

Art, Beauty, and Morality

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... the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue (SGC 371)

Introduction

In this chapter, we examine Iris Murdoch's views about art, particularly in her articles 'Existentialists and Mystics', 'Art is the Imitation of Nature', 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', 'Against Dryness', 'The Idea of Perfection', 'On 'God' and 'Good'', 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts', and 'The Fire and the Sun'. We highlight continuities and differences between her views on art and aesthetics, and those of Plato, Kant, and Freud. We argue that Murdoch's views about art, though traditionally linked to Plato, are more compatible with Kant's thought than has been acknowledged—though with his ethics rather than his aesthetics. Murdoch shows Plato's influence in her idea that beauty is the good in a different guise. However, Murdoch shows a more Kantian than Platonic influence in her suggestion that the experience of beauty can be conducive to virtue, and distances herself from Plato in her claim that the enjoyment, as well as the production, of certain kinds of art can be virtuous. We also argue that her view of bad art as self-consoling fantasy is consonant with Freudian thought. Lastly, we question her view of bad art, specifically concerning her identification of bad art as self-consoling fantasy or entertainment, and her separation of the latter and good art. In doing so we question her assimilation of consolation and escapism.

The unity of the value spheres

Murdoch commends beauty as ‘the visible and accessible aspect of the Good’ (OGG 357), ‘the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct’ (SGC 370), particularly in OGG and SGC:

Beauty and the *technai* are, to use Plato’s image, the text written in large letters. The concept Good itself is the much harder to discern but essentially similar text written in small letters. (SGC 374)

She also comments that:

Goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure. Plato, who tells us that beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love immediately by nature, treats the beautiful as an introductory section of the good. So that aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals. (IP 332)

This assimilation of the good and the beautiful is a leitmotif of Murdoch’s moral philosophy and aesthetics. However, we will argue, she does not fully acknowledge the deep implications that such an assimilation must have for aesthetics. In order to advance this argument, it is first necessary to elucidate her claim of the unity of the value-spheres.

Historically, the good and the beautiful have been understood as part of a Platonic trio of value spheres. Thus Frankfurt Opera House, destroyed in the Second World War and rebuilt, though no longer serving its original function, has the inscription ‘To the Good, the True, and the Beautiful’. The claim that these value spheres are unified is the claim that judgments about the beautiful, the good and the true do not fall into clearly demarcated categories—in judging a person’s beauty, for instance, one also considers their moral qualities. Modern philosophers, following Kant, almost invariably advocate their separation rather than unification. Nineteenth century neo-Kantians originated the suggestion that a *separation or diremption of value spheres*

occurred in the modern era.ⁱ Kant carefully distinguished cognitive, moral, and aesthetic judgments. For him, morality must recognise aesthetic autonomy, expressed through pure judgments of taste, which, unlike cognitive or moral judgments on the one hand, and mere likings on the other, exhibit subjective universality, and postulate purposiveness without a purpose. Kant then re-implicated these categories of judgment at a higher level. Taste has to serve moral autonomy, and its cultivation contributes to moral development. However, Kant argued that taste can serve moral autonomy only if morality also recognizes aesthetic autonomy—that is, that the value spheres are separated.

In contrast, it is commonly held, the Ancient Greeks did not recognise aesthetic autonomy and the separation of the value spheres. As Keats's 'Grecian Urn' tells us, 'Beauty is Truth, and Truth Beauty / That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'. Thus Nussbaum refers to 'the thoroughgoing unity of the aesthetic with the ethical' seen in the Greek concept *kalon*. Translated as 'beautiful', 'noble' or 'fine' according to context, it is in reality a univocal word, she holds, 'evidence of the Greek belief that only what is ethically fine is pleasing to behold and that visible beauty is a sign of excellence' (Nussbaum 1996: 175).

What the unity or separation of the value spheres amounts to is difficult to elucidate, however. It is connected—in ways hard to disentangle—with another key modern development in the world of the arts, the advent of *the modern system of the arts*, which separates aesthetic and non-aesthetic skills. Paul Oskar Kristeller (1990) writes that although the ancients knew excellent works of art and felt their charm, they 'were neither able nor eager to detach [their] aesthetic quality ... from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical functioning or context, or to use such an aesthetic quality for grouping the fine arts together' (1990: 174).ⁱⁱ Prior to the modern era, therefore, there were no overarching categories of fine art or

entertainment. Before the eighteenth century, the non-aesthetic sense of ‘art’—‘practical skill or knowledge’—was dominant. Any skill can be evaluated aesthetically, but the primary evaluation of ‘the art of medicine’ is practical. ‘Medicine and engineering are arts’ means that these are not mechanical processes, but practical skills involving judgment. Before the modern era, art was not separated from skills or disciplines whose ends are not essentially aesthetic, such as the art of medicine, or the art of the astrologer. But since the advent of art for art’s sake in the earlier nineteenth century, the meaning of ‘art’ has become more aestheticized.

The aestheticisation of ‘art’ was accompanied by the development of the Western system of five major arts—painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry. According to Kristeller, this system did not assume definite shape till the eighteenth century, though ingredients were found in classical, medieval and Renaissance periods: ‘classical antiquity left no systems of elaborate concepts of an aesthetic nature ... merely a number of scattered notions’ (1990: 172).ⁱⁱⁱ In Ancient Greece, he argued, what we now separate into art, craft and science were conflated. Kristeller’s claim is not that the Greeks lacked separate *terms* for art, craft and—by implication—entertainment. Rather, they did not *conceive* of a distinction between art and craft, or art and entertainment; they lacked overarching, self-conscious concepts of either. Kristeller must be interpreted as distinguishing *self-conscious art* (‘Art’ with a capital ‘A’), from *unself-conscious art* (‘art’ with a small ‘a’). ‘They did not conceive of these artefacts as art’ does not imply ‘They are not art’. Thus we recognise Anglo-Saxon clasps from Sutton Hoo as art of the highest quality—a conception grasped only imperfectly by their makers.^{iv} Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Plato’s dialogues and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* showed a depth and complexity later recognised as belonging to high art; Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* was perhaps regarded as entertainment in the 1790s, but is high art now.

Murdoch seems not to recognise these broad historical generalisations concerning the value-spheres and the modern system of the arts. In various writings, Murdoch refers to views that Plato and other Greek thinkers had of ‘art’—for instance she comments that Plato ‘came to mistrust art’ (SGC 372)—seemingly without recognising that their possession of an aesthetic concept of art is in question. Her dialogue ‘Art and Eros’ suggests that Plato assumed a system of the aesthetic arts, and she has Plato referring to ‘the arts’, meaning aesthetic arts. The dialogue may be self-consciously anachronistic, but Murdoch does not seem aware that to treat a system of the arts in this way is to undermine her Platonic claim that, to reiterate, ‘aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals’ (IP 332)—that is, that aesthetics and ethics are unified. Her stance in ‘The Fire and the Sun’ is almost ironic, in her comment that ‘the Greeks lacked what Bosanquet 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’ (F&S 391). She acknowledges that the Greeks ‘lacked our reverential conception of “fine art”, for which there is no separate term in Greek, the word *techne* covering art, craft and skill’ (F&S 387); but Kristeller’s thesis is not that the Greeks lacked a word for fine art, but that they lacked a *concept* of art in the modern aesthetic sense, distinct from practical skills such as shoe-making and book-binding. The Greek conceptual system did not properly distinguish aesthetic and non-aesthetic arts. Finally, Murdoch does not discuss the ambiguities of ‘kalon’ (as Nussbaum does, quoted above).

Murdoch might well affirm a thesis of the *qualified unity of the value spheres* in Ancient Greece. On this view, the ethical does not absorb or eliminate the aesthetic, but merely seeks to appropriate it; ‘kalon’ is not univocal but ambiguous, its distinct meanings clearly separated in context. Proponents of qualified separation cite the fact that Socrates argued that ‘kalon’ is

good, and did not assume it.^v When his fellow disputants describe Socrates as a great thinker but very ugly—he has a snub nose and warts on his face—they say that he is not ‘kalos’, but without in this context implying that Socrates is immoral or impious. When the term is used to describe Socrates as lacking martial valour, however, this is a moral criticism.

Christopher Janaway (1995) advocates qualified unity when he argues that Plato was not blind to the realm of the aesthetic, but knew its seductiveness and declared his arguments a ‘charm’ to defend Philosophy from the fine words of poetry (1995: 7). According to Janaway, Plato was familiar with *an aesthetic conception of the arts*—a system of the aesthetic arts—and was aware that some people assign them autonomous value on the basis of the pleasure they provide (1995: 8). On this interpretation, Plato would recognise that a kithara-player was skilful, a purely aesthetic assessment having nothing to do with morality or piety. In *The Republic* and elsewhere, he refers to ‘lovers of sights and sounds’ who fail to learn about beauty because they look only for individual beautiful things, rather than by pure reason trying to divine beauty’s essence; Plato wants to re-educate us to become finer connoisseurs of beauty led by our understanding of the good. Thus, for Janaway, Plato recognises the arts as providing aesthetic pleasure, but denies them a prominent place in the best human lives (1995: 57–58).

It is hard to decide whether the ‘qualified unity’ interpretation is correct—whether the Greeks had a qualified or full unity of the value-spheres. Plato is an extreme example even among Greek thinkers, and his notion of beauty, divorced from the autonomy and subjectivity of aesthetic experience emphasised by Kant, is alien to us. The qualified interpretation is less imponderable, and Murdoch is likely to favour it; it allows us to present her views on the ethical role of art in terms close to those of our contemporary concepts. So on this assumption, we

now turn to the question of how, according to Murdoch, attention to certain kinds of art can have an ethically relevant effect.

The ethical role of good art in virtue of its relation to truth: how Murdoch is closer to Kant than to Plato

In this section we demonstrate that, while Murdoch is drawn to aspects of Plato's treatment of the aesthetic, she also diverges from him in important ways, showing an often-neglected Kantian influence.^{vi}

The ethical role of beauty

According to Murdoch, certain instances of art are instances of beauty more generally. But, when talking about beauty, she refers also to aspects of the natural world that qualify as beautiful, such as flowers and animals. Beauty, according to Murdoch, is connected to the good insofar as contemplation of beauty is 'an occasion for 'unselfing' (SGC 369). 'Unselfing' is one of the most important concepts in Murdoch's ethics. It denotes a virtuous detachment from one's own selfish concerns, by directing one's attention to what is outside oneself. Contemplation of natural beauty can help us direct our attention outside ourselves in this way. It is notable that natural beauty can allow unselfing that is involuntary—capturing our attention and bringing about unselfing almost in spite of ourselves:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then I suddenly observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I

return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care. (SGC 369)

Certainly, observation of nature (seemingly qua beautiful) has the ethically relevant effect of leading us to unselfing—directing our attention towards what is real outside of ourselves. Another thing that Murdoch finds attractive about the ethical role of the observation of nature is that it is within reach of most people:

I take this starting point, not because I think it is the most important place of moral change, but because I think it is the most accessible one. It is so patently a good thing to take delight in flowers and animals that people who bring home potted plants and watch kestrels might even be surprised at the notion that these things have anything to do with virtue. (SGC 370)

Murdoch here seems to have switched from talking about merely observing nature to loving nature ('taking delight in flowers and animals'). This is not surprising since, according to her, exercises of attention are exercises of love—attention ought to involve a loving gaze. Holding that beauty has moral value is consistent with a Kantian separation of the value-spheres. Kant himself regarded natural beauty in this way. However, to reiterate, Murdoch is closer to Plato in advocating at least a qualified unity of the value-spheres.

Good art and the technai: truth and unselfing

Murdoch argues that art, as well as nature, can be an occasion for unselfing, and is thus of ethical relevance: 'The notion of a loving respect for a reality other than oneself is as relevant to making a vase as it is to writing a novel, nor does the theory only apply to arts which involve, in the obvious sense, imitation' (S&G 218). She adds that only good art can achieve this end.

On the ethical relevance of experience of good art, Murdoch comments:

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 in its enjoyment it is ... 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 so 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 consciousness. (SGC 370)

In this passage, Murdoch holds that through enjoyment of *beauty* in the form of good art, we can exercise virtue (i.e., do *good*) as we direct attention away from ourselves, and focus it on something that exists independently of us, namely what is *true*.

Elizabeth Burns (2015) has pointed out that Murdoch recognises ‘the fundamentally religious nature of Plato’s objections to art’—witness Murdoch’s comment that ‘Art is dangerous [for Plato] chiefly because it apes the spiritual and subtly disguises and trivializes it’ (F&S 443), and her argument that ‘Plato never did justice to the unique truth-conveying capacities of art’ (F&S 461). Murdoch holds that proper attention to great artworks generates a clear vision of reality, mediated by beauty. In contrast, she argues, ‘Plato wants to cut art off from beauty, because he regards beauty as too serious a matter to be commandeered by Art’ (F&S 401). Plato accords this ethically relevant role to the *technai*, i.e. ‘the sciences, crafts, and intellectual disciplines excluding the arts’ (SGC 373).

Murdoch calls Plato a ‘puritan’ who espouses a ‘puritanical aesthetic’ (F&S 396). In the terminology that we propose, that makes him an *ideological philistine*—as opposed to a *casual*

philistine with no serious interest in art. Matthew Arnold coined the term ‘philistine’ to mean ‘uncultured person’. The ideological or puritan philistine insists that art can be valuable in itself, provided that it serves some ideological function. Mao Zedong, for instance, commented that ‘There is ... no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics’ (1953: 86). There are also conflicted ideologues, however. Thus Lenin apparently enjoyed listening to Beethoven, but regarded love of art as bourgeois, because it took one’s attention away from revolutionary activity.^{vii} Ideological philistines respect art’s power, maintaining that it has a bad effect on society and should therefore be stamped out. The casual philistine cannot be bothered about art; the ideological philistine actively detests it.

However, as we have seen, it may be anachronistic to assume a modern category of arts in Ancient Greece. Plato is best described as a *proto-philistine*, and one must question Murdoch’s claim that he ‘seems to have come to believe that all art is bad art, a mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality’ (SGC 372). Since the system of the arts that Plato envisages is attenuated at best, one should limit his critique to poetry, as it is the poets—and not artists in general, a category not then conceptualised—that he wishes to banish. Murdoch agrees with Plato that beauty can be a vehicle for exercising virtue and apprehending truth, but disagrees with him concerning whether poetry can be such a vehicle.

Murdoch agrees with Plato concerning the ethical relevance of the *technai*, insofar as they can also reveal to us something that has independent existence from us. She views mathematics as an example of this ethical relevance and provides learning Russian as her own example. Both require devoting attention to something outside oneself, with independent existence. Murdoch vividly illustrates the idea of independent existence in terms of something ‘very like another

organism' (IP 374). Both, therefore, constitute an occasion for unselfing. Moreover, as exercises of learning, they require humility on the part of the learner, an acknowledgment of external authority.^{viii} In sum, Murdoch and Plato agree on the ethical relevance of the *technai*, but, whereas Murdoch accords the same relevance to good art, Plato denies this to poetry.

The paramount ethical value of good art: the reality of other people

We have emphasised how, for Murdoch, good art seems comparable to natural beauty as an occasion for unselfing. However, she suggests that good art is of special moral value, in offering a vantage point on the human condition to those appreciating it. Murdoch is a rare contemporary proponent of artistic truth, arguing that art presents us with 'a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated', 'the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all' (SGC 371).

The comparison with Kant is instructive. He holds that nature has higher moral value than art, while Murdoch ultimately favours art more than he does:

The experience of art is more easily degraded than the experience of nature. A great deal of art, perhaps most art, is self-consoling fantasy ... However, great art exists and is sometimes properly experienced and even a shallow experience of what is great can have its effect. (SGC 370)

She suggests that '[a]rt is less accessible than nature, but also'—unlike Kant—'more edifying since it is actually a human product, and certain arts are actually "about" human affairs in a direct sense' (SGC 370).

In ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’, Murdoch states that, ‘in the case of the novel, the most important thing to be thus revealed, [though] not necessarily the only thing ... is that other people exist’ (SBR 282). Let us qualify this statement, as it contains themes worth distinguishing. First, we again note a statement of the enjoyment of good art as an occasion for unselfing, insofar as good art—in this case, the novel, the form most familiar to Murdoch—reveals the independent existence of something other than ourselves. We already pointed out that the contemplation of nature is also an occasion for unselfing, insofar as it shows us something that exists independently of us; and, as we also saw, the *technai* give us the chance of doing this. However, according to Murdoch, acknowledging the reality of other people, especially how their character and psychology differ from ours, is the most important form of unselfing—insofar as other people’s independent existence is the most important thing that can be revealed to us.

Murdoch argues that not only the *enjoyment*, but also the *production*, of art affords an important form of unselfing, since it connects us with the independent existence of others:

Other people are ... the most interesting features of our world and in some way the most poignantly and mysteriously alien. Literature tells us things and teaches us things. In portraying characters the author displays most clearly his discernment, his truthfulness, his justice, or his lack of these qualities, and one of our enjoyments lies in considering and judging his judgments. The highest pleasures of literature and, one might say, of art generally, are in this sense moral pleasures. (AIN 257)

She maintains that, to represent the reality of other people, the novelist must restrain projection of their own personality and psychology onto their characters. Clearly, this is a struggle with which she is familiar:

Art is not an expression of personality, it is a question rather of the continual expelling of oneself from the matter in hand. [Novelists have] this difficulty in the special form which it takes when one is dealing with fictitious characters ... one [soon] discovers that, however much one is in the ordinary sense 'interested in other people,' this interest has left one far short of possessing the knowledge required to create a real character who is not oneself. (SBR 283)

Thus again we see a connection between beauty in the guise of art and the exercise of virtue: Murdoch maintains that a novelist, in order to produce good art, must possess knowledge of real people that will enable them to 'let his characters be, to respect their freedom' (SBR 284).

Later, we will see that, according to Murdoch, some forms of bad art emerge precisely from lack of this virtue, as an author projects their own inner conflict on the portrayed characters.

Good art as truthful compassion

We noted earlier Murdoch's persuasive statement of artistic cognitivism:

[in art] we are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated and indeed it is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all ... Art transcends the selfish obsessive limitations of the personality and can enlarge the sensibility of the consumer. (SGC 371)

We now contextualise this remark as a statement about the paramount importance of art, revealing to us the human condition.

Sometimes, Murdoch seems to suggest that good art can reveal a view of the human condition that is at once more truthful and more just. She holds that we learn from the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian

... about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life. (OGG 353)

'The enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue', she comments, '... it exhibits to us the connection, in *human* beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion' (SGC 371). 'Art ... is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*' (SGC 372).

As Burns (2015) has pointed out, for Murdoch, great art offers 'a juster, clearer, more detailed, more refined understanding of human nature, or of the natural world' (Murdoch 1986: 90),¹ and that the connection between a more just and a more compassionate view of reality appears in Murdoch's 'The Idea of Perfection', and also in her comment that in Rubens' 'The Last Supper', the appearance of Judas' dog, sitting under his chair, invites us to see him not merely as a villain, but as a sinful human being with redeeming qualities (MGM 86). However, in 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts', Murdoch also seems to suggest that the acknowledgment of reality afforded by appreciation of good art can bring about not only a more compassionate view of reality, but, on occasion, a more disillusioned one. We now explore this other aspect in connection with her distinction between good and bad art.

¹ Material also published in MGM, ch. 11.

Murdoch's view of 'bad art'

In the previous section, we reviewed Murdoch's idea that the production as well as enjoyment of art constitute paramount cases of unselfing, insofar as they acquaint us with what she stipulates to be the most important instance of independent reality: that of other people. To reiterate, Murdoch believes that it is only the production and enjoyment of good, rather than bad, art, that constitutes this particularly important occasion for unselfing.

Good vs. bad art: truth vs. fantasy, complexity vs. order

We can now appreciate what, for Murdoch, is the ethical role of good art. Her account rests on a contrast between truth and objectivity—whose acknowledgement may involve psychological discomfort—and a human selfish desire that takes refuge from reality, partly through its focus on oneself and one's self-interest. This is how we may interpret Murdoch's idea of 'the selfish dream life of the consciousness' and 'self-consoling fantasy' (SGC 370). According to Murdoch, art expresses 'the almost irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy and also of the effort to resist this and the vision of reality which comes with success. Success ... is rare' (OGG 352). 'Almost all art is a form of fantasy-consolation and few artists achieve the vision of the real' (SGC 370).

Murdoch distinguishes between fantasy and imagination in the context of a discussion of literature thus:

... more often [literature] is criticised for being in some sense untruthful. Words such as 'sentimental', 'pretentious', 'self-indulgent', 'trivial' and so on, impute some kind of falsehood, some failure of justice, some distortion or inadequacy of understanding

or expression. The word ‘fantasy’ in a bad sense covers many of these typical literary faults. It may be useful to contrast ‘fantasy’ as bad with ‘imagination’ as good. (LP 11)

On the notion of fantasy, moreover, Floora Ruokonen helpfully comments:

It allows us to deny what is real and unpleasant and thus functions as a protective mechanism of our ego. Fantasy consoles by wrapping our ego in its own dreams and thus forms a barrier against what is real, messy, incomplete and formless. The most persistent dream produced by fantasy is, in light of Murdoch’s account, the dream ... where a fantasizing ego builds up a world with form, order, and purpose and places itself at its centre. (2008: 87)

Thus the ‘sentimental untruthful tale of how the brave attractive ego ... triumphs over accident and causality and is never really mocked or brought to nought’ (MGM 86). In contrast, ‘[a] study of good literature, or of any good art, enlarges and refines our understanding of truth’ (MGM 86).

The ethical power of good art therefore resides in how it can show us the truth about the human condition:

... we find a remarkable redemption of our tendency to conceal death and chance by the invention of forms. Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete. (SGC 371)

Interestingly, Murdoch introduces Kant’s theory of the sublime into a theory of art, citing his distinction between the beautiful as orderly, and the sublime as boundless, overwhelming and escaping order. Kant, like Burke, thought of the sublime as involving the experience of nature as overwhelming and awe-inspiring. Objects of the sublime include the vast expanse of the desert, towering mountain ranges, the countless stars in the night sky, volcanoes, raging seas.

The mathematically sublime involves sheer magnitude and formlessness; the dynamically sublime, irresistible might.

Murdoch suggests that, like wild nature, the human condition can be overwhelming in its absence of order:

‘The sublime’ is an enjoyment and renewal of spiritual power arising from an apprehension of the vast formless strength of the natural world. How close this is indeed to being a theory of tragedy, if we think of the spectator as gazing not at the Alps, but at the spectacle of human life. (SBR 282)

Thus, Murdoch seems to have in mind the mathematically sublime, rather than the dynamical sublime. The idea of the human condition as resisting order and displaying complexity is best appreciated when she discusses the complexity of the human individual, and the previously noted effort that a novelist has to make in order faithfully and realistically to represent the psychology of characters other than those that embody the author’s personality. This attempt is made more difficult by the fact that the personality and psychology of real people is more complicated than meets the eye. Thus, according to Murdoch, ‘what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons’ (AD 293).

Murdoch borrows from Kant also the idea that experiencing the sublime involves a range of responses. We refer to the mathematically sublime, since this seems to be what Murdoch has in mind in her parallel with human individuals. This kind of sublime elicits displeasure which is based on awareness of the inadequacy of our imagination. However, it also evokes pleasure due to an awareness of the superiority of our reason over nature. Murdoch suggests that a similar range of responses is present in our contemplation of the human condition:

It is indeed the realisation of a vast and varied reality outside ourselves which brings

about a sense initially of terror, and when properly understood of exhilaration and spiritual power. (SBR 282)

While her appeal to the Kantian sublime is thought-provoking and of great interest, we submit that Murdoch underestimates Kantian's aesthetics in two respects. First, while she rightly draws a parallel between the contemplation of natural landscapes giving rise to the experience of sublime and the contemplation of 'the spectacle of human life' (SBR 282), the parallel breaks down insofar as Kant requires that spectacles of nature that give rise to experiences of the sublime can be observed from a safe vantage-point (1983: 261). It is unclear what would constitute this vantage-point in the contemplation of the human condition, although perhaps Murdoch could argue that the artist's point of view is such a vantage-point. For instance, while writing a novel, an author is not involved in a real-life confrontation with the characters they portray.

Another respect in which Murdoch may have misinterpreted Kant's aesthetics is her suggestion that 'for Kant [the sublime] had nothing to do with art' (SBR 282). This is unjust to Kant, since he acknowledged instances of the sublime in art, noting that 'the exhibition of the sublime may, insofar as it belongs to fine art, be combined with beauty in a tragedy in verse, in a didactic poem, or in an oration' (1983: 261).

Bad art as fantasy: a Freudian influence

Murdoch was fascinated by Freud's account of human behaviour, which she treated with respect and suspicion. She argued that '[w]e need a moral philosophy which can speak significantly of Marx and Freud ... out of which aesthetic and political views can be generated'

(OGG 337). These modern critics of Enlightenment see human rationality as undermined by self-deception. In 'On 'God' and 'Good'', Murdoch writes that Freud presents us with

a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man. ... Freud takes a 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 341)

His influence is moreover apparent in her comment that

One of [the psyche's] main pastimes is daydreaming ... Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation ... Even its loving is more often than not an assertion of self. (SGC 364).

Her discussion may be informed by Freud's essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1909), referenced in 'The Fire and the Sun' (419–20), which understands art in terms of wish-fulfilment and fantasy.

For Freud, 'every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way that pleases him' (1909: 421). The growing child creates day-dreams: 'most people construct phantasies at times in their lives. This is a fact which has long been overlooked and whose importance has therefore not been sufficiently appreciated' (422). Freud simplistically distinguishes 'writers who, like the ancient authors of epics and tragedies, take over their material ready-made, from writers who seem to originate their own material' (425). From the latter, he selects the 'less pretentious authors of

novels, romances and short stories’, more popular works which feature heroes who improbably survive perilous adventures: ‘through this revealing ... invulnerability we can immediately recognise His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and of every story’ (425).

Murdoch draws on Freud’s conception when she writes that

Ordinary works of art may be seen as illusory unities, the reassuring image of the satisfied ego ... a frolic between the imagination and the understanding producing a quasi-thing (Kant), or a collusion between the unconscious desires of the artist and his client (Freud). (MGM 104)

She allows that tragedy transcends these ‘ordinary artworks’; but her account underestimates Kant’s aesthetics, and is over-generous to Freud, as we now see.

Consolation, escapism and entertainment

Murdoch’s separation between good art and ‘self-consoling fantasy’ or entertainment is too strict. We now argue that good art and what Murdoch terms ‘self-consoling fantasy’, and also good art and entertainment, have points of intersection. One reason for rejecting her separation is the vital distinction between consolation and escapism.

We should first point out that occasionally, especially when discussing the relationship between art and philosophy (e.g., LP), Murdoch does concede, first, that ‘art is fun and for fun’ (LP 4), and, secondly, that there are certain kinds of art that offer consolation in a way that she does not find objectionable. For example, Murdoch acknowledges that ‘[a] sentimental novel can be a decent rest from one’s troubles’ (LP 14)—though, she hastens to add, ‘one might be even better off reading *War and Peace*’ (LP 14). She also comments that ‘[a]s far as we can see into the human future, there will doubtless be bad novels, cheering people up and probably

not doing them too much harm' (E&M 233–234).^{ix} However, there are also many places where Murdoch suggests a separation between good art, on the one hand, and entertainment interpreted as self-consoling fantasy, on the other hand, and it is in relation to this aspect of Murdoch's thought that we present our criticism.

In distinguishing art and entertainment, one must distinguish the escapism found in entertainment, from the consolation that art affords. Art creates an imaginary world that is not an escape from reality, but in some way reflects it. A consoling artwork engages with the issue in question; escapist entertainment has nothing do with it (in fact, this disengagement is probably required). The concept of escapism is surprisingly new, as Heilman points out, but by the mid-20th century became a standard cliché of denigration.^x Norman Demuth, in *Musical Trends in the Twentieth Century*, defended 'finding solace' and insisted, '[t]his is not the same thing as escapism'.^{xi} But Heilman argues that

[t]here is some element of escape in reading all kinds of literature, that one may escape into a simpler and more orderly world or into a richer and deeper one ... the ultimate issue is whether, and in what frame of mind, one returns from the adventure of escape. (457–8)

In light of these considerations, Murdoch demands too much of consolation when she writes that

[t]he 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 347–348)

Her claim that 'almost everything that consoles us is a fake' (OGG 348) is too strong.^{xii} An aesthete gains repose from seeing beautiful things; this may count as consolation, as it involves bringing order to chaos—unselfing, as opposed to bringing a false to order to one's own chaos.

As Roger Scruton comments, the great artists ‘were aware that human life was full of care and suffering, but their remedy was beauty. The beautiful work of art brings consolation in sorrow and affirmation ... It shows human life to be worthwhile’ (Selene 2013).

By ‘bad art’, Murdoch seems to mean ‘pure entertainment’—entertainment that is escapist. But there are also artist-entertainers such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Austen whose work expresses truths about the human condition. It is *pure entertainment* that involves escapism, not the work of artist-entertainers. As mentioned previously, Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* was born as entertainment, and is now considered high art. Thus it may be that instances of (artistic) entertainment can constitute good art from the viewpoint that matters most to Murdoch—an adequate portrait of humanity, and realistic rendition of characters. Murdoch seems not to recognise that almost all human art involves entertainment at least in a minimal sense.

Consider P.G. Wodehouse’s delightful novel *Summer Lightning*. This is entertainment, but replete with richly comic characters that feel as psychologically real as those of the Dickens of *Pickwick Papers*: neither the sketchy, superficial ones that, according to Murdoch, populate novels that resemble journalism, nor projections of Wodehouse’s personality. Thus, for example, the Hon. Galahad Threepwood, brother of the Earl of Emsworth, in virtue of his ‘thoroughly misspent life’, can see through, and distance himself from, the prejudices of others of his social class. Though in a light-hearted way, some Wodehouse novels do indeed offer a truthful portrait of the human condition. That is, there can be instances of entertainment that are good art also from the point of view of their connection with truth.

To sum up, though Murdoch makes concessions to the idea that art can be entertaining, she generally assumes too strict an opposition between good art and entertainment, where the latter is interpreted as escapist in involving self-consoling fantasy. We noted, first, that art can offer consolation in virtue of its beauty without being escapist. We also pointed out that, historically, what we now consider to be high art was produced by artist-entertainers, such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Austen. The entertainment their art offers is not pure escapism: these works of art convey truths about the human condition—which, according to Murdoch, is central to good art.

Separation of the value-spheres reassessed

We now return to the relation of the value-spheres, and attempt to adjudicate Murdoch's relation to Platonic unity and Kantian separation in light of our discussion of art and entertainment. We noted that Kant carefully distinguished cognitive, moral and aesthetic judgments, but re-connected these categories of judgment at a higher level, as follows. Taste has to serve moral autonomy, and its cultivation contributes to moral development. An interest in beauty, especially of nature, suggests 'a good soul' and a 'mental attunement favourable to moral feeling'; experiencing beauty encourages 'the development of moral ideas and the culture of feeling' (1983, sec 42, 60). The beautiful 'prepares us to love something, even nature, without interest' (sec 29)—for itself. Beauty is the symbol of morality; moral ideas (sec 60) can be presented to sense only through experience of beauty, symbolically, because they are purely rational. As Guyer puts it, 'Taste can serve moral autonomy only if morality can also recognize aesthetic autonomy' (2010: 19).^{xiii}

To reiterate, Murdoch's view that art and beauty can have moral effects is consistent with a Kantian separation of the value-spheres: separation does not imply 'no connection'. Murdoch may not recognise this, however—for instance, she comments that 'Kant ... wants to cut beauty off from morals' (F&S 401). Indeed, her avowed position may have more affinities with art-loving unifiers such as Hegel, than with the Plato who banished the poets. Hegel was nostalgic for the harmonious world of the Greeks, disrupted by the Romans and leading to the divisions of the modern era:

the more profound, serious connection of living art [to culture as a living whole] can no longer be understood. The entire system of relations constituting life has become detached from art, [whose] all-embracing coherence has been lost, and transformed into the concept either of superstition or of entertainment ... [intellect and the aesthetic religious perfection] have [separated] into realms that are completely set apart from one another. (Hegel 1977: 92)

Hegel's position has been neglected in the philosophical literature, with the decline in discussion of the unity versus separation of the value-spheres.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have highlighted that Murdoch's views about art show (often neglected) influences of both Kant and Freud. As a committed moral realist, Murdoch's aesthetic standpoint ought to be closer to Plato's than Kant's. But in addressing the ravages of Freud's ego, she thinks that Kant offers an answer: the good undermines the ego. That is, through 'unselfing', one can moderate the ego's impulses and inclination to distance oneself from the truth. Relatedly, according to Murdoch, good art is deeply connected with morality, insofar as both the production and the enjoyment of good art are exercises of virtue. Specifically, the

enjoyment of beauty, both in the form of nature and of art, is an occasion for ‘unselfing’. Good art is also deeply connected with truth, insofar as it shows us the truth of the human condition. Bad art, by contrast, ensnares us in untruthful self-consoling fantasy.

Murdoch is inspired by Kant’s moral perfectionism, therefore—morality is infinitely demanding and always asks more of us than we can achieve. Murdoch also draws on Kant’s account of the mathematically sublime when she discusses the range of responses one can have to the recognition of the complexity of the human condition, though she neglects some aspects of Kant’s account here. The ironic result is a treatment of art and aesthetics that draws more from Kant’s moral philosophy than from his aesthetics, and, generally, more from Kant than from Plato.

There is more of a Kantian moral rigorism in Murdoch’s aesthetics than in Kant’s own aesthetics, indeed. That rigorism underlies Murdoch’s implausible separation of entertainment from art, and her failure properly to distinguish escapism and consolation. To reiterate, her comment that ‘Almost everything that consoles us is a fake’ seems too strong. It is possible to gain consolation from good art without engaging in what Murdoch calls *self-consoling fantasy*.

Above all, we have noted that there is an anachronism in Murdoch’s alleged engagement with Plato’s views about art, which fails to acknowledge that in Plato’s time there was no aesthetic conception of art, but rather an assimilation of arts, sciences and crafts. Murdoch’s discussion of Plato, moreover, reflects the modern neglect of the question of the unity of the value spheres, and is not sensitive to its complexities. Thus, Murdoch’s statement to the effect that ‘[b]eauty and the *technai* are, to use Plato’s image, the text written in large letters’ (SGC 374) may seem to indicate allegiance a Platonic unity of the value spheres. We have pointed out that, in fact,

Plato's thought is consistent with a qualified unity of the value spheres, and Murdoch's other views on art are consistent with a Kantian separation of the value spheres.

We have thus shown that Murdoch's views of art are closer to Kant's than to Plato's, though they rely more on Kant's ethics than his aesthetics. We have also shown the influence that Freud's ideas have had on Murdoch's notion of bad art as self-consoling fantasy, aspects of which we have taken issue with. Murdoch's treatment of the relation of art, beauty and morality is nonetheless a profound one.^{xiv}

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ⁱ ‘Diremption’ just means ‘forcible separation’. See Hamilton (forthcoming 2022).

ⁱⁱ Shiner (2001) also advances this position.

ⁱⁱⁱ By ‘aesthetic’, he presumably means ‘artistic’. See Shiner (2001), especially pp. 10–11.

^{iv} See Nees 2002: 111.

^v These authorities cite the contrast in the *Gorgias* between the pleasant and the good—‘hedu’ (‘pleasant’) is a more important term than ‘kalon’.

^{vi} That influence is however recognised by Bagnoli (2003), Grenberg (2014), Merritt (2017), Velleman (1999).

^{vii} See Hamilton (forthcoming 2022), ch. on art for art’s sake.

^{viii} See Robjant’s chapter in this volume.

^{ix} We are grateful to the editors of this volume for pressing us on this point.

^x Heilman (1975), in particular p. 444.

^{xi} Quoted in Heilman (1975: 453).

^{xii} See Cooper (2019).

^{xiii} As Martin Seel writes, ‘the domains of aesthetics, epistemology and ethics—separated initially by Kant—are internally connected’ (2005: 4).

^{xiv} Thanks to: Andrew Cooper, Clare MacCumhaill, John Skorupski, the editors of this volume.