and nuance philosophy’s drive towards overly neat abstract categories and classifications (Bradley’s (1883: 560) famous ‘ghostly ballet of bloodless categories’; Murdoch 1977: 80-81/456-457; §5.5 below). An important instance of this, Murdoch thinks, is great art’s capacity not only to portray, but to clarify, evil (even if Plato is right to observe that bad art all too often is drawn towards beautifying it).

Sixthly, great art can, perhaps like nothing else, evoke the feeling of the transcendent in us and thereby has the capacity to function as a transcendent proof of the reality of good (Murdoch 1977: 83-84/458-460).

Seventhly and lastly, great art can, because it deals with ideals and as such never can be perfect, help us better understand the unending process that is our journey towards moral perfection. The element of imperfection and fantasy that Plato saw as so problematic in art is thus there because of the human limitations of the artist, and this fact can be seen as just as problematic for philosophy as Plato understands it, since both ‘hovers about in the very fine air which we breathe just beyond what has been expressed’ (Murdoch 1977: 85/461).

Murdoch understands the function of great art as essentially the same as that of Socratic-Platonic philosophy, given its stressing of philosophical activity as an art of life:

The prescription for art is then the same as for dialectic: overcome personal fantasy and egoistic anxiety and self-indulgent day-dream. Order and separate and distinguish the world justly (Murdoch 1977: 79/455).

With this functional characterisation in hand we can return to Widdow's complaint from above—*i.e.* that what Murdoch offers as a characterisation of great art is in a sense tautological—in order to note that what Murdoch has to say about the function of great art is, it seems to me at least, sufficiently rich to still that worry. Still, other worries might be thought to remain.

Firstly, we might be worried that this construal of great art is too demanding. Murdoch is willing to accept this consequence:

A great deal of art, perhaps most art, actually is self-consoling fantasy, and even great art cannot guarantee the quality of its consumer's consciousness. However, great art exists and is sometimes properly experienced and even a shallow experience of what is great can have its effect. Art, and by 'art' from now on I mean good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession. It invigorates our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul. It is able to do this partly by virtue of something which it shares with nature: a perfection of form which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness (Murdoch 1970: 85-86/370).

However, I do not think that this must necessarily lead us to a point where we must be overly restrictive. I think that most of us would agree with Murdoch on the cases she picks out as instances of great art—*i.e.*, *e.g.*, George Eliot, Shakespeare, *etc.* (although we might disagree with her on the reason why this is so, but that is another matter)—and that those she picks out as falling prey to an excessive preoccupation with their own neuroses are rightly deserving of criticism along those lines. In addition, greatness on this model would seem to come in degrees. Artworks are the products of their creator's ego to varying degrees, and something that is dealing mostly in fantasy could still carry the embryo of something that comes much closer to perfection. This means that something that is still not great could very well be worthy of our consideration in virtue of the moral qualities it does indeed possess (even if we, under such circumstances must be extra careful not to be succeeded in by the compelling allure of the neurotic). Furthermore, art is, after all, dependent upon history and tradition and much great art would not be possible, it seems, without a tradition from which it can come. If this is right then more or less base art would seem to be a (perhaps regrettable) necessity. On top of this it would seem that in order for art to be truly investigative of the totality of the world around us, a great deal of freedom and tolerance is essential.

Secondly, we might be worried that what counts as great art, given the focus that Murdoch places on its effects, turns out to be a highly individual matter ultimately decided by ‘its consumer’s consciousness’. I think that this worry is mitigated, at least in part, by Murdoch’s demand that great art should be such that its creator’s ego should be as far away as possible from taking over. The fact that Murdoch considers Shakespeare as the greatest of writers because ‘[h]e is the most invisible of writers’ (Murdoch 1959b: 275) gives us a clear criterion for what to look for that is independent of individual moral agents and could be assumed to have the same kind of effect on all such agents, although, admittedly, to varying degrees. That is, since great art is able to fulfil its function because it constitutes an effort on behalf of the artist to transcend the ‘anxious avaricious tentacles of the self’ the reason that great art can fulfil its defining function is still based in something that is not a feature of the individual consumer.

Thirdly, it might be objected that Murdoch’s understanding of great art is unacceptably moralistic. To be sure, Murdoch’s main concern is with the moral function of art, but that does not, in her framework (as opposed to Plato’s), give rise to anything like objectionable censorship. Rather, Murdoch insists that the freedom of the artist is essential in order for the art produced to be able to fulfil its moral function:

[T]he very ambiguity and voracious ubiquitousness of art is its characteristic freedom. Art, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered (Murdoch 1977: 86/461).

Furthermore, Murdoch is critical of those who wish to use art to promote and maintain social-cum-moral codes and structures since this results in art that gives in to art’s other great enemy, *i.e.* convention.

Murdoch’s response to Plato’s challenge does not sit neatly within any of the ‘three broad strands’ of responses—*i.e.* ‘humanism’, ‘aestheticism’ and ‘transgressionism’—that Berys Gaut (2007: 3-5) identifies, but these categories might still be useful in trying to understand Murdoch’s project.

The humanist strand seeks to defend the ethical value of art by responding directly to Plato. So, for example, Tolstoy (1904) argues that great works of art communicate the artists feelings of joy and spiritual unity in such a way that it morally elevates its audience. Other prominent humanists mentioned by Gaut include Horace, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, F. R. Lewis, Philip Sidney, and, rather unsurprisingly, Henry James. The humanist response, Gaut (2007: 4) rightly notes, forms a foundation, or background assumption, for much of our culture in that given this perspective it seems obviously reasonable that the state

should ‘build museums and concert halls as repositories of culture and knowledge’ (Gaut 2007: 4), that it should subsidise the arts and encourage the teaching of art in schools and universities.

The aesthetic strand seeks to circumvent the critique by arguing for the separation of ethics and aesthetics under the banner of ‘art for art’s sake’. The idea here, as expressed by *e.g.*, James McNeill Whistler, is that Plato’s challenge is beside the point simply because art is valuable *as* art and that the demand for an ethical or didactic justification is unwarranted. In an English context this approach took the form of an attack upon Victorian moralism. Art, the thought goes, is about beauty and form, and to demand ethical (or utilitarian) justification amounts to ‘ignore[ing] its essence and prostitute its power’ (Gaut 2007: 4). This movement has been developed into a more theoretical programme by thinkers such as *e.g.*, Clive Bell (1987: Ch. 1), Monroe Beardsley (1981), and Roger Fry (1981).

The transgressionalist strand holds that art is good precisely because it transgresses, and thereby challenges, received wisdom and the moral assumptions and convictions inherent therein. Much *avant garde* art sees it as its central goal and purpose to go against conventional morals and tastes. Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (1939), Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), and de Sade’s *The 120 days of Sodom* (1785) all belong in this category. Thinkers such as *e.g.*, Jean-François Lyotard (1985) and Clement Greenberg (1939) have done much to provide a theoretical basis for this way of seeing the primary value of art as a challenging of conventions.

To be sure, Murdoch is primarily a humanist both in that she does seek to meet Plato’s challenge head on by arguing for the moral value of art and in that she is fundamentally opposed to aestheticism but she is also very much interested in art’s capacity to challenge convention. Art, in short, functions, Murdoch maintains, in the same way as beauty functioned for Plato: it reveals the good. In order to make this work Murdoch needs to do two things; she needs to show how art can have the immediate revealing function that Plato ascribes to beauty (which she proposes to do by focusing on the immediacy of our experience of the sublime), and she has to show that much of modern aesthetics and art—which Murdoch sees as too preoccupied with form—is problematic due to conceptual errors (that Murdoch takes to originate with Kant), since it divorces the aesthetic from the moral. These tasks are tackled in ‘The Sublime and the Good’ and ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’ respectively, and we will soon turn our attention to these texts. In order to better understand how her argument unfolds (which we shall do in §5.4) it is useful to remind ourselves of Murdoch’s debt to Hegel, and it is to this we shall now turn.

5.3 Hegel's Influence

Murdoch held Hegel in high regard (*cf.* McDowell 1994: 44-45, 111). We have already remarked that she saw him as underscoring the importance of doing philosophy historically:

[I]n the Hegelian world reason has a history, that is the subject has a history [...]. With Hegel the real subject enters philosophy. It is true that Hegel holds that 'all is ultimately reconciled in the Absolute'. But what interests Hegel, at any rate in the *Phenomenology [of Mind]*, is not the goal but the way—and on the way, at any time before the end of history, there are contradictions that remain unresolved (Murdoch 1950: 103).

She also saw him—at least early in her career—as hinting at a proper understanding of 'realism' grounded in the phenomena:

[Hegel] could more justly be considered as the first great modern empiricist; a dialectical empiricist, as opposed to, say, Hume who might be called a mechanistic empiricist. What Hegel teaches us is that we should attempt to describe phenomena (Murdoch 1952a: 131).

By the time of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) Murdoch more freely acknowledges Hegel's shortcomings, in particular with regards to the second point above, since she now seems to think that Hegel 'takes phenomena and forces them to fit within his system' (Broackes 2012: 17n42):

The most obvious objections to Hegel may indeed be to the outrageous implausibility of the whole machine; but more sinister is a lingering shadow of determinism, and the *loss of ordinary everyday truth, that is of truth*. The loss of the particular, the loss of the contingent, the loss of the individual. [...] Hegel's system, and Bradley's smaller more confused copy, ignore (destroy, magic away) the essential contingency of human life, its rejection of any idea of rational totality. The life of morality and truth exists within an irreducible incompleteness (Murdoch 1992: 490, italics in original; see also Broackes 2012: 17n42, 57n118; Midgley 2005a: 120).

In the years prior to the writing and publication of 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959a), 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959b), and 'Against Dryness' (1961), Murdoch's opinion of Hegel was as high as ever. In a review of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (trans. Hazel E. Barnes (1957)) entitled 'Hegel in

Modern Dress' (1957b), in which she sees Sartre as 'psychologis[ing] and de-historicis[ing]' (Murdoch 1957b: 675/147) Hegel, she writes:

It is almost mysterious how little Hegel is esteemed in this country. This philosopher, who, while not being the greatest, contains possibly more truth than any other, is unread and unstudied here. The countrymen of David Hume have, oddly enough, a better record. But it remains the case that scarcely anything of value has been written about Hegel in England—and Oxford and Cambridge undergraduates are directed at him, if at all, as to a philosophical curiosity (Murdoch 1957b: 675/146).

Hegel's (and, to a smaller extent, possibly Heidegger's) influence on Murdoch is especially noticeable in connection to 'The Sublime and the Good' and 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the entire project undertaken in these essays in general, and in 'The Sublime and the Good' in particular, is presented as a kind of dialectical process aiming at a synthesis of the aesthetic theories of Tolstoy (Murdoch 1959a: 42-43/205-206), Kant (Murdoch 1959a: 43-49/206-213), Hegel (Murdoch 1959a: 49-50/213-214), and Plato (Murdoch 50-51/214-215). The outcome of this dialectical movement is presented in summary form (at Murdoch 1959a: 50-51/214-215) before Murdoch (at Murdoch 1959a: 51-52/215-216) presents her own view of the matter as an improvement upon the views discussed earlier (*cf.* Hegel 1993 [1886]: Ch. 4).

Secondly, important elements of the conclusion of this undertaking are presented through a typology of historical stages outlining (at Murdoch 1959a: 52-54/216-218) a 'pocket history of literature' (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216) whose five phases (ordered by merit) shows the treatment of 'the idea of freedom' (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216) during different historical epochs (*i.e.* the 'tragic', the 'medieval', the 'Kantian', the 'Hegelian', and the 'romantic' eras respectively (Murdoch 1959a: 53/217)). Although Murdoch is quick to point out that '[t]his pocket history is, of course, only a toy' (Murdoch 1959a: 53/217), still this manner of analysis, as well as its presentation, shows obvious parallels to both Hegel (*cf.* Hegel 1993 [1886]: Ch. 5) and Heidegger (*cf.* the discussion of Vincent van Gogh's painting 'A Pair of Shoes', C. F. Meyer's poem 'The Roman Fountain', and an unspecified Greek temple at Paestum (most likely the temple to Hera) in Heidegger 1993: 143-212)). Hegel believed that art's most distinctive (and proper) function was to give intuitive, sensuous expression to the freedom of spirit (which explains Hegel's aversion to realism in the arts; The point of art, according to Hegel, is not to mirror life's contingencies but to provide manifestations of divine and human freedom).

Thirdly, as we saw above Murdoch shares with Hegel (*cf.* Hegel 1993 [1886]) a high view of art coupled with a scepticism regarding the possibilities of (much of) modern art living up to its potential.

Fourthly, Murdoch's emphasis on the combination of form and character in novels (that we shall come to shortly) is clearly reminiscent of Hegel's notion of 'ideal beauty'—to be found above all in Greek sculptures of the Gods from 4th and 5th century BC (Hegel had seen a *Dresden Zeus* type in the 1820's (Houlgate 2016))—as harmony between form and spirit.

5.4 The Sublime and the Real

In order for her thesis that great art can reveal the good in much the same way as Plato thought that beauty does, Murdoch needs to show how art can have the revealing function that Plato ascribes to beauty. This task is, as we shall see, undertaken in 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959a). In addition, Murdoch needs to argue that (much of) modern aesthetics and art are problematic given that they divorce the aesthetic from the moral. She does this using a historical argument aimed at exposing conceptual errors (that Murdoch takes to originate with Kant) which she takes to ground an unwarranted separation of the two domains. This latter task is carried out in 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited'.

It is now time to turn our attention to these texts, together with their companion piece 'Against Dryness' (1961), which aims to show how art can aid moral progress, thus showing how we can make ourselves better. In what follows I have included short summaries, or analytical tables of content, for these three texts. Those readers who are already familiar with these texts can safely ignore these summaries, or just give them a cursory glance. I have included these summaries here for two main reasons. Firstly, they give the reader a better understanding of how I read these dense and difficult texts. Secondly, I think that summaries of this kind are valuable when it comes to further study of these important but largely overlooked texts.

Taken together, the three essays 'The Sublime and the Good', 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', and 'Against Dryness' provide, in a manner similar to what the essays that make up *The Sovereignty of Good* does with Murdoch's diagnosis of 'modern moral philosophy' and the alternative she proposes, a crash-course in Murdoch's views on art (history) and (the history of) moral philosophy together with an elaborated philosophical programme concerning the place of art in moral development.

The aim of 'The Sublime and the Good' is to synthesise and thereby to improve upon the aesthetic theories of Tolstoy, Kant, Hegel, and Plato in order to arrive at a more adequate conception of art that can fulfil the revealing function that Murdoch is after. The essay can be divided into six parts:

- (i) An introduction that argues—*pace* Tolstoy (1904: 42) who takes 'all existing aesthetic standards' to start from 'a certain class of works which for some reason [...] is accepted as being art, and a definition of art is then devised to cover all these productions'—that (a) '[o]ur aesthetic must stand to be judged by great works of art [*e.g.*, Shakespeare's plays] which we know to be such independently', (b) that a similar method is appropriate for moral philosophy, and (c) that it is—*pace e.g.*, Hare (1952)—much more important to study the 'highest manifestations' (Murdoch 1959a: 43/206) of art and morals than the lowest common denominator of the class we are interested in (be it *e.g.*, artworks or moral judgments) in order to delineate the class (Murdoch 1959a: 42-43/205-206).
- (ii) A summation of Kant's view of art, the beautiful (Murdoch 1959a: 43-44/206-208), and the sublime (Murdoch 1959a: 44-46/208-209), in the first part of the third critique, entitled *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (*Ak. 5: 3-260 §§1-60*), which Murdoch intends to use as a basis from which to develop her 'own sketch of a definition' (Murdoch 1959a: 43/206). Against Kant's view Murdoch objects that (a) his conception of pure art—which depends heavily on his notions of 'free' and 'dependent beauty'—is 'extremely narrow' in that it cannot allow for any poetry 'except the poetry of Mallarmé' (Murdoch 1959a: 46/210), (b) that common opinion seems more liberal in allowing art to 'incarnate or express concepts' (Murdoch 1959a: 47/210), and (c) that while Kant—by treating aesthetic judgment as analogous to perceptual judgment—can help us account for our apprehension of beauty in *e.g.*, a flower, he has no way of accounting for our aesthetic apprehension of tragedies such as *King Lear* (Murdoch 1959a: 43-47/206-211; *cf.* Murdoch 1961: 20/295; 1972: 240; 1977: 80/456; 1992: 89, 91, 104, 118-23, 130, 141, 143).
- (iii) A section offering the more serious criticisms of Kant—*i.e.* that he 'cannot account for the greatness of tragedy' (Murdoch 1959a: 47-48/211)—and Tolstoy—*i.e.* that he cannot, since he is relying on the idea that 'every man's relation to God is the same' (Murdoch 1959a: 48/212; see *e.g.*, Tolstoy 1904: 99-105) make room for art that is

difficult—which pave the way for Murdoch’s attempted synthesis of the two (Murdoch 1959a: 47-49/211-212).

- (iv) A section outlining Murdoch’s synthesis of Kant’s understanding of *Achtung* (*Ak.* 5: §§26-27, 59)—*i.e.* respect for the moral law—as pertaining to our experience of the sublime and Tolstoy’s attractive ideas that art’s function is to foster love among people (Tolstoy 1904: 187ff.) and that this is tied to religious—and to a certain extent (christian) mystical—consciousness. By thus transferring Kant’s theory of the sublime into the realm of art and there combining it with Tolstoy’s religious love, Murdoch gives us the idea that what is the proper object of sublime experiences is the endless complexity of other individuals. What results is ‘nearly but not quite [...] Hegel’s theory of tragedy’ (Murdoch 1959a: 49/213; *cf.* Hegel 2003a [1807]: VI.A.a) since Hegel, by assuming that conflicts can be resolved from the viewpoint of a social totality, diminishes the tragic by taking it as ‘given’ (Murdoch 1959a: 50/214; on this see Broackes 2012: 33). The true nature of tragedy, *i.e.* awareness of ‘unutterable particularity’ (Murdoch 1959a: 52/215), is also the true nature of morals. (Murdoch 1959a: 49-52/212-216).
- (v) A section outlining a ‘pocket history of literature’ (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216) which connects different conceptions of freedom with different literary eras (Murdoch 1959a: 52-54/216-218).
- (vi) ‘A final word about art and morals’ (Murdoch 1959a: 54/218) which argues that (a) art need not be didactic or educational, (b) that the account sketched—although focusing mainly on literature—is generalizable to all the Arts, and (c) that art—through its connection to love—is closely connected to morals.

Already in the introductory remarks, we are met with an important restriction pertaining to Murdoch’s proposed line of inquiry:

Is it possible to offer a single definition of art at all? The same question may be asked concerning morals. Now clearly both art and morals can be defined in two different ways: either by means of a lower common denominator, asking questions as ‘What distinguishes an art object, regardless of merit, from an object fashioned by nature or chance?’ and ‘What distinguishes a moral judgment, regardless of the value it expresses, from a statement of fact or a judgment of taste?’; or alternatively art and morals may be defined through a study of their highest manifestations, in order to find what is the essence of ‘true’ art or the best morality. [...] I am not concerned here with the first kind of definition, the lowest common denominator one. I think that such a definition is worth formulating [...]. This investigation is,

however, much less important than the other one; and here, of course, in undertaking the other one, one will inevitably be displaying what one takes to be valuable, one will be making (choking to some philosophers) judgments of value. Tolstoy rightly says, [*i.e.* Tolstoy 1904: 53] ‘The estimation of the value of art ... depends on men’s perception of the meaning of life; depends on what they hold to be the good and evil of life’ (Murdoch 1959a: 42-43/205-206).

Murdoch is thus not after a(n extensionally adequate) definition or characterisation of all art, but is rather engaged in the project of understanding what is common to all works of great art—*i.e.* the highest manifestations of art—since this constitutes the more important task given her agenda. By arguing that the sublime experience in art should be understood as a revelation of the other as real, Murdoch modifies Kant, Tolstoy, and Plato into a conception of art as something that is capable of revealing the real in such a way that this experience helps us escape the lure of the ego. In this manner the first of Murdoch’s two main objectives is met. Before we move on to look at how she achieves her second objective—*i.e.* to close once again the gap between the aesthetic and the moral created by modern aesthetics following Baumgarten and Kant—a few things should be said about the details of Murdoch’s account in order to clear away some possible misconceptions and to further explain how her account of the revealing function of art is supposed to work.

Firstly, Murdoch does not disregard efforts—such as those to be pursued by institutionalists such as *e.g.*, Danto (1981) and (Dickie 1974; 1984; *cf.* Wollheim 1980; Dickie 1998; Matravers 2000; Davies 2004: 248-249), and historicists such as *e.g.*, Levinson (1990; 2002) and Stecker (2005), to provide an extensionally adequate definition or characterisation of art. Such efforts might well be useful for problematic cases. What Murdoch seems to be hinting at here, in part, is a problem common to many attempts at definition that gives up on essentialism; namely that that in being simply concerned with delimiting a certain class correctly, they tend to lose track of what made the members of the class belong to it in the first place. That is, while *e.g.*, George Dickie’s institutional theory of art might successfully pick out all and only those objects that are works of art it does not, arguably, do so by focusing in on any feature in virtue of which these objects are works of art in the first place. More importantly, however, Murdoch also suggests that in order for our efforts to be truly interesting—and by this I take her to mean ‘practically oriented’ or something of the sort—we must offer a normative analysis, *i.e.* we must be ‘making (choking to some philosophers) judgments of value’.

Secondly, Murdoch suggests—by drawing on Tolstoy (1904: esp. 53)—that these ‘judgments of value’ must be grounded in our conception of the good life,

thus making her approach to aesthetics intimately connected to her perfectionist moral philosophy. This is, I think, one of the reasons why her approach to aesthetics mirrors her approach to moral philosophy; both endeavours must, in order to be interesting, practically applicable, and guiding, formulate ideals. So just as ‘What is a good man like?’ (Murdoch 1970: 52/342) is a fundamental question for the moral philosopher, ‘What is a great work of art like?’ ought to be similarly guiding for the aesthetician. As we have seen before, it is this central place afforded to normative ideals that make empirical studies less interesting for Murdoch’s endeavour.

Third, and lastly, this parallelism between art and morals also explains why the delineation of the realm of artworks is less interesting for Murdoch; if we agree that moral value is in a sense ubiquitous and that there therefore is little to be gained from trying to delimit the moral sphere, there is little reason to believe that aesthetic value behaves any differently.

Part of the work aiming to close the gap between the aesthetic and the moral is undertaken already in ‘The Sublime and the Good’. The essay thus seeks to establish a strong connection between (great) art and morals:

Let me now briefly and dogmatically state what I take to be, in opposition to Kant’s view, the true view of the matter. Art and morals are, with certain provisos [...] 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 realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagines, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man (Murdoch 1959a: 51-52/215).

The conception of love at work here is obviously gathered from Simone Weil (see Murdoch 1959b: 270; 1961: 20/293; 1970: 34/327, 50/340; *cf.* Broackes 2012: 33; Larson 2014: esp. 160-164). As we have already seen (in Chapter 1 and 2), the central Murdochian concepts of ‘attention’ (see Murdoch 1961: 20/293) and ‘unselfing’ (‘decreation’ in Weil’s terminology) are closely connected to this notion of love *via* Murdoch’s way of reading Plato very much through Weil’s eyes (on this see also Larson 2014; Broackes 2012: 33, 35). Given this Weilian understanding of love it is possible for Murdoch to claim that art can have the kind of revealing function that Plato ascribed to beauty since great art, Murdoch maintains, can make us see the particular other as real. As we have seen above, as was evident already in Murdoch’s ‘pocket history of literature’, and which shall become even clearer once we turn our attention to ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful

Revisited', the idea that art and literature can reveal to us the reality of the other has repercussions for how Murdoch conceives of great art and thus for how she responds to Plato's challenge. In addition, this understanding of love allows Murdoch to reaffirm a close connection between art and morals.

Against this background and with this close connection between art and morals established, Murdoch is in a position to defend the prominent place she has awarded tragedy as an art-form:

That is incidentally why tragedy is the highest art, because it is most intensely concerned with the most individual thing. Here is the true sense of that exhilaration of freedom which attends art and which has its more rarely achieved counterpart in morals. It is the apprehension of something else, something particular, as existing outside us (Murdoch 1959a: 52/215-216).

The connection to Weil—and the notion of 'unselfing'—also enables Murdoch, as we have already seen (in Chapter 4), to single in on the true enemies of art and morals in a passage that was already quoted in part above but that we are now able to properly locate in Murdoch's larger system:

The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis. One may fail to see the individual because of Hegel's totality, because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined. Or we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own. Fantasy, the enemy of art, is the enemy of true imagination: Love, an exercise of the imagination. This was what Shelley meant when he said that egotism was the great enemy of poetry.¹³⁰ This is so whether we are writing it or reading it. The exercise of overcoming one's self, of the expulsion of fantasy and convention, which attends for instance the reading of *King Lear* is indeed exhilarating. It is also, if we perform it properly which we hardly ever do, painful. It is very much like *Achtung*. Kant was marvellously near the mark (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216, italics in original).

¹³⁰ Presumably a reference to Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry* (1840), a work that, although extreme, contains much that Murdoch would agree with including the following striking passage: 'The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own'.

‘Art and morality’ writes Kate Larson, ‘thus share the same struggle against illusion and journey towards loving attention to reality’ (Larson 2014: 158). The connection between art and morals, fuelled by ‘attention’ and Weilian love, is further pursued towards the end of the article in a way that provides further insight into how Murdoch envisages the role of art as being essentially the same as moral encounters with others, especially in tragedy:

In the creation of a work of art the artist is going through the exercise of attending to something quite particular other than himself. The intensity of the exercise itself gives to the work of art its special independence. That is, it is an independence and uniqueness which is essentially the same as that conferred upon, or rather discovered in, another human being whom we love [...] What makes tragic art so disturbing is that self-contained form is combined with something, the individual being and destiny of human persons, which defies form. A great tragedy leaves us in eternal doubt. It is the form of art where the exercise of love is most like its exercise in morals (Murdoch 1959a: 54-55/219).

The argument pursued in ‘The Sublime and the Good’ thus leaves Murdoch with a conception of art as capable of revealing the particular other as real in a way that is in a sense an immediate sublime experience of love.

‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’ expands upon the aesthetic theory developed in ‘The Sublime and the Good’ by adding to it a literary history of the nineteenth century novel and a history of philosophy focusing on conceptions of ‘man’, *i.e.*, metaphysics of the person. These two projects are supposed to inform each other, thus being conducive of Murdoch’s aim of establishing that ‘the general consciousness of today [which philosophy clarifies and crystallises is...] ridden by either convention or neurosis [and...] that this regrettable situation is connected, both as cause and effect, with the decline of our prose literature’ (Murdoch 1959b: 270).

The result of this endeavour is ‘an oppositional model of the development of the novel’ (Nicol 2004: 4). On Murdoch’s side of this opposition stands a ‘Liberal’ tradition—exemplified by *e.g.*, Shakespeare and nineteenth-century realists such as Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott, George Eliot and Tolstoy—emphasising the combination of form and character (*i.e.* the novel should be both ‘representational as well as autonomous’ (Magee 1978/Conradi 1997: 25)). On the other side we find a Romantic tradition—exemplified by *e.g.*, Emily Brontë, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and modernist writers influenced by the Symbolists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Leo Hamilton Myers, and the *nouveau roman* writers—who emphasise a ‘beautiful’ mythic pattern over reflection on the sublime otherness of the individual to the point that it results in ‘crystalline’

(Murdoch 1959b: 279) novels where every allusion and image fit neatly into the mythical, theoretically informed structure erected by the author.¹³¹

In so doing the essay seemingly acts as the literary critic's version of its more philosophically systematic and constructive predecessor and companion 'The Sublime and the Good' but Murdoch wants to distance herself from the label 'critic' as it was—and still, to a certain extent, is—used in the common vernacular:

What I have to say does not fall into the domain of literary criticism, as it is understood nowadays. My subject lies on the borders of literature and philosophy, but it is important to insist that I am not a critic. My remarks will be at times more personal and thorough more abstract than those of a critic; and I would like to say at the start that although what follows may sound like a manifesto and may imply a dogmatic tone of voice, I am not at all that sure that what I say is right (Murdoch 1959b: 261; cf. Murdoch 1959b: 270).

This initial declaration can, in part, be explained by the fact that 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' appeared in the literary magazine *Encounter*, but even more so I take it that Murdoch is eager to underscore the philosophical importance of what she has to say, and the way she is saying it as a philosopher. The reason that Murdoch goes through the trouble of explicating how she sees the history of the nineteenth century novel and developments in philosophy mirror each other and the *zeitgeist* is that through this process she hopes to retrace these steps to a point where Kant's mistake of separating experiences of the sublime and the aesthetic can be rectified in order to make us see how the novel must be in order for it to function as great art in the way identified above. Murdoch thus has two aims; to transfer Kant's notion of the sublime into the realm of art in order to pave the way for her understanding of the sublime as the experience of the endless complexity of other individuals, and to argue, based on this understanding of the sublime, that great art can function as a Platonic interlocutor or friend which reveals the realness of the other since great writers portray live characters in a way that is not overly preoccupied with form.

The essay can be divided into five main parts—an introduction (Murdoch 1959b: 261-262), a history of philosophy focusing on conceptions of the person (Murdoch 1959b: 262-270), a section which applies the dominant philosophy of an age to the novels of its time in order to create a literary history (Murdoch 1959b: 270-282), a reiteration of Murdoch's solution to the predicament that

¹³¹ As Nichol (2004: 5-6) points out, Murdoch's opposition resembles Georg Lukács' (1950; 1963) between 'realism' and 'modernism' and who takes the finest realism to result from periods in history where certain writers understanding of the significance of their age to such an extent that they are able to combine form and representative character in their portrayal of it.

mirrors the conclusion argued for in ‘The Sublime and the Good’ (Murdoch 1959b: 282-284), and an ending (Murdoch 1959b: 284-286)—that can be further subdivided into twelve sub-parts:

Introduction

- (i) An introduction which, apart from offering the declaration discussed above, specifies Murdoch’s main objective: to argue that ‘recent changes in the portrayal of character in novels [are] symptoms of some more general changes in consciousness’ (Murdoch 1959b: 261) and that these changes are connected to Romanticism via Kant’s status as ‘the father of most modern theories of freedom, and also incidentally the father of most modern theories of art’ (Murdoch 1959b: 261-262; 262).

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- (ii) A section dealing with Kant’s influence on modern theories of consciousness (with their emphasis on choice and universal reason at the expense of ‘particular eccentric individuals’ (Murdoch 1959b: 262)), and theories of art (with their construal of the beautiful as sharply distinguished from the sublime and as ‘an experience of conceptless [and thus not truth-seeking] harmony between the imagination and the understanding’ (Murdoch 1959b: 262) as well as their tendency to conceive of the prototypical art object ‘on the analogy of a fairly small perceptual object (Murdoch 1959b: 262-263; 263).
- (iii) A section arguing that Kant’s influence, after Hegel, can be said to result in two main elements—Kierkegaardian (or existentialist) Hegelians and Hobbesian (liberal) empiricists—and that ‘the Liberal dilemma may be seen as the failure of these two disparate elements to help each other to produce a new post-Hegelian theory of personality’ (Murdoch 1959b: 264-265; 264-266).
- (iv) A section dealing with the then-contemporary incarnations of these main elements, existentialism and linguistic empiricism, respectively. Here Murdoch argues that while these two movements are united in their aversion to traditional metaphysics and substantial theories of the mind, as well as emphasis on choice (and antecedent construal of virtue in terms of will rather than knowledge) and liberal political bias (Murdoch 1959b: 267) they are still different in that while ‘Ordinary Language Man’ (*i.e.* the agent as depicted by linguistic empiricism)

surrenders to convention by construing himself as subject to rules arising from the network of ordinary language, 'Totalitarian Man' (*i.e.* the agent as portrayed by (Sartrean) existentialism's dramatic Hegelian psychology) surrenders to neurosis by construing himself as suffering from *Angst* (*i.e.* Kantian *Achtung* stripped of confidence in universal reason) and seeking to remedy this by unfolding a myth about himself (Murdoch 1959b: 267-270).

- (v) A summation that reiterates Murdoch's belief that the metaphysics of the person that the philosophy of a given era has to offer—in the then-contemporary case existentialism and linguistic empiricism—constitute symptoms of what exists in less coherent form in the general consciousness and that critics (such as Simone Weil and Gabriel Marcel) as well as organised religion have, in the current climate, been powerless to combat this soul-picture (Murdoch 1959b: 270).

Literary History

- (vi) An introductory section reiterating Murdoch's earlier declaration as being a philosopher—in the sense of 'putting up an abstract structure to edify, explain, and provoke reflection (Murdoch 1959b: 270)—rather than a critic.
- (vii) A section that argues that despite the fact that 'the dominant philosophy of the nineteenth century, outside England and America, was the philosophy of Hegel' (Murdoch 1959b: 270-271), the nineteenth century novel—whilst sharing with Hegel an emphasis on historical and social sense—is still un-Hegelian and un-Romantic in that it is filled with naturalistically portrayed characters that are given 'a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves' (Murdoch 1959b: 271) and that do not get reduced either to stock-characters (convention) nor function as a means for the author to exteriorise his or her own psychological conflict (neurosis). Prominent examples include Walter Scott, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and, of course, Tolstoy (Murdoch 1959b: 270-272).
- (viii) A section detailing with how the Symbolists—to which Murdoch counts Thomas Stearns Eliot, Thomas Ernest Hulme and Ivor Armstrong Richards among others—, while professing to be opponents of romanticism (see *e.g.*, Hulme 1936: 113-140; On Hulme's relation to T. S. Eliot see *e.g.*, Hadjiyiannis 2013; see also Murdoch 1958a)), still share with the (Sartrean) existentialists and the linguistic empiricists an aversion to the messiness of the particular and try to render

individuality sensible by purging it of contingency thus, in effect arriving at an ideal of art that would have satisfied Plato. This, Murdoch argues, results in an understanding of the beautiful as something distinct and the art object as analogous to sensible objects which makes the Symbolists' view become 'none other than Kant's theory of the beautiful, served up in a fresh form, and as such, it is something which had been inside the Romantic movement from the start (Murdoch 1959b: 273). The Symbolists' fear of the contingent also brings with it a critique of the Liberal view of personality—primarily articulated by T. S. Eliot—that Murdoch has certain sympathies with since it emphasises the need for the realisation that something other than oneself is real but that nevertheless, by reverting to convention, gets things wrong since it focuses on the art object (poetry), the institution, or the dogma in morality rather than other people (Murdoch 1959b: 272-278).

- (ix) A section that attempts to show that '[t]he modern novel, the serious novel, does tend toward either of two extremes: either it is a tight metaphysical object, which wishes it were a poem, and which attempts to convey, often in mythical form, some central truth about the human condition [e.g., Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1946 [1942])]—or else it is a loose journalistic epic, documentary or possibly even didactic in inspiration, offering a commentary on current institutions or on some matter out of history [e.g., Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* (1991 [1954])]' (Murdoch 1959b: 278). Modern literature thus constitutes the triumph of 'neurotic Romantic literature' where the individual personality of the characters largely disappear (both from 'the intention of the novelist and the apparatus of the critic) and when characters are remembered at all it is because—as in the case of Camus' *The Stranger* or J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951)—they exert an overwhelming presence in the work that does not allow for otherness (Murdoch 1959b: 280). This leads to a situation in which the problem that is most distinctive of prose literature and the novel—*i.e.* that of 'the special problem of the individual *within* the work' (Murdoch 1959b: 280, emphasis in original)—can only be solved by either making the fictional individual part of his creator's mind or by treating him as a conventional social unit, thus preventing the writing of truly great literature which is marked by its awareness of others (Murdoch 1959b: 278-281).

- (x) A section that brings together the results from Murdoch's two histories by arguing that the idea that 'literature must be either play (production of self-contained things) or didactic (discursive statement of truths)' (Murdoch 1959b: 281) is a false dilemma resulting from a conceptual error arising from the modern scientific 'technical and departmentalised' (Murdoch 1959b: 281) conception of man (*i.e.* the 'Liberal' concept of personality) stemming from modern philosophy's articulation of the metaphysics of the person of the age. The conceptual error can in turn be traced back to Kant's separation of 'the beautiful' and 'the sublime' (Murdoch 1959b: 281-282).

Murdoch's Solution

- (xi) A section arguing that once Kant's mistake of separating experiences the sublime from the aesthetic is rectified we get a conclusion which is in effect a reiteration of Murdoch's main conclusion from 'The Sublime and the Good'. That is, by transferring Kant's theory of the sublime into the realm of art we get a theory of tragedy that sees the proper objects of sublime experiences as the endless complexity of other individuals. This manoeuvre allows Murdoch to argue that great art is intimately connected with love since it is this never-ending process of understanding other people that enables great artists—through the process that Murdoch at other places terms 'unselfing'—to portray live characters. Murdoch also takes the opportunity to argue for the Socratic thesis that virtue—*pace* Kant—is knowledge and that this knowledge is—*pace* Hegel—not to be construed as self-knowledge but rather knowledge of the reality of other's (Murdoch 1959b: 282-284).

Ending

- (xii) A conclusion which—by invoking Henry James (Murdoch 1959b: 285)—argues that great art comes about through love and that what differentiates art from life is the fact that art must have form and that truly great art manages to prevent form from becoming too rigid by combining form with respect for our particular and contingent reality (Murdoch 1959b: 284-286).

The main point of the article is thus to show that if we go against Kant's separation of the sublime from the aesthetic we can understand the true nature of the sublime as the experience of the endless complexity of other individuals. This makes great art intimately connected with love since the unending process of understanding

other people enables great artists to portray live characters without falling prey to convention or neurosis.

Murdoch's historical methodology in 'The sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' should not come as a surprise to us, equipped as we are from previous discussions with an understanding of the similar historical arguments concerning the modern conceptions of the self from *The Sovereignty of Good*. These historical arguments might, as Heather Widdows (2005: 11) suggests, be such that '[a]lthough this type of argument succeeds in revealing the historicity of the current positions, and thus their contingency, it fails to address the current positions in their own terms'. While it is obviously always a problem for genealogical or historical arguments that pointing to a position's problematic history says little in and of itself about that position's plausibility, I think that Murdoch manages to do a great deal more here than simply pointing to the problematic history of then-contemporary moral philosophy and literature. As Widdows herself acknowledges (Widdows 2005: 111n36), Murdoch comes close to discussing, head on, this problem in an interview with Bryan Magee (as part of the acclaimed BBC TV-series *Men of Ideas* originally broadcast on 28 October 1977, later substantially reworked and published in Magee's *Men of Ideas* (1978):

Sometimes there is a logical or quasi-logical fault in a chain of argument, but more often philosophy fails because of what might be called imaginative or obsessive conceptual errors, false assumptions or starting points which send the whole investigation wrong (Magee 1978/Murdoch 1997: 12).

The general idea behind these historical arguments in Murdoch then seems to be to trace the underlying conceptualisations that ground a later situation—established to be problematic on independent grounds—to an earlier 'conceptual error'. The reason for going through the trouble of tracing the genealogy behind the conceptual error is that once such a genealogy is established it can help us to rethink our conceptualisations and in so doing solving the problem.

The general form of the historical argument of 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' can thus be reconstructed as follows. If, as seems likely, it is to Kant 'even more than to Rousseau or to Hegel, we may impute both the initial strength and the later weakness of the Liberal theory of personality' (Murdoch 1959b: 262) and if it is Kant, rather than Hegel, who has provided modern aesthetics with its main conceptual distinctions, then it seems probable that we should be able to trace the problems Murdoch has identified surrounding the modern novel to a 'conceptual error' originating with Kant; namely the sharp divide he proposes between 'the sublime' and 'the beautiful'. We are thus now in a position to see that 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' is aptly named since what

Murdoch does in the article is to trace the ramifications as they apply to the modern novel to this conceptual error in Kant's work (and remember that Kant here is seen as articulating and clarifying ideas of his *Zeitgeist*).

Widdows is thus mistaken in thinking that Murdoch's historical arguments are meant to address current positions directly (or, as Widdows puts it, 'in their own terms' (Widdows 2005: 11)). Rather, the flaws of the current positions Murdoch addresses are shown to be problematic through means independent of the historical arguments. The role of the historical arguments is rather to diagnose the conceptual error lying behind the current situation in order to rectify it.

In reading Murdoch's account of the great nineteenth century novels an objection suggests itself: are not several writers on Murdoch's list of great writers such that we would want to classify them as clear-cut examples of the Romantic movement, and, even more importantly, are there not several writers that we would feel justified in describing as great who do indeed treat their characters, at least to some extent, as vessels for exteriorising their own neuroses? Murdoch replies:

I realise it is paradoxical to call, for instance, Scott an un-Romantic writer; but I do not mind the paradox so long as the meaning is clear. In calling these novelists the great ones I do not exclude other types of greatness—though it is part of my thesis that this is probably the greatest sort of greatness. It is true that we find in the nineteenth century other remarkable novelists (Dostoevsky, Melville, Emily Brontë, Hawthorne) to whom we would not want to deny a first place, and to whom the title 'Romantic', in my [*i.e.* Murdoch's] sense, could more readily be applied' (Murdoch 1959b: 272).

We have now seen how 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' seeks to reunite the sublime with the aesthetic in general and with beauty in particular. This reunification opens up for an understanding of the sublime along Weilian lines as the experience of the endless complexity of other individuals. Great art, on this picture, is then further clarified as intimately connected with love since it is through love that the artists is able to portray live characters without falling prey to the excessive rigidity of form. The fact that art thus can reveal the real helps explain how it can help us battle convention and neurosis. What remains to be added to this picture is a more precise account of how moral development is supposed to function on this picture that ties together Murdoch's aesthetics with her conceptualism. In order to get such a more precise account, we need to turn to 'Against Dryness'.

'Against Dryness' (1961) is a polemical piece which derives its title from T. E. Hulme's idea that 'we must find beauty in small dry things' (Murdoch 1961:

20/292; cf. Murdoch 1959b: 273). Murdoch, as we have seen, disagrees with this focus on form and simplicity, and her complaint is reiterated in ‘Against Dryness’:

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 the consoling dream necessity of Romanticism, away from the dry symbol, the bogus individual, the false whole, towards the real impenetrable human person (Murdoch 1961: 20/294).

Much of the essay reads ‘somewhat as a manifesto or a summary of conclusions reached elsewhere—as indeed it is’ (Broackes 2012: 34), but its main point is important and twofold. In the article, Murdoch argues both that we must develop a new terminology—the basic building-blocks of which should come from Weil and Plato—and that we must do this in order to be able to truly talk of moral progress. These two points thus join together the theoretical need for a new philosophical vocabulary with the practical need for a model for moral progress. Murdoch argues that moral progress consists not simply (or only) in assigning or readjusting truth-values or credence levels to already available moral propositions but rather in revisiting and deepening our understanding of our moral concepts themselves. This thesis thus joins together Murdoch’s aesthetics (and the thesis that the experience of the sublime otherness of other individuals can put us in contact with the real and the good and thus help in the process of ‘unselfing’) with her conceptualism (and the idea that moral progress is a matter of deepening our grasp of concepts).

The essay can be divided into ten parts:

- (i) An Introductory paragraph that offers an important restriction of scope; Murdoch sees herself as being primarily concerned with ‘prose, not with poetry, and primarily with novels, not with drama’ and more precisely with the background of present-day literature as this is manifested in a scientific and anti-metaphysical age (stemming from the Enlightenment and Romanticism where religion has lost much of its power) which results in a ‘far too shallow and flimsy [...] idea of human personality’ (Murdoch 1961: 16/287).
- (ii) A section describing the ‘picture of human personality’ (Murdoch 1961: 16/287) that is to be gathered from French (drawing mainly on Sartre) and Anglo-Saxon (drawing mainly on Hume and Kant) philosophy as joining materialistic behaviourism with a dramatic view of the individual as solitary will (Murdoch 1961: 16-17/287-289; this section summarises content drawn from Murdoch 1959a and 1959b).

- (iii) A section outlining the lamentable lack of theory in politics that Murdoch sees as a result of the metaphysics of the person described in (ii) above (Murdoch 1961: 17-18/289-290; this section summarises Murdoch 1958b).
- (iv) A section arguing that the above delineated decline has led to a loss of moral and political concepts and vocabulary since we no longer see man as imbedded in a transcendent reality (but rather as will surrounded by an easily comprehensible physical world; Murdoch 1961: 18/290).
- (v) A section that ties the unsatisfactory Liberal theory of personality to the Enlightenment, with its rationalistic optimism regarding education and technology, and to Romanticism, with its solitary conception of 'the human condition' (Murdoch 1961: 18/291) and to what was characteristic of the novels of the 18th and 19th centuries. The 18th century novel was marked by rationalistic allegories and moral tales whereas the 19th century novel—which marks a high-point—managed to thrive upon the 'dynamic merging of the idea of the person with the idea of class' (Murdoch 1961: 18/291), since the problems having to do with the Liberal theory of personality could be placed on hold in a drastically changing world (Murdoch 1961: 18/291).
- (vi) A section arguing that the 20th century novel is either 'crystalline' or 'journalistic' and that this leads—fuelled by Symbolists ideals of smallness, clearness, and self-containedness (the 'Dryness' of the title)—to a broadly Kantian understanding of the work of art (modelled on visual objects and poetry) as an analogue of the lonely, self-contained, individual and a drive to resort to consoling fantasy (Murdoch 1961: 18-19/191-292; this and the preceding section summarises §§vi-ix, as identified above, of Murdoch 1959b).
- (vii) A section that argues that the impoverished view of the inner life that is symptomatic of the modern age has languished the connection between art and morality by leading the focus away from techniques of improvement (the Platonic virtues understood as forms of knowledge) and to isolated choice situations (Murdoch 1961: 19/293).
- (viii) A section that argues that to combat the impoverishment just outlined we need a way to 'picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality' (Murdoch 1961: 19/293) which we get by developing—and in this

we are to take our cue from Simone Weil—a new vocabulary of attention. Through so doing, literature should once again—like ‘the Russians, those great masters of the contingent’ (Murdoch 1961: 20/294-295)—be able ‘to picture the substance of our being’ (Murdoch 1961: 20/294) in a way that makes clear that real moral progress is—first and foremost—an enriching and deepening of moral concepts and that this progress is one guided by attention to reality (Murdoch 1961: 19-20/293).

- (ix) A section that argues that literature—‘since it has taken over some of the tasks [*i.e.* conceptual elucidation in Murdoch’s sense which shields us against consolation and fantasy by portraying the transcendent complex qualities of the other] formerly performed by philosophy’ (Murdoch 1961: 20/294)—is of the first importance but that it must, in order to perform this task, be returned to its former, *i.e.*, 19th century, glory (Murdoch 1961: 20/295).
- (x) A final section that argues that literature, if it can be reformed so as to take the interplay of form and character seriously, as a consequence can provide us with a new vocabulary of experience (Murdoch 1961: 20/295).

The main point of ‘Against Dryness’ is thus that we must develop a new philosophical terminology in order to be able to truly talk of moral progress. By arguing that moral progress consists in revisiting and deepening our understanding of our moral concepts themselves, Murdoch also integrates her conceptualism and her aesthetics.

Given this, all three of Murdoch’s main objectives—*i.e.* to argue that art can reveal the real and the good in much the same way as Plato thought that beauty could, that we need to reconnect the aesthetic and the moral, and that art can aid moral progress—have been addressed. I do not know whether her argument is ultimately to be considered as successful, perhaps nothing on such a grand scale ever could be. But nevertheless, I think that what Murdoch has to offer is an intriguing take on the connection between morals and aesthetics. In particular, I find Murdoch’s conceptualism both powerful and plausible. The analysis of the decline of the modern novel might be seen as unreasonably moralistic but there is nevertheless some truth to both the complaint that the increased concern with form in the period is at least somewhat problematic, and that aesthetics since Baumgarten and Kant has tended to work under a great deal of assumptions that can be questioned from a vantage-point that is closer to the ancients.

What remains for us to do at this point is to take a closer look at the interplay between philosophy and literature that Murdoch envisages before we can go on

(in §5.6) to draw some conclusions concerning how Murdoch's stance gives rise to a way in which we can engage with literature for moral purposes which is to be explored in the case studies that make up chapters 6 through 8.

5.5 Morality and Literature

There seems to be, as Nora Hämäläinen points out, 'a rather conventional division of philosophical labor in Murdoch's view, where literature depicts the particular and philosophy makes the generalizations' (Hämäläinen 2016a: 168). While some commentators (such as *e.g.*, Lamarque 1996: esp Ch. 6) leave Murdoch's stance on the relation between (moral) philosophy and literature to the side, most engage with it in a manner that has created considerable controversy in Murdoch-scholarship (on this see Hallberg 2011: Ch. 2). Murdoch addresses the respective aims and resulting demands on philosophical and literary writing in an interview with Bryan Magee (as part of the acclaimed BBC TV-series *Men of Ideas* originally broadcast on 28 October 1977, later substantially reworked and published in Magee's *Men of Ideas* (1978):

Philosophy aims to clarify and to explain, it states and tries to solve very difficult highly technical problems and the writing must be subservient to this aim. One might say that bad philosophy is not philosophy, whereas bad art is still art. There are all sorts of ways in which we tend to forgive literature, but we do not forgive philosophy. Literature is read by many and various people, philosophy by very few. Serious artists are their own critics and do not usually work for an audience of 'experts'. Besides, art is fun and for fun, it has innumerable intentions and charms. Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate mystification. Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing (Magee 1978/Murdoch 1997: 4)

This quote, due in no small part, surely, to its being given in a less formal setting, is difficult to interpret. It might be read as proposing a sharp divide between philosophy and literature (*i.e.* neither could be made to serve the purposes of the other without significant loss (see Hämäläinen 2016a: 153)). But, as Hämäläinen (2016a: 153) points out '[l]ooking at the totality of Murdoch's work, this separation of the domains seems to tell less than half the truth'. Hämäläinen suggests that the above statement is to be understood personally, as expressing Murdoch's strive to keep her philosophical work and her work as a writer separate. If this is so, then it is surely easier to understand why Murdoch's own

philosophical writings, and ‘the most natural use of novels, hers or others’, when read in the spirit of her views on literature’ (Hämäläinen 2016a: 153) do not seem to support strict discontinuity between philosophy and fiction. Still, it would seem, both (narrative) art and philosophy, though their workings are importantly different, serve a common purpose in Murdoch’s view. They are both engaged in the activity of picturing human life in such a way as to enable us to put aside social convention and fantasy-ridden neurosis. As such they are both picturing activities that are essential to our attempts at making sense of the world around us. Nevertheless, there is both a division of labour and a difference of importance. Consider again the following passage from the very end of ‘On “God” and “Good”’ (that was already quoted above):

Ethical theory has affected society, and has reached as far as the ordinary man, in the past, and there is no good reason to think that it cannot do so in the future. For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all. But there can be no substitute for pure, disciplined, professional speculation: and it is from these two areas, art and ethics, that we must hope to generate concepts worthy, and also able, to guide and check the increasing power of science (Murdoch 1970: 76/362).

What this quote suggests—apart from emphasising, as we saw above, the practical nature of ethics—is that the division of labour discussed above is to be understood thus: the point of philosophy is to clarify, whereas the (or at least a) point of art is to ‘mystify’ in the sense of making us think. Understood in this way, philosophy and art fulfil slightly different but related roles in the same project (*i.e.* that of picturing human life in such a way as to enable us to put aside social convention and fantasy). Philosophy, due to its esoteric nature, is less capable than literature and art of touching people’s lives profoundly. Hence the stressing of the importance of the latter. Our preoccupation with art is thus both continuous with and distinct from the picturing tasks of moral theory and pictorialist metaphysics (*cf.* Hämäläinen 2016a: 174; Antonacio 2012a: esp. Ch. 3).

5.6 Concluding Remarks

In her attempts to grant art, and in particular literature, a central place in (individual) moral progress and development, Murdoch relies on the notion of ‘great art’ as sharply distinguished from bad art. Bad art is all art subject to Plato’s

critique, *i.e.*, it is the manifestation of the ego in terms of self-consoling fantasy, neurosis, or convention, that imitates moral advancement and thus directs us away from what would indeed be genuine progress. Great art, on the other hand, directs attention away from the selfish ego and towards beauty and the Good. It thus makes us see the other as real, and in doing so actively aids the moral life.

What ultimately makes Murdoch's account of great art so powerful is that it combines a classic humanist genuine and thorough engagement with Plato's criticism of art with a transgressional stressing of art's capabilities to challenge conventions and help us work with how we conceptualise ourselves and the world around us.

At the centre of Murdoch's efforts stands the claim that Plato, due to his mistrust of mimetic art, failed to recognise the possibility of 'great art', which—in contrast to bad art that works by fuelling our neurotic tendencies or reinforce conventional thinking—has the capacity to help us see beyond our own selfish nature in a manner that helps us see the particular individuality of the other as real. Murdoch equates this (potentially) painful recognition of the other as real with love. This love, in turn, is also sublime. Understood in this way the sublime function as a means to counter yet another threatening separation of the aesthetic and the ethical, namely that proposed by Kant. Seeing (Platonic, tragic) love in this way opens up for the possibility that Great art can function as a friend or Platonic interlocutor which, through its connection to beauty, can help us revisit our 'normative-descriptive' concept(tion)s and thus get us on the way towards the never-ending journey of moral progress. This is what Murdoch means when she says that:

Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagines, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man (Murdoch 1959a: 52/215).

Murdoch's development of a theory of great art comes in several steps starting with an argument aiming to show how a problematic situation that invites a gulf between art and morality can be avoided if we retrace this situation's historical origins to the development of modern aesthetics in the eighteenth century. Once we have retraced our steps we are in a position to see that a closer connection between artistic and moral value is in fact reasonable. This realisation leads to an increased appreciation for Plato's criticism of art along moral lines which now seems all the more threatening given that aestheticism's denial of any connection between art and morals as a reaction to Plato no longer seems like a live option. This situation also makes an answer almost suggest itself: if Plato's separation

between art and beauty can be resisted and if we can rectify the idea that engagement with art, at least on occasion, can be seen as a technique (*technê*) then engagement with art can be such that it brings us into contact with beauty and what is real, and therefore with the Good. That this connection must be seen as intimately bound up with love, and therefore with the particularity of the other, also increases the appeal of the model since it becomes clear how art can function as a Platonic interlocutor and friend (on this see Schellekens and Dammann 2017).

Murdoch adds to this essentially humanist way of meeting Plato's criticisms a transgressional stressing of art's capability to deepen our grasp of 'the cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men live by' (Murdoch 1957a: 122/74-75) which lets her talk of moral progress in an informative way.

The idea that someone's grasp of a 'normative-descriptive' concept might alter and deepen with time in a way that is unique to that individual, which in Murdoch's case comes out as a distinctively Platonic idea, is not unique or exclusive to a Platonic theoretical framework. That much is, I take it, shown by John McDowell's (1979) successful adaptation of a similar kind of conceptualism into a broadly neo-Aristotelian framework. This means that Murdoch's strategy for arguing that art can help us with such deepened conceptual understanding is open to any conceptualist. Any such conceptualist can thus argue against the triviality charge against the moral value of art—*i.e.* that the moral understanding gained from art is either completely adventitious or largely trivial (thus, at most, generating commonplaces)—most famously voiced by Jerome Stolnitz (1992) that the true moral value in art lies in its ability to help us understand and improve the way we conceptualise ourselves and the world around us. That is, any approach that accepts the idea that 'our perceptual relation to the world is conceptual all the way out to the world's impacts on our receptive capacities' (McDowell 2007: 338) can argue that one important moral function art fulfils is to help us deepen our understanding of said conceptualisations. This grants the strategy an attractive generality. That is, anyone accepting that our concept(ualisation)s can change in this way can argue that art can aid us in our struggle to work with our concept(ualisation)s and that this work, although it might not chiefly work by rearranging our assigned truth-values or credence levels with regards to moral propositions, is still valuable moral work that, if done rightly, can lead to moral progress for the individual. What counts as moral progress, and what is meant by a deepened grasp of a concept, will obviously have to be filled in and done so in different ways by different theories. The Aristotelian would presumably do so by talking about a better understanding of our conception of happiness, or flourishing (*eudaimonia*), whereas those of a more

Kantian persuasion might do so in terms of increased understanding of the nature of the moral law and the will, for example. A self-realisationist inspired by, *e.g.*, Bradley or Green might do the same in terms of a better grasp of one's station and its duties, *etc.* Many, indeed I think most (if not all), classical perfectionists—if interpreted in a conceptualist fashion—can thus make use of this element of Murdoch's strategy in arguing for the moral relevance of art.

In the chapters that follow I will try to demonstrate the fruitfulness of both Murdoch's stance (by attempting to apply it to two literary works) and the more general conceptualist strategy just outlined by adapting it into a (neo-)Aristotelian framework.

In Chapter 6 I try to demonstrate the more general strategy adapted to an Aristotelian framework by arguing that a close reading of Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) inspired by this general strategy has a lot to tell us about the nature of both self-deception and friendship (the latter again, understood along Aristotelian lines), as well as the ideal of self-sufficiency. In order to emphasise the generality of Murdoch's basic insights in this context I have kept the references to Murdoch's work in this chapter to a minimum by simply pointing out some common themes and functions (in footnotes).

In Chapter 7 I argue that attention to Sophocles *Antigone* in general, and the character of Teiresias in particular, can deepen our understanding of the Murdochian exemplar.

In chapter 8 I argue that a close-reading of John Williams's *Stoner* (2012 [1965]) provides us with a useful illustration of the practical implication of pursuing a strategy for self-realisation along Platonic lines which seeks unification through the adoption of a single exclusive end in a manner that emulates the Socratic maieutic teacher. This illustration, the thought goes, helps us better understand the importance both of conceptual work related to our understanding of our end and the nature of love.

Before moving on, I would like to emphasise—in the light of all the promises that has been made here about the moral potential of art—the never-ending nature of our struggle towards moral perfection. In light of this the kind of engagement with Great art that is required is extremely demanding both because it is an activity that can never be finished and because true engagement, if it is to avoid turning into self-consoling fantasy, is oftentimes both painful and demanding.

6. Moral Development, Friendship, Self-sufficiency, and Self-deception in Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*

Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) can profitably be read as shedding light on personal identity and moral development as well as how these connect to contemporary society, history, friendship, self-knowledge and self-deception in a way that ought to be of interest to classical perfectionist theories. This chapter deals with the role of literature in moral development, the benefits of first person narration, Drabble's historicism and its consequences for moral development and the metaphysics of the person. Furthermore, I provide an Aristotelian reading of the role that friendship plays in gaining self-knowledge in the narrative while taking into account the protagonist's self-deception, which, I argue, is of importance in understanding personal development that is approaching but not yet nearing self-realisation. This last part is again interpreted along Aristotelian lines by relating it to the virtue of magnanimity.

6.1 Aristotelian Perfectionism

On the most general level of abstraction classical perfectionism—ethical theories informed by the good human life understood in terms of the development of human nature (see Hurka 1996: 3-5)—offers a way to unite a conception of our end with a general recipe for its attainment in terms of practical rationality. Any such theory must explicate the relevant conception of practical rationality, provide at least a formal specification of our end, and specify the nature and strength of the supposed relation between them.¹³² Aristotle fulfils these tasks by providing a

¹³² These tasks can be approached from the left-hand side (by shaping our conception of our end via our conception of practical rationality), from the right-hand side (by beginning with a conception

catalogue of virtues coupled with a detailed discussion of their nature, a list of formal features of happiness (*eudaimonia*), and, by arguing that the former—understood as active states (*hexis*) involving deliberation and choice united in their relation to practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—together with some necessary external goods constitute the latter. The formal properties of our end—being desired by everyone for its own sake (see *e.g.*, Pl. *Euthd.* 282^a1-2, *Sym.* 205^a7f; Arist. *NE*1097^a5-6; Green (1883: §253)), forming the resting place of desire (see *e.g.*, Pl. *Sym.* 205^a; Arist. *NE*1097^a15-24 Arius 76.21-4, 131.4; Sextus, *PHI* 25; Alex. *Aphr. de An.* II150.20-21, 162.34; Green (1883: §§171, 176), and hence complete (*teleios*; Arist. *NE*1097^a25-30; Bradley (1927: 74-78)) and self-sufficient (*autarktes*; Arist. *NE*1097^a15-1098^b10; Annas (1993: 34-42))—can be characterised in abstraction leading to an outline (Arist. *NE*1098^a20-26): ‘activity of the soul in accord with virtue’ (Arist. *NE*1098^a17-18 (trans. Irwin)).

Formal specification is not enough since ethics, being a practical science, does not seek theoretical knowledge—*i.e.* apprehension of principles—for its own sake, but has the practical aim of good choices and appropriate passions for a fulfilled life in such a way that we also need to form a substantial conception of our end that is in an important sense our own.¹³³ In order to be fully grasped, the substantial elements of both our end and our practical rationality must be filled out by the agent herself. Even if some pointers can be given as to their nature and scope, the virtues are such that they, in the words of T. H. Green, ‘consists in the realisation of capacities which can only be fully known in their ultimate realisation’ (Green 1883: §193).¹³⁴ Our end consists in activity and is thus dynamic rather than static; it is the matter of leading a life rather than just living it, and doing this involves reflecting on how our actions fit into the structured patterns of our lives generated by our long-term goals.¹³⁵ At the ‘entry point of

of our end and argue for an explication of practical rationality by reference to this conception) or by alternation. See McDowell (1998: 3-22).

¹³³ Aristotle divides the sciences on the basis of subject matter, aims, methods, and appropriate level of precision (See Arist. *Top.* 145^a13-18; *Metaph.* vi.i.). The practical sciences—ethics, politics, and, household management—have their principles in us, the practical aim of good choices and appropriate passions for a happy life (Arist. *NE*1095^a2-11), utilize the endoxic method (Arist. *NE*1145^b2-7), and should not be made into exact sciences (*NE*1098^a26-30).

¹³⁴ The doctrine of the mean (Arist. *NE* 1106^a15-11209^b30), a list of general features coupled with illustrative examples applied in practice together with features most characteristic of those possessing the virtues add some substance to the outline and consequently delimits the range of possible substantial conceptions.

¹³⁵ Many of the candidate elements of happiness should appear to the agent as involving processes, *i.e.* activities that involve continuous reflective work on our behalf. This, I take it, is why Aristotle requires that *eudaimonia* include so-called ‘second activities’—*i.e.* not mere capacity but active

ethical reflection' (Annas 1993: 27ff.; see also Eadem, (2011: Ch. 8); *cf.* Long (2001)). our end is 'the indeterminate notion of what I am aiming at in my life as a whole' (Annas 2011: 124) and developing this cannot be achieved by imposing a ready-made plan from the outside, nor can it be anything you want it to be since there are better and worse ways of organising one's life and any such plan must abide by the formal characterisation. We must thus work both on honing our capacities and with organising our goals and aims into an overall structure that amounts to a conception of our end.

6.2 Literature and Moral Growth

Forming a conception of our end requires proper appreciation and understanding of alternatives since no end is free of opportunity costs (thus giving rise to constraints if embraced), and because our own conception must be tested against alternatives with regard to its reasonableness (Broadie 1991: 31; LeBar 2013: 12-14). One strategy for substantial elucidation of alternative conceptions of our end, practical strategies for attaining it (see *e.g.*, Nussbaum 1986: Ch. 3; Davies 2007: 145-146; Novitz 1987: 132ff.), and the what-it-is-likeness of such processes, which I will utilize in what follows, is to turn to (narrative) literature's ability to depict moral growth in a manner arguably superior to argumentative philosophical form.¹³⁶ Nora Hämäläinen (2016b: 15-30) distinguishes between three predominant ways in which literature has been utilised in the service of contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy: a 'thin use' where literature is used to exemplify or illustrate ethical issues fully formed prior to the engagement with literature thus hardly affecting the modes, concerns, and priorities of moral philosophical thinking; a 'thick use' where the use of literature effects the formation and understanding of the issues at hand, and; an 'open ended' use where literature is truly primary in the sense that the philosopher—cum—novelist

engagement in said capacity—and that it consequently cannot be a mere state (Arist. *NE*1095^b32, 1178^b18-20). Some plans (partly) fix future desires but do not by themselves bring any strong consistency requirement, as it seems perfectly possible to pursue multiple such projects that can potentially come into conflict, although in order to avoid conflict we seem to want to reach a point where our disparate ends agglomerate and the best way to achieve this is to try to reach a point where our disparate ends are subsumed under a single unifying end. See Bradley 1927: 69; Irwin 2009: §1217.

¹³⁶ In focusing on moral development and conception revision I do not want to suggest that this is all that literature is capable of doing that is relevant for moral philosophy. *Cf. e.g.*, Green 2010; 2016.

refuses the translation of literature into philosophy.¹³⁷ The approach taken here is situated between Hämäläinen's two first categories in that while literature functions as an illustration of concerns relating to classical perfectionism that are articulated beforehand the engagement with literature both enriches our understanding of said concerns and the relations that hold between these as well as make us scrutinize—and realize the dangers of—said strategy thus raising methodological, moral, and philosophical issues. Most importantly, literature can help the perfectionist not only by providing a fuller description of, but also explore normative ideals, by *e.g.*, investigating moral exemplars and the role these fulfil both in theory and in practice. This function of literature is especially important when it comes to moral development since such development is not simply a form of change, but a kind of change that relates explicitly to ideals (*cf.* §§2.6, 3.6, 4.2, 4.3; Chapter 5 above). This means both that this function of literature is not something that could be (straightforwardly) tested empirically and that the role of literature in perfectionist ethics so conceived isn't merely complementary but something that fulfils a distinctive and important role.

In what follows I will argue that Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) sheds light on certain aspects of moral development.¹³⁸ The novel might not immediately stand out as one of Drabble's most philosophically intriguing as it seems lacking the self-awareness of its philosophical pretensions evident in her later works. Susan Spitzer even argues that the novel fails as an agent of mature moral discovery since the truths that the novel's protagonist-narrator arrives at are 'shabby, partial truths that only partially camouflage the more vital current of self-deception flowing through the novel' (Spitzer 1978: 229). I argue, to the contrary, that a range of features (including the aforementioned self-deception) exhibited by *The Millstone* makes it a valuable contribution to our understanding of the development of moral character that supplements and complements recent work in moral philosophy in the way just outlined.

One of the main themes of *The Millstone* concerns the ideal of self-sufficiency and its relation to external goods and the novel can be fruitfully read as depicting moral development from a first-person perspective thereby providing the beginnings of a substantial specification. Such alternative points of view are valuable to us since they not only award us with alternative takes on our task but

¹³⁷ This taxonomy is not meant to be exhaustive (Hämäläinen 2016b: 27) nor necessarily seen as comprised of higher and lower stages, although it is clear that Hämäläinen finds the radical possibilities of the third kind appealing. I do not want to commit myself to a ranking of any sort since I consider all of the abovementioned, and a host of other, ways in which philosophers turn to literature as fully legitimate (although obviously more or less suited to different purposes).

¹³⁸ Page references to this work are hereafter given parenthetically in the text.

also have the possibility of elucidating pitfalls and mistaken strategies (see also *e.g.*, Nussbaum 1986: Ch. 3). The novel can thus be seen as aiding both moral inquiry (by aiding in the substantial specification of our end) and us as aspiring moral agents (by making us aware of pitfalls and dangers as well as suggesting a phenomenological analysis of moral development).

6.3 Reflections on the Role of Literature for Morality

The Millstone offers explicit reflection on, and a critique of, turning to narrative literature when it comes to moral matters. Drabble has her protagonist-narrator Rosamund Stacey, upon recalling a planned sexual encounter with a fellow Cambridge student named Hamish at a hotel during her university years, assert: ‘We were well educated, the two of us, in the pitfalls of such occasions, having both of us read at one time in our lives a good deal of cheap fiction, and indeed we both carried ourselves with considerable aplomb’ (5).¹³⁹ While this can be taken to suggest the inadequacies of fiction, and thereby the novel itself, when it comes to supplying moral guidance, another plausible reading of the passage is as a warning against using bad fiction for such purposes, and above all doing so in an unreflective manner.¹⁴⁰ In what follows I commit myself to a version of the thesis that literary fiction can provide non-adventitious knowledge, namely: some literary fictions contain or imply propositions about human life which they support or gainsay that must be pondered and assessed as true or false, at least tentatively, as part of their ‘afterlife’ (Kivy 1997: 120-139), *i.e.* the period, marked by significant gaps and an indeterminate outer boundary, in which we formulate, interpret, and process these propositions.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ The adventure is nearly ground to a halt when the protagonist carelessly signs the register in her own name. While the receptionist grudgingly ‘gave us our key’ (6) the narrator remains a virgin.

¹⁴⁰ This reading thus paves the way for an Aristotelian version of Murdoch’s treatment of Great art as capable of generating insight in a Platonic framework. On this see Chapter 5 above; Murdoch 1959a; 1959b; 1961; 1977).

¹⁴¹ I here rely on Kivy 1997: 120-139 and Green 2010: 350-366. In addition, see *e.g.*, Davies 2007: 142ff.; Gaut 2007; Carroll 1998: 126-160. The *locus classicus* of the modern opposition is Stolnitz 1992. For a recent defence see Green 2016. These propositions, or ‘thematic statements’, usually general in nature (see *e.g.* Lamarque & Olsen 1994: 321; Kivy 1997: 120-139; Green 2010: 350-366), are occasionally stated outright, such as *e.g.* the famous opening sentence of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1918 [1978]): ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’, more often than not, however, this is not the case. I thus go beyond the claim that literature can be a source of belief as it demands that the belief in question must be supported by the work itself in such a way as to enable justification. On this see Green 2016. This does not rule out

It is clear that Rosamund is, or at least wants to be, an advocate of some kind of literary cognitivism. Upon realising that Dafoe's *The Plague Year* is a fictional and not a factual account and consequently 'that it wasn't, as they say, true' she is 'extremely put out', but 'even more put out that I was put out' since she has 'always maintained that I hold an Aristotelian and not a Platonic view of fact and fiction' (146; cf. Murdoch 1977).¹⁴²

6.4 The Dangers of Literature

Undeniably, fictional portrayals can be dangerously deceptive and harmful; a skilled writer can make almost any human trait, activity, or world-view seem attractive and vice as well as virtue can be cultivated and refined.¹⁴³ Hence our engagement with literary fiction for the purposes of aiding moral inquiry and development must be marked by scepticism concerning the credibility of the narrative, its psychological portrayals, and its purported ideals and convictions *etc.*¹⁴⁴ In reading literature for moral guidance and elucidation we must in a sense not only become moral philosophers, we must also be prepared to scrutinize our own opinions, conceptions, and practices as well as those gathered from the literature we are engaging with. This amounts to a dauntingly demanding task: not only must we fulfil the role of literary critics—in that we must identify the general thematic propositions, and philosophers—in evaluating these propositions as theoretical possibilities—but also as human beings in that we will have to live with these realisations and their effects upon our conceptions, our

fictional works providing non-trivial but perhaps not knowledge-enabling justification as uninteresting since such works might spur further investigation.

¹⁴² Rosamund's friend Lydia maintains to the contrary that 'there's a difference between what happens to one in real life and what one can make real in art. That happened to me, I agree it happened to me, but I'm not convinced by it, it hasn't the stamp of reality on it to me' (65). The literature on Aristotle's *Poetics* is obviously huge. For two recent contributions see Schiapparelli and Crivelli 2012; Brito 2016.

¹⁴³ I believe there to be limits to how far one can go in convincingly portraying traits and ideas we initially want to distance ourselves from as attractive. These limits are and should be tested by the arts. I have in mind e.g. Nabokov's *Lolita*, David Bowie's *Station To Station*, and Disney's *The Lion King* (for two interesting albeit problematic readings see Strzelczyk 2008 and Roth 1996).

¹⁴⁴ That is, literature can often function as a means to entrench what Murdoch (1959a; 1959b; 1961; 1970; 1977) would call fantasies, conventional thinking, and neuroses.

sense of self, and world-view.¹⁴⁵ In doing this we must take a stand on issues that require proper appreciation and understanding of alternatives. This includes, but is not limited to, understanding of alternatives that we whole-heartedly reject. This is so since a stable rejection of *e.g.*, fascism, can arguably only be reached once we are acquainted with among other things the raw appeal of that doctrine (*i.e.* when portrayed as a natural self-assertive regulative order promising a sense of belonging in terms of strength, unity and security), and the horrors it embodies when viewed from a perspective that appropriately but unreflectively demonises it. Propagandistic portrayals might seem naïve in their one-sidedness but I believe that a proper understanding of the issue at hand requires familiarity with, and the informed rejection of, such brute appeal in order for our rejection to be truly secure.¹⁴⁶ It is this basic realisation that ultimately tells against the all too familiar ideas that we are simply and straightforwardly to learn valuable lessons and find exemplary character-portrayals to imitate from literature.

6.5 The First-person Voice

The Millstone is a tale of personal development written in the fluent and clear but still stiffly awkward first-person voice of Rosamund Stacey.¹⁴⁷ The protagonist-narrator is economically, socially, and intellectually privileged; she is well brought up and well educated.¹⁴⁸ As the author herself puts it ‘unlike some of the relatively wealthy, she is fully aware of this’ (Drabble 1970: ix). She also, as Susanna

¹⁴⁵ Here it thus becomes evident that this proposal requires a kind of conceptualism. See above §2.4; *cf.* above §§4.2, Chapter 5; Murdoch 1959a; 1959b; 1961. The works of scholars from these and other fields will in all probability provide indispensable input when engaging with this task.

¹⁴⁶ Propaganda is thus often intimately connected to, and dependent upon, what Murdoch (1959a; 1959b; 1961; 1970) would call ‘fantasy’. See above §§2.6, 3.3, 4.2; Chapter 5.

¹⁴⁷ Here we can see a clear affinity between Drabble and Iris Murdoch since Murdoch also frequently utilised first-person narration to great effect in order to illustrate moral progress. Murdoch’s first-person novels in general, and *The Black Prince* (1973) in particular, is frequently counted among her best. On this see Nicol 2004: 64-86, 87-107.

¹⁴⁸ Rosamund is the daughter of well-known middle-class socialist academics. During the course of the novel she completes and successfully defends her PhD-thesis on Elizabethan sonnet sequences eventually finding a position at ‘one of the most attractive new Universities’ (155). Her main income consists of ‘research grants and endowments’ (9) coupled with some private tutoring and she resides—rent free—in her parents’ large central London flat with ‘so good an address’ (96). Her parents are residing in India, doing unspecified good work, when the novel opens and later move on to Africa. Consequently, they are off-stage during the action of the novel.

Roxman (1984: 67) puts it, ‘has other prerogatives, being beautiful, intelligent, and, at least professionally, self-confident’.

The tale of chaste and secretly ‘Victorian’¹⁴⁹ (18) Rosamund’s journey through pregnancy—resulting from her single sexual experience, with a friend whom she had assumed a homosexual—contains inconsistencies and ambiguities that the narrator seems unaware of that reflect her dual feelings concerning the pregnancy (she, half-heartedly, attempts to induce an abortion with gin and a hot bath but some friends drop by and drink the gin). The baby, Octavia (named, we are told (170) after nineteenth century social reformer Octavia Hill, thus further emphasising the themes of social responsibility and situatedness as well as self-sufficiency) later, like one of Drabble’s own children, develops a heart defect. The ensuing operation is successful.

The novel, with its linear narrative and first person semi-autobiographical voice, predates what can, for want of a better term, be called Drabble’s post-modern turn. She remarks: ‘After *The Millstone*, I stopped writing first-person novels. I came to think it a lazy form, and embarked on more complex and ambitious polyphonic efforts. I sometimes wish I could recapture that easy single linear narrative, and in *The Seven Sisters* in 2002 I tried to do so, but felt mysteriously compelled to mess it up with a bit of modish postmodernism. Modish postmodernism was easy. It’s the straight true line that’s hard’ (Drabble 2011).¹⁵⁰

Upon reading *The Millstone* one is immediately struck by the strangeness of the narrator’s voice; frequent quotations and literary allusions betray Rosamund’s status as an upper-middleclass academic, and her fondness of the distancing pronoun ‘one’ suggests there is still work to be done for the heroine when it comes to internalising her experiences.¹⁵¹ Rosamund’s tendency towards checks and shifts—in line with her academic tone—lends the voice a spoken character that adds immediacy and urgency to the narrative. At the same time, as Pamela S. Bromberg (1986: 180) argues, ‘Rosamund’s solipsistic first-person narrative creates uncertainty about authorial distance, preventing the reader from reliably

¹⁴⁹ Rosamund cleverly avoids sexual commitments by oscillating between two escorts, each of whom assume that she is sleeping with the other while in fact she remains a virgin.

¹⁵⁰ Bromberg (1986) traces this development in detail by focusing on *The Millstone* and *The Waterfall* respectively. Note also the clear affinity between the view Drabble expresses here and Iris Murdoch’s concern for realistic character-portrayals and realism (on this see Chapter 5 below).

¹⁵¹ E.g., Rosamund’s humorous allusions to Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* at (17 seq.) and her likening of her parents’ withdrawal to the cruelty of the abusive father in Henry James’s *Washington Square* at (145). For more extensive discussions of this with additional examples see e.g., Grosvenor Myer 1991 and Roxman 1984: 21-24.

evaluating the teller and the tale' producing 'three levels of inescapable uncertainty for the reader': unreliability of the narrator, the lack of a clear perspective from which to judge development, and, Drabble's own problematic relation to the narrative.

These features—like the explicit warning not to rely too heavily on narrative literature as a guide to life—call for carefulness when trying to learn something from the particular in the form of personal narratives. Rosamund states: 'Confidence, not cowardice, is the part of myself which I admire, after all' (5). Yet, uncertainty and ineptitude plague the novel, but there is afterthought in the voice also; Rosamund's narration bears the mark of someone that is speaking self-consciously and with a plan as well as a point. It is the voice of someone consciously and conscientiously trying, albeit not necessarily succeeding entirely, to learn from past experiences.

Jane Duran remarks that 'Drabble assumes a certain sort of reader; she assumes someone who, like herself, finds ordinary life fraught with difficulty and problematic enough' (Duran 2007: 27). While this makes for difficult reading it also underscores the fact that if any engagement with literature *qua* literature is to be philosophically rewarding it must be so through the engagement with the literary work that is marked by the kind of scepticism that was outlined in §6.4. This also, as Jane Duran (2007: 31) notes, marries well with Drabble's use of interior narration; 'the effectiveness of this device, especially insofar as it allows the narrator to posit a number of queries, is not in question. Jane, Alison, and Faro (protagonists, respectively, of *The Waterfall*, *The Ice Age*, and *The Peppered Moth*) do not go at life without bewilderment.' While first person narration therefore undeniably is problematic it also opens up for an in-depth portrayal of the phenomenal aspects of moral development. We might be forced to resort to several hermeneutic strategies, including focusing on actions rather than verbal defences (see *e.g.*, Bromberg 1986; Spitzer 1978), in order to ultimately take a stand on the plausibility, reliability, desirability, and usefulness of the moral development depicted in *The Millstone*, but this is nothing less than what is to be expected.

6.6 Social Connectedness

The Millstone, like most of Drabble's work concerns contemporary English society and how it informs its individual members.¹⁵² The characters are as much shaped by social and economic class, politics, liberal agendas and conservative restrictions as they through conscious or unconscious efforts make up and sustain them. This is also the case with the ideal of self-sufficiency, which forms a main theme of the novel. Rosamund is, through her privileged social status, able to deal with single parenthood in a manner that does not reduce her baby Octavia to anything like the millstone of the title. In fact, when Rosamund's sister Beatrice, whom have hitherto 'always sung [...] the praises of motherhood and domesticity' (76), focus on the demands of motherhood and its (assumed) incompatibility with independence this only deepens Rosamund's resolve (77-79). Her maintained self-sufficiency, Rosamund observes, is only possible due to her social status; 'I would not recommend my course of action to anyone with a shade less advantage in the world than myself' (112). The novel thus examines the tension between the ideal of self-sufficiency and our dependence upon external goods, friendship, and the self-knowledge that can be gathered from interacting with those close to us, thereby highlighting and describing in great and believable detail the self-deception that one often encounters in moral development. A virtue of *The Millstone* is the way in which it is made clear to the reader how profoundly and continuously Rosamund's victories and defeats—from which she undeniably learns and develops a great deal—effect her judgement of herself, her abilities, and those around her.

It might be tempting to read Drabble as what her sister A. S. Byatt (2000) calls a 'historical novelist' but, as Byatt herself notes, Drabble's writing is firmly anchored in the present and as Jane Duran argues, 'there is a great deal going on in Drabble that pushes beyond this [historicism]' (Duran 2007: 4-5). Concern with the present does not exclude preoccupation with the history that shapes it and it is such concern that we find as a recurrent theme in Drabble's work. This questioning of history and our conceptions of it are dealt with on at least two different levels. The frequent internal reflective monologues of Drabble's characters—and here Rosamund in *The Millstone* is certainly no exception—often concern their personal narratives but in addition there is also a concern for master narratives and their effect on individuals as well as larger collectives.

¹⁵² Compare this to Murdoch's insistence on the importance of the 'historical individual' (Murdoch 1970: 26/319-320; cf. Murdoch (1957a: 122/75).

Part of what the author seemingly wants to get across—and Drabble is acutely aware of herself as author as well as our awareness of her—is, argues Jane Duran, an idea of ‘history as a chain of culture (however miserable)’ (Duran 2007: 29) where ‘the arts (like the classics embodied by Anthony’s Oxbridge friend in *Ice Age* (1977)) provide a window for a way of seeing the historical in a different mode, as something that had at least moments of light and from which we might be able to catch rays of hope’ (Duran 2007: 30).

Drabble’s particular brand of historicism is apparent also in *The Millstone* where personal history, setting (pre-swinging London), and changing times, constitute much more than a backdrop as Rosamund frequently muses over the spirit of the times, childhood memories, and the more distant past. Her class identity—signalled by formality of tone and investigated through encounters with friends and family that function as snapshots caricaturing class segmented Britain¹⁵³—is portrayed as something she is acutely aware of¹⁵⁴ and is at pains justifying.¹⁵⁵ Rosamund’s social status also comes with codes of politeness, which are reinforced by the period’s mingling of formality and informality as well as the contrast between her friends’ easy permissiveness and the stigmatization of unmarried mothers (most notably by the medical establishment). As John Mullan puts it: ‘Drabble’s narrator is a creature of her times: free-thinking but proper; informal, but formal too’ (Mullan 2011).

While the historicism we encounter in *The Millstone* is perhaps less self-interrogative than *e.g.*, the disruption of narrative through the authorial voice and time shifts in *The Peppered Moth* (2001) or the perspectivist questioning of the received view of history in *The Ice Age* (1997; see also Duran 2007: 26ff) it is still not insignificant. The central concern in *The Millstone* as far as historicism is concerned is rather with the narrative self and its relation to genetic and social heritage as well as privilege in terms of social class (Roxman 1984: 66-71). Here too the voice matters. This is perhaps most obvious in how the different character’s different sociolects—from Lydia’s ‘would-be modest middle-class

¹⁵³ Rosamund’s two writer friends, Joe (the writer of bad but successful novels that functions as one of Rosamund’s escorts) and Lydia (who writes good but unsuccessful ones) are both from the poorer classes while self-made Roger (the other escort) is platonic and arrogant High Tory. Her labour voting parents represent idealistic upper middle class with social consciousness and socialist beliefs while her pacifist socialist sister Beatrice (married to a nuclear scientist) does not allow her children to play with the locals because of their unrefined speech. Her brother Andrew has married a conventional member of their class that spends her time throwing dinner-parties and going to the hairdressers.

¹⁵⁴ She calls herself ‘rather rich [...] by any human standard’ (9), and concedes to having gone to ‘a very good grammar school’ (84).

¹⁵⁵ *E.g.*, ‘I was continually aware that my life was too pleasant by half’ (50).

voice' (11) via Rosamund's stiff academic awkwardness to George's received pronunciation (he works as an announcer on BBC radio)—mirror their background. Rosamund is, in sharp contrast to her optimistic socialist parents, well aware of being moulded by her historical and social situatedness emanating in a kind of puritanical morality (Grosvenor Myer 1974; Seiler-Franklin 1979; Sherry 1979; Roxman 1984: 66-71) which she tends to construe in terms of determinism, social or otherwise:

Sometimes I wonder whether it is not my parents who are to blame, totally to blame, for my inability to see anything in human terms of like and dislike, love and hate: but only in terms of justice, guilt and innocence. Life is not fair: it is a lesson that I took in with my Kellogg's cornflakes at our family home in Putney. It is unfair at every score and every count and in every particular, and those who, like my parents, attempt to level it out are doomed to failure. Though when I would say this to them, fierce, argumentative, tragic, over the cornflakes, driven almost to tears at times by their hopeless innocence and aspirations, they would smile peaceably and say, Yes, dear, nothing can be done about inequality of brains and beauty, but that's no reason why we shouldn't try to do something about economics, is it? (84)

The passage suggest that the truth of the matter is to be found midway between Rosamund's socio-genetic determinism and her parents' pragmatic bracketing of genetics and optimistic reduction of social and personal change to a matter of 'economics'. While things such as community membership, socioeconomic background, and the like do inform individual identity we should not conclude (as Rosamund at times seems to do) that fixed, unchangeable identities follow or that predictable individual life-narratives follow from such inevitable background conditions.

The passage also expresses the thoroughgoing theme of class-segmentation and connects it to the formation of identity. In characteristic manner Rosamund later ponders class-structures and, initially at least, interprets the situation in terms of determinism: 'what a pity it was that resentments should breed so near the cradle, that people should have had it from birth' (90). Susanna Roxman argues that the world of *The Millstone* is 'essentially a static one, where it is nearly impossible to leave one's original social class' (Roxman 1984: 69) and while this certainly is an in many ways apt depiction of 1960's England, the personal narrative is far from static. We must not forget that Rosamund's recollection points to another part of Drabblean historicism. Jane Duran (2007: 29-30) writes: 'part of Drabble's take on the malleability of history is that we see it differently in different contexts. Our personal slants are the products of the very situations in which we find ourselves

as we interpret historical moments'. Later, primarily through the birth of and bonding with her daughter but also through her interactions with her acquaintance Lydia (see §6.7), Rosamund acquires the necessary perspectives to begin to question her upbringing and its accompanying puritanism.¹⁵⁶ When pondering her parents' non-interventionist, unengaged, way of dealing with the news (delivered, Rosamund speculates based on a remark in one of her fathers' letters, by her attending physician, Dr Richard Protheroe, a friend of her parents') of her becoming a mother, Rosamund asserts:

Their behaviour seemed natural to me, for I am their child, but I have speculated endlessly about whether or not they were right. Such tact, such withdrawal, such fear of causing pain, such willingness to receive and take pains. It is a morality, all right, a well-established, traditional, English morality, moreover it is my morality, whether I like it or not. But, there are things in me that cannot take it, and when they have to assert themselves the result is violence, screaming, ugliness, and Lord knows what yet to come (144-145).

Rosamund gradually comes to question her upbringing, history, morality and identity along with her previous deterministic convictions. This questioning is—as is usual in Drabble's work—never seen to an end (see Irvine 1985). To see this as somehow disappointing is, however, a mistake. It is an important aspect of the work that it portrays with tact and attention to detail what partial moral development can be like from the vantage point of the agent.

6.7 Living Together

While Valerie Grosvenor Myer (1991: 35) overstates the case when she asserts that 'Rosamund discovers community by giving birth', it is true that the protagonist progresses further in her relationship to her daughter than with any other character in the novel. The voice changes accordingly into being initially collective but quickly reverting to the singular while the preoccupation is still with her daughter (*e.g.*, 'when we got back home and settled in, Octavia and I, I found

¹⁵⁶ It has been argued by *e.g.* McClellan (2000: 132ff.) that all that happens here is a form of over-compensation which drives Rosamund to excessive bonding with her daughter at the expense of the possibility of any other meaningful relationships. This, I think, neglects that the novel portrays personal development (that does not, within the confines of the novel, reach full moral maturity) and the open-ended nature of the plot. It also neglects the admittedly immature but progressing relationship between Rosamund and Lydia.

that my initial relief was quickly replaced by new anxieties' (142)). We have here an indication of the possibility of genuine shared life-experiences on Rosamund's part. It appears that in her relation to her daughter Rosamund can sense the possibility of what Aristotle calls 'living together' (*to suzên*; Arist. *NE*1172^a1-14). To live together, Aristotle seems to claim, is what we most desire from our friends and togetherness is what seems most of all to be the mark of true friendship (Arist. *NE*1157^b19-25; 1158^a8-10). A natural and influential reading of Aristotelian friendship is to see friendship as an extension, or even redefinition, of an individual's life in terms of the introduction of new or redefined boundaries so that this individual's happiness (*eudaimonia*) comes to include the happiness of others (see Sherman 1987).¹⁵⁷ This reading emphasises the help we can get from our loved ones in better understanding the nature of human happiness and its attainment.¹⁵⁸

Nothing so dramatic as a change in voice occurs in Rosamund's dealings with her friend Lydia, who is in many ways (*e.g.* through her creative spontaneity, sociality and lower social standing) Rosamund's opposite (12) (See also Roxman 1984: 67; Grosvenor Myer 1974: 39, 121). Still, their evolving relation is significant for the narrative. Lydia is initially part of a loose circle of friends that belong to 'a raffish seedy literary milieu' (20) but becomes decidedly more involved when her economic predicaments combined with Rosamund's need of assistance make it convenient for them to share lodgings at Rosamund's parents' spacious flat.

The relationship that evolves between Rosamund and Lydia thus progresses from pleasurable but distanced acquaintances to the utility of shared living arrangements and mutual support. It falls short, however, of genuine friendship. Their story not being of the unmitigated success variety thus mirrors Rosamund's personal development. The progression in Rosamund and Lydia's friendship and Rosamund's relation to Octavia corresponds to Aristotle's distinction between three main types of friendship; friendships of advantage, friendship for pleasure, and complete friendship found between virtuous people (Arist. *NE* 1156^a7-1159^b25). Just as in Aristotle, it is primarily the necessary but externally dependant good of friendship that reveals for Rosamund the tensions inherent in the ideal of self-sufficiency. Prior to the actualisation of issues having to do with the relation to others Rosamund appears as a parody of puritanical independence

¹⁵⁷ At times (*e.g.* 147) Rosamund even refers to Octavia as an extension of herself.

¹⁵⁸ This aspect of the novel clearly corresponds to how Murdoch sees Great art as potentially fulfilling the role of a Platonic interlocutor and friend (on this see §5.6 above; Schellekens and Dammann 2017).

by *e.g.*, engaging in solitary work, keeping her own family and the baby's father in the dark regarding her pregnancy, and her almost manic reluctance to seek assistance (see Roxman 1984: 69).¹⁵⁹

Friendship also serves to reintroduce other external goods that by the beginning of the novel are—partly due to Rosamund's privileged social position—of no concern into her deliberative process via her subsequent need to understand Lydia and care for Octavia.

That this need for understanding is reciprocal becomes evident when Rosamund discovers that Lydia's manuscript, which 'she had started shortly after moving in [...] and which she had been working on, intermittently, ever since' (92), is in actuality a thinly veiled account of Rosamund's 'life story, with a few alterations here and there, and a few interesting false assumptions among the alterations' (93).¹⁶⁰ These false assumptions are primarily due to Lydia's inability to fully comprehend Rosamund's reasons (based primarily in her high regard for self-sufficiency) for not including, or accepting financial assistance from, the father, whom Lydia assumes to be Joe (93). Rosamund is initially rather flattered by the portrayal of the heroine as 'independent, strong-willed, and very worldly and *au fait* with sexual problems' (93) but annoyed and upset at the way in which 'the Rosamund character's obsession with scholarly detail and discovery was nothing more nor less than an escape route, an attempt to evade the personal crises of her life and the realities of life in general' (94). Here Rosamund seems to be on the brink of realising something of importance concerning her professional pride, the nature of her work, and the latter's insufficiency as a sole source of life satisfaction. She stops short of drawing out the consequences of this (partial) realisation however, reverting instead to distinguishing between scholarly ability and the motivation behind it:

¹⁵⁹ Valerie Grosvenor Myer even criticizes Drabble for providing an unrealistic portrayal of academic life: 'we do not altogether believe in Rosamund as a research student: she never seems to have to see a supervisor, for example. Rosamund [...] lives the life of a freelance writer, unconstrained by the organizational structures of postgraduate life, or its normal contacts.' (1991: 46). This, it seems to me, rather than being unrealistic underscores Rosamund's drive towards self-sufficiency. Rosamund's work also illustrates her unengaged ways. Her topic—Elizabethan Sonnets—is as safe as they come and her way of engaging with it seems analytical, bordering on cold. Nora Foster Stovel (1989: 63) remarks 'Rosamund's reference to correcting "the proofs of an article of mine on an article on a book on Spencer and Courtly Love" [...] makes it clear that her critical approach to her subject is particularly artificial, being at several removes from the real thing'.

¹⁶⁰ Lydia had, by accident, left a page of the manuscript in Rosamund's type-writer since 'she had been complaining for weeks that her machine was going wrong' (92).

I did not think this view of scholarship at all justifiable: I could not produce my reasons for believing in its value, but in a way I was all the surer for that, for I knew it for a fact. Scholarship is a skill and I am good at it, and even if one rated it no higher than that it is still worth doing. Whether I used it as an escape or not was a different matter, and did not seem to me to be as relevant. (94).

What Lydia, and perhaps Drabble and the work as such, suggest is that scholarship on its own cannot serve as the basis for a good life, or, somewhat weaker, if it is to so serve it cannot be pursued in Rosamund's characteristically detached manner.

The episode in its entirety offers a meta-reflection on a par with the reflection on (bad) narrative literature as a guide to life discussed in §6.3 and Lydia's partial understanding of Rosamund, as well as their inability to communicate, are highlighted. Immediately after the episode just discussed Rosamund is rushed to the hospital where her daughter Octavia is born. Rosamund reflects on others' perception of her:

On the way to the hospital I thought how unnerving it is, suddenly to see oneself for a moment as others see one, like a glimpse of unexpected profile in an unfamiliar combination of mirrors. I think I know myself better than anyone can know me, and I think this even in cold blood, for too much knowing is my vice; and yet one cannot account for the angles of others. Once at a party I met a boy whom I had known at school, and not seen since; we both had known that the other would be present and I had recognized him at once, but when we met and talked he confessed that when looking out for me he had taken another girl to be me (97).

Rosamund here observes that we often do not perceive our lives directly. Rather, we do this through other activities (*cf.* Arist. *NE*1170^a29-^b1) in a way such that a part becomes a representation of the whole, what Irene Liu (2010: 586; Arist. *NE*1171^b34-1172^a6) terms *synecdochic activities* (so named after the poetic device). This goes for the way we perceive the lives of friends as well for how we enjoy our friend's good activities as our own (*oikeios*) in a pleasurable way (Arist. *NE*1170^a3; 1169^b33). Moreover, this special perception (*sunaisthêsis*) of the friend's life is mutual and reciprocal (Arist. *NE*1155^b27-1155^a5). Our life as a whole—the central organizing concern of classic perfectionism—is thus made available to us through the life together with friends. The joint perception of these synecdochic activities makes self-awareness of life as a whole possible in such a way that we see the structure of our lives and can organise them accordingly. Joint perception is to be regarded as an indispensable tool for organising life, but it is also an

expression of solidarity with one's friends and a necessary component of genuine friendship in that it makes it possible for us to truly see and enjoy the good lives of friends (Arist. *NE*1156^b9-10) and share in them in such a way that we go beyond the lesser forms of friendship (outlined at Arist. *NE*1156^a6-^b6) and share in each other's lives (Arist. *NE*1171^b12-14) as ends in themselves (Arist. *NE*1156^b7-14). Our relation to others can thus serve as a guide to moral development by helping us see the structural elements of our lives, by recasting our values, and by broadening, strengthening, and deepening our understanding of happiness.

The above is merely pointing out resemblance and correlation between fiction and philosophy and consequently of limited interest. What is of real interest in *The Millstone* is the portrayal of issues relating to friendship and development from a first-person perspective and the qualitative description that this brings. Such descriptions are useful both from the vantage point of ethical theory—as means to filling out the substantial content of our end—and for us as aspiring moral agents in that they bring with them an understanding of the process of moral development making us prepared for the journey ahead. Substantial specification in moral theory and personal moral development are different but related tasks. Any substantial specification given ought to have implications for what strategies (therapeutic or otherwise) are reasonable to employ in our search for self-realisation and the progress made with regards to our character will effect how we specify and conceptualise our end.¹⁶¹

The Millstone draws our attention to how this conceptualisation is not a solitary affair in two different ways. Firstly, the novel draws our attention, as was argued in §6.6, to the way in which society grounds our 'entry point of ethical reflection' (Annas 1993: 27ff.; 2011: Ch. 8; cf. Long 2001), *i.e.* the vantage-point from which the central Socratic question 'How ought I to live?' (Pl. *Rep.* 352d) is asked by ordinary people—although many are obviously 'too unreflective, or too satisfied with convention, or just too busy, to pose the question' (Annas 1993: 27); cf. *e.g.*, Hursthouse 1999: 59ff.)—of average intellect with a 'modicum of leisure' (Annas 1993: 27; cf. Nussbaum 1994a: 3) reflecting on their lives against the background of a set of values and commitments already (tacitly of explicitly) embraced.

¹⁶¹ This only holds provided we accept some kind of practicality requirement stipulating that any ethical theory, specification of our end, and any strategies we recommend ought to be such that they are practically applicable to human agents. See Nussbaum (1994: Ch. 1). See also Arist. *NE*1096^a12-1997^a15.

Secondly, the novel emphasises how this conceptualisation continues to be informed by our relations to others. Rosamund gathers some insights through reading Lydia's manuscript and the interactive nature of such self-realisation is further underscored when later in the novel Octavia, in an unguarded moment, chews parts of the manuscript to bits (146-147):

It seemed so absurd, to have this small living extension of myself, so dangerous, so vulnerable, for whose injuries and crimes I alone had to suffer. It was truly a case of the right hand not seeing what the left hand was doing, for both good and ill. [...] It really was a terrible thing, I realized this, especially as by constant nattering I had at last persuaded Lydia of the necessity for keeping her door shut: and yet in comparison with Octavia being so sweet and so alive it did not seem so very terrible (147).

Closed doors turn out to be an impossibility in the slowly deepening relationship, and Lydia's uncharacteristic willingness to re-type the manuscript (151-152) is indicative of a growing understanding of Rosamund as well as increased willingness to deepen the friendship. Lydia remarks:

I'm sure I can put it together again. And If I do have to rewrite a few bits, that'll be good for me, because things are always better the second time, I'm just too lazy to do it, that's all. It'll probably be good for me, going through it again (152).

It is obvious that Lydia is much more dismayed than she wants to let on and we are reminded, through the lack of closure, of the open-endedness of the process and of the potentiality inherent in the relation to blossom into a genuine friendship. Rosamund makes a half-hearted attempt to put an end to their living-arrangements following this episode but the two, partly out of politeness and partly through genuine other-concern, renew their arrangement. That Rosamund is more willing to let people into her life is also evidenced by a later encounter with her neighbours (160-161) but she remains unable, or perhaps chooses not, to let George into her life when the opportunity arises given a chance encounter at an all-hours pharmacy, since she realises that her bond with Octavia would forever eclipse anything that she and George might have together. With that the novel ends, in characteristic Drabble fashion, without ultimate closure but with a sense of possibility.

6.8 Self-deception

Drabble offers frequent examples of wrongful turns and immature blunders and Rosamund is, at least at times, aware of her tendency towards self-deception; ‘I only just caught myself out in time’ (33) she observes when pretending to herself that she needs to go shopping near Broadcasting House (George’s workplace) and, on occasion, corrects herself when distorting elements of the narrative. At times—*e.g.*, ‘the name of the boy, if I remember rightly, was Hamish. I do remember rightly. I really must try not to be deprecating.’ (5)—this is done in such a manner that the link to magnanimity is evident.

Magnanimity (the traditional Latinized form of *megalopsuchia*), or (appropriate) ‘pride’¹⁶²—as opposed to both undue, or excessive pride (*hyperephanos*) and diffidence (*mikropsuchia*)¹⁶³—is, according to Aristotle (Arist. *NE*1123^a35-1125^a35), a virtue concerned with ‘honour’ (*timē*) in its various aspects, *i.e.* (i) how and for what an agent esteems herself; (ii) what she expect others to honor her for; (iii) which other agents she honours in what way and for what; and (iv) which other people she wants to honour her. Let us distinguish between ‘honour’ and ‘honours’ where the former concerns (i) and (iii) above whereas the latter concerns (ii) and (iv).¹⁶⁴ So understood honour differs little from how the other virtues connect to what is right (*dein*), noble (*kalon*), and honourable whereas honours—to be the kind the virtuous person cares about—must be those that are well deserved as well as of the proper kind and amount given by the right people in the right way and so on (See Arist. *NE*1124^a6-20). Thus, pride, while not as structurally central a concept as happiness or virtue, because of its interconnectedness ‘can reveal important insight into the overall shape of Aristotelian ethics, including the place of external goods and the significance of luck in the virtuous life’ (Crisp: 2006: 158).

¹⁶² Alternative translations include ‘great-souledness’, ‘proper pride’, and ‘self-respect’. See *e.g.* Ross 1923: 208.

¹⁶³ While appropriate pride, or greatness of soul, can be thought to sit awkwardly with the doctrine of the mean (see *e.g.* Hardie 1978: 65; Curzer 1990: 527-528; Horner 1998) since greatness is in itself an extreme it is also the case that since it does seem to operate with less variables (*i.e.* intensity, temporality, directedness, *etc.*, see Arist. *NE*1106^b28-33) than some other virtues it could be argued to fit even into an excessively strong (see *e.g.*, Hursthouse 1980) understanding of the doctrine of the mean as implying that for every virtue there exist two and only two corresponding vices.

¹⁶⁴ In doing so I follow *e.g.* Tolland (2013).

Pride is one of the most controversial of the Aristotelian virtues, often thought to stand in conflict with the Christian virtue of humility¹⁶⁵, constituting an artefact of a by-gone aristocratic age (MacIntyre 1998: 78-80)¹⁶⁶, and, as W. D. Ross (1923: 208) would have it, betraying ‘somewhat nakedly the self-absorption which is the bad side of Aristotle’s ethics’.¹⁶⁷ If the distinction between honour and honours is tenable it would seem that while pride in the sense of honour is perhaps not unproblematic, it is the emphasis on honours that is the most puzzling; why should the virtuous agent be so concerned with how she is perceived by others? If we assume that the concept/conception distinction is applicable to the notion of our *telos* as it is conceived in the Aristotelian ethical tradition one candidate answer is that the role of honours is epistemic. By taking heed of the way she is perceived by others the virtuous agent can make sure (provided that the honours received come from people that are to some significant degree dependable) that her conception of the good life, and thereby her understanding of the virtues, does not go off track. This input is obviously more valuable to the less than fully virtuous than it is to those close to or even embodying the ideal, and since Aristotle tends to frame his discussion in terms of the exemplar this might go some way towards explaining why this epistemic aspect is not dwelt on in the ethical works.

This reading also has the benefit of providing a neat explanation of an apparent contradiction. The phrase ‘the greatest external good’ occurs twice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, once applied to friendship (Arist. *NE*1169^b9-10), and once to honour (Arist. *NE*1123^b17-21), thus giving two goods priority in the ordering, which, on this reading, is to be expected since the two goods (at least in part) fulfil the same function of providing, in the positive case, assurance that our search for the good life is on the right track, and in the negative instance, providing information that can serve as the basis for correction.

In the case of the fully virtuous this input is obviously less valuable, but given a qualified pluralism concerning *eudaimonia*—*i.e.* the thesis that a range of different lives can constitute human fulfilment and that different conceptions of

¹⁶⁵ See *e.g.*, Mill (1859: Ch. 3), but see also Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2-2 q129 a3 ad 4.

¹⁶⁶ The virtue is well-attested as widely recognized in Aristotle’s time, although *megalopsuchia* and *megaloprepeia* (magnificence, see Arist. *NE*1122^a19-1123^a35) were usually treated as synonymous and seen as closely related to generosity (see Crisp 2006: 161; Dover 1974:178) and this is how *megalopsuchia* is treated in Arist. *Rhet.*1366^b17.

¹⁶⁷ Ross does, I think, have a point when it comes to biography as the relevant passages in *NE* and *EE* can be seen as betraying Aristotle’s self-absorbed character. Ross is however, as I shall argue in what follows, wrong with regards to the implications for ethical theory since he misunderstands the epistemic value of pride because of his own intuitionist persuasions.

this central concept are allowed (see Hursthouse 1991: 228n4)—such input could still have a valuable role to play in allowing the virtuous person to navigate the limits of this pluralism.

Rosamund, with her emphasis on self-sufficiency, seems at times a parody of Aristotelian virtue. Upon finding Lydia's manuscript the protagonist is initially angered but this subsides when she realises that the incident cements the reciprocal usefulness of the relationship between her and Lydia, and even makes her come out as the one least benefitted as this underscores her self-sufficiency:

In fact, lately I had even come to think of myself slightly in her debt, despite the disadvantageous rent situation: and here, at least, in those pages of typescript had been proof that I was still the donor, she still the recipient. More than ever now I had the upper hand; she had got her moneys worth out of me. Do not think I resented this: on the contrary, looking at our relationship in this light, I felt much happier, for I saw that we had maintained a basis of mutual profit (95).

This is clearly reminiscent of Aristotle's characterisation of the 'great-soled' (*megalopsuchos*) as people who 'seem to remember the good they do, but not what they receive, since the recipient is inferior to the giver, and the magnanimous person wishes to be superior. And they seem to find pleasure in hearing of the good they do, and none in hearing of what they receive' (Arist. *NE*1124^b14-17 (trans. Irwin)).

I believe that, rather than seeing this as parody, it is more fruitful to read Drabble's careful treatment of pride and friendship in *The Millstone* as providing us with a way of understanding both as having an epistemic value that at the same time highlights, from a first person perspective, the difficulties inherent in the formal demands placed upon our *telos* in the ancient tradition that makes it seem as if, in Tad Brennan's (2005: 117) words, 'all of the Hellenistic ethical theories are variations on a theme, with the element of variation provided by the specification of the end'. On this reading Drabble manages to give us a believable treatment of the tension between self-sufficiency and external goods that informs and elucidates ethical theory while providing valuable insight into the developmental process.

7. Practical Deliberation and Political Extremism in Sophocles' *Antigone*

In this chapter I seek to demonstrate how—based on interpretations of Martha C. Nussbaum (2001: Ch. 3) and Simon Goldhill (2012)—Sophocles's *Antigone* can be read as throwing light on the Murdochian exemplar, since the combination of Nussbaum's and Goldhill's readings creates an interpretative problem concerning the character Teiresias which is fruitfully solved by drawing on Murdoch's (1959a) understanding of tragedy.

7.1 Introduction

In what follows I argue that given that we accept a reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* proposed by Simon Goldhill (2012) according to which the main conflict of the play stands between political extremists (Antigone, Creon) on the one hand, and those willing to compromise (Haemon, Ismene, and in effect everyone else) on the other we can also, following Martha C. Nussbaum (2001: Ch. 3), adopt a similar and compatible reading of the deliberative aspect of the play.¹⁶⁸ Doing so invites the conclusion that a main theme of the *Antigone* is a questioning of the parallelism of state (*polis*) and mind (*psuche*) by examining the success-conditions for public and private debate and decision-making respectively. This manoeuvre creates an interpretative problem concerning the character Teiresias: what is it about him that enables him to break through to Creon in a way that leads the latter to a tragically late change of heart? I further suggest that Iris Murdoch's (1959a; 1959b) understanding of tragedy (which draws heavily on Simone Weil's

¹⁶⁸ On reading ancient drama through a political lens see *e.g.*, Hardwick & Harrison 2013; Goldhill 2012: Ch. 1.

understanding of love) as the awareness of free individuals in conflict might provide a kind of solution to this problem that might go beyond (and perhaps even defy) what we can reasonably assume to be Sophocles' intention and 'the tragic' as such.

Sophocles' *Antigone* has—to a large extent due to Hegel's influence on interpretative tradition (see *e.g.*, Steiner 1984¹⁶⁹) and critical vocabulary underlying contemporary critical readings (see *e.g.*, Goldhill 2012: 137ff.; Nussbaum 2001: 67-79)—taken the place as exemplar 'incomparable *par excellence*'¹⁷⁰ of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic'¹⁷¹. In the face of such prominence lack of consensus (to such an extent that even a cursory listing of the main contenders is beyond the scope of this chapter) even over what ultimately constitutes the driving conflict of the play is hardly surprising.¹⁷² Nor is such consensus, perhaps, ultimately desirable. It might be better 'to explore the fullest range of meanings that this text can yield to us now' (Griffith 1999: viii), while keeping in mind that this does not preclude us from attempting to retain historical self-consciousness, attentiveness to (reception) history¹⁷³, and the particular. Indeed, given the play's significance for (the history of) political and ethical thinking it seems that re-readings are called for as part of a conscious re-conceptualisation of tradition. What follows should, consequently, be treated as a suggestion.

Iris Murdoch argues that 'what makes tragic art so disturbing is that self contained form is combined with something, the individual being and destiny of

¹⁶⁹ On this work, in turn, see Barnes 1984. Steiner (1984) sees the end of the play's popularity as signalled by Freud's preference for Sophocles' *Oedipus*. A re-evaluation of Freud's stance has resulted in novel critical engagement with the *Antigone* amongst psychoanalyst and feminist theoreticians (*e.g.*, Irigaray 1985 [1974]; Lacan 1992 [1986]; Butler 2000; Honig 2011, 2013; Chanter & Kirkland 2014). Butler (2000: 1) in a way anticipates some of the dangers that we shall be concerned with in what follows when she asserts that *Antigone* is a fiction 'that does not easily allow itself to be made into an example one might follow without running the risk of slipping into irreality oneself'.

¹⁷⁰ Steiner 1984: 4-5 attributes the phrase to Richard Wagner.

¹⁷¹ The use of these labels—especially in the manner common in the nineteenth century—is highly problematic not only in tending to downplay the politics of Greek tragedy, either by undervaluing plays concerned with then-contemporary or local issues or by treating politics at its most abstract (Goldhill 2012: Ch. 6), but also by obscuring the particularities of the more narrowly ethical and deliberative issues that these texts are wrestling with (*cf.* Murdoch 1959a: 50/214: 'The shortcomings of Kant's aesthetics are the same as the shortcomings of his ethics. Kant is afraid of the particular, he is afraid of history. He shares this fear with Plato, and also in a different way with Tolstoy').

¹⁷² In speaking of a driving conflict, dialectic and opposition, I am in a broad sense adhering to Hegelian dogma even if I do understand the opposition in a different way than Hegel did.

¹⁷³ For a list of works concerned with the reception history of ancient drama see Goldhill 2012: 5n2.

human persons, which defies form' (Murdoch 1959a: 55/219). Murdoch's insight carries over especially well to the *Antigone* given that the characters that we meet there—perhaps with the exception of the guard with his unstructured but still relatable rant (see §7.3 below; Nussbaum 2001: 53-54)—are so abstract (although see Griffith 1999: 34). This abstraction means that (many of) the virtues commonly emphasized by those that seek to draw on literature for the purposes of moral philosophy are absent, and that consequently the moral importance of the play must be sought elsewhere.¹⁷⁴ Give this it is hardly surprising that Hegel's highly schematic interpretation has gained such prominence.

It will be useful for what follows to keep in mind the outlines of Hegel's influential reading of the play (in Hegel 2003a [1807]: VI.A.a) and the construal of the main conflict that comes with it. On Hegel's reading the play dramatizes the competing duties and commitments of family and state by pitting heroic individuals committed to conflicting (but not conflicted) deeply held senses of duty against each other. Antigone construes obligations—'unwritten and unerring laws of the god' (Hegel 2003a [1807]: 248; cf. *S. Ant.* 456-7)—as familial (e.g., *S. Ant.* 45) and emanating from the gods and our relation to our loved ones (*philoî*) whether alive or dead (*S. Ant.* 450ff., 905, 913-914). Creon construes them as emanating from the primacy of the civic good (*S. Ant.* 176-7, 293-4, 477-8, 649-51, 188ff) and as tied to the state (*polis*). Indeed, as Segal observes:

[F]or Creon *nomos* is secular and civic: above all, it demands obedience and discipline (see 175-191). He identifies the *nomoi* with his decrees and indeed with his own personal voice. The whole of his little speech on his political philosophy begins and ends with "I" (Segal: 1981: 169; cf. *S. Ant.* 184, 173, 178, 191).

As a result, Antigone insists—with 'true ethical sentiment [consisting in] holding fast and unshaken by what is right, and abstaining altogether from what would move or shake or derive it' (Hegel 2003a [1807]: 248) on the basis of blood and family ties, making her a heroine of ethical action—on burying her traitor brother Polynices. This runs contrary to the orders of her uncle and king Creon whom has forbidden this and instead insisted that Polynices not be sanctified by holy rites. He should according to Creon's decree (the terms of which are reported by Antigone at *S. Ant.* 28-30; see also Segal 1981: 157ff.) rather be left on the battlefield outside the city walls on the grounds that Polynices's rebellion in the preceding civil war is a crime against the state that reduces him to the status of a foreigner (on this see e.g., Segal 1981: 157-166; Nussbaum 2001: 55 esp. n14

¹⁷⁴ On this see in particular Hämäläinen 2016b but also e.g., Nussbaum 1990; Gaut 2007; Davies 2007: Chs. 7-9; and the contributions to Levinson 1998, and Hagberg 2016.

which supplies informative references). For Hegel this conflict represents the tragic journey of self-consciousness towards transcendence.¹⁷⁵

7.2 Goldhill on First Lines, Ismene, and Conflicts

Simon Goldhill draws attention to the play's very first line—'Of common kin, my very sister, dear Ismene' (S. *Ant.* 1 trans. Goldhill 2012: 235)—and how its 'concretely hyperbolic' (Steiner 1984: 209) tone brings attention to the conspicuous neglect of Ismene in contemporary scholarship following Hegel's lead in order to focus on the 'charged and normative relationship' (Goldhill 2012: 236) Antigone's initial call invokes.¹⁷⁶ In focusing on Ismene, Goldhill's approach resembles Rawlinson (2014) and Honig (2011, 2013). Honig—like Rouse (1911: 41) and Harry (1911) before her—argues that the first burial of Polynices¹⁷⁷ is actually completed by Ismene. For Honig this constitutes a subversive thwarting of Creon. On Honig's reading, Antigone later realizes this and takes on the

¹⁷⁵ After the events of *Oedipus Tyrannus*—which take place after Oedipus unwittingly murders his father and marries his mother, thus bringing a curse on the ruling dynasty of Thebes—heirs and brothers Polynices and Eteocles for some reason (various accounts are given in various sources) cannot agree to share the rule and an invading army made up partly by foreigners but led by Polynices attacks the city. In the ensuing civil war the brothers kill each other (for a broad outline of the story presupposed by S. see Griffith 1999: 4-6). Note the influence of A. *Th.* on the narrative. See e.g., Griffith 1999: 7-8; Else 1976: 35-40; Davidson 1983; Garner 1990: 80-81. As Nussbaum (2001: 63-64) points out the heterogeneity of the brotherly conflict is not recognised by either Creon or Antigone. See below §7.3.

¹⁷⁶ On the importance of first—e.g., S. *OT* 'My children'—and last words see Goldhill 2012: 138, Nussbaum 2001: 51-52; below §9.3. 'Common' (*koine*) can be taken to simply mean 'kin' but carries political connotations (in the sense of the common good (cf. S. *Ant.* 162)) and is especially troubling given the incestuous family history of the Theban dynasty. Ismene's description of her brothers' fratricidal act as *koinon moron* (shared doom) at S. *Ant.* 55-60 where she immediately connects this to the sisters' shared predicament further emphasises the theme of shared and paired destruction (cf. S. *Ant.* 145-146). Goldhill 2012: 240-242 provides an insightful discussion and ample references. 'My very sister' (*autadelphon*; 'own-sibling') suggests that mere 'sister' is not enough (Goldhill 2012: 235; cf. Nussbaum 2001: 63). The addition of 'common' (*koinon*) further emphasises. The periphrasis *Ismenes kara* (the head of Ismene) is normally a sign of affection or respect (see Nussbaum 2001: 63; Goldhill 2012: 236). Griffith (1999) merely notes the elevated tone whereas Jebb (1900) sees the periphrasis as implying 'respect, affection, or both' and argues that '[t]he pathetic emphasis of this first line gives the key-note of the drama. The origin which connects the sisters also isolates them. If Ismene is not with her, Antigone stands alone.' On this see Dunn 2006: 138 and cf. the remarks in Nussbaum 2001: 63. Jebb has 'My own sister Ismene, linked to myself.'

¹⁷⁷ On this classic interpretative problem see Burnett 2014; Honig 2011, 2013.

additional (the second burial is Antigone's doing) blame out of sisterly love.¹⁷⁸ Goldhill (2012: 247; cf. Hannaway 2014) ultimately rejects Honig's reading. Although I do believe Honig's suggestion that Antigone realises and responds to her sister's involvement in the events by attempting to save her sister to be, in many ways, contrary to Antigone's character and mode of address (cf. Goldhill 2012: 32-33; Nussbaum 2001: 63-67; §7.3 below). Still, I find the reading of Ismene as a subversive political actor rather compelling in that it is very useful as a means to inspire new interesting performances of the play. For all three authors the focus on Ismene 'hint at [...] an alternative to Hegel's dialectic' (Honig 2011: 63). The focusing on Ismene ('who can care, and fight and wonder, but without the all-embracing extremism of her sister' (Goldhill 2012: 54))—whose role as a companion and foil to Antigone (S. *Ant* 1-99) mirrors the relationship between Haemon and Creon (S. *Ant* 639-757)—makes it possible to highlight '[o]ne of the contrast in the *Antigone* [as one] between ideologues or extremists [...] and the characters that try to muddle along in a more complex and less extremely coloured world' (Goldhill 2012: 54).¹⁷⁹ This contrast is painted not by means of 'explicit political posturing' but rather through 'an encouragement to see oneself watching, and, through such self-reflection, to explore what responsible citizenship might involve' and how hard it is to avoid becoming a victim of rhetorical persuasion (Goldhill 2012: 54-55). This leaves us with a fruitful construal of a main conflict of the *Antigone* as one between political extremists (Antigone, Creon) on the one hand and those willing—in one way or another—to compromise (Haemon, Ismene, and in effect everyone else) on the other.

7.3 Nussbaum on Practical Worlds and Deliberation

As is usual in Sophoclean tragedy—cf. e.g., the themes of revenge and role-playing introduced by the Paidagogos in *Electra*, the messenger in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* rehearsing the dangers of language and knowledge, Hyllus in the *Trachiniae* who is forced to tell his mother she has killed his father thus delivering a message that

¹⁷⁸ The character of the two burials—the first one done at night and in secrecy, the second out in the open under a blazing sun accompanied with vengeful cries—thus corresponds to the 'characteristic style of each sister' Honig (2011: 44, 2013: 161), argues.

¹⁷⁹ This recasting of the conflict invites the question of why the drama carries the name it does. If Antigone is not the principal, then why does the play carry her name? I have no ready answer, but perhaps it is as Burnett (2014: 218) suggests: 'the tragedy has taken her name because of her Labdacid fate, because of her long farewell, and most of all because of the untamed youthfulness of her pious disobedience'.

leads to her own suicide (on this see *e.g.*, Goldhill 2012: 137-138; Griffith 1999: 17)—a messenger, in the case of the *Antigone* an unnamed guard, introduces main themes and thereby integrates, and is integrated into, the play's dramatic and thematic structure¹⁸⁰:

Guard: My king, I will not say that I arrive breathless because of speed, or from the action of a swift foot. [225] For often I brought myself to a stop because of my thoughts, and wheeled round in my path to return. My mind was telling me many things: "Fool, why do you go to where your arrival will mean your punishment?" "Idiot, are you dallying again? If Creon learns it from another, must you not suffer for it?" [230] So debating, I made my way unhurriedly, slow, and thus a short road was made long. At last, however, the view prevailed that I should come here—to you. Even if my report brings no good, still will I tell you, [235] since I come with a good grip on one hope, that I can suffer nothing except what is my fate (*S. Ant.* 223-236 trans. Jebb).

The message—'a vivid picture of ordinary practical deliberation' (Nussbaum 2001: 53)—is of course met with scorn by Creon (*S. Ant* 280-325), introducing both the theme of deliberation and illustrating the difficulty in handling political extremism, thus providing a synopsis of sorts of two thematic aspects of the play.

¹⁸¹

Like Goldhill (2012: 235, 58ff.), Nussbaum (2001: 54ff.) draws our attention to the prominence of deliberative language—*e.g.*, frequent allusions to 'reason' and 'wisdom' (*phronein*)—and the unusually frequent employment of inference indicators like *gar* ('for'; 'because') in constructing the *stichomythia* (the formal exchange of single lines between two characters on stage) between Haemon and Creon (*S. Ant* 631-765; see Goldhill 2012: Ch. 3; Griffith 1999: 16-17)).¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ There are four 'messenger speeches' in the *Antigone* (*S. Ant.* 249-77, 407-40, 998-1032, 1192-1243) only the last of which is delivered by a 'Messenger' but the other's—*i.e.* the two narratives of the guard (249-77, 407-40) and Teiresias description (998-1032)—are clearly examples of the sub-genre. See Griffith 1999: 17, nn. *ad locc.* The fact that the theme of citizenship and commonality is presented juxtaposed with the theme of practical deliberation and avoidance of conflict I think indicates that no stable demarcating line can be drawn between the personal and the political spheres in the world of the play.

¹⁸¹ How do Antigone and Creon manage to avoid 'the guard's painful turnings' and 'move so far away from the ordinary, to a point from which daily human cares seem to belong only to a base, comical figure, to a peasant, rather than a king?' Nussbaum (2001: 53, 54) asks.

¹⁸² See Nussbaum 2001: 51n6. See also *e.g.*, Goldhill 1986: 175-180; Whitlock-Blundell 1989: 136-148; Griffith 1999: 41-43; Foley 2001: 172-200. The play contains four climactic confrontations, one between Antigone and Ismene (*S. Ant* 1-99), one between Creon and Antigone (*S. Ant* 441-525), one between Creon and Haemon (*S. Ant* 631-765), and finally, one between Creon and

Instead of emphasising the public and political connotations of such exchanges as drawing language ‘into the public domain to be contested’ (Goldhill 2012: 57), Nussbaum’s focus is on the deliberative strategies exhibited by the characters.

On Nussbaum’s reading the *Antigone* ‘is a play about practical reason and the ways in which practical reason orders or sees the world’ by examining ‘two different [Antigone’s and Creon’s] attempts to close off the prospect of conflict and tension by simplifying the agent’s commitments’ and asks, ultimately, ‘whether practical wisdom is to be found in this sort of strategy or in an entirely different approach to the world’ (Nussbaum 2001: 51).¹⁸³ This reading thus explicitly ties together the opening scene’s practical crisis (S. *Ant* 1-99) with the chorus’ final assertion that practical wisdom (*to phronein*) is the most important constituent in the well-lived life (*eudaimonia*).¹⁸⁴

Single-minded concern and narrowing of vision as a strategy to avoid conflict as pursued by Creon and Antigone is then further analysed:

We have, then, two narrowly limited practical worlds, two strategies of avoidance and simplification. In one [*i.e.* Creon’s], a single human value [*i.e.* the civic good] has become *the* final end^{185, 186}; in the other [*i.e.* Antigone’s], a single set of duties [*i.e.* familial obligations] has eclipsed all others (Nussbaum 2001: 66).

Teiresias (S. *Ant* 988-1090). Griffith (1999: 16-17) disregards the first of these but it is unclear whether this is for stylistic reasons or the (unwitting) result of neglect of Ismene in contemporary scholarship. Goldhill (2012: 80) concludes that ‘[d]ialogue is often held up as an ideal for the political process and as a token of civilized life, and rightly so: but Sophocles’ tragic *stichomythia*, with painful irony, uncovers the potential naivety in such idealism. Line for line, Sophocles’ *stichomythia* stages the full range of the nastiness of what people do to each other with words’.

¹⁸³ Nussbaum (2001: 51n1, n10) explicitly ties this strategy to sophistic rationalism and supplies informative references. See also Segal 1981: 152: ‘This coral ode [*i.e.* S. *Ant* 332-375], the first stasimon of the play, draws on Sophistic speculation about the origin of human culture and invites us to consider the action of the play in this broad perspective of the achievement of civilization. [...] It seems therefore to support the position of Creon, who begins as the embodiment of the secular rationalism of the Sophistic Enlightenment. Nothing could be further from the truth. The subsequent action negates or qualifies nearly all the achievements which the ode celebrates’.

¹⁸⁴ Nussbaum 2001: 51-52. Jebb renders the final statement (S. *Ant* 1347ff.) as: ‘Wisdom is provided as the chief part of happiness, and our dealings with the gods must be in no way unholy. The great words of arrogant men have to make repayment with great blows, and in old age teach wisdom’.

¹⁸⁵ Creon’s conception of the final end is thus neither, to use Aristotelian vocabulary, complete (*teleios*; Arist. *NE*1097^a25-30) nor self-sufficient (*autarktes*; Arist. *NE*1097^a15-1098^b10, cf. e.g., Annas 1993: 34-42)

¹⁸⁶ Creon’s narrow and simplistic means of categorization (even applied to something as intricate as the family-connections the play is concerned with) make decisions easy. The following practical syllogism can easily be constructed from Creon’s remarks. Major premise: ‘Nor would I ever make

These strategies are reflected in the characters' language (see *e.g.*, Griffith 1999: 36-37, 38-40). Creon—whose strategy of avoiding conflict is to see all other values as functions of the civic good thus ensuing commensurability (see Nussbaum 2001: 58)—is fond of financial metaphors. This makes his practical world 'rationally calculable in terms of gain (*kerdos*)' (Segal 1981: 166), and he seeks to set things 'straight' (*orthos*: one of his favourite words, *e.g.*, *S. Ant* 163, 167, 190, 403, 494; *cf.* 636, 685, 706, 99; Nussbaum 2001: 58; Segal 1981: 179). Antigone—who recognizes a plurality of duties to family and loved ones that are not, in sharp contrast to Creon, created by agreement in the *polis* but rather the result of the conditions of one's birth (see Segal 1981: 155)—avoids conflict through a lexical ordering (*S. Ant* 891ff; Nussbaum 2001: 64-65) made possible by the construal of the 'family' (*philos*) as an abstract entity tied above all to ancestors in the realm of the dead (Segal 1981: Ch. 6; Griffith 1999: 41n124; Nussbaum 2001: 64-65; Goldhill 2012: 240-241).¹⁸⁷ As a clear sign of her isolation she avoids the first-person plural (*hêmeis*) to refer to herself and another person—she uses it only once, in majestic plural; when she walks towards her death (and does so in a manner that curiously, or more likely consciously, omits the still alive Ismene (see Goldhill 2012: 110-113; Nussbaum 2001: 63-65)).

This analysis provides the key, Nussbaum (2001: 66-67) argues, to understanding why—in spite of all their similarities—Antigone appears morally superior to Creon. Antigone's dishonour to civic values involved in awarding proper burial rites to an enemy is—in the world of the play (see Nussbaum 2001: 54-55, esp. n14 for further references)—far less radical than the violation of religion involved in Creon's act. Antigone thus shows a 'deeper understanding of the community and its values' (Nussbaum 2001: 55).¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, Antigone's actions, carried out in isolation, do not—unlike those of Creon—harm anyone

a man who is hostile to my country a friend to myself (*S. Ant* 187, trans Jebb), Minor premise: Polynices was hostile to my country. Conclusion: Therefore, Polynices is no friend of mine [and should not be given proper burial rites]. Antigone, on the other hand, never responds to the accusation that Polynices was a traitor and argues that the brothers' quarrel is superseded in death (*A. Ant* 508-525; see Griffith 1999: 41). Neither Antigone nor Creon thus, characteristically, acknowledge any legitimacy or even reasonableness on behalf of the other, whereas Ismene, again characteristically, shows some sympathy to both sides (*e.g.*, *S. Ant* 79, 98-99).

¹⁸⁷ Goldhill (2012: 241) writes: 'Antigone's sense of *philia* is as polarised as Creon's and as impossible: if you disagree with her you are hated, even if you are a sister. If you are a brother you are loved, even when you attack the state'.

¹⁸⁸ Nussbaum (2001: 66) further notes that '[t]he belief that not all values are utility-relative, that there are certain claims whose neglect will prove deeply destructive of communal attunement and individual character, is part of Antigone's position left untouched by the play's implicit criticism of her single-mindedness'.

else and she is capable and ‘ready to risk and to sacrifice her ends in a way that is not possible for Creon, given the singleness of his conception of value’ (Nussbaum 2001: 66-67). The same ranking can, for similar reasons, be constructed from a political perspective: Creon’s revisionary language¹⁸⁹, authoritarian stance (e.g., *S. Ant* 736: ‘Am I to rule this land by the will of another than myself?’, 738), and disregard for public opinion (e.g., *S. Ant* 734: ‘Shall Thebes prescribe to me how I must rule?’) make him a far more dangerous political extremist than Antigone, even though her single-minded rebelliousness is by no means unproblematic.¹⁹⁰ This ranking also finds support in Haemon’s and Ismene’s criticisms of Creon and Antigone respectively. These differences regarding political stances should be familiar from a contemporary perspective also, and in fact, the two points are intimately related in that it is the construction of narrowly limited practical worlds that makes this kind of political extremism possible.

7.4 Uniting the Two Readings

The central uniting feature of Goldhill’s and Nussbaum’s readings of the *Antigone* can thus be thought of as a recasting of the dynamics of conflict from the Hegelian orthodoxy of Creon (*polis*) versus Antigone (*oikos*) into a conflict between single-minded fanaticism (Antigone, Creon) on the one hand, and compromise (Haemon, Ismene, and in effect everyone else) on the other. When combined, Goldhill’s and Nussbaum’s readings give rise to a different understanding of the dynamics of our social embeddedness and personal reflective stance best illustrated by the authors’ diverging evaluations.

The central difference—resulting from, I take it, deliberative and political focus respectively—between Goldhill’s and Nussbaum’s readings of the *Antigone* is their differing evaluations of the possibility of compromise evidenced by their readings of Teiresias’s speeches (*S. Ant* 999-1032, 1064-1090) and the accompanying exchange between him and Creon which results in Creon’s change of heart and resolve to seek to set things straight (1109-1114). In the next section we shall therefore first explicate Nussbaum’s reading of this event before we turn, in § 8.6, to Goldhill’s reading, and then, in § 8.7, to a synthesis and some

¹⁸⁹ See Nussbaum 2001: 54-63; Griffith 1999: 36, 39-43; below § VI.

¹⁹⁰ Goldhill (2012: 53) also makes a point—in the context of Creon’s observation of Antigone’s lament as she leaves for her death—about the illustrative potential on stage: ‘What we watch when we watch Creon observing the *kommos* is the increasing isolation and stubbornness of the ideologue. His distance from the action gives us the distance to observe him’.

conclusions. After that, in § 8.8, we shall finally turn to Iris Murdoch for help in untangling at least some of the difficulties and predicaments we shall have landed ourselves in at that point.

7.5 Nussbaum on Creon's Change of Heart

For Nussbaum (2001: 79-82) the play does not end with a 'paralyzing vision' (Nussbaum 2001: 79).¹⁹¹ The fact that a child leads the blind Teiresias onstage (S. *Ant* 998-989) suggests community as giving rise to the possibility of action guided by Teiresias' art (*technê*).¹⁹² Teiresias' main concern, he tells us, is with the most precious of our possessions (S. *Ant* 1050)—*i.e.* good deliberation (*euboulia*)—and he counsels Creon to rid himself of unhealthy senselessness (S. *Ant* 1050-52).¹⁹³ This should be done without falling prey to the other extreme of grappling immobility by yielding (S. *Ant* 1029). Key here is renouncing stubbornness (S. *Ant* 1028) and embracing flexibility (S. *Ant* 1027) in a manner that recalls Haemon's earlier (S. *Ant* 639-757; esp. 705-719) advice to his father (Nussbaum 2001: 79). Both Teiresias and Haemon insist on the need to square the two demands of harmony and heterogeneity of the self with demands set on us by the world, thus going beyond Antigone's lexically ordered pluralism. None

¹⁹¹ Nussbaum's reading might be coloured by the times. Particularism as a philosophical doctrine was in 1986 in its infancy and the political dimension of Nussbaum's work was largely yet to come. Particularism is, broadly construed 'resistance to the idea that the content of morality must be statable in the form of universal principles (allowing instead, *e.g.*, that it might be captured in what would ideally be *seen* or thought of each individual case by a just person)' (Broackes 2012: 9). This idea is usually traced to Aristotle (on the basis of *e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1104^a7-8) but it, and the visual imagery often associated with it, can also be found in Plato (see *e.g.*, Pl. *Rep.* 520c; *Plt.* 294-296). This idea forms one of the themes of Nussbaum 2001 as a whole. In addition, this work predates her work (*e.g.*, Nussbaum 2009) on the Hellenistic schools. On these and other related issues see Nussbaum 2001: xii-xxxix.

¹⁹² The term obviously suggests the so-called 'skill-analogy', or 'skill-model' of virtue: the Socratic (Cooper 1982; Pl. *Gorg.* 463a-466a, esp. 464a; Dodds 1958: 226) assumption that attention to different skills or crafts can tell us something about the virtues (on this see *e.g.*, Sellars 2009; Annas, 1995, 2011, 2014; Stichter 2007). This point loses much of its force if one instead emphasises the alleged suprahuman character of these abilities and Teiresias' connection with the gods. This manoeuvre, in turn, can be blocked by considering the way talk of the gods often functions as short-hands for deontic constraints. On this see *e.g.*, Helm 2004, Gävertsson 2017. On this see also Murdoch 1970: 46-76/337-362, esp. 64-67/352-354.

¹⁹³ By invoking the health-metaphor, Teiresias turns Creon's talk of disease (*e.g.*, S. *Ant* 732) upon himself. Perhaps this goes some way towards accounting for his success (see §7.6).

of these strategies are easy to live by, as signalled by their proponents'—Creon at S. *Ant* 280, Antigone at S. *Ant* 875, and Haemon at S. *Ant* 766—anger, or temper (*orgai*) which transforms the previously deliberative language into insults.

The difficulty of heeding the demands of harmony and heterogeneity in life (and our life-plans) and squaring these with external demands constitutes a perennial theme in perfectionist ethical thought (and is a common theme in other more pluralist approaches).¹⁹⁴ For example, Bradley (1927: 74) asserts:

Both in theory and practice my end is to realize myself as a whole. But is that all? Is a *consistent* view all that we want in theory? Is an *harmonious* life all that we want in practice? Certainly not. A doctrine must not only hold together, but it must hold the facts together as well. We can not rest in it simply because it does not contradict itself. The theory must take in the facts, and an ultimate theory must take in all the facts. So again in practice. It is no human ideal to lead 'the life of an oyster' (Bradley 1927: 74, italics in original).

If Nussbaum (2001: 81) is right in reading Creon's remark that 'I am held by the fear that it is best to keep the established laws to life's very end [*ton bion telein*]' (S. *Ant* 1113-1114) as the proper conclusion to draw from Teiresias' lesson, then it would seem that Teiresias agrees with Bradley (1927: 160-213) in thinking that reliance on 'traditions of a community, built up and established over time, offer a good guide to what, in the world, ought to be recognized and yielded to' (Nussbaum 2001: 81), at least as a start (*cf.* Bradley 1927: 214-250).

7.6 Goldhill on Compromise

For Goldhill the futility of compromise takes centre stage. This is shown, he argues, by the progressively deteriorating exchange between Creon and Haemon—'where political self-definition is at stake' (Goldhill 2012: 58):

¹⁹⁴ *Cf. e.g.*, Green 1885: ii 330-331, § 24; Ross 1930: 19: 'But it is more important that our theory fit the facts than that it be simple, and the account we have given above corresponds (it seems to me) better than either of the simpler theories [*i.e.* a Kantian system of perfect obligations and utilitarianism respectively] with what we really think, viz. that normally promise-keeping, for example, should come before benevolence, but that when and only when the good to be produced by the benevolent act is very great and the promise comparatively trivial, the act of benevolence becomes our duty'. The emphasis on common sense to be found in Bradley, Green, and Ross ultimately goes back to Aristotle. On this see Ross 1939: 1-6; Irwin 2009: 581-582, § 85.

In a bare forty lines, Creon's commitment to the proper order of the state is stretched into wild self-assertion of personal authority, just as Haimon's principle of flexibility turns into a strident threat which will be instantiated in his suicide. Sophocles, as ever, brilliantly captures the twists of reason into extremism, and brings out in excoriating detail the emotion seething in articulate, self-confident political stances (Goldhill 2012: 58).

The *stichomythia* exchange between father and son (at *S. Ant* 726-757) is thus taken as an illustration of how difficult (and potentially disastrous) it can be to try to retain a compromising and open-minded position against the extreme (and extremist) onslaughts of the likes of Creon and Antigone without falling prey to emotional turmoil.¹⁹⁵ The deteriorating final lines—'[t]he syntax of these lines is fragmented, emphatic, with "furious pleonasm"' (Goldhill 2012: 62)—also emphasise the limitations of language as a way towards compromise. Creon 'has inherited, and uses, a number of different evaluative terms [...] among the most common labels that would be used by an agent in fifth-century Athenian culture to demarcate the world of practice' but he has 'shifted them around, wrenched them away from their ordinary use' and '[t]hrough this aggressively revisionary strategy, he secures singleness and the absence of tension' (Nussbaum 2001: 54). But this is not all. Creon also, by deviating from ordinary use, made himself near immune to outside interference and, simultaneously, also acquired a weapon to be wielded against those who try to generate such outside interference. By twisting and turning the words of the other, Creon can attempt to drag those who try to interfere into his own practical world by, little by little, transforming the rules of debate and the connotations and denotations it requires. As Creon twists and turns Haemon's words against him it becomes clear just how difficult it is to penetrate the rigidly solidified and simplified world that Creon inhabits.¹⁹⁶ The truly tragic element here is, of course, that it is when one is occupying this kind of world and 'have a superior feeling of knowledge about yourself that you are most vulnerable to self-deception and to self-destructive decisions' (Goldhill 2012: 27¹⁹⁷). What we get here is a clear statement of the limitations of the compromiser's communicative tools as means to penetrate another's practical world, especially one as simplistic as those of Creon and Antigone. When such a

¹⁹⁵ Ismene suffers in a way comparable to Haemon in the first dialogue scene at *S Ant* 1-99.

¹⁹⁶ Goldhill (2012: 59) writes: 'Haimon has used the word *erga* in a general way: judge me by "my actions". Creon is adding an edge to the term, as if "deed" means something of which one is especially proud, a "worthy task" [...] the king takes up Haimon's language, and, with an aggressive twist of re-definition, appropriates it to his own view of things'.

¹⁹⁷ Note that Goldhill is here discussing *S. OT* rather than *Ant*, but I take it that the point is transferable.

break-through finally occurs it does so with Teiresias' turning of Creon's words of sickness against himself (S *Ant* 1050-1052; cf. Haemon's attempt at S. *Ant* 755). I am inclined to think that perhaps this hints at a strategy for dealing with the likes of Creon: by invoking similar terminology as the extremist ideologues we might be able to poke holes in their carefully constructed practical world by creating tension within it. This strategy is obviously of limited usefulness and we must be careful not to be carried along too far so that we are dragged into such a world ourselves. The power of such language is limited. There must remain much that is impossible to say given such language and utilising it also implies meeting our opponents on their own turf, which invites considerable risk. The cost of this laborious enterprise is clearly shown by the fact that Creon's relenting abandonment of his narrow vision comes too late. Goldhill also takes the fact that Creon's reversal comes too late as significant. He writes:

This [*i.e.* S. *Ant* 593-600] is a climactic moment, not least because it is so rare for a Sophoclean hero to change his mind. It is, of course, thoroughly Sophoclean that he has learnt too late, and his hope to alter what he has set in motion will prove vain (Goldhill 2012: 21).¹⁹⁸

Creon's vow as he departs—'I will be there to set her free [*ekluó*], as I myself confined her. I am held by the fear that it is best to keep the established laws to life's very end [*ton bion telein*]' (S. *Ant* 1112-1114)—is also significant:

Luein ['set free'] in Greek, as with 'undoing' in English, can always imply either a 'solution', or an 'untying' or a 'downfall' – or all three. Sophoclean language works with this potential ambiguity to explore the fragile control humans have over their narratives (Goldhill 2012: 23).

7.7 A Synthesis and Some Conclusions

Thus, we have here two ways of evaluating Creon's change of heart. From a standpoint focusing on deliberation it is a welcome ray of hope as it shows that even someone as entrenched in their simplified and streamlined practical world as Creon can change and refine their outlook. From a political vantage-point this is a cold reminder that when such radical change comes for ideological extremists it

¹⁹⁸ See also Segal 1981: 152: 'Teiresias comes closest to this function [*i.e.* of leading society out of a deadlocked conflict of values], but his intervention comes too late to save Antigone'.

does so far too late, far too painfully, and usually after horrible consequences that the culprits could never, in their neatly organized minds, have imagined, or, through their distortedly narrowed vision, foreseen. This, of course, is not exactly news as it should appear familiar to us from political discourse and encounters with single-minded individuals. It is still useful, I think, to point out just how forceful an illustration of these regrettable facts the *Antigone* remains. The play brilliantly captures our reactions and the disturbance to our own life-projects when we are forced, in a self-reflecting manner, into the role of spectators and interpreters, and therefore, in a sense, co-creators of both ourselves and the drama.¹⁹⁹

Moreover, I think, as we are reminded by the fate of the compromisers, there is little that can be done to penetrate the rock-hard convictions of the ideologues and extremists from the outside. This insight is deepened and worsened if we, as I think we should, grant some plausibility to Honig's reading of Ismene as a player with her own agenda pursued through subversive strategies. In that case we also get a vivid illustration of how futile such strategies are when it comes to influencing either the course of events or the convictions of those adopting a simplifying strategy.

The reconfiguration we have arrived at by going against Hegel's understanding of the driving conflict of the play seems to carry with it a kind of audience participation—Goldhill's (2012: 54) 'encouragement to see oneself watching'—which given what we have arrived at, seems attractive. We must engage with the play both as social and political beings seeking to confront extremist ideologues and as individuals seeking to hone our deliberative capacities in order to reconfigure our own practical worlds and our life-plans.

7.8 Teiresias as A Murdochian Exemplar

The world-view of the *Antigone* is, obviously, tragic and the compromising attempts of Haemon, Ismene, the chorus, and Teiresias prove futile (and in the

¹⁹⁹ This, I take it, is Gadamer's (2004: 113ff.) idea of a 'double' *mimesis* as understood by Schweiker (1990: 84n25), *i.e.* as the idea that 'there is a performative transformation into figuration of both the being of the work and the being of the one understanding' which I take to mean that not only does (repeated re-)interpretation accrue more aspects to a subject-matter which in turn works towards its realization but also allows the interpreter to present and develop herself, which explains why the 'joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar' (Gadamer 2004: 113, emphasis in original). See also Murdoch 1978a.

first case fatal (S. *Ant* 1231ff.)) in the face of the un-nuanced and thereby determined onslaughts of Creon and Antigone, at least on the level of politics. It would be easy to draw the conclusion that this is where Sophocles leaves us: with an illustration of how single-mindedness and simplification makes for instrumentally successful political ideology on the one hand, and how swift and brutal simplified, stream-lined, and algorithmic decision-making can be, on the other. The fact that such strategies—at least in the world of the play—ultimately and inevitably crash and burn offers little solace. It is all and well, yes, even fitting, for a tragedian to end like that, but we, as spectators and interpreters, must ask ourselves whether there is a way forward that does not simply collapse into naïve belief in compromise as a road to salvation (*cf. e.g.*, the chorus' hopes at S. *Ant* 100-161, 1115-54). It is at this stage, or so I think, that the resolve and stability—in its way equally as steadfast but built on very different grounds than those of Antigone and Creon—exhibited by Teiresias (but tragically found lacking in Haemon) becomes significant.

What, then, are we to read as the grounds for Teiresias' tragically late success in penetrating Creon's narrow, stable, streamlined and protected practical world?

It is at this stage I think that Iris Murdoch's understanding of art and tragedy becomes helpful.²⁰⁰ It is suggested that Teiresias' success somehow has to do with age. It is not merely age counted in years—as Haemon's remarks (at *e.g.*, S. *Ant* 715-723, 729, 735; *cf.* the chorus' remark at S *Ant* 681) make clear—but rather the kind of wisdom that comes with loving recognition of the other as real (*cf.* Murdoch 1959a: 51; 1970: 46/337, 60-65/349-353) that amounts to a kind of flexible and open-ended stability. This makes it possible for Teiresias, I think, to see and respect the particularity of the other without being provoked in a way that makes a genuine encounter impossible.

Murdoch (1959a) develops her position through a critique and revision of Kant, Hegel, and Tolstoy. Murdoch rejects Tolstoy's (1904) approach on the grounds that she favours a kind of what is today known as an exemplar-theory utilizing 'great works of art which we know to be such independently' (Murdoch 1959a: 42/205) to Tolstoy's application of a definition of 'true art' to particular cases and because he leaves no room for art that is difficult (Murdoch 1959a: 48/211). She accepts his close connection between art and morality ('art and morals are, with certain provisos [...], one' (Murdoch 1959a: 51/215)) and

²⁰⁰ Murdoch is an important influence on Nussbaum although she does not refer explicitly to Murdoch's writings in general or to Murdoch (1959a) or (1959b) in particular while discussing the *Antigone* and has assured me (in private conversation) that Murdoch was not on her mind while engaging with the *Antigone* (although see Nussbaum 2001: xxiv-xxviii, 12n18, 16, 47n61, 214n33).

understanding of art proper as transmission of ‘the highest feelings’ as a ‘means of union among men’ (Murdoch 1959a: 48/211).²⁰¹ This leads Murdoch to Kant’s connection between the sublime and reverence (*achtung*) for the moral law in *The Critique of Judgment* (§59; see also §§ 26-27; cf. Murdoch 1959a: 49/212): they both involve an elation of consciousness in the demand to find our world a systematic whole coupled with distress or pain directed at our inability to comprehend (cf. Murdoch 1959a: 45/208). Kant, like Hegel, Murdoch thinks, is ultimately unable to ‘account for the greatness of tragedy’ (Murdoch 1959a: 47-48/211). Kant and Hegel are ultimately unable to handle tragedy because ‘Kant is afraid of the particular, he is afraid of history’ whereas ‘Hegel’s tragedy does not seem to be tragedy at all, since the spectators are not in the helpless position of the dramatic characters, but comfortably seated at the point of view of the totality’, and, she adds, ‘[w]hatever Aristotle meant by *catharsis* it was not this’ (Murdoch 1959a: 50/214, emphasis added). It is thus a prerequisite, Murdoch argues, of tragedy proper that it involves ‘[t]he exercise of overcoming one’s self, of the expulsion of fantasy and convention, which attends for instance the reading of *King Lear* is indeed exhilarating. It is also, if we perform it properly which we hardly ever do, painful’ (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216). This ‘combination of Kantian and Hegelian elements’ (Murdoch 1959a: 50/214) leads to what Murdoch (1959a: 51/215) sees as ‘the true view of the matter’: Love—understood as ‘the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real’—is the essence of both art and morals. Thus we all have

an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others. Tragic, because there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there any social totality within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled. We have only a segment of the circle. Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216).

It should be pointed out that while art thus, on Murdoch’s view, nurtures moral improvement, it does not follow from this that art is necessarily didactic or moralising since

[t]he level at which that love works which is art is deeper than the level at which we deliberate concerning improvement. And indeed it is of the nature of Love to

²⁰¹ As an alternative to ‘feelings’ Murdoch (1959a: 49/212-213) also accepts ‘perception’.

be something deeper than our conscious and more simply social morality, and to be sometimes destructive of it (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216).

Thus, on this view, '[t]he enemies of art and morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention [*e.g.*, I take it the Chorus and Antigone] and neurosis [*e.g.*, I take it, Haemon's and Creon's emotional outbursts]' (Murdoch 1959a: 52/216).²⁰²

So construed Teiresias becomes the embodiment of an ideal limit²⁰³ for our knowledge of individuals and (moral or practical) concepts. Our knowledge of such concepts is 'infinitely perfectible' (Murdoch 1970: 23/317)—but not thereby unattainable—in a way that drives reason to accept such perfection as an ideal limit. Thus Teiresias seems to fully realize what John McDowell calls our 'second nature'²⁰⁴ (McDowell 1995a: 170)—a kind of grounding of ethical considerations 'within the sphere of the practical' (McDowell 1995a: 150), what I have referred to above as a 'practical world', as 'a specific shaping of practical *logos*' that enable us to 'step back from any motivational impulse one finds oneself subject to, and question its rational credentials' (McDowell 1995a: 170)—that is in line with Murdoch's views on moral philosophy elsewhere:

Moral philosophy cannot avoid taking sides, and would-be neutral philosophers merely take sides surreptitiously. Moral philosophy is the examination of the most important of all human activities, and I think that two things are required of it. The examination should be realistic. Human nature, as opposed to the nature of other hypothetical spiritual beings, has certain discoverable attributes, and these should be suitably considered in any discussion of morality. Secondly, since an

²⁰² This is not to deny either that Creon relies on convention (albeit heavily transformed through his revisionist language) or that Antigone's resolute doggedness lacks neurotic elements. I wish to thank Thérèse Söderström for fruitful discussions on this point.

²⁰³ Cf. Murdoch 1970: 31/324, 42-49. Broackes (2012: 36n75) connects this idea to Kant's 'Ideas of reason' (KrV B366ff., B377 ff., B595-9; KpV Ak. 5: 32-33) but the same ideas are also to be found in *e.g.*, Bradley (1876: 63ff./64ff.) and Green (1883: §193). The connection to Kant is troublesome in that it suggests that this ideal might be unreachable, which I take it Murdoch would deny (*cf. e.g.*, Murdoch 1970: 78/363-364) on the grounds that '[w]hen Kant wanted to find something clean and pure outside the mess of the selfish empirical psyche he followed a sound instinct but [...] looked in the wrong place' (Murdoch 1970: 83/368). The connection to Kant is also troublesome in that it, at least today, suggests a deflationary, or projectivist, conception of moral metaphysics. I think that this is the reason why Murdoch stresses that 'facts' cannot be 'theorized away' (1970: 1/299) and that the metaphors of 'vision' (*cf.* Murdoch 1956a) and 'attention' (Murdoch 1970: 34/327) suggest themselves naturally.

²⁰⁴ McDowell is heavily influenced by Murdoch. The phrase seems to allude to those idealised elements of character expressed in Stoic and Aristotelian ethics via the notions of the 'sage' (*sophos*) and 'practically wise' (*phronimos*) respectively. On this see *e.g.*, McDowell 1979, 1980, 1995b.

ethical system cannot but commend an ideal, it should commend a worthy ideal. Ethics should not be merely an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct, it should be a hypothesis about good conduct and about how this can be achieved. How can we make ourselves better? Is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer (Murdoch 1970: 78/363-364).

Murdoch's demands upon ethical theory—that it be realistic in the sense of taking into account our particular human predicament and that it should put forth an ideal coupled with a recipe for its attainment—are obviously controversial but they help us to an understanding of Teiresias as an embodiment of something close to that ideal that possesses the stability to withstand the onslaughts of extremists ideologues such as Creon while managing to remain open and flexible enough to penetrate such narrow practical worlds unaffected and still retain a basis for a personal, authentic, and informed decision. The road to attaining this personal aspect of moral development as a moral prerogative and burden re-emerges in the ultimate realization that we are socially situated beings whose conception of what matters in terms of ends, commitments, and values and how to pursue them are somehow—although guided by the schematic aid that is to be gathered from moral theory and 'traditions of a community, built up and established over time' (Nussbaum 2001: 81)—still ours and ours alone to flesh out.

In conclusion, then, it seems to me that what enables Teiresias to withstand Creon's onslaught and penetrate his narrow practical world are two things: love and language. That is, Teiresias is able to handle Creon due to his stability, granted by a practical world that is open in such a way that a proper recognition of the other is possible, and a linguistic strategy that seeks to create internal tension in a narrow practical world by invoking a shared or similar terminology.

8. The Cost of Conviction in John Williams's *Stoner*

I argue that given a plausible reading of John Williams's *Stoner* (2012 [1965]) the novel throws light on the demands and costs of pursuing a strategy for self-realisation along Platonic lines which seeks unification through the adoption of a single exclusive end in a manner that emulates the Socratic maieutic teacher. The novel does not explicitly argue either for or against such a strategy but rather vividly depicts its difficulties, appeal, and limitations, thus leaving the ultimate evaluation up to the reader.

8.1 Introduction

The philosophical insight to be gathered from literature²⁰⁵ is often thought of as somewhat opaque, or at least unsystematic, in character since it is usually suggested that the primary virtue of fiction lies in its attention to the particular (on this see Hämäläinen 2016a: 61ff., Ch. 3, Ch. 5, *cf.* Ch. 4; for examples see *e.g.*, Nussbaum 1990: 54-105, McGinn 1997: esp. 3, 171-178; Goldberg 1993; Winch 1972, 1987), its highlighting of the interplay between form and content

²⁰⁵ It is rather common (*cf. e.g.*, Green 2016: 281) to distinguish between fiction, which might or might not be of a sufficiently high calibre to count as literature (*e.g.*, Harlequin romances), on the one hand and literature that is of sufficiently high calibre but not fictional (*e.g.*, well-crafted biographies), on the other. In what follows I assume no such distinction as what I have to say does not heavily depend, or so I believe, on the literary merits (in the sense of deserving, whatever that means, to be called literature in the sense outlined above) of *Stoner*. While it seems clear that properties such as complex and compelling character-portrayals and insights into life's larger themes (*cf.* Kivy 1997: 120-139) make it easier to utilize a fictional work for the purposes of doing philosophy I do not believe that such properties are in any way necessary (since the philosophical use we might make of fiction and literature should not be delimited). For classifications of common ways of utilizing fiction and literature for the purposes of moral philosophy see *e.g.*, Cray 2013; Hämäläinen 2016a; Hagberg 2016: 1-11.

(e.g., Nussbaum 1990: 3-53), or in its ability to go beyond conventional philosophical prose and argumentative techniques (cf. e.g., Moyal-Sharrock 2016; Hämäläinen 2016b; Diamond 1993; Wittgenstein 1922: 6.421; Winch 1972, 1987).²⁰⁶ Sometimes, however, it seems that literary works present us with easily identifiable philosophical arguments. I am thinking of e.g., how Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) naturally reads as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that pleasure hedonically construed is sufficient for happiness (on this see Green 2010; for additional examples see e.g., Green 2016: 291-294). A third way in which literary texts can provide insight in a way that is neither opaque nor strictly argumentative is by scrutinizing philosophical positions in a manner that elucidates or poses problems for the position(s) in question that 'may stimulate a philosophical perception which otherwise might have been missed' (Raphael 1983: 1).²⁰⁷ In what follows I argue that John William's *Stoner* (1965) can be read in a way that makes it come out as an example of the latter kind.²⁰⁸ In particular I argue that the novel investigates the costs, demands, and benefits of a particular strategy—most famously articulated in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. 10 but having an important antecedent in Plato's tripartite division of the soul (most notably in the *Timaeus*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*. Cf. esp. *Pl. Rep.* 434d–441c)—for unifying one's life that relies on making the single activity of

²⁰⁶ I shall, for the purposes of this paper simply assume that there is such insight to be gathered since, if my argument within these pages is in any way successful, at least part of the proof of the pudding seems to be in the eating. Nevertheless, two common and influential principled objections should be noted from the outset: some have thought that it is impossible to gather any insight into the workings of the actual world from events in a fictional one precisely in virtue of its fictionality (e.g., Lamarque & Olsen 1994; Lamarque 2008; on the latter see Harcourt 2010) or because our primary response to fictional events is not belief but rather 'make belief' (Walton 1990; cf. Matravers 2014) there is no non-adventitious insight to be had (cf. e.g., Stolnitz 1992). Thirdly, there seems to be an imminent danger of confirmation-bias associated with our felt want to believe in stories about people whose lives were changed for the better by great art. On these issues see e.g., Raphael 1983; Diffey 1995; Gaut 2007; Gibson 2008; Green 2010, 2016. Raphael's example is Mary Midgley's (1984: Ch. 6) masterful use of a double, or shadow, in R. L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, O. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, J. Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and A. von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* to argue that philosophical discussions of personal identity has neglected self-deception stemming from the belief that we can rashly cast aside wickedness as an aspect of personality.

²⁰⁷ These functions are naturally not exclusive; rather, they can, and often have been combined to great effect.

²⁰⁸ Henceforth page references to *Stoner* are given parenthetically in the text. Note that while the above commits me to a form of literary cognitivism—roughly the claim that some works of literature are potential sources of insight or knowledge in a way that crucially depends upon them being fictional—I am not committed to the (much) stronger thesis that such knowledge or insight cannot be attained by any other means. Cf. e.g., Green 2016: 286; Kivy 1997: 120-139.

contemplation paramount.²⁰⁹ In accounting for the Platonic elements that permeate the novel I rely on the interpretation of central Platonic myths provided by Iris Murdoch (1970) since this interpretation appears to lie particularly close to Williams' portrayal.²¹⁰

Before we proceed to expand on these issues in what follows it is, I think, appropriate to say something about the novel, its problematic aspects, and its somewhat peculiar reception history.

8.2 The Novel

Stoner was published in 1965, retained a modest cult following (Mewshaw 2015; Doherty 2015), and unexpectedly became an international best seller in 2013 following its reissue by New York Books Classics in 2006 (on this see *e.g.*, Habash 2013: 6; Doherty 2015; Maughan 2014). Its unexpected success ushered in interest for so-called 'Lazarus literature': reissues of neglected or out-of-print texts (Maughan 2014: 16).

As Livatino (2010: 420) points out, the novel is remarkable in its scope (telling a life story from birth to death) despite its relatively short length (less than 300 pages), in that Williams tells rather than shows much of the story (thus running counter to one of the dictums of modernism), in its elegant yet un sentimental prose, and in its sympathetic portrayal even of minor characters.²¹¹

The plot of *Stoner* is deceptively straightforward, seemingly simple, and easy to summarise: William Stoner, who has grown up at the turn of the twentieth century on a hardscrabble Missouri farm, is, by age nineteen, sent by his father to the University of Missouri to study for a bachelor's degree in agricultural science.

²⁰⁹ The soul's tripartite structure is also, I take it, discussed in the *Laws* and hinted at (or anticipated) in the descriptions of the different virtues in the *Gorgias* (*cf.* Pl. *Gorg.* 493b1-3, 505b). *Cf.* Arist. *de An.* 432^b6.

²¹⁰ As Murdoch's main Platonic works started to appear (with the latter contributions to Murdoch 1970 in 1967 and 1969 respectively) in the late 1960's, we are dealing with mere correlation, not influence, since Williams reportedly worked on *Stoner*, which saw publication in 1965, for five to seven years (see Livatino 2010: 420). It should however be noted that some notably relevant works by Murdoch's hand (*e.g.*, Murdoch 1959) appeared while Williams was working on the novel.

²¹¹ Through exhibiting these features *Stoner* manages to avoid the shortcomings that Murdoch (1961: 18) sees with the 20th-century novel being 'either a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition and not containing "characters" in the 19th-century sense, or else it is a large shapeless quasi-documentary object'. In so doing Williams can perhaps be said to approach the ideal sketched in Murdoch 1959b and 1961. On this see Nicol 2004: Ch. 1.

Stoner approaches his coursework in a manner that closely resembles his toiling at the farm until a mandatory semester survey of English literature. Following this course Stoner changes his major, earns his doctorate in 1918, and accepts an instructorship at the university. During his many years of teaching he suffers a range of setbacks divided between his personal and professional life: 'a loveless marriage, a ruthless professional rival, a thwarted love affair, and, finally, a cancerous tumor that kills him' (Doherty 2015: 69).

Williams portrays the university as a retreat from the world in order to focus on teaching as a vocation (see *e.g.*, Livatino 2010). This makes *Stoner* exhibit features associated with the 'campus' or 'academic' novel. Its timeframe (1910-1956) and setting at the University of Missouri make the novel touch upon the post-war expansion of higher education by scrutinizing academic seclusion and abstraction and can be seen as part of a larger movement of the period that 'brought the academic novel out of its cloister' (Williams 2012: 564).²¹² Still it would be a mistake to classify *Stoner* as simply a 'campus' or 'academic' novel in the narrow sense as this invites a reading along the lines of *e.g.*, Reicher & Haslam (2013: 620; *cf. e.g.*, Doherty 2015) of the central character, and the way he sticks to his values rather than adapting to the world even when this results in worldly failure, as a (simple) manifestation of how universities should be.²¹³ To be sure, these elements are to be found within the work and they are important. But to fully appreciate these elements we must recognize that Williams, through his portrayal of the university in general and Stoner's personal connections with it and others associated with it, adheres to a platonic image of the soul and an idea of life-fulfilment attached to it.

²¹² *Stoner* contains elements of both basic plots of academic novels identified by Connor 1995: 71: 'the one concerns the disruption of a closed world, and the gradual return of order and regularity to it, while the other concerns the passage through this closed world of a character who must in the end be allowed to escape its gravitational pull'. See also Showalter 2005.

²¹³ The demands of genre come with distinctive sets of norms and may force the narrative into patterns that might not mirror real life but, nevertheless, often mandate standards of veracity, especially concerning human psychology (*cf. e.g.*, Green 2010). Furthermore, genre features can be utilised to bring out and illuminate generalities that can serve as rules of thumb, informative patterns pertaining to human life and action, *etc.* (*cf. e.g.*, Hämäläinen 2016a; Eldridge 1989).

8.3 Stoner's Life as a Whole

The opening paragraph of *Stoner* presents a summary of the book's plot, constitutes an obituary of sorts of its protagonist William Stoner, and makes it, I think, abundantly clear that we, as readers and interpreters, are meant to evaluate this life (*cf. e.g.*, Doherty 2015: 69; Livatino 2010: 421-422):

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: 'Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues'.

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers (1).

This suggests an interpretative strategy in line with ancient moral philosophy's stressing of the importance of the whole life for an accurate appraisal of an individual's fate (*cf. e.g.*, Arist. *NE*1100^a10-1100^b22; Hdt. 1.30-32). Diana Martin argues that Stoner's evocative moment—a direct inquiry in front of his classmates from his teacher and later mentor Archer Sloane concerning the meaning of Shakespeare's seventy-third sonnet, 'That Time of Year Thou Mayest in Me Behold', which leaves Stoner in a baffled focused daze—hints at the key to the 'excitement that sweeps us forward', namely 'the gathering certainty, conveyed by the clarity and conviction of the writing, that there is some pattern to be revealed, some meaning to the story that we can only dimly perceive' (Martin 2010: 1537).

Martin takes sonnet 73's main theme to be the 'heightened perception that the imminence of death can give' (Martin 2010: 1538) and connects this to Stoner's attempt at an evaluation of his own life on his deathbed towards the very end of the novel (284-288):

When we come to the last section of the novel, which describes Stoner's terminal illness, we seem to rise with him to just such a higher plane of perception. Through his eyes, we see every nuance of color and shadow in the room where he lies, and with him, in this new, clear light, we begin to understand the inner trajectory of his outwardly unsuccessful life. The intensity and flow of the writing at the end of the book breaks on the reader with the same sense of profound insight that Shakespeare's sonnet brought to Stoner 40 years before. In this transcendent light, we finally recognize what we have been witnessing all along: a life of passion and integrity (Martin 2010: 1538).

This compelling analysis highlights two important Platonic (*e.g.*, *Pl. Rep.* 520c; *Plt.* 294-296; *cf. e.g.*, *Arist. NE*1104^a7-8; Broackes 2012: 9n24) metaphors: those of light and perception that we shall return to in what follows.²¹⁴ The sonnet's final two lines, repeated for emphasis by Archer Sloane (11), highlight the perceptual element and introduce the further theme of love:

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

What this suggests, I take it, is that we, as readers, are to evaluate William Stoner's life in its totality with special adherence to the role played by love—mentioned twice in the final lines of Sonnet 73—and the way it colours his perception. Focusing on the totality of Stoner's life means that we must also evaluate the benefits, costs, and limitations of the strategy for self-realisation adopted by the protagonist.

8.4 The Platonic Image of the Soul

During a weekly gathering at a saloon in central Columbia, David Masters, one of Stoner's two only friends—all of whom are doctoral students at the English department teaching as a means to fund their studies—gives a heated analysis of the three friends and their respective views of 'the true nature of the University' (28):

Stoner, here, I imagine, sees it as a great repository, like a library or a warehouse, where men come of their free will and select that which will complete them, where

²¹⁴ On metaphors in this context see Murdoch 1970: 77/363, 93-94/377-378.

we all work together like little bees in a common hive. The True, the Good, the Beautiful.²¹⁵ They're just around the corner, in the next corridor; they're in the next book, the one you haven't read, or in the next stack, the one you haven't got to (28).

Masters goes on to describe the third member of the circle of friends, Gordon Finch's instrumental view of the institution:

To you, the institution is an instrument of good—to the world at large, of course, and just incidentally to yourself. You see it as a kind of spiritual sulphur-and-molasses that you administer every fall to get the little bastards through another winter; and you're the kindly old doctor who benignly pats their heads and pockets their fees (28-29).

Finally, Masters gives his own cynic view of the matter²¹⁶:

It is an asylum or—what do they call them now?—a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent. Look at the three of us—we are the University. The stranger would not know that we have so much in common, but *we* know, don't we? *We* know well. [...] It's for us that the University exists, for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear. *We* give out the reasons, and we let a few of the ordinary ones in, those that would do in the world; but that's just protective coloration. [...] [*W*]e have our pretenses in order to survive. And we shall survive—because we have to (29-31).

Masters alludes to Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act 3, Scene 4) in order to portray the three friends as in desperate need of protection both from inner and outer turmoil ('we're all poor Toms, and we're a-cold' (30)), and the discussion haunts the remainder of the novel (*e.g.*, 172, 214, 254, 273, 283; *cf.* Livatino 2010: 418).²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Note how, with these notions, all the main components of the higher tier of Platonic metaphysics are introduced.

²¹⁶ Masters' ironic malevolence (30) mirrors the portrayal of the proponents of the three kinds of lives from *Pl. Rep.* 581c-e; esp. 581d. On this see below. Note also how Stoner's fate can be read as gentle mockery of the conclusion of Plato's argument: that the philosopher wins by his use of arguments and since he has, by necessity, tasted the pleasures of the competing modes of life since childhood (*Pl. Rep.* 582b-e). Alternatively, the final pages of *Stoner* can be read as corroboration of Plato's point as Stoner considers and rejects, in turn, the pleasures of youth and fame only to conclude that '[i]t hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; and the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial' (288).

²¹⁷ It is, in the light of what is to come, interesting to note that Iris Murdoch (1959a: 52/216) also references *King Lear* when discussing the nature of tragedy. *Cf.* Murdoch 1961: 20/295.

[F]or years afterward, at odd moments, Stoner remembered what Masters had said; and though it brought him no vision of the University to which he had committed himself, it did reveal to him something about his relationship to the two men, and it gave him a glimpse of the corrosive and unspoiled bitterness of youth (31).

While an important theme of the novel is undeniably the nature of the university, the roles it fills for people affiliated with it, and its place in the larger world, it would be a mistake to think that the main issue with Stoner's personal story simply is his relation to that particular larger entity.²¹⁸ We must also, I think, recognize how the three men bear clear resemblance to the component parts of Plato's tripartite division of the psyche.²¹⁹ Stoner, with his concern for the Good shows clear affinity with the rational (*nous*) part of the soul whereas arrogantly (27) jovial Dave Masters with his lust for honour and recognition represents the spirited (*thumoeides*) part and the overweight (27) Gordon Finch, with his colourful shirts (260), represents the appetitive (*epithumêtikon*) part.²²⁰ If the three friends are indeed to be read as governed by Plato's intra-psychic parallels to the

²¹⁸ The university, apart from being a protective institution, also takes on the form of a symbol of a way of life, e.g., 'Sometimes he stood in the center of the quad, looking at the five huge columns in front of Jesse Hall that thrust upward into the night out of the cool grass; he had learned that these columns were the remains of the original main building of the University, destroyed many years ago by fire. Grayish silver in the moonlight, bare and pure, they seemed to him to represent the way of life he had embraced, as a temple represents a god (14). This passage, it seems, recalls Hegel's discussion of architecture (Hegel 2003b: 221) as well as Heidegger's (1977: 27-29) discussion of the role of the ancient temple.

²¹⁹ For an opinionated introduction to the issue see Singpurwalla 2010. Plato introduces this picture of the soul in the interest of accounting for the familiar phenomenon of psychological conflict. While the details of the argument is subject to much debate its outline is comparatively simple: starting out from the assumption that a simple thing cannot exhibit the relevant opposites (Pl. *Rep.* 436b-c), Socrates claims that desiring something and rejecting it are opposites (437b-c) and presents three different sorts of cases where the soul both desires and has an aversion to one and the same thing. He concludes that the psyche contains (at least) three different elements. For recent detailed reconstructions see e.g., Price 1995; Bobonich 2002; Lorentz 2006; Stalley 2007. Cf. Irwin 2007: §§47-48; Singpurwalla 2010: 881-882. Taking the parts of the soul as agents (on the basis of e.g., Pl. *Rep.* 588c-590b) is problematic since it seems to invite an explanatory regress (on this see e.g., Irwin 2007: § 48; Singpurwalla 2010: 888-889), and makes it difficult to account for the unity of the person.

²²⁰ The rational part of the soul knows what is advantageous for the whole and for each of its parts (Pl. *Rep.* 442c), aims at truth, loves learning and wisdom, and can be called philosophical (Pl. *Rep.* 581c). While first introduced as the part of the soul with which we feel anger (Pl. *Rep.* 439e3-4), Socrates' most explicit characterizations of the spirited part occur at Pl. *Rep.* 439e-442d, 545b-550c, and 580d-592b. The appetitive part is described as multiform (Pl. *Rep.* 580d) and should not be reduced to the source of bodily pleasures as Socrates attributes a wide variety of desires to it. On this see e.g., Cooper 1984; Pettersson 2013.

three classes in the ideal state, then it would seem, provided that we should subscribe to Dave Masters' view of the three friends as constituting the university, that the isomorphic structure of city and soul carries over to the university too, making it, at least in theory, a form of ideal state (*polis*). This also helps explain why Dave Masters' death at Château-Thierry (on July 18, 1918) is especially keenly felt by Stoner throughout the novel, as Socrates repeatedly stresses that the spirited part of the soul is the natural ally of reason (e.g., *Pl. Rep.* 440b4-7, 440c1-7, 440c7-d5, 440d5-8, 440e3-6) as long as it is not corrupted by bad upbringing (*Pl. Rep.* 441a2-4).²²¹

In *Republic* 9 Socrates claims that each part is wholly directed towards a certain end and that when an individual is governed by a certain part of the soul he organizes his life²²² around the pursuit of this end (*Pl. Rep.* 580d-581c). This 'suggests that we should think of the parts of the soul as representing deeply embedded drives or values, which color our perception of the world, as well as direct our actions' (Singpurwalla 2010: 888).²²³ The picture we have arrived at might seem far removed from the way(s) people ordinarily tend to live their lives.²²⁴ I believe that the most fruitful reading to be along the following lines:

²²¹ In addition, courage, the characteristic virtue of the spirited part, is defined in terms of reason at *Pl. Rep.* 442b9-c3. If what I have argued here makes sense, it is possible to read *Stoner* as an investigation into what happens to the soul when the spirited part is lacking. While Plato's two-way division of rational and non-rational desires has seemed to many easy enough to accept, it might seem more difficult to understand what calls for a three-way division of the soul as the spirited part does not seem to yield a class of desires parallel to the rational and the non-rational. A reading of *Stoner* along the lines suggested here could provide some insight into this hotly debated topic. For some recent contributions to this debate see Irwin 2007: §§46-49; Moss 2008; Singpurwalla 2013.

²²² Aristotle (*Arist. NE* 1.5, 10.6-8 *Cf. EE* I 4-5, *Pol.* 7.1-2; *Pl. Phd* 68b-c) also relies on this trope that casts the problem of our final end in terms of three kinds, modes, forms, or ways of life (*bios*; on the term see e.g., Sellars 2003: 21-32; Reeve 2012: 239): the life of enjoyment (*apolaustikos*), the life of politics (*politikos*), and the life of contemplation (*theōrētikos*). On this see e.g., Joly 1956 (although see also Wilson Nightingale 2004: 17-24); Lawrence 1993: 33-34; Brown 2013; Lockwood 2014. It is unclear whether life (*bios*) in *Arist. NE* X 6-8 is supposed to be read (following e.g., Stewart 1982: II 443-445) as 'aspects' of which there can be many or (following e.g., Cooper 1975: 160) as an exclusive 'mode of life'.

²²³ It is unclear whether we should read Plato as claiming that the three lives exhaust our possibilities. Aristotle considers and dismisses what is for him a fourth candidate, a life devoted to moneymaking (which for Plato constitutes the most versatile version of the life of enjoyment), as a non-starter due to the instrumental nature of money (*Arist. NE* 1096^a5-10). *Stoner* seemingly takes a similar view, as indicated by the brief account of Stoner's father-in-law's suicide in conjunction with the 1929 stock market crash (111-112).

²²⁴ Aristotle, reiterating Anaxagoras claim, recognizes that the *Sophos* will appear 'absurd' (*atopos*, *Arist NE* 1179^a15) to most people (*cf. Pl. Symp.* 175a5, 221d). The *exempla* of virtuous agents to

while there is nothing in principle that excludes a life made up of many aspects, it holds for many ways of life that the strategies for attaining fulfilment that naturally go together with such modes to stand any chance of success, a more or less exclusive focus is needed. This means that any one of the three life-archetypes can take on a range of different guises when manifested in particular lives. It is certainly true that many of us are more comfortable with a balancing of multiple aspects (*e.g.*, social, familial, and civic) of life than with a singular focus on one sort of activity but this (as *e.g.*, Lockwood 2014: 366-367 remarks concerning a similar problem in Aristotle) does not in and of itself provide an argument against the latter strategy, as we might equally well argue that a 'view of life as comprising an unending balancing act is a bit chaotic (if not downright Sisyphean)' (Lockwood 2014: 366).²²⁵ At any rate, there are obvious such Platonic elements to Stoner's strategies and way of looking at the world and what is of importance in it, since his love of learning, the true, the good, and the beautiful, and disregard for money and reputation is clearly governed by reason (*cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 581b). In order to fully appreciate Stoner's personal narrative, we must evaluate his conviction to teaching and learning and the strategies he employs in dealing with this way of life. Stoner is, as Lear on the heath, plagued by both inner and outer turmoil but if, as Livatino (2010: 421) suggests, we are to read him as a hero then we must ask ourselves how he is capable of overcoming (if indeed he does) those obstacles. Doing so will highlight what I take to be important insights into the internal workings and costs of applying such a strategy.

be found in the first nine books of the *NE* are both social and emotive whereas the *exemplum* of the sage (*sophos*) to be found in Bk. X 7-8 by contrast is singularly preoccupied with his mind (*nous*—a part of the soul Aristotle describes as disconnected from emotions and as possible to exercise, provided one is wise, in perfect isolation from others (Arist. *NE*1178^a15-16, 1178^a19-20, 1177^a33-34)). The quasi-divine (see Long 2011) life described as the pinnacle of happiness in *NE* X 6-8 (*cf.* esp. 1177^a33-34) seems equally strange and some commentators (*e.g.*, Jaeger 1948; Nussbaum 2001: 276-377) have sought to excise Bk. X 6-8 on the grounds that it can be read as belonging to an earlier platonic phase of Aristotle's thinking.

²²⁵ For recent introductory treatments of the modern debate that originated with Hardie 1965 see *e.g.*, Lear 2009; Irwin 2012. The debate has often been framed in terms of what activities a well lived life includes or excludes with 'monistic' or 'dominant' end interpretations (such as *e.g.*, Hardie 1975; Kraut 1989; Heinaman 1988, 2007) holding that it includes only contemplative activities and 'inclusivist' end interpretations (such as *e.g.*, Ackrill 1980; Whiting 1986; Crisp 1994; Cooper 1999) allowing for non-contemplative activities. For compromise positions seeing non-contemplative activities as approximating a final end see *e.g.*, Charles 1999; Scott 1999; Lear 2004. For dissatisfaction with the state of the debate in general see *e.g.*, Bush 2008; Long 2011; Bostock 2000: 201. For an attempt to side-step the debate see Lockwood 2014.

8.5 Conviction, Love, and Planning

Some commentators (*e.g.*, Livatino 2010: 421) have remarked upon a feeling that grips the reader; a feeling that one would want Stoner to ‘get out’ and turn his back on his wife or the University in order to save himself.²²⁶ This feeling, it seems to me, results, at least partly, from the difficulties we have in comprehending the magnitude of the demands inherent to a life devoted to contemplation and teaching places upon us.

Initially we share this incomprehension with Stoner himself. At the beginning of his University career Stoner seems to lack any sort of plan (other than to attain a degree from the college of agriculture, which is forced upon him from the outside), let alone a clearly formulated one of the kind that the contemplative life seems to require. On top of this Stoner’s stoicism—inherited, it is suggested (*e.g.*, 2), from his parents and agrarian upbringing—leads him to endure life in a manner that might lead us to question whether he really constitutes an active agent. It might be thought that he stumbles upon the few opportunities he is awarded without anything resembling a clear plan:

‘But don’t you know, Mr Stoner?’ Sloane asked. ‘Don’t you understand about yourself yet? You are going to be a teacher.’

Suddenly Sloane seemed very distant, and the walls of the office receded. Stoner felt himself suspended in the wide air, and he heard his voice ask, ‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure,’ Sloane said softly.

‘How can you tell? How can you be sure?’

‘Its love, Mr Stoner,’ Sloane said cheerfully. ‘You are in love. It’s as simple as that.’ (19).

Stoner’s love carries with it definitiveness and a change of perception. At this point in the novel his practical deliberation goes from being unreflectively ordinary in the sense that it lacks a clear purpose to hinting at comprehension of the demands and costs that his new path will involve. It would be a mistake to take this initial lack of a clearly formulated plan to constitute the reason for Stoner’s ultimate

²²⁶ Upon the possibility of retiring at sixty-five, Gordon Finch remarks ‘[H]ell, Bill, life’s too short. Why don’t you get out too? Think of all the time—’ to which Stoner retorts: ‘I wouldn’t know what to do with it, [...] I never learned’ (261).

shortcomings. This would be to miss the significance of this meeting with Archer Sloane as an evocative moment in Stoner's life. Immediately after that meeting Stoner starts to recognize the costs of the choices he has made:

He thought of what he would have to tell his parents, and for the first time realized the finality of his decision, and almost wished that he could recall it. He felt his inadequacy to the goal he had so recklessly chosen and felt the attraction of the world he had abandoned. He grieved for his own loss and for that of his parents, and even in his grief felt himself drawing away from them (21).

A plan begins to take form, even though it is by no means fully articulated or understood by the protagonist.

He saw the future in the institution to which he had committed himself and which he so imperfectly understood; he conceived himself changing in that future, but he saw the future itself as the instrument of change rather than its object (24).

Little by little Stoner begins to recognize that a plan, or at least a commitment to a certain kind of life, is needed. This commitment comes with an estrangement from his parents (*cf.* 21-23), and, at times gripping, 'awareness of all that he did not know, of all that he had not read' that disrupts 'the serenity for which he laboured' (25), and a felt inability to convey his own excitement to his students (26).

8.6 External Goods, and Moral Vision

Some of William Stoner's shortcomings—at least early on in the novel—I think stands to be found in the process character of external goods necessary for life fulfilment. Many, if not all, of the things that stand out as plausible candidates for constituents of the good life, such as *e.g.*, friendship and knowledge, are processes that we engage in throughout our lives on a continual basis.²²⁷ They

²²⁷ The 'if not all' qualification is intended to side-step the intricacies of what has been called 'the passivities objection' (Lott 2016; Wolterstorff 2008: 176), *i.e.* the idea that the emphasis on agency and activity inherent to many perfectionist ethical approaches prevents them from accounting for important goods—such as *e.g.*, goods consisting in being treated in certain ways, that are neither activities nor necessary instruments for such activities (see Wolterstorff 2008: 176; Lott: 774). While Wolterstorff (2008), Crisp (2010), and Lott (2016) all frame their discussions in terms of *eudaimonism*—*i.e.* a kind of ethical theory, almost universally accepted in the ancient world (see *e.g.*, Annas 1993), that holds that the central aim of moral thought and practice is the attainment of *eudaimonia* (Eng. 'happiness'; 'flourishing')—I take it that that the objection carries

ought, so to speak, never to be far from one's mind and for them to fulfil the role they ought to play in a fulfilled life we must continually engage with them. This continual engagement seems hard to account for if these goods are not part of an overarching plan but rather just engaged with when the situation at hand speaks in favour of doing so. Many of the things that could have been valuable and fulfilling activities in Stoner's life fail to deliver, at least partly, because Stoner, at least initially, seems to view them as intermediate goals to be achieved (and simply kept on hold once they are), rather than as activities forming part of a life-plan. The problem is, arguably, worsened due to Stoner's exclusivist strategy in that such a strategy invites, and in its more extreme incarnations perhaps require, looking at intermediate ends as valuable only in so far as they are conducive to the overarching activity embraced.

The realisation that many goods necessary for life-fulfilment have such a process-character is, in line with the novel's preoccupation with love, most keenly felt in connection to Stoner's love affair with Katherine Driscoll, a gifted younger colleague²²⁸:

In his forty-third year William Stoner learned what others, much younger, had learned before him: that the person one loves at first is not the person one loves at last, and that love is not an end but a process through which one person attempts to know another (199).

This understanding of love closely resembles that which Iris Murdoch develops out of the writings of Simone Weil²²⁹:

over to many, if not all, versions of the wider class of 'classical' or 'narrow' (Hurka 1993: 3-5) perfectionist approaches—a family of ethical theories united in understanding the central, or fundamental (on this see Annas 1993: 7-10), ethical demand to be the attainment of the good, or intrinsically (most) desirable, life through the perfection of human nature—such as *e.g.*, the self-realisationism of Green (1883) and Bradley (1927) due to their comparable stressing of human perfection as an active state of being. It is important not to get distracted by the oddities—the right not to get your reputation ruined behind your back, and the right to a polite answer from a receptionist—that are Wolterstorff's (2008: 176-177) examples as the strangeness of these examples does not impede the structural point.

²²⁸ The sharp contrast between Stoner's marriage (with its impersonal initial courtship (55), purely bodily sexual arousal, and questionable release thereof on behalf of both parties (75-76; 86-87)) and his love affair (with its age-difference, reciprocity (198-200), seamless mingling of body and soul (202, 205), shared spiritual goals (204), progress towards insight (204), and painful aftermath (224-226)) correspond in minute detail to the stages outlined in the *Phaedrus*, see esp. Pl. *Phd.* 250d-252b. For an insightful and thorough treatment of this difficult passage in Plato see Nussbaum 1994b: 1570-1581. On this in relation to Murdoch see Nussbaum 2012.

²²⁹ Weil remains unnamed in Murdoch 1959a but see *e.g.*, Murdoch 1961; 1970: 34/329, 50ff.

Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love [...] is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realisation 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 things is the mind of man (Murdoch 1959a: 51-52).

Closely connected to this understanding of love as recognition of the other as real is another idea Murdoch gathers from Weil and elaborates upon, namely that morality is (largely) ‘a matter of attention not of will’ (Murdoch 1961: 20/295; 1956b; *cf.* Weil 1956: 205; Broackes 2012: 53; Holland 2012) and that ‘true vision occasions right conduct’ (Murdoch 1970: 66/353).²³⁰ This, combined with the idea that what we are able to see is dependent upon our conceptual scheme (*cf.* Murdoch 1970: 32) makes moral progress largely a matter of conception revision, a process of perfecting our grasp of concepts. This, it seems, is exactly what Stoner accomplishes with his understanding of love:

In his extreme youth Stoner had thought of love as an absolute state of being to which, if one were lucky, one might find access; in his maturity he had decided it was the heaven of a false religion, toward which one ought to gaze with an amused disbelief, a gently familiar contempt, and an embarrassed nostalgia. Now in his middle age he began to know that it was neither a state of grace nor an illusion; he saw it as a human act of becoming, a condition that was modified moment by moment and day by day, by the will and the intelligence and the heart (201).²³¹

This episode resembles Murdoch’s famous example (Murdoch 1970: 16-23/312-313) of a mother, M, who, without exhibiting any outward changes in behaviour changes her conception of her daughter-in-law, D, thus illustrating both the

²³⁰ The connection, as far as I understand it correctly, seems to be possible to spell out along the following lines: recognition of, and proper attention to, the other as real helps us, provided that we put in the effort (1970: 37/329), to hone our conceptions into a personal vision (1956a: 39-40, 1970: 22/316-317, 37/329) and through the application of these conceptions—which are ‘normative-descriptive’ (Murdoch 1970: 42/334)—to the world ‘an action will follow naturally’ (Murdoch 1970: 42/334) if our vision is correct. On this see below. The idea here, I take it, is, at least in part, that ‘by tightening the connection between cognition and choice, we make this connection in one way easier to defend: it need not go through the metaphysics of the will’ Setiya 2013: 7. *Cf.* McDowell 1978: 15-16, §2; 1979.

²³¹ Note how the stages of realisation outlined here correspond to the stages on the soul’s journey towards enlightenment outlined at Pl. *Rep.* 509d-511e. More on this below.

importance of the inner life and how moral progress can be a matter of changing our way of conceptualising the world and others that we meet in it.²³²

As Kieran Setiya (2013: 10) points out, it is tempting to understand such changes in light of Bernard Williams' (1985: 140) notion of 'thick moral concepts' such as '*coward, lie, brutality, gratitude, and so forth* [...] characteristically related to reasons for action' whose application is simultaneously 'action-guiding' and 'world-guided' (Williams 1985: 140-141, italics in original).²³³ However, as Setiya (2013: 11) points out, it is not, *pace e.g.*, Brookes (2012: 14-15), mere non-vicarious correct application of such concepts but the rarely approached perfection of 'true vision' that guarantees motivation on Murdoch's approach. Furthermore, Murdoch's Platonic approach is, in contrast with Williams' Nietzschean leanings, much less bound up in the degree of social convergence displayed by such concepts and she consequently allows for 'specialized personal *use* of a concept' (Murdoch 1970: 25/319, italics in original) that 'may be private or idiosyncratic' (Setiya 2013: 11).²³⁴

Our grasp of the relevant moral concepts is 'infinitely perfectible' (Murdoch 1970: 23/317) in a way that drives reason to accept such perfection as an ideal limit:

I want here to connect two ideas: the idea of the individual and the idea of perfection. Love is knowledge of the individual. M confronted with D has an endless task. Moral tasks are characteristically endless not only because 'within', as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing. To speak here of an inevitable imperfection, or of an ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes, may be taken as a reference to our 'fallen' human condition, but this need be given no

²³² The importance of seeing others is especially clear in Murdoch 1970: 64/353-354: 'The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing'.

²³³ On Williams' connection to Murdoch in this instance see Williams 1985:141n7; Brookes 2012: 15n37. The connection to reasons envisaged by Williams makes him focus on concepts with valence, a restriction not to be found in Murdoch. See Setiya 2013: 11. These concepts are world-guided in that there are necessary limits to divergence in their use as those who grasp the relevant concepts are bound to agree in their application (except at the margins (Williams 1985: 140-141)) and action guiding through their characteristic relation to reasons and because one cannot grasp them unless one shares, at least through imagination, their evaluative point (Williams 1985: 140-142). 'Thin' concepts do not share the same degree of world-guidedness due to their freer terms of application (although they are not, presumably, unbounded, on this see Foot 2002: xiv).

²³⁴ Furthermore, as is pointed out by McDowell (1978: 22, §6) the language used to express a special reason-constituting conception of a situation need not be explicitly evaluative.

special dogmatic sense. Since we are neither angels nor animals but human individuals, our dealings with each other have this aspect (Murdoch 1970: 28/321-322).²³⁵

This idea of infinite perfectibility, which should not be conflated with this ideal being unreachable, shields Murdoch (at least to some extent) from charges of passivity against the idea that the virtuous agent is ‘compelled almost automatically’ (Murdoch 1970: 37/329) to act. If this is the whole story, the argument goes, then the ideal deliberator is always simply reacting to (his conception of) the situation at hand rather than from a general plan for shaping his environment and this is hardly a depiction of life at its best (*cf.* Kraut 1993: 366n2).²³⁶ If we understand the idea that the agent—capable of choice, deliberation, calculation, and supplied with a ‘view about the reason why’ (*hypolēpsis tou dia ti*, EE1226^b21-30)—ought to live life under ‘a correct conception of doing well [*cf.* Arist. EE1214^b6-10; NE1095a18-20], as brought to bear on this situation, dictates acting with a view to [the] particular end’ (McDowell 1996: 25) then the endless activity of shaping the relevant conception takes on such a prominent role that a charge of passivity seems much less compelling.²³⁷ This is so even if the conception at work ‘is only implicit in the mind of the deliberator’ (McDowell 1996: 24).

Also, since the situational comprehension that occasions such almost automatic reactions is the object of continual conscious effort on behalf of the agent, we have even less cause for concern. The historical, personal, and continuous elements (all stressed by Murdoch, *cf. e.g.*, Murdoch 1956a: 43; 1961; 1970: 26/319-320) of this process are illustrated towards the end of *Stoner*:

²³⁵ *Cf.* Murdoch 1951: 31/39: ‘It is rather a necessary regulative idea, about which it makes no sense to ask, is it true or false that it is *so*? It is for us as if our thoughts were inner events, and it is as if these events were describable either as verbal units or in metaphorical, analogical terms. We constantly recover and fix our mental past by means of a descriptive technique, a sort of story-telling, whose justification is its success. We know too of ways in which to adjust and check, in ourselves and others, the accuracy of this technique. And if a philosophical precedent be needed for this important *as if*, we have only to look to Kant’s use of the regulative idea of freedom, which seems to me essentially similar and equally empirical.’ Broackes (2012: 36n75) connects this idea to Kant’s ‘Ideas of reason’ (KrV B366ff., B377 ff., B595-9; KpV Ak. 5: 32-33) but the same ideas are also to be found in *e.g.*, Bradley (1876: 63ff./64ff.) and Green (1883: §193).

²³⁶ Note that Kraut (1993) here is discussing Broadie’s (1991) interpretation of Aristotle.

²³⁷ Like Kraut and Broadie, McDowell is also discussing Aristotle but I take it that his point is readily applicable to our situation as well (especially in light of McDowell’s obvious debt to Murdoch. On this see Broakes 2012: esp. 7, 8-18).

Then he smiled fondly, as if at a memory; it occurred to him that he was nearly sixty years old and that he ought to be beyond the force of such passion, of such love.

But he was not beyond it, he knew, and would never be. Beneath the numbness, the indifference, the removal, it was there, intense and steady; it had always been there. In his youth he had given it freely, without thought; he had given it to the knowledge that had been revealed to him—how many years ago?—by Archer Sloane; he had given it to Edith, in those first blind foolish days of his courtship and marriage; and he had given it to Katherine, as if it had never been given before. He had, in odd ways, given it to every moment of his life, and had perhaps given it most fully when he was unaware of his giving. It was a passion neither of the mind nor of the flesh; rather, it was a force that comprehended them both, as if they were but the matter of love, its specific substance. To a woman or to a poem, it said simply: look! I am alive (259).

This episode bears a striking resemblance to Plato's Analogy of the Divided Line (Pl. *Rep.* 509d-511e) and the journey of the soul portrayed there and it is to this that we shall turn in the next section.

8.7 Love and Learning

In the midst of his efforts to come to terms with his choice to remain at the university, the United States enter the First World War, and Stoner 'discovered within himself a vast reserve of indifference' (33). Although he resents the disruption upon the University, he, unlike his friends, cannot muster any strong feelings of patriotism and ultimately, after yet another enlightening encounter with Archer Sloane whom recounts the devastating effects the American Civil War had on scholarly efforts, elects to stay at the university rather than to join the war-effort. Sloane urges him:

You must remember what you are and what you have chosen to become, and the significance of what you are doing. There are wars and defeats and victories of the human race that are not military and that are not recorded in the annals of history. Remember that while you are trying to decide what to do (36).

It is clear that Sloane speaks from personal experience as he is soon destroyed by the onset of the war (*cf.* 39-40) in a manner that foreshadows Stoner's later rapid ageing during the next Great War. Unlike Sloane, destroyed by the sense of waste

that the war brought, Stoner manages, at least for a while, to endure through belief in the strategy he has committed himself to:

He foresaw the years that stretched ahead, and knew that the worst was to come.

As Archer Sloane had done, he realized the futility and waste of committing one's self wholly to the irrational and dark forces that impelled the world toward its unknown end; as Archer Sloane had not done Stoner withdrew a little distance to pity and love, so that he was not caught in the rushing that he observed. And as in other moments of crisis and despair, he looked again to the cautious faith that was embodied in the institution of the University (228).

This strategy, although successful in the moment, does have a dividing effect upon Stoner and thus threaten to undermine itself from the inside in the long run just as the war, as it drags on, constitutes more and more of a threat to the protective institution that is the university:

The years of the war blurred together, and Stoner went through them as he might have gone through a driving and nearly unendurable storm²³⁸ [...]. Yet for all his stoical endurance and his stolid movement through the days and weeks, he was an intensely divided man. One part of him recoiled in instinctive horror at the daily waste, the inundation of destruction and death that inexorably assaulted the mind and heart; once again he saw the faculty depleted, he saw the classrooms emptied of their young men, he saw the haunted looks upon those who remained behind, and saw in those looks the slow death of the heart, the bitter attrition of feeling and care (254).

Archer Sloane's fate and Stoner's later misfortunes recall Aristotle's remarks concerning Priam:

For the truly good and wise person, we believe, bears all the fortunes of life with dignity and always does the noblest thing in the circumstances [...]. If this is so, the happy person could never become wretched, though he will not be blessed if he meets with luck like that of Priam. Nor indeed will he be unstable and changeable. He will not be shifted easily from happiness, and not by ordinary misfortunes, but by many and grave ones (Arist. *NE*1101^a1-14; cf. e.g., Hursthouse 1999: 74-75).

The level of self-sufficiency attained by the (near-)exclusivist strategy adopted by Sloane and Stoner is so high, especially when one is shielded by a protective

²³⁸ This imagery once again seems to allude to Lear's situation on the heath.

institution such as the university, that only extraordinary circumstances—here most forcefully depicted by the onset of war—can mar one’s life:

He saw good men go down into a slow decline of hopelessness, broken as their vision of a decent life was broken; he saw them walking aimlessly upon the streets, their eyes empty like shards of broken glass; he saw them walk up to back doors, with the bitter pride of men who go to their executions, and beg for the bread that would allow them to beg again; and he saw men, who had once walked erect in their own identities, look at him with envy and hatred for the poor security he enjoyed as a tenured employee of an institution that somehow could not fail (226-227).

Self-sufficiency (*autarkes*: Arist. *NE*1097^a15-1098^b10; cf. Annas 1993: 34-42) is a formal demand that together with completeness (*teleios*; Arist. *NE*1097^a25-30; cf. Bradley 1927: 74-78) is placed on our ultimate end, the well-lived life (*eu zên*), commonly accepted in the ancient ethical discussion.²³⁹ The level of self-sufficiency attained by Stoner, I think, accounts for the feeling that while he might be conceived as failing, he is perhaps never defeated. That failure need not equal defeat can be seen as constituting a main unifying theme of Williams’ otherwise seemingly disparate output as a novelist.

It is with his choice to remain at university that Stoner for the first-time experiences that the continual activity of building up and adjusting our practical world (cf. Murdoch 1970: 26/319-320) and sense of what matters by articulating a plan for our life can, at times, make moral choice a matter of simply seeing what is to be done²⁴⁰:

He had never got in the habit of introspection, and he found the task of searching for motives a difficult and slightly distasteful one; he felt that he had little to offer to himself and that there was little within him which he could find.

²³⁹ This end is also characterised as being desired by everyone for its own sake (See e.g., Pl. *Euthd.* 282^a1-2, *Sym.* 205^a7f; Arist. *NE*1097^a5-6; Green 1883: §253) and as forming the resting place of desire (See e.g., Pl. *Sym.* 205^a; Arist. *NE*1097^a15-24 Arius 76.21-4, 131.4; Sextus, *PH* I 25; Alex. *Aphr. de An.* II150.20-21, 162.34; Green 1883: §§ 171, 176).

²⁴⁰ Stressing this continuity moves us away from ‘choice’ as a central notion and the ‘choice situation’ as the assumed *locus* of moral philosophy. It also seems to problematize any clear demarcation of the sphere of moral philosophy (cf. Bradley 1876: v, 193ff./215ff.). This emphasis on continuity and the whole of an individual’s life, in turn, also questions the idea of morality as marked by “imperatives” and disagreeable duties’ (Bradley 1876: 194/215; cf. Annas 1993: 4-7).

When at last he came to his decision, it seemed to him that he had known all along what it would be (37).

Here, it seems to me, Stoner becomes aware that ‘our ability to act well “when the time comes” depend partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention’ (Murdoch 1970: 56/345), that moral development has much to do with the work we are required to do with honing our conceptions in between isolated situations of choice (*cf.* Murdoch 1970: 37/329), and ‘that reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity’ (Murdoch 1970: 57/346-347; *cf.* 1970: 70/357; *Pl. Rep.* 443d). This unity manifests itself through the increased understanding of the connections between concepts such as *e.g.*, love and knowledge (*cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 508d-509b; Murdoch 1970: 95/378).

‘Lust and learning,’ Katherine once said. ‘That’s really all there is, isn’t it?’

And it seemed to Stoner that that was exactly true, that that was one of the things he had learned (204).

This idea of unity (‘quite unlike the closed theoretical unity of the ideologies’ (Murdoch 1970: 94/377)), when combined with the theory of conception revision outlined above amounts to nothing short of an interpretation of Plato’s analogy of the divided line (*Pl. Rep.* 509d-511e, itself, presumably, an allegory of the soul *cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 508d, 592).²⁴¹ On what I take to be Murdoch’s (1970: 94-95/377-378; *cf.* Broackes 2012: 73) understanding of the Plato passage, the soul ascends through four stages of enlightenment to the idea, or concept, of the Good only to descend again in order to revisit the (*Pl. Rep.* 511b) concepts it had previously only had an imperfect understanding of (*i.e.* only through first grasping the Good can we fully understand the nature of other concepts and how they relate to each other).²⁴² This conceptual understanding must be brought to bear on ‘the world of particularity and detail’ (Murdoch 1970: 96/379) through proper attention (there is a return to the cave at *Pl. Rep.* 520c). This return is effectuated

²⁴¹ The label ‘divided’ is, on this interpretation slightly misleading in that it might suggest that the world of forms is in some strong sense separate from the world of perceptible things and that our mode of epistemic access to the two are distinct. On the interpretation here offered quite the opposite is the case.

²⁴² Murdoch (1970: 95/378) admits that ‘Plato’s image implies that complete unity is not seen until one has reached the summit, but moral advance carries with it intuitions of unity which are increasingly less misleading’. This insight is illustrated (Murdoch 1970: 95/378) through (the intuitive plausibility of) the thesis of the unity of the virtues.

by Stoner through his teaching and it is at its most effective when he is able to transcend his ego and display his loving attention to his subject (*e.g.*, 114-116) which paves the way for insight into the self:

He felt himself at last beginning to be a teacher, which was simply a man to whom his book was true, to whom is given a dignity of art that has little to do with his foolishness or weakness or inadequacy as a man. It was knowledge of which he could not speak, but one which changed him, once he had it, so that no one could mistake its presence (115-116).

Stoner relies on an intellectual discipline to get to grips with the virtues ‘at work in *accurate perception* of an independent and respected reality’ (Broackes 2012: 69) in a manner similar to that in which Murdoch utilises art (Murdoch 1970: 85-90/370-274; *cf.* Broackes 2012: 71-72). Indeed, Murdoch recognizes that ‘[a]n intellectual discipline can play the same kind of role as that which I have attributed to art, it can stretch the imagination, enlarge the vision and strengthen the judgment’ (Murdoch 1970: 90/374).²⁴³

Though the above-quoted passage illustrates how ‘increased understanding of an art reveals its unity through its excellence’ (Murdoch 1970: 96/379), it also illustrates how there is still work to be done for Stoner. ‘A serious scholar’, Murdoch remarks, ‘has great merit. But a serious scholar who is also a good man knows not only his subject but the proper place of his subject in the whole of life [as ... the] area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world’ (1970: 96-97/379-380). Stoner too, although he has the outward appearance of someone cloistered in his studies and teaching, understands this outside world:

It was a commonplace among his colleagues—especially the younger ones—that he was a ‘dedicated’ teacher, a term they used half in envy and half in contempt, one whose dedication blinded him to anything that went on outside the classroom or, at the most, outside the halls of the University [... b]ut William Stoner knew of the world in a way that few of his younger colleagues could understand. Deep

²⁴³ It should be pointed out that while art, on Murdoch’s view nurtures moral improvement, it does not follow from this that art is necessarily didactic or moralising since ‘[t]he level at which that love works which is art is deeper than the level at which we deliberate concerning improvement. And indeed it is of the nature of Love to be something deeper than our conscious and more simply social morality, and to be sometimes destructive of it’ (Murdoch 1959: 52).

in him, beneath his memory, was the knowledge of hardship and hunger and endurance and pain (226).

8.8 Light

The imagery of light plays a major part in the novel. Many of Stoner's realisations are accompanied by a change of lighting (*e.g.*, 11-12, 14, 19-20). Further emphasis is added by the contrasting of natural versus artificial light (*e.g.*, 47, 201), with many of the most profound changes in Stoner's life taking place with light shining in through the windows *etc.* (*cf.* esp. 288, more on this below). This not only recalls the usual metaphoric connection between light and enlightenment (*cf.* Reichardt 1998) but also Plato's Simile of the Sun (Pl. *Rep.* 507b-509c) and its continued influence—through neo-platonic philosophers (*cf. e.g.*, Remes 2008: esp. 197ff.)—upon medieval art, Stoner's own area of specialisation.

The Simile of the Sun is further extrapolated upon *via* the allegory of the cave (Pl. *Rep.* 514a-520a) and in the present context, given the contrast between natural and artificial light already noted, we need to place special emphasis on the role of the fire in the cave as a false and distracting sun. Murdoch argues that there is a 'genuine mysteriousness' (1970: 99/381) that attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good due to the unsystematic nature of the world (coupled with our human frailty) and our distance from the Good (coupled with our tendency to be blinded by the self).²⁴⁴ If we, following Murdoch, understand the fire in the cave as a false sun representing 'the self, the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth' (1970: 100/382), we find a way of understanding the role played by artificial light and romanticism in *Stoner*.

Romanticism's preoccupation with the self, in the sense of *e.g.*, the belief in and celebration of the genius, is most obviously to be found embodied in Stoner's professional antagonists, department chairman Hollis Lomax (*e.g.*, 172-177), and his protégé Charles Walker (*e.g.* 143-152, 156-165), as well as in Stoner's wife Edith (*e.g.*, 53-55, 118-123). The three characters display different extreme incarnations of that concern for the self deeply bound up with romanticism's view of man that Murdoch calls 'romantic freedom', *i.e.* a view of the individual as 'solitary and as having importance in and by himself' (Murdoch 1959a: 53/217), and which she sees as leading to existentialism.

²⁴⁴ On the reasonableness of Murdoch's interpretation of the cave, see Broackes 2012: 77-78.

Hollis Lomax is by far the most successful of the trio since he manages to stake out his own identity whereas the other two only can manage to define themselves by reference to something else. Even so, we get the feeling that even despite his charisma (*e.g.*, 92-95) and the fact that Lomax is described as ‘a good man’ (170, 264) and ‘a good teacher’ (264) that has soul (*i.e.*, he resembles Dave Masters (see 94-95)), something is not quite right with his relation to the true and the good (175, 264).

Edith’s cloistered moralizing upbringing tied to her social class severely limits her sense of identity. She is brought up ‘upon the premise that she would be protected from the gross events that life might thrust in her way’ (53). This leads to a form of life diametrically opposed to the one aiming at self-sufficiency through focus on a single all-embracing end pursued by Stoner. In contrast to Stoner (and Lomax), Edith is unable to focus on any activity with anything resembling genuine commitment and she can only define herself through a reaction against Stoner.

The antagonism that defines Edith can be found also in Charles Walker’s attacks upon Stoner (*e.g.*, 143-148) but Walker is defined, above all, through his imitation of Lomax.

It is telling that whenever either Lomax, Edith, or Walker make reference to what is right or just, they do so by reference to benefits or advantages to selves or groups of selves in a way that recall the attempted definitions of justice forwarded by Thrasymachus and Glaukon in the *Republic* (*Pl. Rep.* 338e, 358e-359a). Lomax, Edith and Walker are the products of an understanding of the self, traceable to the Enlightenment and Romanticism in such a way that, in a sense, William Stoner’s ultimate dilemma is that described by Iris Murdoch:

We have not recovered from two wars and the experience of Hitler. We are also the heirs of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Liberal tradition. These are the elements of our dilemma: whose chief feature, in my view, is that we have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality (Murdoch 1961: 16).

But Stoner is far from flimsy. He is far from being unconcerned with ‘techniques of improvement’, or ‘emphasising choice at the expense of vision’ (Murdoch 1961: 19). Indeed, his death can be seen as illustrating Murdoch’s point that ‘there is a special link between the concept of Good and the ideas of Death and Chance. (One might say that Chance is really a subdivision of Death. It is certainly our most effective *memento mori*.) A genuine sense of mortality enables us to see virtue

as the only thing of worth; and it is impossible to limit and foresee the ways in which it will be required of us' (Murdoch 1970: 99/381):

He dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure—as if it mattered. It seemed to him now that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of what his life had been (287).

It hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; and the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial (288).

The scene also illustrates Shakespeare's seventy-third sonnet's main theme of heightened perception at the imminence of death, and in so doing, highlights how this perception can result in a kind of 'attention which is not just the planning of a particular good action but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection' (Murdoch 1970: 101/383) which might provide help when difficulties seem insoluble. This activity is, Murdoch argues, 'difficult and easily corrupted' (1970: 102/383) and it is easy to see how the kind of single-mindedness that is required by Stoner's adopted strategy requires that there be no turning back, no abandonment of the project, for any reason whatsoever as that would mean a return to a meaningless existence.²⁴⁵ William's flowing prose can be thought to stand in the way of immediate contemplation in that the reader is swept along with the narrative in a manner that makes questions concerning *e.g.*, the narrator's reliability seem secondary but, I believe, the narrator's remorselessly relentless factuality is instrumentally essential in conveying this image of Stoner's unwavering conviction. Through the narrator's voice we are given an illustration of how unwavering commitment can be transformed into unquestioning acceptance of the unfolding events as both natural and unavoidable. The dangers of this transformation should be apparent enough. Unwavering commitment can, when distorted, lead to dangerous fanaticism but it can also, if guided by love and proper attention, provide a kind of stability that brings with it a high degree of self-sufficiency. I think that it is one of *Stoner's* greatest strengths under the reading here presented that it does not argue for or against the strategy in question but instead vividly presents to the reader its dangers, costs, and limitations as well as its benefits.

²⁴⁵ It would, of course, be possible for Stoner to abandon his life-project for an entirely new one but this would involve a significant cost, not least in terms of a loss of identity.

References and Abbreviations

Page references to Murdoch's works are, with the exception of references to the three papers that make up *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1056a), to their original publication, and, following a forward dash (/) to Conradi (ed.) 1997 which has by now become a standard reference work collecting all of Murdoch's philosophical writings except Murdoch 1992.

Abbreviations for Greek authors follow the list of abbreviations in Liddell H. G., Scott R. & Jones H. S. (eds.) (1968) *Greek-English Lexicon 9th edition* Oxford: Clarendon Press. Roman numerals following an abbreviated work refer to chapters or parts; Arabic numerals following a colon refer to pages; Arabic numerals following a section sign refer to sections. References to the *Corpus Platonicum* use standard Stephanus numbering. References to the Aristotelian corpus use Bekker numbers. All quotations from *S. Ant* are from Jebb R. (1891) *The Antigone of Sophocles* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press unless otherwise noted.

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