Virtue[1]

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza

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Was Iris Murdoch a virtue ethicist? At first sight, it would appear that she was not. She does not offer an explicit definition of account of the term 'virtue', and there are significant differences between her views and those of standard Aristotelian virtue ethicists. There is no reason, however, to think that the standard Aristotelian view represents the only legitimate form of virtue ethics. In this chapter, I begin by recalling (in section 1) the main commonalities between Murdoch's criticisms of the prevailing moral theories of her time and those of other first-wave virtue-ethicists. I then highlight (in section 2) some cornerstones of Murdoch's peculiar approach to morality, which represent the background against which her account of virtue is developed, and I propose to trace these cornerstones back to a more diverse range of influences than the standard version of Aristotelianism. In section 3, I sketch the basics of Murdoch's account of virtue, and I argue that there are at least three routes to vindicate it as a genuine virtue-ethical approach: the Buddhist, the Kantian and the Socratic-Aristotelian. I explore each of these routes in turn in sections 4, 5, and 6. In conclusion, I argue that the virtue-ethical field would benefit a great deal from the kind of pluralistic account of virtue that Murdoch offers.

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1. Iris Murdoch and virtue ethics

It has been common for a long while to locate Iris Murdoch's thought within the virtue-ethical realm (see, for example, Okin 1998). This location has been established both on theoretical grounds and on the grounds of Murdoch's personal intimacy with the group of Oxford philosophers (including G. E. M. Anscombe and Philippa Foot) who first gave rise to a revival of virtue ethics. If we focus on the theoretical reasons only—the more relevant for a philosophical assessment of Murdoch's collocation within the virtue-ethical debate and for understanding her peculiar account of virtue—the commonalities can be grouped into two kinds: shared enemies and shared positive stances. One might say that there is a family resemblance between Murdoch and the other founders of virtue ethics, grounded both in their common targets and in an attempt to sketch a new ethical framework. Increasingly, however, important dissimilarities have led scholars to treat Murdoch as either an unorthodox virtue ethicist or a proponent of an entirely different framework: from Neoplatonism, to anti-theory, to some kind of Christian Buddhism or practical mysticism. In what follows, I briefly explore some of these hypotheses and try to vindicate the ways in which Murdoch can be seen as proposing a credible and coherent—and certainly original—account of virtue. First, however, let us take a step backwards to consider the commonalities and divergences between Murdoch and the rest of the Oxford group.

A well-known and striking example of the common enemies against which the members of the Oxford group all led an impressive battle is what Murdoch calls the 'current view' in moral philosophy—that is, the peculiar synthesis of metaethical noncognitivism and deontologism or consequentialism in normative ethics, against which Murdoch, Anscombe, and Foot raised a common voice (VCM 77). Echoing and endorsing Anscombe's famous critique of deontology (Anscombe 1958: 5), Murdoch complains, for example, that 'we have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold

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virtues of man and society. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him' (AD 290). The 'current view', held responsible for this loss, joins 'a materialistic behaviourism with a dramatic view of the individual as a solitary will' (AD 287), placing morality 'at the point of action' (AD 311). Refuting this 'Protestant, liberal, empiricist' (M&E 70) view means, for Murdoch, also rejecting existentialism and its emphasis on choice and free will (cf. IP 327).

In addition to this general criticism by Murdoch of the 'current view' in metaethics, and more specifically its anti-naturalism, another battle Murdoch joins with most first-wave virtue ethicists concerns the rejection of *principle-based ethical systems*, be they deontological or consequentialist. Against this approach to ethical theory, Murdoch emphasises the primacy of particular experience, and the importance of 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (IP 327), which is in direct opposition to the emphasis on impartial moral reasoning characteristic of contemporary theories (cf. Hämäläinen 2009: 541).

All of the criticisms seen so far pave the way for many of the positive stances shared by Murdoch and the 'founding mothers' of virtue ethics. Among the stances are, at least, the re-unification of facts and values and the importance of character and inner life (as opposed to an exclusive focus on overt actions). It is the latter positive view, in particular, which is most likely to have led to the inclusion of Murdoch among first-wave virtue ethicists.

It is here, at the intersection between the prevailing metaethics and normative theories, that the recovery of a central notion is located: that of character, and consequently of virtue. But, surprisingly, the mentions of the term 'virtue' in Murdoch's texts are not as frequent as in the writings of her colleagues; hence an impression may arise of lack of systematicity and of a proper theory of virtue, rather than the mere evocation of an image of virtuous character or the virtuous condition. Before

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asking whether and to what extent this impression is justified, however, it is necessary to take a look at the elements that make Murdoch an independent, almost-heterodox member of the group.

What, on closer inspection, prevents Murdoch from being pigeonholed in the virtue-ethical movement in the strict sense is, more than any thematic difference, her particular inspiration in accounting for the good, the self, and moral character, which generates a different image of virtue. This inspiration is the product of the original Murdochian reception and combination of Plato, Freud, Buddhism, and Simone Weil, which together give life to a different image of the self and the moral path, a rival to the Aristotelian naturalistic mainstream view shared by both Anscombe and Foot. I cannot dwell at length on this fourfold inspiration; however, in order to better understand the peculiar image of virtue which springs from it, it is necessary to sketch at least briefly the contours of Murdoch's original conception.

2. The good, the self, and moral progress

If one approaches Murdoch's writings in search of a proper definition of virtue, or a systematic theory, or even a list of virtuous traits, one cannot but be disappointed by a striking lack of such things, together with a lack of definiteness in her approach to the subject. This, however, does not mean that no definition can be found at all or that Murdoch has no interest in offering a positive account of how to develop a virtuous character. But such an account should not be borrowed from traditional lists or deduced from descriptions of human nature and its capacities. Thus, in this section, I highlight two cornerstones of Murdoch's original ethics and anthropology, which clearly depend on a different set of influences from the classic neo-Aristotelian ones and which help us to understand her peculiar account of virtue as moral vision, which I discuss in the next section:

   (i) The reality (hence, objectivity) of the good, platonically understood

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(ii) The fact that human nature is fallen (according to a Christian, but also markedly Weilian and Freudian, image), its fall consisting in the egocentric closure of the self and in the inability to escape from the self, which corresponds to the impossibility of bearing otherness and, more generally, reality. Hence, moral progress and transformation are understood in terms of an orientation to the good which consists in a reorientation of conscience through the attitude of unselfing, in line with a distinctly Weilian and Buddhist view.

In 'On "God" and "Good"' Murdoch defends the reality of the good as 'a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*' (OGG 344). This view appeals to a recovery of the platonic image of the sun: '[The sun] is real, it is out there, but very distant. It gives light and energy and enables us to know the truth. In its light we see the things of the world in their true relationship' (SGC 376). As this image suggests, one of the worst philosophical mistakes of her contemporaries is to offer a simplistic characterisation of the good as reducible to and absorbable by other concepts.[2] Every definition of the good reduces its sovereignty and mystery; rather than defining it, the good must be preserved in its otherness and irreducibility to good objects. Therefore, before trying to characterise the good and to link it to the exercise of the virtues, one should acknowledge the ultimate unknowability of the good and the fact that the good is always beyond our grasp. This is why Murdoch thinks of morality as 'a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsoled love of the Good' (SGC 376).

On the one hand, Murdoch lines up against Moore's successors when affirming that 'the concept Good resists collapse into the selfish empirical consciousness. It is not a mere value tag of the choosing will' (SGC 376). On the other hand, she is with Moore when it comes to the good's definability: 'Functional and causal uses of "good" (a good knife, a good fellow) are not, as some

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[2] For a more extended discussion, see Vaccarezza 2017.

philosophers have wished to argue, clues to the structure of the concept' (SGC 376). This latter criticism is quite evidently directed against the distinction between attributive and predicative uses of the adjective 'good'[3] and against neo-Aristotelians:[4] it is wrong to reduce goodness to a function of an omnipotent will, but it is likewise wrong to identify it with one of the world's objects by making it a form of 'natural goodness': 'If we try to define Good as X we have to add that we mean of course a good X. if we say that Good is Reason we have to talk about good judgement. If we say that Good is Love we have to explain that there are different kinds of love. Even the concept of Truth has its ambiguities and it is really only of the Good that we can say "it is the trial of itself and needs no other touch"' (SGC 380–81). Therefore, we need to dismiss the attempt to define the good exhaustively; all we can know about goodness is its relation to a genuine openness to reality: '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 376).

This fact marks a deep difference from other contemporary attempts to restore a philosophical account of the virtues since the latter assume as their starting point the identification of the good with a specific object—be it rational nature or happiness—and, to put it roughly, conceive of the virtues as means to achieve it. But things with Murdoch are different since she challenges any reductionist account—even Aristotelian ones—of the good by combining aspects of Moore's reflection with a sui generis kind of Platonism and with Weil's peculiar mysticism.

As a consequence of the reconceptualisation of the good in platonic terms, a new image of the self, of human nature, and of moral progress emerges. As long as the good is not conceived of as a natural

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[3] A distinction put forward by Peter Geach in his *Good and Evil* (1956), and one entirely embraced by Foot.

[4] See Banicki 2017: 100: 'A notable feature of Murdoch's concept of Good, at least on a plausible reading, is that—unlike the Aristotelian virtue ethical concept of *eudaimonia,* which it essentially replaces in Murdoch's moral theory—it seems to be non-naturalistic'.

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human telos, any Aristotelian account of human nature disappears as well. But this does not imply getting rid of all accounts of nature; in Murdoch's thought, indeed, the traditional view is replaced by another image of the self. This substitution means that human nature is real and a meaningful source of direction for the ethical life. However, nature does not primarily consist of a set of biological properties indicating to the agent how she should live but is rather conceived of as a contradictory locus characterised by both positive and negative forces and drives. According to Murdoch, we need to recover a realistic image of human beings as fallen creatures. This awareness is what Christianity calls 'original sin' and what Freud first explained scientifically: the ego is dominated by selfish drives and self-comforting dreams, where the agent takes refuge to escape reality. Our 'self-defensive psyche' is a 'powerful energy system' (SGC 368): 'We are anxiety ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world' (SGC 369). At the same time, however, every human being is also 'naturally' directed towards the good—that is, towards reality in its otherness, reality as something to respect, to contemplate with humility, and to love. Human nature consists therefore, for Murdoch, of two conflicting forces: one that pushes the subject inwards, and one that opens to the good. This is why morality is so important: it can foster the second force, through techniques of purification, such as focusing one's attention on the beauty of art and cultivating forms of detached love (cf. VCM 76; SGC 369).

But how is it possible to reorient oneself in an age in which religion has faded, and with it not only its consolations but also the spiritual resources it afforded to morality? In other words, how can the vast area of freedom be purified, once it has been recognised as not reducible to the moment of isolated choice (cf. OGG 344)? Murdoch's answer lies in the proposal to refocus the gaze or acquire new objects of attention, in the same way in which, in order to fall out of love, it is not enough (and sometimes it is even counterproductive) to exert a muscular effort of will. Instead, it is necessary to

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focus one's cognitive and affective energies on different objects. The goal of this reorientation is precisely the exit from dream and personal fantasy and the acceptance of reality as it is: 'One might start from the assertion that morality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable … The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one' (OGG 347–48). The moral pilgrim is therefore one who embarks on a path of liberation from the tyranny of the ego and its obsessions and accepts the difficult task of opening up to reality in its otherness to welcome it lovingly; in doing this, she becomes truly free, for she cuts the bonds that keep her prisoner of a consoling dream and agrees to confront reality.

This is the dynamic shown by the famous example of M and D. When the moral philosopher analyses this example, he can use it to show, against existentialism, that a world of moral facts with its own authority exists or, against behaviourism, that the moral life is not reducible to publicly observable acts but is located largely in the interiority of the agent, at least as regards the fundamental disposition of loving attention that reorients the agent's gaze. But the realism shown by M is not only—and not mainly—functional in support of a metaethical theory, but a fundamental moral option, the choice of consenting to the possibility of a Gestalt change.[5] It is the option of letting the outside in, rather than projecting one's narcissistic aspirations and illusions onto it. It is an existential attitude, a fundamental option, a transformative journey:

> What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or
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> lovingly. M's activity is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible
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> … M is engaged in an endless task (IP 317).

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[5] The extent to which Murdoch's theory amounts to a form of realism is a much-debated issue which I cannot tackle here. For references, see e.g. Antonaccio 2000; Pihlstrom 2005; Bagnoli 2007; Jordan 2014.

This kind of moral pilgrimage is a long and never perfectly completed path, which implies a constant struggle against one's own selfish impulses in order to transform them into energy for orienting oneself towards the good and towards an imaginative understanding of the world that respects and loves otherness. Weil's influence is particularly striking here. In order to love, according to Weil, detachment is needed—that is, a renunciation that imitates the renunciation of God himself in creation. This attitude is the result of an exercise in asceticism that implies suffering and dispossession, a necessary condition to rise from the natural and possessive way of relating to the other and reach a condition of emptying desire. Only through this path of 'de-creation' is it possible to purify desire, thus regaining what has been renounced. What is needed to achieve the fundamental disposition of loving attention is an eradication of selfishness. Only on this condition is it possible to get out of the imprisoning dream and get in touch with reality (cf. Weil 1999: 65).

3. Moral vision and the background conditions of virtue

Now that I have stated these anthropological and ethical premises, I have sketched a background against which I may turn to the central question of this chapter: what account of virtue—if any—follows from this image of human nature and of moral progress? In the passage which most closely resembles a definition, Murdoch claims, 'Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness. It is a task to come to see the world as it is' (SGC 375). The idea of virtue as a kind of habit which produces consequent actions finds little room in Murdoch's thought; more important is the condition—or the disposition, one might say—which makes virtue possible. Moral vision thus looks like the main background condition of virtue.

As Mauri notes, 'Where one of human nature's principal attributes is this "selfish consciousness", then virtue can be regarded as the highest expression of an individual's ability to relinquish the ego

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and learn to look at reality as it is. The prerequisites for virtue are, as Murdoch says "a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness"' (2009: 153). The kind of background condition which is typical of a virtuous character is constantly characterised—as we have seen—in visual terms, as a capacity to see, pay attention, and look.

Blum (2012: 307) emphasises that 'choice takes place only against the backdrop of the world of value, and *seeing* that world should be the prime task of the individual moral agent'. The virtuous person, as concisely expressed by Crisp (2012: 287), 'will be someone who looks out rather than in'.
Many passages in Murdoch's work illustrate the importance of a cluster of interchangeable terms, all of which encompass a visual and an affective component and therefore appear impossible to disentangle.

The first and most important of these terms is attention: 'The word "attention" . . . [expresses] the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent' (IP 327). Attention, therefore, is the capacity to detach from the obsessions and neuroses of the ego and also from systematic and totalising conventions in order to grasp reality as it is.

Equally important is imagination, the active and creative counterpart of attention. Imagination—as opposed to selfish and narcissistic fantasies—is an activity to which, like attention, Murdoch confers a key role in moral life and which can be defined as

> a type of reflection on people, events, etc., which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual. When this activity is thought to be bad it is sometimes called 'fantasy' or 'wishful thinking' . . . Imagining is *doing*, is a sort of personal exploring . . . The world which we confront is not just

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> a world of 'facts' but a world upon which our imagination has, at any given moment, already worked; and although such working may often be 'fantasy' and may constitute a barrier to our seeing 'what is really there', this is not necessarily so. (DPR 198–99)

That these attitudes or activities should not be understood in intellectualistic terms is clearly shown by their equation with a loving gaze and the so-called 'realism of compassion', two labels in which cognitive and affective components are explicitly matched:

> Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. . . It is the apprehension of something particular, as existing outside us. (S&G 215–16)

> It is in the capacity to love, that is to see, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. (OGG 354)

One might wonder, at this point, what kind of account of virtue this is. It might be claimed that Murdoch stops on the threshold of virtue—that is, that she is content with describing its background conditions only and therefore cannot be considered a virtue ethicist. Virtue, after all, is seldom (and always derivately) mentioned in her work, and Murdoch's main concern seems to be its preconditions. Such an interpretation would be unfair, however, for it betrays a 'totalitarian Aristotelian' attitude: the idea that virtue ethics perfectly overlaps with accounts that offer definite lists of (traditional) virtues, preferably conceived of in naturalistic terms. In what follows, I claim that there are at least three routes to vindicate a Murdochian account of virtue, if not to ascribe to her (some sort) of virtue ethics. I also show how such a Murdochian account of virtue would be highly beneficial to virtue ethics itself, providing it with more diverse resources with which to conceptualise virtue.

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4. A Buddhist virtue ethicist

According to a first interpretation, an effective lens through which we should read Murdoch's ethics is to be found in her secularisation of mysticism,[6] which is due to the influence of Weil, as seen before (see also Panizza 2017). According to this reading, 'Iris Murdoch takes the concept of attention from Weil almost intact', as is made clear by the passages about attention as love and as the passive activity of emptying the self in order to make space for God in Weil's *Waiting for God*.[7]

However, an equal if not greater influence on Murdoch's ethical outlook is exerted by Buddhist ethics. Murdoch herself, when introducing her ontological proof, suggests that her work be read as a 'Buddhist Christian' one, and the Buddhist side of the coin has been emphasised by Peter Conradi, especially when, in *Going Buddhist* (2005), he traces back to his study of Iris Murdoch the beginning of a path which ended with his becoming a Buddhist. This interpretation has been criticised as untrue to Murdoch's spirit and as a misappropriation accomplished on the basis of a reading of Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, often considered as the main locus of her declaration of Buddhism.[8] However, the Buddhist structure of Murdoch's ethical outlook ought not to be—although it probably has been—overlooked, since it extends well beyond specific points of similarity to permeate the whole structure of her work. My point here is that since it can be argued that Buddhism developed a peculiar kind of virtue ethics,[9] the same can be said, transitively, of Murdoch's secularisation of Buddhism. On this line of interpretation, it is precisely in light of her secular reformulation of Buddhism that the label of 'virtue ethicist' can be attached to Murdoch.

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[6] See, for example, Antonaccio's (2012: 116) 'ascetic' reading.

[7] Cf. Weil 1978.

[8] See Robjant 2011.

[9] This strong interpretation is advanced, for example, by MacKenzie 1998.

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There are, undeniably, markedly Buddhist echoes in Murdoch's account. These can be summarised in three main legacies: the critique of selfishness, or egocentrism; the importance of moral perception and empathic imagination; and the view of ethics as a transformative-developmental path. As MacKenzie (2018) notes, the critique of selfishness, or egocentrism, is absolutely central to Buddhist thought and practice. On this view, what is central to Buddhism is the overcoming of a false perception of a conflict between what is beneficial to the self and what is beneficial to others. Thus, ethics is mainly concerned with transforming the self, 'dismantling the greed' (MacKenzie 2018: ivi), and cultivating non-attachment and compassion.

In order to achieve this aim, moral perception and empathic imagination are of the utmost importance, since a number of cognitive distortions related to self-perception and one's conception of others can alter or impede this path. In MacKenzie's words, these distortions 'are based in a failure properly to recognise the three marks of conditioned existence: impermanence (anitya), unsatisfactoriness (duḥkha), and no-self (anātman)' (MacKenzie 2018: 5). The term saṃsāra identifies the distorted and dysfunctional bondage to the self that leads to hedonism and to a failure to rebut self-centredness. More than an attitude, this term denominates a whole lifestyle, the saṃsāric, to which Buddhism opposes the 'awakened'—that is, selfless, virtuous—one.

Precisely as in Murdoch's formulation, what allows the pilgrim to achieve this state of selflessness is the exercise of attention. Even though Murdoch owes the use of this term to Weil, resemblances and debts to Buddhism cannot be overestimated. In the Buddhist transformative journey, attention (in terms of smṛti, or mindfulness) plays a pivotal role in the cultivation of the virtues. Together with attentional stability (samādhi) and wisdom (prajñā), attention is fundamental to increase the awareness of the self and spot morally relevant features of a situation and therefore to act virtuously

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(cf. MacKenzie 2018: 159). De Silva (1991: 64) lists three set of virtues which are central to Buddhist ethics and whose closeness to the attitudes and activities highlighted by Murdoch is quite remarkable:

- Virtues of conscientiousness (veracity, truthfulness, and righteousness)
- Virtues of benevolence (lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity)
- Virtues of self-restraint (self-control, abstinence, contentment, patience, celibacy, chastity, and purity)

In sum, Buddhist ethics offers a paradigm in which virtue is central and foundational and a coherent list of virtues which follows from a definite account of human nature. Buddhist virtue ethics can therefore compete as a legitimate option within the virtue-ethical field, one in which a rather pessimistic anthropology justifies the idea that virtue is to be thought of as a form of compassionate non-attachment. And since Buddhism's conceptual imagery is the same as Murdoch's image of virtue cultivation as a journey in which vision is the chief virtuous aim, and as several attitudes make this achievement feasible, there is no reason why Murdoch should not be seen, in addition to a secular mystical ethicist, as sharing in many features of a Buddhist account of virtue.

5. Love and Kantian virtue

I have just shown that, given her peculiar approach to morality, Murdoch can be legitimately seen as a virtue ethicist, although an unorthodox one—namely, a Buddhist-inspired one. However, without denying the legitimacy and importance of this reading, I maintain there are also two ways to include Murdoch's idea of virtue within the Western tradition and make it available as a viable alternative to other Western approaches to virtue.

A first, more challenging way consists in rebuilding a Kantian theory of virtue by merging Murdoch's remarks on love and Kant's idea of respect. This idea, which can be traced back to Velleman's (1999)

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seminal paper on love as a moral emotion,[10] has also been advanced by Bagnoli (2003; 2014).[11] According to Bagnoli, despite Murdoch's overt scepticism of Kantian ethics, her view of a loving gaze has much to do with Kant's idea of respect and recognition of humanity as central to morality. This Kantian idea has been constantly criticised by many—Murdoch included—for its alleged abstractness, and on this ground replaced by what seems a more appropriate category to deal with others: love. We cannot relate to others simply by considering them in abstraction as empty sources of rationality.

However, according to Bagnoli and to Merrit (2017), a loving gaze originates from a recognition of others as others, independently from one's own desires and expectations. It is a compassionate, yet detached and realistic, gaze. The struggle to achieve realism of compassion is described by Murdoch, in Bagnoli's view, in Kantian terms; that is, it is described as jeopardised by many, mainly internal, obstacles, principally our proneness to narcissistic fantasies and consolatory delusions. Like Kant's idea of respect, loving attention forces the agent to exercise humility, through which selfish claims are screened. The less we are focused on ourselves, the more we become attentive, sensitive to the demands that others impose on us as people.

Paradoxically enough, Murdoch's view of moral life is explicitly proposed as an alternative to the Kantian conception, and particularly critical of Kant's idea of respect; as Bagnoli has it, 'Murdoch's point is that Kant's conception of respect expresses a mistaken conception of freedom, and consequently grounds an inadequate account of agency and deliberation' (Bagnoli 2003: 489). Also, according to Murdoch, since 'respect, as Kant understands it, is not directed to individuals but to 'the

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[10] For a criticism, see, for example, Millgram 2004.

[11] Maria Antonaccio (2012) offers a similar interpretation when discussing Murdoch's reflexive realism. Bagnoli claims that the features which make Murdoch's realism reflexive are precisely the features she shares with Kantian constructivism in metaethics.

universal reason in their breasts', it cannot adequately express mutual recognition (Bagnoli 2003: 485). However, on closer inspection, her account of a loving gaze looks like nothing more than a reformulation of the Kantian conception of respect itself. Virtue for Kant is a sustained effort at living according to the moral ideal, since, for finite beings like us, the experience of the moral law presupposes a conflict and an internal obstacle and involves sacrifice and self-constraint. Living up to the moral ideal implies not only observing a law but practicing discipline and self-control. It is through this exercise that reflection modifies the necessary motives, and it is in this way that we transform the capacity for autonomy into strength of character. For agents to whom spontaneity is precluded because they suffer the obstacles of their own arrogance, autonomy is expressed and realised in the practice of virtue.

In sum, according to this interpretation, Murdoch is—perhaps unwillingly—offering a Kantian view of attention as respect and a Kantian account of virtue. She is a (reluctant?) Kantian virtue ethicist.

6. Moral vision, phronesis, and the Socratic unity of virtue

A second way of accounting for Murdoch's view of virtue as a Western one is to consider it a particularistic-Aristotelian, or a 'Socratic phronetic', one. By this I mean an account of virtue that has phronesis, interpreted as moral vision, as the sovereign, or (better) only real, virtue, which in turn can be assimilated to a Socratic 'unity of virtue' thesis. The idea is that phronesis consists in a form of perception of particulars, not dissimilar to Murdochian moral vision, which ceases to be seen as a precondition of virtue and becomes a metavirtue, or second-order virtue.[12] It is to this reading that I devote the rest of this chapter.

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[12] In the conclusion of this section, I propose that it may be seen as a third-order virtue, or meta-metavirtue.

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The Aristotelian tradition notoriously assigns to the intellectual virtue of phronesis, or practical wisdom, the leading role of directing the virtues when particular choices are to be made. Not all readings, however, render phronesis as a form of moral perception. A plausible and well-established reading of Aristotelian ethics stresses the importance of vision and perception of particulars as central to deliberation and choice, and to this end it assigns stronger primacy to phronesis over the other virtues than standard neo-Aristotelian readings do. As I have claimed elsewhere, contrary to a generalist reading of Aristotelian ethics, according to neo-Aristotelian particularists,[13] the proper excellence of phronesis consists in reaching each particular case in a non-deductive way and in identifying the particular action that is virtuous in light of the circumstances. As Aristotle notes, the capacity of discerning and perceiving a situation in its singularity is not accidental to phronesis but rather represents its specific excellence. Grasping particulars is a sort of intelligence (*nous*) whose immediacy is comparable to that of a kind of sensation (*aesthesis*). *Nous*, therefore, is an intelligent vision, an ability to grasp particulars.[14] It provides phronesis with knowledge of the singular case by means of a sensorial and intellective intuition. It is a form of perception capable of grasping data as particular specifications of the universal end of action. As such, then, *nous* is one of the cognitive preconditions of phronesis, providing it with the knowledge of the singular it needs to give birth to good actions. However, this does not amount to an intellectualist account of virtue, since phronesis would be mere cleverness without the orientation to the good provided by a virtuous character.

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[13] Including Sherman 1989; Broadie 1991.

[14] It might even be translated as 'attention' or 'sensitivity', since the peculiarity of *nous* seems to be a sort of attention, an opening to reality able to perceive its relevant aspects, similar to the attitude of those who are called 'sensitive', who are able understand at a first glance that the person they are talking with is sad or that one aspect of a situation is more relevant than others.

Proper phronesis, as opposed to cleverness, encompasses virtuous emotions, which perform the fundamental epistemic function of providing information about the environment, not by photographically recording reality but by making moral reasons accessible. The access to goods and values implied by phronetic perception is therefore always emotionally charged, never neutral and detached. What we can see, in other words, depends on the kind of people we (emotionally and morally) are (see NE III.5, 1114a30–1114b1). Phronesis so conceived can be seen as sharing in many features of moral vision, especially as concerns its capacity to reach the particular and do without the guidance of general rules—so much so that some have already compared Aristotelian phronesis with Murdoch's moral sensitivity (Crisp and Slote 1997: 11).

With all these features in mind, it is not difficult to see how Murdoch could be seen as an Aristotelian virtue ethicist. Unlike other neo-Aristotelians, who have mostly emphasised the Stagirite's naturalistic proposal and thus developed forms of neo-naturalism of different kinds, Murdoch's Aristotelianism should be seen, in this view, as grounded on the primacy of moral perception of particulars. This, in turn, does justice to the kind of agent-based, anti-universalistic ethical proposal Murdoch invokes in criticising the 'current view'.

This way of making sense of Murdoch's peculiar account of virtue implies abandoning attempts at sketching a Murdochian account of virtue in naturalistic Aristotelian terms and taking a different route. But in order to fully grasp Murdoch's peculiar proposal, this route must be pressed further, to reconcile the view of moral vision as phronesis with a 'Socratic' unity-of-virtue thesis. Before seeing how this view applies to Murdoch, let me briefly explain what I mean by the label 'Socratic unity-of-virtue thesis'.

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In Plato's *Protagoras*, 356d–357b, Socrates claims that courage, temperance, and all the other virtues are names (or branches, versions, or applications) of wisdom. Rather than claiming, like Aristotle, that virtues are reciprocal and rooted in the possession of phronesis, Socrates claims here that there is only one real virtue. We may call this view a 'unity of virtue' (singular) thesis, as opposed to the 'unity or reciprocity of virtues' (plural) thesis, which is mainstream in neo-Aristotelianism.[15] Among contemporary virtue ethicists, the idea of the unity of virtue has been revived by John McDowell. In McDowell's (1998: 51) interpretation, each virtue is a form of the same 'reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behaviour', and it consists in 'a sort of perceptual capacity'. Moreover, 'the specialized sensitivities that are to be equated with particular virtues . . . are actually not available one by one for a series of separate identifications' (McDowell 1998: 59). Even if we leave aside the fact that McDowell has been directly influenced by Murdoch here as with many other ideas, including the very idea of moral sensitivity, it is striking to see how this image of virtue fits perfectly Murdoch's remarks on the primacy of moral vision, seen as a sovereign virtue and a form of practical wisdom.

My thesis here is therefore that, just as in Socrates's view virtue is one, and in McDowell's all there is to virtue is a unified moral sensitivity or perceptual capacity, Murdoch establishes moral vision in the sense of moral perception or sensitivity[16] as the sovereign and only virtue. More to the point, moral vision in my view plays the role of a meta-virtue, or second-level virtue, or a cluster of virtuous attitudes,[17] since it is made possible by what I see as enabling attitudes—that is, by cognitive and motivational components. This is how I read Murdoch's remarks on attention, imagination, compassion, and a loving gaze. Paying attention and exercising imaginative engagement implies an

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[15] Among many others, see Annas 2011; Russel 2009.

[16] For a reading that stresses differences between Murdoch and McDowell, see Panizza 2019.

[17] I acknowledge that these three options are far from equivalent, but they are the main options traditionally available for understanding Aristotelian phronesis (or practical wisdom). This becomes more relevant below.

epistemic effort to see differently; however, this is only possible when one accepts the challenge of unselfing and directing to an individual reality a just and loving gaze.

In order to grasp a moral situation, many capacities are needed, some more related to sensitivity (such as attention, empathy, opening to the other's feelings and concerns, imagination) and others displaying a more intellectual nature (such as the possession of a certain character, the willingness to change one's moral concepts, a critical attitude towards oneself and one's moral categories, the capacity to call oneself into question). It is this descent to the particular detail of the individual situation, grasped in its unique moral configuration, which allows one to build and to clarify one's moral vision on a more general level.

However, one shouldn't take these different enabling attitudes as separate dispositions, but as a cluster in which each attitude makes the other possible or, better, represents a different side of the other. The cognitive and motivational sides of vision, as already noted, cannot be disentangled: realism and 'really looking' come from a 'just and loving gaze directed on an individual reality' (IP 327). Conversely, the key motivational attitude of love is defined by Murdoch as 'the extremely difficult realisation that something other than ourselves is real' (SG 215).

7. The names of moral vision

What happens to the traditional virtues which cannot be seen as parts of the cluster or as enabling dispositions in this picture? Should we get rid of them? My proposal is that we shouldn't. Rather, as in McDowell's Socratic view, they should be seen as names in different domains of the only real virtue. If this is a defensible reading of Aristotelian phronesis (see De Caro, Vaccarezza, and Niccoli, 2018), it seems even more plausible as a way of making sense of Murdoch's account of virtue, from which it receives further support. The virtues, in many passages, are described as names, or articulations, or descriptions of moral vision in different moral domains. Continuous acts of attention

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and imagination, made possible by the magnetic power of attraction of the good, shape a moral vision which becomes increasingly complex and articulated and allows the agent to see the virtues in their mutual relationships and hierarchy, so as to give to each of them due credit in each situation.

Obviously enough, this shift does not leave the content of the virtues unaltered; rather, they undergo a radical change, both in their list and in the meanings they assume:

> Courage, which seemed at first to be something on its own, a sort of specialized daring of the spirit, is now seen to be a particular operation of wisdom and love. We come to distinguish a self-assertive ferocity from the kind of courage which would enable a man coolly to choose the labour camp rather than the easy compromise with the tyrant . . . Freedom, we find out, is not an inconsequential chucking of one's weight about, it is the disciplined overcoming of the self. Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues. (SGC 378)

If the good is ineffable but connected to the attitude of overcoming the self through moral vision, the virtues cannot but be pervaded by an analogous attitude, their common denominator being the thrust towards the outside and their nature that of dispositions aimed at facilitating moral vision in the various fields of experience.

At this point, however, it is impossible not to see again the priority of one of the traditional virtues over the others. If the closest thing to goodness is letting reality enter through moral vision, the epitome of the moral, or virtuous, person is the authentically humble man:

> Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self. In fact any other

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name for Good must be a partial name . . . The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are. He sees the pointlessness of virtue and its unique value and the endless extent of its demand . . . Although he is not by definition the good man, perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good. (SGC 385)

Moral vision—which, as we have seen, is made possible by a cluster of enabling dispositions and which acts as a meta-virtue—is therefore expressed and exercised in each area through the exercise of the traditional virtues. But, of these, the virtue that most realises the virtuous attitude is—and can only be—humility, as a fundamental attitude. From this point of view, one could therefore review the overall picture of the Murdochian conception of virtue as a three-level structure (based on a reading not immune to a certain fundamental Platonism): at the top, the meta-metavirtue, or third-order virtue, of moral vision and its enabling dispositions; at a second level, humility as the 'form' of all the other virtues, or a metavirtue (or second-order virtue); and, finally, the traditional virtues, reinterpreted in this light.

8. Conclusion

The three paths I proposed in this chapter are not meant to be rivalrous or mutually exclusive, nor as a way to confine Murdoch's thought within rigid limits. She is far too polyhedric a thinker to be so enclosed. Rather, they are to be seen as compatible and complementary reasons why Murdoch can be seen as a virtue ethicist and as the developer of a specific and positive account of virtue. At the same time, they suggest a way in which virtue ethics could be reformed by enlarging and diversifying its sources, influences, and inspirations. It is not that Murdoch is an unorthodox virtue ethicist; rather, it is that virtue-ethical orthodoxy is untrue to the multiplicity of possibilities a genuine virtue-ethical view should contemplate.

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