‘It is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge’: Murdoch’s Idealist Epistemological Ethics

Amber D. Carpenter

Abstract: In this chapter, I argue that Murdoch’s overall outlook belongs to a class of idealist epistemological ethics on which morality consists in transformation of consciousness through ideal cognition of reality. Such an outlook naturally draws together metaphysics, epistemology and psychology, and offers a radical alternative to any action-based conception of ethics as well as differing fundamentally from *eudaimonism* and neo-Aristotelian style virtue ethics. Framing Murdoch’s thought in this way enables us to bring her into the shared philosophical conversation, while allowing her to change it; and it enables us to place her thought in conversation with Platonist and Buddhist variants of idealist epistemological ethics.

1. Domesticating Iris Murdoch[1]

How do we bring into the philosophical conversation someone whose contribution consists fundamentally in inviting us to have a different conversation?

One strategy—perhaps the primary one for most of the fifty years since *Sovereignty of Good* was published—is for those interested in taking up the invitation to do so, while leaving the rest of moral philosophy to get on with business as usual. This, however, is as much as to say that Murdoch is not brought into the philosophical conversation at all—there is no place for her there. This then leaves that conversation untouched by, and therefore without answers to, the trenchant criticisms Murdoch brings against it. For Murdoch was, after all, inviting us—those of us engaged in philosophy—to have a different conversation together, not to benignly tolerate some other conversation happening elsewhere without us.

A second and more promising strategy, then—and one pursued with increasing frequency over the past quarter-century—is for those embedded in some part of the

[1] My thanks are due to Laura Candiotto, whose invitation to Pardubice first prompted me to try to articulate some of these ideas in writing. I thank also Carla Bagnoli and Brad Cokelet for the invitation to contribute to the volume, and for their patience. Carla Bagnoli and Mukund Maithani generously provided much appreciated comments on a previous draft, and thanks are also due to Anja Burghardt, Raja Rosenhagen and the anonymous readers from the Press for comments on the penultimate draft. Especial gratitude goes to Fay Lee, for astute comments on this piece, and for the many rewarding conversations about Iris Murdoch, and Sovereignty of the Good in particular.

established philosophical discourse to domesticate Murdoch, to make her thought fit for general consumption by exposing it as really, at bottom, a version of something we already know and incline to endorse. Thus in spite of her many criticisms of it based on serious engagement with Sartre's thought, Murdoch was for Moran an existentialist;[2] in spite of Murdoch's sophisticated and differentiated engagement with both Kant and neo-Kantianism, Antonaccio's Murdoch offers us an updated transcendental philosophy;[3] in spite of her careful and sometimes critical positioning with respect to Wittgenstein (e.g. IP 9-15), Murdoch becomes for Mac Cumhaill 2020 a particularly subtle Wittgensteinian.[4] Forsberg puts Murdoch squarely in the 'ordinary language philosophy' tradition, concluding that 'Murdoch sides with ordinary language philosophers, while thinking that she opposes them'.[5] And regardless of her frequent encouragement to consider vision prior to choice, knowledge to action—and her revisionary conception of moral thinking on which 'if I attend properly, I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at' (IP 38)—Bagnoli 2011 suggests that Murdoch contributes a novel theory of deliberation, while Blum (2011) wants to make her talk about agency.[6] Setiya deliberately presses Murdoch, contrary to her own idiom (Setiya 2013: 15b), to speak the language of the 'ethical rationalist', complete with reasons for action, 'perfect rationality and responsiveness to reason' (13b), and 'if the fact that *p* is a reason for A to φ…' (7a).[7] Stern wittingly and with sophistication presses Murdoch—who likens a proper conception of will to obedience (*IP* 39)—into service in the debate between normative realists or 'intellectualists' (Stern 2022, 6) and voluntarists. While his discussion brings interesting things to light about the role of imagination in moral

[2] Moran 2011; Robjant 2011a offers compelling considerations against Moran.

[3] '[N]o necessary transcendent reality […], but a transcendental structure', writes Hämäläinen 2014: 209 of Antonaccio's Murdoch, 'not a 'Platonic' metaphysics but a roughly 'Kantian' one'. Robjant 2011b offers insightful considerations against a crypto-Kantian Murdoch which turns the Good into a *mere* concept whose reality consists in structuring our consciousness.

[4] Wiseman 2020 also sees Murdoch as trying to stay 'within the broad contours of [Wittgenstein's] philosophy of mind and language' (225), but acknowledges Murdoch's relationship 'was far from that of a disciple'. Hämäläinen 2014 takes on the challenge of integrating Murdoch's Platonism with her Wittgensteinianism.

[5] Forsberg 2022: 124; see also Forsberg 2013 and Forsberg 2018. Hämäläinen 2013 also favours Murdoch as 'ordinary language philosopher'.

[6] Bagnoli 2011 does much more than this, with a perceptive and rewarding exposition of 'moral vision' and moral change in Murdoch; Bagnoli 2003 explicitly connects Kantian respect and Murdochian attention, making both about deliberation and agency. Cooper 2021, while writing insightfully about moral perception in Murdoch as a kind of reorientation, nevertheless retains a voluntarist notion of freedom rather than acknowledging Murdoch's revision of the concept, concluding that 'this capacity for slight control is the core of moral philosophy' (Cooper 2021: 646).

[7] Setiya is fully aware of how contrary to Murdoch's idiom this is, and that this matters: 'Rationality is not a central concept in her book [*Sovereignty*]. The contrast here is not just terminological' (15b). A significant part of his paper then goes on to engage Murdoch insightfully more on her own terms.

life for Murdoch, the deeper opportunity to revise our conception of will and its place in morality is thereby lost.[8]

But it is difficult to know what other strategy there may be. Ideally, we could just focus on the problems themselves.[9] But if it is our very conception of the problems which is at issue, this proves difficult. In order to change the existing conversation, Murdoch must participate in it; and in order to participate in it, Murdoch must be made to sufficiently speak the language of existing concerns that there can be exchange.[10] Not wanting the riches of Murdoch's thought to be lost in a backwater of Murdoch exegesis—indeed, recognising the consistency with which Murdoch herself explicitly situated her thought with respect to the shared philosophical discussion—I will venture in what follows to hazard my own attempt at the second sort of strategy, focusing as the occasion demands on *Sovereignty of Good*. I do this with some caution and no small trepidation. But I will at least pursue this strategy by taking Murdoch's lead in how to situate her thought and relate her project and concerns to other familiar projects and similar concerns.

2. 'The trouble, as ever, is Plato.'

So Robjant (2012a: 623) aptly observed a dozen years ago, and so it largely remains. If there is any philosopher with whom Murdoch most positively associates her own thought, it is Plato. This is well known. But it is not well liked.[11]

Plato believed in transcendent forms, not tame Aristotelian immanent forms; Plato's Good is a heavily laden metaphysical object that does not suit the taste of the times, which taste tends towards metaphysical lightness where the preference is not for eschewing metaphysics altogether. And so sympathetic exponents of Murdoch's thought tend to look politely away from this aspect of Murdoch's Platonism: discretely pass over the fact that Murdoch too argues for a transcendent Good (OGG

[8] Lost also is the opportunity to offer the obvious and much-needed reply to the Chang view Stern discusses: "It's just not about you". 'Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action. It is what lies behind and in between actions and prompts them that is important, and...should be purified' (OGG 65).

[9] Brewer 2009 and Chappell 2013 might be taken as pursuing this path.

[10] Note the first question Socrates asks of Meno's slave when he sets about proving that inquiry is possible: 'Does he speak Greek?' (*Meno* 82b)

[11] McLean 2000's brief discussion is something of an exception, as of course is Robjant's own work. So is Tracy 1996, although his placement of Murdoch within largely French and German Plato revivalists and critics does not much help to situate Murdoch with respect to the contemporary Anglophone discourse. Broackes 2012: 63-69 constructively suggests for Murdoch an 'oddly modest' Platonism (64), 'thoroughly unmetaphysical' (69), and 'this-worldly' (75); Setiya 2013 constructively articulates Murdoch's 'Platonic theory of concepts and concept possession' (12-13), distinguished from her Platonic commitment to the Good (16b-18a).

57-59), unitary (OGG 55-56), unifying (SGC 94-96), sovereign, and 'a source of uncontaminated energy (SGC 92-94); that she, according to the title of her book, takes metaphysics to be a guide to morals; that while she may call 'the great metaphysical systems' 'image-play' (SGC 75), this is in the context of arguing that 'Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition' (SGC 75), to explore which is not just to explore our minds but also to discover *the truth* (OGG, 45).

It is indeed a ticklish business to determine just how Platonist Murdoch's metaphysics is; in fact, we would do well to consider that it is not at all clear how Platonist *Plato's* metaphysics is. How much ontology does it take to make a realist?[12] But it is in any case a mistake to associate Murdoch's Platonism only with metaphysics and realism about value. The realism is just one half of the relevant moral story. The other half is the epistemology—and in particular the ethically driven epistemology which demands a corresponding metaphysics.[13]

For where Murdoch's Platonism really shines through is in not just *positing* a reality not of our making but in making it our primary moral task to *know* this reality. Plato supposes there is a reality which is not dependent on our concerns; but the distinctively Platonic move is to place our good and all prospect for improvement in *knowing* this reality, which knowledge consists in grasping it as it manifests real goodness.[14] For Murdoch as for Plato, the crucial move is to make knowing reality an intrinsically normative transformative moral task, around which all of ethical life may be organised and understood: 'at the level of serious common sense and of an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals, it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge' (IP 37). One orients oneself towards the good, towards the real, by striving to *know* it—to grasp it,[15] to see it in the cognitive sense.[16] One is thereby improved insofar as one allows one's psyche to be organised around this effort, seeing and experiencing some reality independent of oneself in the light of one's (always incomplete) apprehension of the good. Murdoch's ethics, like Plato's, is a fundamentally epistemological ethics, idealist in

[12] Robjant 2012b engages astutely in examining this, in the context of Murdoch's Platonism. Tracy 1996 insightfully lays out how Murdoch's plausible reading of Plato offers a rebuttal of the (mainly Heideggerian) mistaken complaint that Plato inaugurated "the ontotheological reign of metaphysics" (62). See also Broackes 2012: 63-74; Hämäläinen 2013; Mason 2023.

[13] Quoting *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 202 ("what about truth? [...]"), Robjant 2012b observes, 'These are Murdoch's guiding concerns. My suggestion is that they are Plato's too. *These* moral and epistemological concerns are his metaphysical motivations, not some odd project in logic'.

[14] See *Phaedo* 98e-99c; *Republic* 580b-509b; 531d-534e; *Symposium* 210d-211d.

[15] 'Thinking is not designating at all, but rather understanding, grasping, "possessing"' ('Thinking and Language', E&M 40-41).

[16] As Gomes 2022 and Forsberg 2022 both emphasise, vision in Murdoch's moral philosophy is a cognitive, even conceptual matter. 'In order to gain clarity regarding moral differences as differences of moral vision,' writes Forsberg (2022: 116), 'the work one has to do is a conceptual work.' Perception itself is 'conceptual through and through', argues Panizza (2020: 285).

the sense of aiming at a high and worthy ideal—specifically, at ideal comprehension of reality as such. Murdoch's metaphysics—what 'real' means, even—will, like Plato's, then be whatever it has to be in order to make sense of the project of knowing reality and the edifying effect that has on us.

Centring ethics on knowing is even more unfashionable today than queer metaphysical entities. Kant declared the question definitive of the moral domain to be 'What ought I *do*?'; consequentialists may prefer to focus on outcomes, but these are outcomes of *actions*. This was in fact a significant part of the target of Murdoch's critique of 'behaviourism', in 'The Idea of Perfection'. Yet according to proponents of contemporary virtue ethics, this definition of the realm of the moral as the realm of agency and action can be traced back to Aristotle, who so helpfully distinguished between practical and theoretical wisdom. Murdoch's Platonism consists primarily in locating ethics prior to any such distinction, in the effort to know reality. The knowing involved is ideal cognition (not knowledge in the everyday sense, which comes so easy); the object known is simply what is real, *as* real. 'All just vision...is a moral matter' (OGG 68).[17] Eschewing a distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom, a Platonic epistemological ethics does not distinguish a realm of moral (i.e. practical) knowledge of moral truths distinct from some other kind of knowledge (theoretical, scientific) of bare facts.[18] This redefines the domain of the moral (VCM 33): the *telos* is ideal cognition of reality as such, and aiming at it reorients all cognition, so that ethical life encompasses potentially all of our experience and "morality [is] something which engages the whole person" (IP 42).

In short, Murdoch is most Platonic in putting forward an ethics of transformation through knowledge of reality. This relates immediately to what is properly Platonic in Murdoch's moral psychology—as well as what is at once pessimistic and idealist in her position. Ideal cognition of reality is both transformative and difficult to attain because we are ordinarily deeply confused, with strong tendencies to self-absorption, self-indulgence and self-aggrandisement.[19] Enormous, sustained effort is needed to overcome these powerful internal obstacles to attaining an ideal cognitive grasp of a reality not of one's own making nor ordered with respect to one's own concerns. Murdoch attributes the view to Freud, because we all speak the

[17] Though more common in classical Indian philosophy (Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad 2001), other idealist epistemological ethics are not unheard of in the European tradition. Spinoza might be among these.

[18] One central goal of 'Idea of Perfection' is to disrupt the prevailing notion that such a distinction is easy and obvious, and given prior to any ethical commitment.

[19] 'We are largely mechanical creatures, the slaves of relentlessly strong selfish forces the nature of which we scarcely comprehend' (SGC 97). 'I assume that human beings are naturally selfish... [which] seems true on the evidence, whenever and wherever we look at them, in spite of a very small number of apparent exceptions' (SGC 76).

language of Freudianism today, even now.[20] But Plato is the one who first, and so powerfully, formulated the picture of our default condition as one full of appetites pulling in all directions, of ego-driven fear and aggression, with extremely limited and episodic glimpses of the possibility that things might be otherwise.[21] This is the pessimistic (or realistic, OGG 69; SCG 76) view of our natural state, the starting condition demanding great effort to move out of, and to which we are nevertheless continually returned. With the ideal cognition of reality—what Murdoch would call 'attending' or 'attention' and thus seeing truly, perhaps the Good itself (OGG 55, SGC 99), though any real thing would do (IP 29, 36-37; OGG 65; SGC 83)—so demanding and so very alien to most everyday experience, what is required is not cultivation, but transformation.

The idealism is conveyed in the way that this apprehension of reality is 'progressive' and 'infinitely perfectible' (IP 23; see also IP 29).[22] Idealist epistemological ethics thus distinguishes itself from all forms of *eudaimonism* in not taking the human—even some notional ideal human or ideal human nature—as the ultimate aspiration or the basis for conceiving the *telos*.[23] Certainly, Murdoch agrees, ethical thought must work with a realistic (that is, realistically pessimistic) conception of human nature; but it must *also* recommend a worthy ideal (SCG 76). Recognising that 'the psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself' (SCG 76) is essential for a realistic appraisal of the starting position we find ourselves in and the materials we have to work with. This supplies the mechanism (OGG 53); but no study of it can supply the goal. The goal is found, as with Plato, by turning

[20] Freud 'presents us with is a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man'; what is 'true and important in Freudian theory is ...[the] thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings' (OGG 50).

[21] 'I have already suggested that a pessimistic view which claims that goodness is the almost impossible countering of a powerful egocentric mechanism already exists in traditional philosophy and in theology. The technique which Plato thought appropriate to this situation I shall discuss later' (OGG 53). Milligan 2010 picks up Murdoch's distinctively secularised and non-despairing awareness of our 'fallenness' and 'original sin.'

[22] 'A deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect. Increasing understanding of human conduct operates in a similar way' (OGG 60); and 'For all our frailty the command 'be perfect' has sense for us...The proper and serious use of the term refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know ("There is no good in us") and which carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence' (SGC 90-91).

[23] See McLean 2000, who is incisive on this point. It is also thereby different from all self-cultivation philosophies as Gowans sets those out in Gowans 2021 and Gowans 2022 and Gowans 2023. Neither Plato nor Murdoch—nor, as will be relevant in a moment, the classical Indian Buddhists—work with 'an account of the self which explains the basis of' (Gowans 2022: 397) the ideal state of being, nor with a notion of self which, with proper cultivation, may grow and flourish into its true and best version.

towards reality: the ideal worth striving for is grounded in reality itself and as such; it consists in ideal cognition and in the goodness of orienting oneself towards the infinitely challenging task of apprehending reality truly. Apprehending a reality independent of our egocentric concerns transforms us for the better; but such changes count as good because reality is more truly grasped and not because we now better match some template of ideal humanness. That is to say, the good we seek is not the *human* good, but the Good *simpliciter* (OGG 69); and human nature does not play a normative role as that the good functioning of which determines what counts as a virtue. Virtue is whatever facilitates the clear, undistorted apprehension of reality.[24] When Murdoch ventures to suggest which virtue comes closest to being another name for the Good, she offers 'humility' (SGC 100-101), understood simply as 'selfless respect for reality' (SGC 93).

This explains why contemporary neo-Aristotelianism and its virtue ethics brethren have been able to carry on autonomously of any injection of specifically Murdochian thought, and she also autonomously of it: Murdoch has neither the *eudaimonism* (the goal is the *human* good, identified as human flourishing), nor the normative conception of human nature (with respect to which virtue and flourishing are defined),[25] nor the orientation of ethics around practical reason characteristic of most virtue ethics.[26] While Murdoch and neo-Aristotelians make common cause in identifying deficiencies of consequentialist and Kantian ethics, Murdoch is not an Aristotelian; she is Platonist, and that makes a world of difference.[27]

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[24] "Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature" (IP 40); and "anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue" (SGC 82; SGC 91).

[25] Contrary to Aristotelianism, 'functional and casual uses of 'good' (a good knife, a good fellow) are not, as some philosophers have wished to argue, clues to the structure of the concept' (SGC 90).

[26] Milligan 2012: 165-66 is insightfully emphatic on this point; although Milligan 2010 attempts more *rapprochement* with Aristotle, he is even more explicit that Murdoch's ethics is 'not ultimately *eudaimonistic*' (Milligan 2010: 25) .

[27] Fay Lee draws my attention to Ian Hacking's observation, in his review of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* for the *London Review of Books* (17 December 1992), that the editor tried so 'valiantly to inject a little Aristotle' into the index that he included 'The Aristotelian Society' under the entry for Aristotle, while for Plato the indexer offers only 'passim'. As MacIntyre (1982) observes, 'Iris Murdoch's morality is a morality of virtue, not of the virtues'. Forsberg notes that 'Murdoch consistently rejected the label 'virtue ethics' as a heading for her way of thinking' (Forsberg 2022: 121). McLean 2000 argues in detail that 'Murdoch is not a virtue ethicist as that term is properly used, and that to class her as such is to muffle a genuinely distinctive and engaging voice in modern moral philosophy' (191). Vaccarezza 2022 attempts to retain some way in which Murdoch might be a virtue ethicist by making out an anomalous form of virtue ethics in Murdoch's thought. But it takes more than a conception of virtue, howsoever innovative, to make a virtue ethicist, and as Vaccarezza acknowledges, 'virtue, after all, is seldom (*and always derivatively*) mentioned in [Murdoch's] work' (Vaccarezza 2022: 188, emphasis mine). While virtue ethics might be enriched by considering Murdoch's quite different thoughts on virtue, ethics as a whole might rather be enriched by acknowledging her quite different ethical approach altogether.

3. The other trouble, if less often, is Buddhism

It is recognised that Buddhist thought was of some interest to Murdoch personally, and she did some investigations in the area.[28] She referred to her own thinking as a kind of Christian-Buddhism (MGM 419), and those more intimately familiar with Buddhist philosophy recognise in Murdoch's thought familiar patterns that would amply warrant the first part of that hyphenate.[29] Yet she did not formally study Buddhist philosophy and she rarely appeals to any specifics of Buddhist thought as an orientation point in laying out her own views. (*Sovereignty of Good* makes no references to Buddhism, nor even to the Buddha as a figure.) There can be a danger of overplaying the Buddhist elements in Murdoch's thought, or rather of misplaying them.[30] But regarding Murdoch's ethics as idealist epistemological ethics, as set out in the previous section, allows the legitimate Buddhist affinities to come to light.

For Buddhist ethics, too, might be aptly characterised as a kind of epistemological ethics—indeed, an idealist epistemological ethics.[31] For all its conspicuous contrasts with Plato, classical Buddhism agrees with the Platonist that our central moral task

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[28] She engages, for instance, with Katsuki Sekida's *Zen Training* at *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, pp. 239-46; and her novels are peppered with Buddhist-influenced characters. According to John Bayley, 'Buddhism attracted her, and she loved to talk with two friends who were practising Buddhists' (Bayley 2011, 117). Her many books on Buddhism, acquired over thirty years, show signs of serious engagement (Grimshaw 2010: 168), and her personal correspondence reflects this interest (e.g. letters to Peter Conradi, June 1983 and December 1990; to Tapan Kumar Mukherjee, January 1987; to Naomi Liebowitz, August 1991 and June 1992, as found in Horner and Rowe 2016). My thanks to Mukund Maithani for these references.

[29] Peter Conradi is the most prominent of Murdoch interpreters to emphasise the Buddhist aspects of Murdoch's thought (early, in Conradi 1986, through to Conradi 2005). Vaccarezza 2022: 189-90 succinctly summarises these Buddhistic elements, although further arguments that there is a route here to virtue ethics for Murdoch rely entirely on a virtue ethics interpretation of Buddhism, which I would query (see Carpenter 2023), as I would also query Gowans 2022's discussion of Murdoch and Buddhism as 'self-cultivation philosophies' (see note 20).

[30] See Robjant 2013, who raises such worries in a fair-minded and insightful way.

[31] In what follows, I will speak regularly of 'Buddhist thought' or 'according to the Buddhists'. This is a useful shorthand with about as much accuracy as 'Christian thought' or 'on the Christian view'. When used in this way, it draws together a reasonably close approximate of what many Buddhist thinkers have thought, or what is said in (or has widely been taken as following from what is said in) foundational Buddhist texts. There will always be outliers and dissidents even from these fairly core commitments. But the classical Indian Buddhist tradition is primarily the one I have in mind, and I will at times tie specific claims to specific texts or philosophers.

is to know reality as it is.[32] Like Plato and Murdoch, Buddhists too suppose that the perfect cognition of reality we aim at is almost impossibly difficult to attain, and requires significant effort to approach, so that achieving it will effect a wholesale psychological transformation and transformation of experience. It shares also the pessimistic-realistic assessment of our current condition and of the available resources to effect that move towards an almost unreachably high cognitive ideal. Buddhism no more than Platonism can be squeezed into the *eudaimonist* mould without serious disfigurement, and for the same reasons: human nature does not ground norms, and the *telos* is not flourishing, well-being or any other version of being realised specimens of the human kind,[33] but simply knowing reality as it is.

In identifying obstacles to transformative apprehension of reality, Buddhists, even more explicitly than Plato, share Murdoch's view that the primary impediment to such knowledge is egoism; and the distortions, fears and obsessive attachments of egoism are powerfully at work regardless of degree of native intelligence or formal education. Egocentric compulsions cause one to create an experienced reality that is out of touch with reality as it is. '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' (OGG 57).[34] When contemporary Buddhists speak similarly in terms of ego-distortions, they are drawing on a long intellectual tradition in which the misapprehension of a substantial-agential self creates distorted apprehensions of the world and confused, distressed experiences.[35]

While Plato's pessimistic moral psychology certainly recognised the dangers posed by ambition and need for status (the 'thumistic' motivations in the soul), the importance and sheer power of egoism is more explicit in both Buddhist thought, which takes delusions of self as the primary cause of the attachment and aversion at the root of suffering (e.g., 'Right View Sutta', MN 9), and in Murdoch, for whom 'goodness is the almost impossible countering of a powerful egocentric mechanism' (OGG 53), and '[m]oral philosophy is properly...the discussion of this ego

[32] Right View leads the Eightfold Path, and together with Right Resolve is *prajñā* (wisdom, insight)—note that recognisable Indo-European root for cognition (γνω, *jñā*) with an intensifier prefix, *pra-*. Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* culminates in *prajñā*, as does Śāntideva's. Candrakīrti devotes overwhelming proportion of his *Introduction to Madhyamaka* to *prajñā*, but his list of perfections culminates in *jñāna*. Vasubandhu praises the Buddha for destroying all ignorance, which ignorance 'hinders seeing things as they really are' (*Treasury of Abhidharma, Commentary* I.1).

[33] Carpenter 2023 sets out the similarly non-eudaimonistic character of Buddhist and Platonist ethics in greater detail in. While felt well-being is not the final end, both Buddhism and Platonism do promise that it will (ordinarily) attend achievement of the final goal (for Plato, nature will provide *eudaimonia* if we pursue the good, *Rep*. 521; for the Buddhists, see Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland* I.1-8, discussed in Carpenter 2016).

[34] And of course, 'in moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego' (OGG 51).

[35] For instance, Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification;* Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses;* Śāntideva's *Guide to Bodhisattva Conduct.*

and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat' (OGG 51).[36] This is more than just a difference of emphasis, I think, and it will turn out to be related to a whole cluster of differences between Buddhist and Platonic epistemological ethics rooted ultimately in a profound difference in their epistemologies. These differences will be the focus of the following section, in order to draw out Murdoch's distinctive form of idealist epistemological ethics. For now, we may simply observe that while Plato may tell us to aim at knowing an impersonal reality, Buddhists talk the way Murdoch talks: in terms of 'looking right away from self' (SCG 99), rather than from the changing particulars, or 'becoming'; in terms of 'unselfing' (SGC 82), of eliminating self-absorption, seeing without self, and not through the distorting prism of self-concern. As Murdoch above all would insist, how we talk matters.

Where the core impediment to apprehending reality is self, the reality rightly apprehended is in some sense not self. Plato, Murdoch, and the Indian Buddhist philosophers can agree on some minimal sense of what this amounts to: the reality by knowing which we are transformed is not *me*, it is not personal to me ('*my* truth'), nor is it some special portion of reality—the practical, moral, or distinctively human portion; it is reality, as such, just inasmuch as it is real.[37] But the Buddhist (in)famously goes further and claims that real reality is entirely devoid of self. There are many things that this can mean and has meant to Buddhist philosophers and practising Buddhists.[38] But one is especially salient to Murdoch's Buddhism—*viz.,* no-self as related to ubiquitous transience and mutual dependence, and so to the comprehensively non-teleological nature of reality.[39]

Perhaps Murdoch is in some sense right that 'there is no Platonic "elsewhere," similar to the Christian "elsewhere"' (MGM 399); for Plato, the really real being which it is the business of the philosopher to discern is manifest in this world

[36] Murdoch bends Plato to her will on this point, interpreting the fire of Plato's Cave Allegory as the self, which we must tear ourselves away from in order to escape the cave. While there are indeed, as Broackes (2012:77) writes, 'certain attractions to this reading', it is not an interpretation that lies on the surface of the text.

[37] "[The] greatest art is 'impersonal' because it shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all" (OGG 63). Taylor 2022: 203 writes of Murdoch's 'insistence that the real...must be impersonal'.

[38] I work through some of these, as they arose in the classical Indian tradition, in Carpenter 2014, especially Chapter 2.

[39] The fairly common meaning of no-self as the rejection of a substantial self in particular is also relevant to Murdoch, for she recognises as a lack to be made good that 'Philosophy on its other fronts, has been busy dismantling the old substantial picture of the 'self', and ethics has not proved able to rethink this concept for moral purposes' (IP 46-7). Buddhist ethics and metaphysics is just such a thorough rethinking of ourselves as non-substantial.

around us.[40] But for the Buddhist, there is no 'elsewhere' because there is no such 'real being' in Plato's sense, at all. There is only changing, mutually dependent reality, and it is exactly as it appears: pointless, with nothing in it that is not affected by things outside its control, no persisting structure that grants meaning to these changes, and no principle of organisation or intelligent agency coordinating the transience of the world into a coherent, meaningful plan. No self is no providence, and it in is this strikingly non-Platonic *motif* that Murdoch's Buddhism can be seen. 'I assume that human beings are naturally selfish', Murdoch writes, 'and that human life has no external point or τελος' (SGC 76).

> [T]here is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. *We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance.* [...] Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here. (SGC 77, emphasis mine)

On Murdoch's non-teleological conception of reality, there is no whole for us to be a part of, no place within that whole that is 'proper' to us, no internal order which is natural and therefore good for us to establish.[41] And for both Murdoch and the classical Buddhist philosophers, this is precisely what we are to come to know about reality, perhaps even appreciate about it: 'More naturally, as well as more properly, we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees' (SGC 83).[42] Thus, in an unPlatonic vein, Murdoch urges that properly attending to *any* reality is beneficial, and makes us better than we were.[43] But it is not always a pleasure: we are vulnerable to chance and death, and facing this squarely without consoling teleologies is, for both Murdoch and for the Buddhist, one of the most important and demanding exercises in seeing reality that there is.[44]

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[40] See Robjant 2012b for incisive argument that Murdoch is faithful to Plato on this point.

[41] The ethical relevance of the non-purposive arrangement of nature, and therefore of our lives within and as a constitutive part of this reality, highlights again the difference between Murdoch's idealist epistemological ethics and forms of naturalist *eudaimonism*.

[42] On the Buddhist side, the first noble truth, the truth of suffering (transience, no self) is 'to be known'. Buddhaghosa's *prajñā* is knowledge of reality 'as impermanent, suffering, not-self' (*Path of Purification* XIV.3; also XVI.99, XXIII.32).

[43] "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality... [is] the characteristic and proper mark of the moral agent" (IP 33/E&M 327); "why not indeed? Why not consider red as an ideal end-point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual object of love?" (IP 29); "This exercise of *detachment* [looking and loving without seizing and using] is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound" (OGG 65; OGG 68, quoted above). Murdoch, as Broackes 2012: 67 says, 'actually intends the relevant accuracy to be...knowledge literally of anything: accuracy in the presentation of any fact is a good, whatever that fact may be'.

[44] See discussions of chance and death, OGG 69-72, SGC 85-86; and SGC 96-100.

Thus even the apparently metaphysical matter of the teleological structure of reality leads back again to epistemological divergences. For reality is to be known; and a reality that is not teleologically, intelligibly structured is not to be known in the same way, and via the same discursive techniques that Plato recommends. As the predominant metaphor of vision in Murdoch suggests, truly apprehending reality will be for Murdoch more quasi-perceptual, as it is for the Buddhists, for such is the most appropriate mode for grasping a non-structured, non-teleological reality as it is.

4. Comparative Epistemologies: How Ought We Ideally Apprehend Reality?

Plato, Murdoch, and classical Buddhism, I have argued, share a broadly similar outlook, distinct from more familiar views. Their idealist epistemological ethics recommends perfect cognition (call it true knowledge, *epistēmē*, *prajñā*) of reality as the defining ethical project; supposes a default state of utter confusion, devoid of such true knowing; pessimistically attributes to us a psychology on which egocentric cravings and aversions, fears and ambitions, regularly thwart our efforts to know reality, so that progress towards the goal requires tremendous effort and is (almost) always incomplete.[45] On this view, the kind of ideal cognition aimed at is prior to any theoretical-practical distinction, and the reality to be known is accordingly simply *reality*: what is real, as real, because it is real. The search is not for the *human* good, but for the good, and the effects of such searching are seen in the whole of the soul, or the whole of our psychology and phenomenology; it is the whole 'continuous fabric of being' (IP 29) that is relevant to the moral project, and engaging in the project transforms this fabric of being; improved choice, deliberation and action are just one part of the effects of such transformation (and not perhaps the most important part).[46]

If this is right, then characterising this shared outlook as an idealist epistemological ethics also gives us a good indication of how we might best identify and articulate the important differences between their respective views, and so come to see Murdoch's view in particular more clearly, both its advantages and its potential dangers. For if idealist epistemological ethics posits an ideal apprehension of reality as our goal, we may then well ask what exactly this ideal consists in. Varieties of idealist epistemological ethics will differ not just according to the reality that is to be known but, more importantly, according to the conception of ideal knowledge and what therefore it takes to attain such knowledge, and what knowing does to us.

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[45] Although glimpses of non-egoistic apprehension of reality may come upon us by surprise, as Murdoch's kestrel.

[46] "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 the natural products of attention to the Good." (OGG 69; 'true vision occasions right conduct', OGG 64; see Gomes 2022: 150). 'I can only choose within the world that I can see' (IP 35-36) puts vision and what Murdoch calls 'conceptual attitudes' (VCM, 43-44, 52) prior to action and choice.

The stark opposition on this point between Buddhist and Platonist is more consequential than their divergent views on the transience or otherwise of real reality.[47] For Plato in the *Republic*, the ideal cognitive state—let us call it *epistēmē,* even if Plato himself does not remain strict with his terminology—contains, if it does not consist in, the ability to give and defend complete explanatory accounts of the nature of real being(s), or intelligible reality (*Rep.* 508-534).[48] The *Phaedo* indicates that such an account, in order to get at the intelligible nature of a thing, must be an account of how it is good so (*Phd.* 96b-102e). The *Philebus* compactly describes a cognitive ascent similar to *Republic* VI-VII, proceeding as the better-known Divided Line passage of the *Republic* through applied to abstract mathematics (*Phil.* 55a-57d), but culminating in dialectic (*Phil.* 57e), which Socrates defines by reference to the dialogue's earlier discussion of organised classification, distinction and inter-relation as the model of inquiry (*Phil.* 14c-19c). *Dialektikē*, as its common meaning of 'dialogue' makes evident, is discursive.

Plato appeals, as Murdoch does, to metaphors of vision in epistemological contexts concerned with ideal cognition (*Republic* VI.508a-509b and VII.514a-519a being the best known of these occasions). But his intention there is to convey the encompassing, all-at-once quality of perfect comprehension. It is certainly *not* his intention to assimilate the highest possible cognition with *aisthēsis*, with the sense-perception of which literal vision is one kind. Plato is famously critical of sense-objects; but his objection to these is their *epistemic* inadequacy.[49] The problem is not that they change, but that they are not self-explanatory and they resist a full explanatory account. Plato is persistently critical of *aisthēsis*—see especially the first part of the *Theaetetus*, where he is explicitly critical of sense-perception *as a mode of cognition*, as knowledge-giving. Here Plato is quite specific where the defect lies: because sense-perception is private (*idion, Tht.* 154a2, 166c3-5) and *alogos (Tht.* 184b-186c; *cf. Tim* 69d5*)*—not such as to be shared and defended in an articulate account—it cannot count as or provide true knowledge.[50] Whatever he wants with his Simile of the Sun or Allegory of the Cave, it cannot be to make perfect knowledge, hard-won through extensive dialectical exercise, like *that*.

Like *that*, however, is precisely what Buddhist ideal cognition is. The preference for experiential knowledge which is private and *alogos*—literally not able to be captured in words—pervades the early and Pāli Buddhist literature, where it is buttressed by an associated disparagement of 'disputatiousness': the truly wise person does not

[47] I have argued in detail for this, and the claims of the following paragraphs, in Carpenter 2024.

[48] Carpenter 2024 and especially Carpenter 2025 look closely at Plato's description of ideal cognition in *Republic* V-VII.

[49] See McCabe 1994.

[50] 'Judging things correctly without being able to give a reason [*logon*]', Socrates says in the *Symposium* (202a5–8), 'Surely you see that this is not the same as knowing [*epistasthai*]—for how could knowledge [*epistēmē*] be unreasoning [*alogon*]?'

quarrel with the world (*MN* 18).[51] The knowledge of she who knows reality-as-it-is is experienced in an immediate non-conceptual apprehension and is best expressed in silence. This preference becomes codified in the course of Indian Buddhist philosophy as a distinction between two modes of knowing—the one, *anumāṇa,* conceptual and involved in reasoning (associated with conventionally real, *saṃvṛtisat*, everyday experience), the other, *pratyakṣa*, perceptual-experiential, immediate and non-conceptual (apt for the ultimately real, *paramārthasat*); ideal cognition which transforms experience is decidedly the latter. For Vasubandhu and Dignāga, in particular, immediate non-conceptual experience is the only mode of knowing reality as it is: "the object of perception is the form which is to be cognised as it is and which is inexpressible" (*PS* I.5; *cf.* 2cd).[52] Explanation (*logos*) has no role in ideal, transformative knowledge and little place even in secondary, conceptual forms of knowing—even Dignāga's carefully articulated and revolutionary theory of reasoning (correct conceptual cognition, *anumāṇa*) does not involve *explanatory* power.

What is curious is that when the distinction between Buddhist and Platonist is made this way, epistemologically rather than metaphysically, Murdoch—whose real Good so emphatically recalls Platonic and not Buddhist thought—looks distinctly more Buddhist than Platonist. When Murdoch says 'it is perfectly obvious that goodness *is* connected with knowledge', she clarifies that knowledge here is 'a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline' (IP 37). This discipline is not, however, that of Plato's mathematician or dialectician. And when Murdoch appeals to the metaphor of vision to capture that good-making sort of apprehension of reality that is a worthy ideal, she is at pains—quite unlike Plato—to embrace the perception-like qualities Plato identifies as epistemically dubious: in particular, its *privacy* (especially in 'Idea of Perfection') and its experiential quality.[53] The startled apprehension of natural beauty may not be 'the most important place of moral change, but..it is the most accessible' (SGC 83) and 'a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life' (OGG 63). While Murdoch is very far from abhorring concepts in any true cognition of reality as Dignāga might (*PS* I.3cd), neither does she suppose that what we *do* with those concepts is construct teleological explanations of a Platonic type. On the contrary, her name for the

[51] Renunciants and lay folk alike ought not be disputatious (*SN* 56.9, 22.3), even about correct interpretation of the Dharma.

[52] Vasubandhu will not call this *pratyakṣa*, but the cognition described in *Treasury of Abhidharma, with Commentary* VI and VII unequivocally bears the qualities that for Plato make perception epistemically inadequate; the yogācāra views set out in *Twenty Verses* and *Thirty Verses* offer no revision in this respect. Dignāga is more explicit that *pratyakṣa* is not by definition a matter of the senses, in *Compendium of Means of Valid Cognition* I, and his rather austere presentation of modes of valid cognition leaves some sort of non-sensory *pratyakṣa* as the only available mode of cognising ultimate reality as it is. Carpenter 2024 argues this point more fully.

[53] E.g., M's reflecting 'may well be an activity which can only be performed privately' (IP 22).

cognitive activity which facilitates and results in the apprehension of reality is *attending*, a being-with, in-the-service-of. Attending is necessarily experiential and private; neither it nor the patient exploration of concepts sometimes involved consists in *reasoning* (still less, 'practical reasoning' or deliberation) in a publicly evaluable way, and the conceptual 'deepening or complicating' (IP 30; also IP 28, SGC 93) which may result is personal to the individual who is attending, and to their particular history and field of concepts and experience.[54] It is in Plato's sense of it *alogos*.

This Buddhist-like conception of ideal apprehension of reality as a kind of perception-like grasp highlights an important non-Platonic element fundamental to Murdoch's project: 'to do justice to both Socrates and the virtuous peasant' (IP 2). Plato's explanation-based conception of ideal cognition has no trouble accommodating Socrates; but giving and 'defending against all interrogation' complete explanatory accounts of the being of things (*Rep.* 534b8-c4; *Rep*. 531e3-4) demands exceptional intelligence and extensive training in systematic, abstract thought (ideally mathematics). Of course, nothing precludes a peasant being smart (*Rep.* 415a-b; Socrates himself was the son of a stonemason), but they will ordinarily have little opportunity to exercise the sort of intelligence Plato has in mind, and even less chance of acquiring the necessary training.[55] A private, experiential kind of knowledge, by contrast, is in principle available to everyone, no matter their native wit, daily duties, or educational opportunities.[56]

Murdoch recognises as well as Plato does the psychologically beneficial character of abstract thinking, which is well-suited to drawing one out of myopic and inflated self-concern (SGC 86-88); for some people, learning a discipline is a useful way of overcoming egoism and practicing the patience and humility that attending well requires. As far as Murdoch is concerned, these unselfing qualities are what recommend *technai*, and so one might as well appeal to learning Russian as to learning mathematics (SGC 87), or indeed learning to *really see* a bit of natural terrain. This is very different from Plato, for whom it is important that the

[54] '[W]ith Murdoch's emphasis on the idiosyncratic, personal use of concepts,' Panizza 2022b: 164, 'we get a different picture of the kind of unselfing that attention demands: the use of one's own resources, including sensibility and experience, to put aside one's self-interested demands on reality, and direct focus and energy truly outwards.' Wiseman 2020 and Mac Cumhaill 2020 emphasise Murdoch's acknowledgement of the historical individual, perhaps rather at the expense of Murdoch's realism; see also Mason 2022.

[55] Consider that practically the only flattering portrait we get of a learner in Plato's dialogues is of Theaetetus, a precocious mathematician. Meno's slave, of course, is shown to learn (or, in the language of that dialogue, not to learn but to recollect), so Plato evidently does not think that the required intelligence tracks class or social rank. But that slave, however quick his native intelligence, is unlikely to have the opportunity to engage in the further exercises and conversations that would take him beyond Pythagoras' theorem to matters of justice, beauty, and true goodness.

[56] There may be other ways of vindicating the virtuous peasant—for instance, by installing conscience or a capacity for practical judgement innately in the breast of each person. This is not, however, the route Murdoch chooses.

discipline studied maximally exhibit features of accuracy, stability, clarity and explanatoriness characteristic of fully intelligible being—mathematics is better than architecture, and pure is better than applied mathematics.[57] For Murdoch, by contrast, 'goodness...is most convincingly met with in simple people—*inarticulate*, unselfish mothers of large families' (OGG 51-52, emphasis mine). And when she ranks objects of attention as more and less beneficial, it is not according to their liability to complete, precise, integrated explanation, but simply according to their goodness, and perhaps the complexity of their goodness and therefore how much unselfing requires: 'We can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps [...] the idea of goodness itself" (OGG 55).

'[M]orality, goodness, is a form of realism' (OGG 57), Murdoch says, where 'realism' is not some sort of practical stance but 'is connected with knowledge' (IP 37); 'Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality' (SGC 87). So we may say Murdoch's good, simple people have knowledge—not a Platonic ability to give accounts, nor an Aristotelian *phronesis* about the objects of deliberation and choice, nor even a Kantian reasoning about the universalisability of maxims—but an experiential, possibly inarticulate apprehension of reality. Such apprehension need not be acquired by training in an abstract discipline, for achieving it is not a matter of acquiring new content or skills—not even a facility with abstraction or real explanation. Instead coming to know reality requires simply attending to, and patiently exploring, reality—the particular, everyday reality that is all around one; such attending and exploring is available to anyone, wherever the impediments to attention are removed. These impediments, in turn, are almost exclusively psychological rather than deficits of information or ability or circumstance, and comprise the various often subtle and unacknowledged forms that egoism takes. Egoism drives the fabrication of a fantasy-reality, which occludes one's perception of what is there as 'not-me'. To see undistortedly, which is to say unegoistically, *is* to see truly or to apprehend reality 'objectively' (as Murdoch puts it) or 'as it is' rather than as we wish or fear it to be.[58] Consistently in *Sovereignty of Good,* Murdoch associates absence of selfishness with realism, reality and truth (e.g. OGG 50; OGG 64; SGC 82; SGC 84): 'appreciation of beauty...[is] a completely adequate entry into...the good life, s*ince it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real*' (OGG 63, emphasis mine).

Reality, for Murdoch, is what is known when one's ways of perceiving and conceiving—of interpreting and feeling—are not obscured and distorted by self-

[57] Carpenter 2015 sets out in detail Platonic hierarchical epistemology of the *Philebus.*

[58] The objectivity at issue, Murdoch makes clear in 'Idea of Perfection', is not that of the supposed neutrality of scientific fact extended into the moral domain; the 'idea of 'objective reality'', she argues, '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' (IP 25). This modified understanding of 'objective reality' is what she deploys when she says, for instance, that 'objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings' (OGG 50); or that 'the role...of exactness and good vision' [is] unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention' (OGG 64).

concern.[59] Full stop. There is nothing more to say about the reality or otherwise of what is thus apprehended, except that it is essential to the experience that what is thus known is experienced as not-me, separate from me, not of my making or under my control.[60] Consider for comparison the Buddhist no-self claim taken as an ongoing practice: the importance and the difficulty of acknowledging for any arising phenomenon 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self' (MN 22.16).[61] Reality is what you see, and how things look, when you are *not* perceiving them as they relate to yourself, your concerns, your life, when you are not engaging with them as a (potential) possession.[62] Intellectual disciplines as well as great art are 'realist' in just this sense: an intellectual discipline, rightly pursued, 'leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal' (SGC 87); and great art, which like Rilke's Cézanne 'did not paint "I like it", he painted "There it is"' (OGG 57), presents 'a perfection of form which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness" (SGC 83; *cf.* SGC 86).

5. On Knowing and Sharing Reality

This may go some way towards addressing the question of Murdoch's realism. 'Real' is what is experienced as itself—as 'not me, not mine, not relevant to my concerns'—when one is apprehending without the distortions of egoism in its many forms. Whether this can be made to be a plausible interpretation of Plato's realism is doubtful; even if we resist (as we should) Platonic heavens of eternal forms, there is still for Plato the teleological structure, which is really real and permits of singular, unambiguous explanation, articulable and defensible in stable terms which are the

[59] '[T]he 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 the self' (OGG 64).

[60] Murdoch laments that "we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves" (OGG 46), while in intellectual as well as artistic disciplines 'My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me' (SGC 87).

[61] Buddhist practice is instructive here for indicating how aspects of one's own personality might similarly be non-pathologically treated as 'not me'. Thus, M may take her own jealousy as an object of attention, see it 'objectively', as Murdoch has it (see previous note), without this thereby being egoistic self-absorption. Such objectivity about oneself may be difficult (OGG 66), but it is neither impossible nor (*pace* Mole 2006) incoherent, and is worth the effort. Panizza 2022a, Chapter 4, engages with the question, suggesting (as does Mole 2006) that self-knowledge is to be gained primarily via attention to the world rather than to the self.

[62] 'What Murdoch insists on, grammatically,' writes Robjant 2013: 1001, 'is that reality is that which a suitably instructed person would see, but for certain failures of love, such as jealousy.' Compare Mason 2023, approaching the metaphysics directly rather than via the epistemology, considers Murdoch's peculiar realism to consist in 'a relation between the moral *observer* and the object, rather than...a feature attributed solely to the thing observed' (650).

same for everyone. Plato cannot say, as Murdoch or Vasubandhu can, that 'real' is 'whatever remains when egoism's distortions are removed'.[63]

But what Plato's more robust metaphysics can ensure is *shared* reality, and—more importantly—the epistemology to go with it: *viz.,* an interactive, non-coercive way of arriving at understanding that reality, through the sharing and joint examination of reasons. Where reality is intelligibly and teleologically structured, the explanations of the nature of things and the correct concepts to use and their meanings are the same for everyone and in principle open to anyone. This means that any person's claim to articulate how things are is available to scrutiny by any other truth-seeker capable of grasping the intelligible structure of reality. Giving up on this, insisting on the inner and idiosyncratic nature of improved vision,[64] can make Murdoch's ethics look intolerably solipsistic, insufferably *private*.[65] Given the preference in both for an experiential, perception-like conception of ideal cognition, rather than an explanation-based conception, it should be no surprise that this has been an objection also levelled against Buddhist thought.

What Murdoch retains of her Platonic inheritance, however, offers a rejoinder not so obviously available to many Buddhist thinkers. For Murdoch may give up on teleological explanation, but she does not give up on concepts and language, nor think that any apprehension that is conceptually structured is thereby a distortion of the pure apprehension of reality as it is.[66] On the contrary, it is through metaphors, concepts, and imaginative labour done with these that one is able to reach out to reality: 'Metaphors can be a mode of understanding, and so of acting upon, our condition', Murdoch observes (SGC 91), and 'We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real' (SGC 88). Real might be what we see when we see without ego-distortions; but there is

[63] I mention Vasubandhu specifically because this *via negativa* strategy is particularly characteristic of his *Treasury of Abhidharma, with Commentary*.

[64] As Paese 2020 effectively argues.

[65] "[S]ince we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy' (IP 28; see also 'can only be performed privately', IP 22). MacIntyre 1982 voices dissatisfaction along these lines: 'It is characteristic of Iris Murdoch's later novels that all goodness being referred to the Form of the Good seems to entail that there is no such thing as a good way of life or a good form of human community. Good is an object only of individual aspiration. Social circumstances are not themselves, except accidentally, part of the matter of morality, which is a purely individual enterprise.' Bagnoli 2011 and Hämäläinen 2022 might think this goes too far; but both in their different ways argue that Murdoch's views require extension or addition in order properly to accommodate the interpersonal (social, institutional) dimension.

[66] This is the position of Vasubhandu (both in his Abhidharma and his Yogācāra writings), Dignāga (in the *Compendium* and the *Prajñāppāramitāpiṇḍārtha*), and Dharmakīrti (e.g. *Pramāṇavarttika*). It also seems to be the view of Nāgārjuna (see *Root Verses on the Middle Way*, dedicatory verse) and Candrakīrti (see especially *Introduction to the Middle Way* VI).

something there to see, which we illuminate through the concepts we use to apprehend it.[67]

Moral improvement arises in part through conceptual deepening, through the patient exploration which enriches and refines our conceptual repertoire, and thus improves our connection to and apprehension of reality. Because concepts are *also* public, even a deeply personal, idiosyncratic development of them is essentially world-involving and potentially dialogical. 'Of course this investigation [of whether what one feels is repentance] is subject to some public rules, otherwise it would not be *this* investigation' (IP 25). While such investigation may be personal and inward, in connecting us to reality, it connects us to the world (Mole 2006, Panizza 2022a)—'the value concepts are here patently tied on to the world' (SGC 88), and not to some *other* reality (see Robjant 2012b).

The Sovereignty of Good may not make much of this interpersonal, dialogical dimension—in context, it would be too easily mistaken for endorsing the 'public verifiability' criterion of reality Murdoch is keen to reject in 'The Idea of Perfection'. But where concepts are modes of true apprehensions of reality, these apprehensions are in principle communicable. Such communication may necessarily involve reference to personal historical elements informing the process (rather than exclusively to impersonal Platonic forms), and it may take the form of sharing rather than demonstrating; but this does not inherently distort the understanding, and may well provide opportunity for enhancing and refining one's grasp in conversation with another. Our attempts to articulate our personal understandings of concepts to others become part of the experiences which feed into the refinement and the deepening of our understanding of a concept.[68]

The challenge, however, is in the claim that such changes in view are *in fact* improvements. This is not a question of 'How can one be sure?', because the forces of self-deceit are wily and perhaps one never can be absolutely sure. The question is how any change in view can genuinely count as being truer rather than more

[67] This may come out more prominently when we consider the more positive descriptions of successful cognition as 'truthful' (SGC 84, 86, 87) or when the 'realism of a great artist [...] is essentially both pity and justice' (SGC 85). *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* adds 'being faithful to' and 'doing justice to' the object known (see Mason 2023, 659-66 for discussion). As Panizza 2020: 279 observes, for Murdoch, 'concepts are, at the same time, deeply contextual *and* world-related'.

[68] '[T]he senses of our words and concepts are something we 'develop' *together*,' writes Forsberg 2022: 121, 'not by means of decree, or voting, or definition, but by means of being together, of engaging in each other's projects and practices'. This may not go so far as to incorporate social and institutional structures into the conditions of meaningfulness. It may be that Murdoch simply overlooked and was not interested in how public meanings and institutional practice shape shared reality and personal experience. Or it may be that she saw social institutions and practices, Plato-wise, as simply manifestations of the same psychological egoistic forces at work on the individual level, in which case there may not be much more to say about them.

distorted, more accurate rather than less.[69] On this point, one is tempted to dig in one's heels and reiterate, 'It is the absence of egoism in one's attending to another that *makes it the case* that a view is more accurate and true'. Or as Murdoch writes in 'The Fire and the Sun', 'The instructed and morally purified mind sees reality clearly and indeed (in an important sense) provides us with the concept' (E&M 426). But as the inclusion of 'instructed' here perhaps suggests, the absence of egoistic fantasy-distortions *alone* cannot ensure that one's revised cognition is *clearer* and *of reality*. Moreover, if the instructed and purified mind provides the very concept of reality, then supposing you and I can lay claim to equally purified vision, if the refinement of concepts is inevitably shaped by one's personal history—'since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy' (IP 28)—then why suppose the respective realities you and I perceive will be mutually compatible, or (and this the crucial thing) that *we can or should work to make them so*? Perhaps our histories are too incommensurable for us to be even mutually intelligible to one another.[70] The spectre of solipsism rises again.[71] The worry is that knowledge that is experiential or personal, however conceptually rich it may be, abandons a shared reality even 'in some very remote and ideal sense' (IP 37) as something to be aimed at and by which to discipline our efforts to see aright.

To address this second worry, recall Murdoch's observation that, when we speak of seeing reality, '"reality" here inevitably appears as a normative word' (IP 36). To say that we have got at reality is to say that we have got it right, and to say that our cognition has been successful, and is good. Not only is it 'better to know what [is] real than to be in a state of fantasy or illusion' (OGG 62), but to call it 'reality' is to say that it lays claim to *anyone's* attention. When we manage 'to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness', we do not just *see* reality, we 'join the world as it really is' (SGC 91).

And this does not exhaust the normative sense of reality. There are more aspects to 'the realism which we perceive to be connected with goodness' (OGG 73-4). It is good

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[69] If, as Forsberg writes, for Murdoch 'central 'moral concepts'...do not have one singular sense that is there for us to just unearth [and] [w]e are left with the task of trying to unravel the senses we have inherited' (Forsberg 2022, 121), what makes any stage of that process, or any particular person's version of it, an *unravelling* rather than an entangling, just a further confusion?

[70] Mason 2022: 1130 entertains 'the possibility that different people's moral concepts, in this deep sense, may no longer truly be the same concepts, and may even develop in inconsistent directions' and concludes that 'Murdoch's insistence on the privacy of (some) moral concepts does suggest that there is no guarantee that all concepts (and thus all knowledge involving those concepts) will be able to be fully shared' (1132). The concern is that not *enough* concepts are shared *enough* to insist that we be able to inhabit the same moral world; that 'as we evolve in different ways, we may become mutually unintelligible to one another, without any of us having gone wrong' (Setiya 2013), so that there is no longer even the expectation we ought to work to try to make ourselves intelligible to each other.

[71] Forsberg 2022: 122-23 is happily unbothered by this prospect—it just confirms that moral disagreement goes deep. But in his rejection of a Platonic-style response, he seems to have forgotten Murdoch's Good as a magnetic centre, drawing us towards it.

to know what is real: 'Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness' (SGC 91, 'virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil').[72] But is it not just we who are made good, but the knowing itself and the known are themselves good: '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' (OGG 64).[73] Via the conditions on *really* knowing reality we move from the goodness of being connected to reality to the reality of goodness (OGG 54-55, 60-62).

On the reality of goodness, Murdoch argues mostly 'from experience' (OGG 73). To experience something as good is to have an intimation of a real value that survives the destruction and imperfection of the thing experienced as good (OGG 58-59). The transcendence of the Good is linked to the idea of a standard, of perfection. We know from experience that there is a 'true direction', which 'cannot be reduced to psychological...terms' (OGG 59). This sense of a standard, a real direction in which a perfection may be found not marred by the imperfection of any particular manifestation, and invulnerable to corruption or decay (OGG 58-59), becomes later the magnetic centre 'from which lines converge in a definite direction' (SGC 96), which draws us onward and orients us in the project of clarifying and unifying our piecemeal, provisional and approximate concepts by which we illuminate reality: 'The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections upon the moral life' (OGG 73; see also SGC 97 and 100).

The Good may not be a direct object of knowledge; but the intimations we have of it draw us to pursue ever more accurate vision of reality, and this means ever more coherent vision of the Good as well (OGG 55-56). This sense of a true direction in the pursuit of completeness and coherence of apprehension of reality continually pushes back against the dangers of solipsism, vacuity and arbitrariness that may lurk in an ethical epistemology that makes reality 'whatever appears to the unclouded sight', and makes the concepts through which reality is illuminated inflected with contingent personal history. If there is a real magnetic centre on which our lines of thought converge when we are genuinely apprehending reality without distortion, then there is reason to believe that our clear apprehensions cannot be incommensurable, and the ideal of undistorted vision of reality contains within it the demand that we make the effort to ensure that the reality perceived is a shared one.

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[72] 'The concept of Good is bound up with realism', writes Milligan 2010: 23, because 'goodness is a matter of looking *away from* the shadowy flickering images of the self, and attentively gazing out into the world.'

[73] 'The Good appears necessary to us,' Taylor 2022: 202 writes, 'because it is an aspect of (necessary for) any attempt to perceive what is true'. Broackes 2012: 76 ties Good to reality still more epistemologically: 'The necessity of the good is the necessity of the notion of the ideally good (or ideally accurate) representation'.

The sovereignty of Good is a sovereignty over other concepts—which is to say, over our thinking, over our attempts to see reality truly.[74] It 'partakes of the infinite elusive character of reality' (IP 41) because in its separateness from us it transcends any single effort at comprehension, and because all our specific concepts, so essential for a rich appreciation of individual realities, have idiosyncratic personal histories informing their particular content. But the Good exerts 'the authority of truth, that is of reality' (SGC 88) over these indispensably particular concepts by making epistemic demands and setting epistemic standards in our thinking, in our understanding and deployment of other concepts. This is a teleological element in Murdoch's thought neither Buddhist nor, on most metaphysical understandings of it, Platonic. The Good provides the idea of perfection that has the authority to organise and be the measure of the improvement of these concepts (OGG 60-61; SGC 88).[75] The sovereignty of Good is exercised in the demands it makes for unity, coherence, justice, necessity, purity, clarity and accuracy of vision, and in the demand that these form the standard by which to measure the personalised, historically evolving concepts with which we must work. These demands provide the normative force to continually try to seek genuine improvements in vision and in the concepts by which we apprehend it, rather than to remain within our idiosyncratic, personal elaborations of our concepts for framing experience. And they provide the pull to make constant effort to inhabit a shared and shareable reality, however difficult our particularised histories may make that. It may be that '[t]hat *of* which it is knowledge, that 'reality' which we are so naturally led to think of as revealed by just 'attention', can...only be thought of as 'one', as a single object for all men, in some very remote and ideal sense' (IP 37); but in this ideal sense, it can and must be so thought. 'At a superficial level history fashions morals, at a deep level morals resist history' (MGM 232).

6. 'Almost all philosophers have been led in one way or another to picture goodness as knowledge' ('Idea of Perfection', 37)

Iris Murdoch's thought is as inexhaustible as the reality she makes it our project to see truly, and there are, fittingly, many ways into it. I have tried to show that recognising her overall outlook as belonging to a class of idealist epistemological ethics is an especially helpful and non-distorting way to bring Murdoch into the shared conversation, while allowing her also to change it. In particular, it allows us to place her thought in conversation with Platonist and Buddhist variations on the same.

An outlook on which we are transformed by acquiring perfect cognition of a reality independent of us offers an ethics which integrates metaphysics, epistemology, and

[74] As Panizza 2020: 280 puts it, 'all our acts of cognition are in one way or another structured by an orientation to the Good'.

[75] 'And this can occur, indeed must occur, without our having the sovereign idea in any sense 'taped'. In fact it is in its nature that we cannot get it taped. This is the true sense of the 'indefinability' of the good...It lies always beyond, and it is from this beyond that it exercises its *authority*' (OGG 61).

moral psychology. A moral psychology at once hopeful (knowledge of reality will improve, indeed *transform*, us) and pessimistic (we are ordinarily deeply confused, and we are our own largest impediment to improvement) is wedded to a very robust conception of knowledge: the cognition of reality that would transform us is an ideal which we might continually approach without ever completely reaching. The reality to be known is then whatever it needs to be in order for ideal cognition (however that is conceived) to be something that might transform creatures of the sort we are. Since Murdoch's epistemic ideal is quasi-perceptual, rather than explanation-based, the reality known will not be the publicly accessible, unique explanatory structure Plato favours, and the method of approaching it will not be dialogical reason-giving but rather attending—making oneself open to the reality of the other, of what is not self. But since clarity of vision won through attention is thoroughly saturated with concepts with particular histories, and metaphors with shifting connotations, neither will reality be, as it is for many Buddhist thinkers, by definition 'free from conceptual construction', and therefore only to be experienced wordlessly. For Murdoch, reality is whatever appears to a thoroughly purified vision, responsive to the norms implicit in the idea of perfection, as something independent of me, external to my concerns, which at the same time intimates a kind of goodness which is compelling and impervious to accident.

So regarded, Murdoch offers a much more substantial challenge to modern moral philosophy than does virtue ethics, and a much more radical alternative. Unlike standard neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, on Murdoch's view the domain of the moral is not defined as the domain of action, deliberation and choice, and the elusive ideal knowledge we seek is not of some sub-section, a 'practical reality' of which one may have 'practical knowledge', but of reality—any and all of it—just because it is real. This is what makes incorporating Murdoch into mainstream questions of moral philosophy so challenging. For she does not just argue that there is, in addition, another part of morality, an inward and mental part; she argues that ethics is fundamentally about *how we think*, how we look at the world—literally, the concepts by which we organise experience—and the inescapable need to discern real from fake, true from false. When we reorient our conception of what ethics is about in this way, then currently core notions such as choice, deliberation, freedom and action become secondary, mere issuances of our thinking; indeed our very conception them changes (IP 36; IP 38-39).

Murdoch's epistemological ethics is also distinct from, and more radical than, the *eudaimonism* that takes its inspiration from the ancient Greeks. For although an idealist epistemological ethics demands a realistic moral psychology, the aim is not human well-being on any definition, nor to fulfil or perfect our human nature. Like Plato, Murdoch does not recommend to us the *human* good, but *the Good*, which we approach through knowing it, and which is to be known by attentive exploration and increasingly refined appreciation of reality itself, and any individual reality, as such. Like the Buddhists, Murdoch takes the primary impediment to such knowledge to be self: our natural selfish, self-absorbed fantasies and fears.

Through a distinctive understanding of concepts, ideal knowledge of reality—in spite of its perception-like qualities—remains for Murdoch communicable. It may not be tested and refined through proofs of the sort one finds in mathematics, or even through the sort of *elenchus* modelled by Socrates in Plato's dialogues, with its demand for defensible explanations of why things are what they are. But the very notion that it is *reality* we are seeing, whether a particular mundane real thing before us, or the real beauty that has struck us in a bird or a sonata, keeps us committed to the aspiration that this can and should turn out to be a shared reality, when it is properly grasped. It may even provide a demand that we incorporate shared exploration of concepts into the personal history giving our concepts determinate shape.

It is worth briefly addressing in conclusion an objection liable to be raised by action-centred ethicists against any epistemological ethics of this sort. We may well *see* the same reality, the objections goes, but what about knowing reality ensures we will *act* in the world? The conscientious perfection of my own cognitive condition makes the Good 'an object only of individual aspiration...[morality] a purely individual enterprise' (as MacIntyre puts it), and neither pursuing it nor achieving it ensures that I will respond in deed to the real suffering I see.

A fuller response to this objection would require carefully reviewing the moral psychology sketched above, examining the ways and reasons we are transformed in our 'complete motivational set' by practices of attending to reality. But a crucial part of any response has not be mentioned thus far. Murdoch enigmatically but repeatedly insists that just attention *is* loving attention, that truly seeing and truly loving are one and the same. Like the Buddhists (who faced a similar objection), Murdoch seems to suppose that ego is not just the only obstacle to true seeing, but is also (thereby?) the only obstacle to true loving. This is an empirical claim, for Murdoch as for Buddhists: 'defeat' of the ego leaves care or love in its place.[76] The undistorted apprehension of reality is also the unimpeded, unselfish love of the individual realities apprehended. Unselfish, clear-eyed love prompts—or perhaps even is—a uniquely apt responsiveness to others (what the Buddhists call 'care', *karuṇā*) which encompasses the unpossessive acknowledgement of their full reality and the generosity Timaeus attributes to the ultimately purified knower, that everything might be made good so far as possible (*Tim.* 29e).

[76] Dunne 2019 offers compelling arguments for how a Buddhist might defend this claim. Panizza 2020 articulates this in Murdoch's idiom (esp. 286-86), but without showing why it should be the case that *correct* application of concepts make a claim on us.

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