In: M. del Carmen Paredes (ed.) *Filosofía, arte y Mística,* Salamanca University Press, 2017.

A Secular Mysticism? Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and the Idea of Attention

Silvia Panizza, University of East Anglia

I

In this paper I compare the idea of attention as a necessary condition for mysticism in Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. Simone Weil, the mystic and philosopher, understands attention as a necessary, but not sufficient, exercise in order to achieve a mystical experience of the divine. A few decades later, Oxford philosopher Iris Murdoch takes the concept of attention from Weil almost intact, but places it within her own metaphysics, from which, notably, God is absent. At the same time, however, Murdoch wishes to retain the sense of the mystical in relation to the idea of attention, despite denying the existence of God. The question I address in this paper is in what way, if at all, Murdoch can claim to offer a form of mysticism without God. The answer to this question depends on an examination of the similarities and differences between Weil’s concept of attention and Murdoch’s, since both hold attention to be central for grasping any kind of truth. I will conclude by suggesting that, despite the differences, in both philosophers the mystical is best understood as an ethical attitude.

II

In *Waiting for God*, Simone Weil writes that prayer is not petition, but attention to God which is also a form of love. Such attention is not to be understood as active straining or a kind of muscular effort, but rather, as Weil puts it, as a “passive activity”, which involves the attempt to silence and empty the self in order to make space for God within one. Attention involves, on the one hand, a positive or active effort, insofar as the attentive individual desires to be in the presence of the divine, and orders all her faculties and desires towards that goal; the attentive individual must also actively expel or silence any interference coming from her particular self, which includes her individual perspective and imagination. On the other hand, the passive element of attention means that the attentive mind is receptive but not seeking; that it is not trying to understand, but to make itself available for understanding to occur. Such passivity is not mere lack of action, but a very difficult task, because it goes against what Weil sees as the natural human tendency to grasp, possess, interpret. Weil describes attention in an illuminating and beautiful passage thus:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Attention does not, of course, guarantee any form of mystical insight. Human beings have no such power. All we can do is to place ourselves in the state of maximal receptivity and self-negation, and then, if God wills, Grace descends upon us while being attentive, and we are brought closer to the truth and to the reality of the divine.

III

The idea of attention as pre-requisite for the mystical needs to be understood upon the background of Weil’s religious metaphysics, so in what follows I shall briefly summarise its relevant aspects. Following the Kabbalistic tradition of Isaac Luria, Weil believes that God withdrew from the world at the time of creation. Because God is fullness of being, God cannot coexist with anything else; for anything else to exist, God has to withdraw. Such withdrawal is God’s supreme act of love: by making him/herself less, God allowed the world and living beings to exist.

Because everything emanates from the act of an absent God, reality is both empty of divinity but also follows its laws necessarily. The world, once created by God, continues to obey his/her will, in what Weil sees as an extreme form of determinism: everything in it follows mechanical laws. The only exception is constituted by human will or autonomy. Such autonomy is, however, for Weil, extremely limited: we are only free to choose whether to will to obey God’s laws, or not to will such obedience. As Weil puts it, “a creature cannot but obey. The only choice given to men, as intelligent and free creatures, is to desire obedience or not to desire it”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Desiring to obey equals to renouncing one’s will. And that, for Weil, is precisely the central act that is required, morally, of us: the only reason we have a will is so that we can give it up, and thus conform to God’s will. Our will is the only element in the whole of creation which is able to be discordant from God. By giving up our own will in obedience, we give up ourselves, in what Weil calls *decreation*, and at the same time give our consent to reality as God has ordered it. Such act imitates precisely the loving act of self-withdrawal by which God allowed us to exist.

IV

The attempt at withdrawing oneself just described under the heading of love is precisely, at the same time, what constitutes the act of attention, as Weil understands it. At its highest point, Weil writes, love is nothing but “intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention”[[3]](#footnote-3). Attention is related both to love and desire: like God’s love, attention is self-surrender, but like desire it creates a tension towards an external reality and out of oneself.

Problems begin to emerge, however, when we consider what the proper object of attention is. Earlier I mentioned attention to God as the necessary condition for the mystical. And indeed it can be said that God is the proper object of attention according to Weil: if attention is the only real free act of human beings, exercising the part of the soul that is not tied to necessity, then attention requires an object that is as infinite as its aspiration, and only God can fulfil that role. At the same time, however, in Weil’s metaphysics, God is absent from the world. So if we take God as the proper object of attention, a puzzle arises: how is it possible to attend to an object which does not exist in the reality given to humans?

Weil’s answer takes the form of a paradox: God is absent, but it is precisely through that absence that God manifests him/herself. Like two prisoners communicating by knocking on either side of a wall, the wall being both what separates them but also what allows them to talk to each other, so the reality of the world both carries the necessity of God’s absence, but it also displays, in God’s very absence, his/her reality.[[4]](#footnote-4) Absence is God’s way of being present.

The upshot of this idea is the following: attending to God and attending to the reality of the world are not two alternative activities, but part of the very same act. Attending to the beauty of nature, or to other human beings, can reveal *at the same time* the deeper reality of those objects, together with the existence of God of whom they are testimony.[[5]](#footnote-5)

To observe the world attentively in this way is, contrary to the ordinary sense of “attending”, an exceptional and almost impossible deed. This is because the natural state of humanity, for Weil and following Plato, is one of illusion or fantasy, and such condition is dependent on the presence of a self or ego. Because as individuals we are positioned, Weil writes, at the centre of our space and time, we fancy ourselves to be at the actual centre of space and time, and thus also to be a moral and metaphysical centre. The very possession of an “I” and of a point of view makes this illusion unavoidable. Therefore, everything is naturally viewed through our individual perspective, which is necessarily, qua perspective, distorting. To see reality clearly through attention, therefore, requires the effort to give up oneself, to unself or *decreate*, as Weil puts it, rejecting our natural self-centredness. Clear perception of reality coincides with loss of self. Because complete unselfing is almost impossible, clear perception of the world is also extremely rare: attention is an extraordinary state. As in Plato’s cave, human beings live in a state of illusion; only very few can give their individuality up in attention and thus reach a state of mystical contemplation of true reality. Not for nothing Weil believed that Plato was a great mystic, indeed “the father of Western mysticism”[[6]](#footnote-6).

To conclude the discussion of Weil’s notion of attention, we can identify two elements that characterise attention as necessary to the mystical path, intelligible on the background of Weil’s metaphysics:

i) the first element is *self-transcendence*, whereby in attention the individual is transformed and loses her individuality, replacing it with a sense of union with something greater than herself;

ii) the second, corresponding element is the *absolute value of reality and truth*, where the perception and understanding of reality and truth are considered as not being available to everyone, but only accessible through a mystical path.

V

The idea of attention has been notably inherited, in a different tradition, by the moral philosopher Iris Murdoch, who, influenced by Weil and Plato, has made the imperative to attend central to her thought. Strikingly, however, Murdoch’s idea of attention, while derived from Weil in almost all its elements, including the connection with mysticism, find its place within a metaphysics which explicitly excludes the existence of God. Whether and how it is possible for Murdoch to maintain the idea of mystical attention in a secular framework are the questions to be addressed.

In “On God and Good”[[7]](#footnote-7), Murdoch outlines the core requirements of her moral theory. Morality, Murdoch writes, depends first of all on purifying ourselves and our psychic energies. Such purification consists, mainly, in minimising if not eradicating the distorting influence of the self. That is achieved, Murdoch suggests, through attention, by which she understands the same gratuitous, selfless, loving passive-activity theorised by Weil.[[8]](#footnote-8) Both Murdoch and Weil recognise that, if attention has to be purifying and thus improving, the object of attention must be something that is able to capture the energies and motivation of the individual, inspire her with a worthy ideal, and thus transform her. Murdoch argues that such morally purifying object of attention must be something comprising a series of elements: it must be “single, perfect, transcendent, non-representable [and] necessarily real”[[9]](#footnote-9).

Murdoch admits that such “transcendent magnetic centre” can easily be identified with God and indeed has often been so identified. Similarly, she notes that attention can be taken as a form of prayer to God which purifies and improves the individual. But in Murdoch’s explanation of the various elements of the object of attention, there appears to be no necessity of conceiving of it as a supernatural entity, or a personal God. What is single perfect, transcendent, non-representable, necessarily real, for Murdoch, does not need to be anything more than the idea of Perfection or, in other words, the Good.

VI

Murdoch then goes on to prove that the Good exists, and that it has the features she claims, exactly in the same way as Anselm proved the existence of God.[[10]](#footnote-10) What Murdoch takes as important in Anselm is the idea, found in the reply to Gaunilo, that there exist degrees of perfection in realty, and that we are able to apprehend them as such. The apprehension of constantly different degrees of perfection or goodness in the world point us towards the idea that there must exist an end-point to such scales, and that such end point is the idea of Perfection or the Good. The Good, Murdoch claims, exists necessarily because it is implied in every thought and act of perception, because in every perception we intuit the possibility of perfection, however imperfectly instantiated, and in every thought we try to distinguish true from false according to an ideal. The perception of some degree of goodness and the search for truth are omnipresent aspects of human experience. The image, again, is Platonic: the Good – or the sun – is present, implicitly, whenever we see something clearly, whenever there is truth, and whenever we see something good.

However, for Murdoch, the Ontological Proof is only able to show this much: that there must exist an ideal of perfection, or a necessarily existing absolute, which is by its nature transcendent. Nothing else can be proven by the argument – the absolute or idea of perfection must be, as an ideal, indescribable. Therefore, for Murdoch, not even God can be proven by the argument, because what is perfect and transcendent cannot have any other particular attribute, as a personal God has. Therefore, she suggests that we substitute God with the Good as the magnetic centre of purifying attention, while retaining the ideas of transcendence, of absolute, and of perfection.

VII

Having made this move, Murdoch still goes on to employ, in a secular context, the very same concepts that Weil uses in her religious metaphysics in relation to the way in which it is possible to access truth – in particular, moral truth. If the Good is real but, being an ideal and an absolute, both transcendent and ineffable, then the Good is not accessible to ordinary experience. However, through attention, it is possible to come closer to a grasp of the Good. Let us see how.

For Murdoch, as for Weil, attention is meant to counter the natural self-centredness of human beings, which creates fantasies and illusions. While Weil gives a metaphysical account of the tendency towards self-centredness, Murdoch translates those ideas into modern psychological terminology, with a nod to Freud: for her it is the *ego* which is responsible for all our errors, because the *ego* is constantly involved in the attempt to protect and gratify itself, which often results in the distortion of reality, by seeing things as one wishes them to be, or as one fears them to be, etc. So for Murdoch, too, attention, as the attempt to see truly, involves a process of purification of the self, whereby the individual is turned completely towards the outside, away from the self. What motivates this process, for Murdoch, is not desire for God as in Weil, but desire for the Good. Again following Plato, Murdoch holds that what human beings really want is the Good (our energy is *eros*, love of the Good). Good is the proper object of desire and hence of attention. Here arises a parallel question to the one presented above in relation to Weil with respect God: how can Good be an object of attention, if it is transcendent, and thus beyond perception?

The answer, too, is similar to the one provided by Weil, but in the light of Murdoch’s reinterpretation of Anselm the solution becomes clearer: when one attends, one is aiming at the Good (or God, in Weil’s case), but all that one can apprehend is the world where the Good (or God) is not present, but at the same time where everything suggests the reality of the Good (or God). So directing attention to reality is, again, instrumental to achieving an apprehension of what is beyond ordinary reality. But because the Good, like God, governs the whole of reality, what successful attention yields is an apprehension of totality, of the world as a whole, which points both *at* and *beyond* itself, to the absolute.

Because Murdoch’s attention is necessary to achieve an apprehension of something that lies beyond immediately perceptible reality, but also governs the whole of it, she can refer to the effort to attend as a mystical aspiration, and to the rare successful instances of attention as experiences that are mystical in nature.

VIII

Through her view of morality as attention to the Good, Murdoch presents an understanding of the mystical as the apprehension of the absolute via the apprehension of reality as a whole. This understanding of the mystical, as a view *sub specie aeternitatis*, is reminiscent of some remarks made by a contemporary of Weil’s, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. In propositions 6.44-5 and 6.522 he writes:

6.44 Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is.

6.45 The contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni* is its contemplation as a limited whole. The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling.

6.522 There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Wittgenstein’s definition of the mystical, although not quoted by Murdoch, involves precisely that kind of attention to the world as a whole which Murdoch believes can disclose the omnipresence of the inexpressible Good. Following Wittgenstein, Murdoch’s way then appears as a mystical one, but without God.

Murdoch’s secular concept of attention, and the secular mysticism linked with it, also fits the famous four requirements laid down by William James for something to be considered mystical.[[12]](#footnote-12) First, attention enables some insight into the Good, which is at the same time ineffable; second, the Good is a real object of knowledge, although imperfect and non propositional knowledge; third, because attention is so rare and so difficult, and because ultimately apprehension of the Good does not entirely depend on the individual, such apprehension and union can only be transient; fourth, the act of attention leads to a passive receptivity to the reality which confronts the individual, which both Weil and Murdoch call *obedience*.

IX

I have suggested that it is possible to understand the linked perception of reality and of the absolute, which Murdoch believes can be achieved through attention, as a form of mysticism, as Murdoch herself claims. Clear perception goes hand in hand, in this model, with apprehension of the absolute, which is the Good. If this suggestion is accepted, then the mystical and the moral are indissoluble, and the practice of attention can be understood as a mystical practice of a moral kind. I would like to add, in closing, that Murdoch’s “moral mysticism”, despite lacking the idea of God, is in relevant aspects very similar to Weil’s mysticism, which is also essentially ethical. The similarity is displayed both in the moral psychology of attention, as well as in the metaphysical underpinnings of the practice of attention.

In both Weil and Murdoch, the exercise of attention enables apprehension of a reality which is beyond ordinary grasp. Yet, for both, such reality is nothing but the true nature of the world around us, which we are ordinarily too flawed to see (too selfish, too distracted, too afraid, etc.), so attention is required to purify our vision. The two requirements of attention presented above in Weil’s thought return unchanged in Murdoch’s secular view: self-transcendence and the absolute value of truth. For both, attention is self-transcendent, because it requires bracketing the ego, which becomes the central imperative in their moral psychology. This imperative depends on the normativity of truth and reality, which has two aspects.

Firstly, for both Weil and Murdoch reality and truth possess inherent value. Whereas for Weil reality has value because it manifests God’s will, for Murdoch its value depends on the existence of the Good which, while not manifest evenly in realty, is both variously present in the world and enables clear perception. Hence the individual’s first and foremost task is to try and perceive reality as clearly as possible. Secondly, a true vision of reality includes whatever value we perceive therein, and can therefore guide our actions, because the demands and needs of individual realities are finally truly perceived (this is understood by Weil as following God’s will, by Murdoch as responding to the moral demand of particular situations and individuals).

For these reasons, in both Weil and Murdoch, clear perception of reality is at the same time a mystical apprehension of the absolute. In the framework common to Murdoch and Weil, the mystic then becomes, not (only) a religiously enlightened person, but also the epitome of the good person, who having forgotten herself is able to see reality clearly as it truly is.

1. S. Weil, *Waiting on God* (translated by E. Craufurd), Glasgow: Collins, 1978, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. S. Weil, *Intimations of Christianity* (translated by E.C. Geissbhler), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. S. Weil, “Human Personality”, *Selected Essays 1934-1943* (translated by R. Rees), London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1962, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is an analogy used by Weil in S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (translated by E. Crawford and M. von der Ruhr), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See her remarks on the beauty of the world in S. Weil, “Love of the order of the world”, *Waiting on God*, 113-135. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. S. Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (translated by R. Rees), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Essay published in I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Murdoch explicitly acknowledge having borrowed the word “attention” from Simone Weil on various occasions; see for example *The Sovereignty of Good*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See “The Ontological Proof”, Chapter 13 of I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (translated by D.F. Pears and B. McGuinness), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 290-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)