

## Murdoch's Ontological Argument

by Cathy Mason and Matt Dougherty

‘Must a moral philosopher be a metaphysician?’<sup>i</sup>

The image of God plays a conspicuous role in Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy. Like many of her contemporaries, she sees the idea of God as one which we can no longer be truly comfortable with – one which, in the words of Paul Tillich, has come to feel like a ‘strange body’ imposed on the human mind, or else like a simple impossibility.<sup>ii</sup> Unlike many of her contemporaries, however, Murdoch's attempts to reinvigorate morality in the absence of God do not do away with every aspect of the idea of God. She thinks that we have no need to abandon moral metaphysics in favour of moral anthropology or the analysis of moral language, for instance; and more generally, she disagrees with Nietzsche that without God we must now be plunging through an infinite nothing, with no up or down (Nietzsche, 1887, §125), such that we need to take a wholly different track from our thought about morality *pre-mort Dieu*. The moral philosopher, she believes, can and must still be a metaphysician, even a sort of theologian.

The most direct exemplification of this quasi-religious approach to morality is Murdoch's re-fashioning of St Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of *God* as an ontological argument for the existence of *the Good*. Against contemporary popular opinion of Anselm's argument, she believes that the argument essentially succeeds – that it does nearly all that it's meant to do, just not in the way that it is popularly thought to do it, and not in service of the particular conclusion (about God) that Anselm intended.<sup>iii</sup> Our aim in the present paper is to explain Murdoch's conception of Anselm's argument and to show how she makes use of it for her own conclusion that the Good exists. More generally, as Kieran Setiya mentions in another piece on Murdoch, our aim is not so much to provide a definitive evaluation of her argument, as to make it ‘plausible, intelligible, and, as far as possible, argumentatively sharp’ (Setiya, 2013, p. 2). In doing

so, we hope to illuminate some of the ways in which she is philosophically distinctive but also to suggest that her argument is one that contemporary moral philosophers should take seriously.<sup>iv</sup>

We begin in §1 by outlining Murdoch's distinctive understanding of Anselm's argument. In §2 we compare her notion of the Good with the traditional notion of God. In §3 we offer an initial sketch of Murdoch's ontological argument, and in subsequent sections we examine its key moves. We begin to do so in §4 by examining an idea at the core of her argument – 'degrees of goodness'. In §5 we explore how degrees of goodness are supposed to point us toward the idea of perfection, or the Good. And in §6 we examine the sense in which Murdoch believes that the Good is necessary. In doing so, we aim to shed light on these key Murdochian ideas, as well as to explain how they come together in her own ontological argument.<sup>v</sup>

## 1. Murdoch on Anselm

Most newcomers to Anselm's argument are introduced to it by way of contrast with other arguments for the existence of God. Unlike the cosmological or teleological argument, students may be told, the ontological argument is not empirical but purely 'logical', or wholly *a priori*. It attempts to move deductively from a definition of God to the reality of God's existence.<sup>vi</sup> Though the form and content of the argument remain matters of intense debate, the following is a common way of construing it:

P1. God is that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived.

P2. If we understand the expression "that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived",  
then that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived exists in the mind.

P3. We do understand the expression "that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived".

C1. Therefore, that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived exists in the mind.

P4. It is greater to exist in reality than it is to exist in the mind alone.

C2. Therefore, if that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived exists in the mind alone,  
it is not that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived.

C3. Therefore, that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived exists in reality.

C4. Therefore, God exists in reality.

Murdoch's understanding of Anselm's ontological argument is very different from this. To begin, whereas the above takes the ontological argument to be fully expressed in *Proslogion* II, Murdoch understands the best form of Anselm's argument (and thus, for her, his ontological argument itself) to be fully expressed only later, and especially in his 'Reply' to Gaunilo's 'On Behalf of the Fool'.<sup>vii</sup> As she understands it, Anselm's reply relies primarily on an implicit *experiential* element, rather than on a definitional one. Her reconstruction takes that element to be basic and also to generate a particular sense in which God is a necessary being.

Gaunilo objects to the argument of *Proslogion* II on the basis that we simply do not possess the relevant concept of *perfection* – 'that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived' – nor, indeed, the relevant understanding of God. In his reply, Anselm turns to experience, suggesting that we perceive and conceive of perfection and of God through our perception of the imperfectly good things of the world. Indeed, he argues that we can conceive not only of God's existence but of God's *necessary* existence in this way. Murdoch writes in summary:

So [according to Anselm] we find God both, and inextricably both, in the world and in our own soul... We have instinctive faith in God, and also conceive of him by looking at the world; and when we consider what we conceive of we understand that it exists necessarily and not contingently... God exists, he exists necessarily, we conceive of him by noticing *degrees of goodness*, which we see in ourselves and in all the world which is a shadow of God. (MGM, p. 396)<sup>viii</sup>

So, Murdoch regards Anselm's ontological argument as resting on our experience of things that we recognise as *imperfectly* good, which themselves point to the necessary reality of perfect goodness. Latent in our experience of the imperfectly good things of the world is a conception of perfect goodness and, at least for Anselm, of a perfectly good being, a being necessary in virtue of its perfection.

This unusual reading of Anselm is accompanied by a particular vision of the purpose and structure of the ontological argument. As concerns its purpose, she thinks that despite its being an argument for the reality of God, it is not aimed at persuading unbelievers.<sup>x</sup> Instead, she suggests, its purpose is to shed light on the reality of a being whose existence is (and must be) in some sense *already* known:

[Anselm's ontological argument] may be seen as a clarified or academic summary of what is already known, rather than as an argument to be put to an outsider. It may be seen too as a proof which a man can only give to himself, herein resembling *cogito ergo sum*. (MGM, p. 392)

As we will see, in constructing her own ontological argument, she makes use of each of the points made in this passage. First, she regards the ontological argument as relying on knowledge that we already possess. Second, she thinks that the argument's role is to *clarify* this knowledge rather than to establish it. And, finally, she thinks that the argument is distinctively first-personal – 'a proof which a man can only give to himself'.<sup>x</sup>

## 2. God and the Good

Despite having much sympathy with (her own rendering of) Anselm's argument, Murdoch disagrees with its conclusion. The personal Judeo-Christian God, she thinks, does not exist, and if Christianity is to persist, it must be 'demythologized' (MGM, p. 431). In fact, she suggests that the ontological argument itself points toward the impossibility of God's existence; she thinks that any being sufficiently *personal* to count as God would be too *contingent* to be God (MGM, p. 425).<sup>xi</sup> Nevertheless, she thinks that an amended form of the argument is successful and that it establishes the existence of *something* that is necessary, perfect, and transcendent: the Good.

Murdoch's conception of the Good in many ways parallels the standard concept of God. As with 'God', Murdoch regards 'the Good' as a magnetic focal point for a kind of 'religion', a potentially communal recognition of unconditional moral demands (MGM, p. 432). And as with

God, she holds that the Good has the capacity to inspire and sustain us (TSG, p. 60). In fact, aside from conceiving of God as a personal being, she holds that most of the central features standardly ascribed to God can be said of the Good:

God was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept [viz., the Good] which has all these characteristics. (TSG, p. 54)

The Good, Murdoch thinks, binds up every kind and variety of goodness in a single and uniquely necessary reality – though not in an *object* in any straightforward sense (‘Good is not a particular, it is not a thing among others’ (MGM, p. 405)). It transcends any conception that we might reach of it and is thus non-representable despite being made manifest in the things of the world. Perhaps most crucially for our purposes, Murdoch thinks that only in the light of the Good can we discern that some things in the world are (imperfectly) good. Discussing a similar conception of the Good in Plato’s allegory of the cave, she writes:

When Plato wants to explain Good he uses the image of the sun... The sun is seen at the end of a long quest which involves a reorientation (the prisoners have to turn round) and an ascent. It is real, it is out there, but very distant. It gives light and energy and enables us to know truth. In its light we see the things of the world in their true relationships... It is a different kind of thing from what it illuminates.

Note the metaphor of ‘thing’ here. (TSG, p. 90)

Like Plato, Murdoch holds that only in the light of the Good can we see things as they truly are, ‘in their true relationships’. Such vision, she insists, will not be easy (the Good is ‘very distant’) and our achievement of it is far from guaranteed (it involves an uphill climb and a ‘reorientation’ from our typical ways of seeing and living). Nonetheless, it is worth striving for, since only in its full and impartial light can we know how things truly are. As we will see, this image of the Good forms the crux of her own ontological argument.<sup>xii</sup>

### 3. Murdoch's Ontological Argument in Brief

Anyone with only the standard 'logical' conception of the ontological argument in mind will find it difficult to discern anything resembling that argument in Murdoch's texts. She does not begin with a definition of the Good but, instead, with an appeal to moral experience (which we have seen her take to be the implicit foundation of Anselm's argument as well). Mapping out her task, she writes:

[O]thers who feel that perhaps [Anselm's Ontological] Proof proves something, but not any sort of God, might return to Plato and claim some uniquely necessary status for moral value as something (uniquely) impossible to be thought away from human experience, and as in a special sense, if conceived of, known as real. (MGM, p. 396)

Murdoch herself is the kind of ambivalent reader she mentions here, drawn to the proof and yet sceptical of its conclusion. And her bold aim is also the one she mentions: to show that the Good must be real, that it has some uniquely necessary status in human life, and that if it is conceived of, it must be known to be real.

The starting point for Murdoch's ontological argument is our experience of degrees of goodness. Such experience, she thinks, is not only possible but ubiquitous in human life, *everywhere* within ourselves and the world. Further, this recognition of ubiquitous degrees of goodness implies an idea of perfection lying behind it. Thus, she concludes, the Good exists.

This argument will require much unpacking and filling in, but the following is an initial sketch:

1. We experience degrees of goodness.
2. This experience of degrees of goodness is ubiquitous.
3. There must be an idea of perfection underlying such degrees of goodness.
4. Thus, the Good exists.

So, Murdoch begins with a claim about experience and moves from there to the reality of the Good.<sup>xiii</sup> Importantly, one might wonder at this point what has become of a concept that was crucial to Murdoch's presentation of Anselm's argument, namely, *necessary* existence. Murdoch regards that notion as continuing to have a crucial role here, which she identifies as being present in the notion of perfection.<sup>xiv</sup> Her understanding of the relation between the two notions can be understood as follows: the ubiquity of our experience of degrees of goodness helps reveal the *necessity* of an idea of *perfection*. This idea of perfection is the Good. In turn, the Good sheds light on our ordinary experience: we recognise that it is only in the light of the Good that we can discern degrees of goodness. Moreover, once we have turned our attention to the notion of the Good, we recognise its essential necessity, for we are unable to 'think away' such a concept from human existence.

In this sketch of her argument we can see the key ideas Murdoch takes from her reading of Anselm. As with that interpretation, she here takes the experiential component of the argument to be basic. Building upon this, she connects the notions of perfection and necessity, and suggests that the Good exists necessarily.

Even this initial sketch of Murdoch's argument is likely to have raised many questions. What exactly are degrees of goodness supposed to be ubiquitously discerned *in*? Why think that they're ubiquitous? Why think that they point to *absolute Good* or *perfection* rather than merely to high levels of relative goodness? Why think that the different kinds of goodness we experience all point to a *single Good*? In what sense is the Good *necessary*? And finally, what kind of 'argument' is this? For whom is it intended – is it only for 'believers', as in Murdoch's understanding of Anselm's argument? The following sections will attempt to answer these questions. In doing so, we hope to provide a rendering of the argument that makes clear its appeal for Murdoch and its potential appeal for contemporary moral philosophy.

#### 4. Degrees of Goodness

Beginning, then, with the first step of the argument sketched above, what does Murdoch mean by claiming that we experience degrees of goodness? What are these degrees of goodness supposed to be discerned *in*? Murdoch seems to approvingly describe Anselm's answer to the latter question as follows:

God exists, he exists necessarily, we conceive of him by noticing *degrees of goodness*, which we see in *ourselves* and in *all the world* which is a shadow of God. (MGM, p. 396, second two emphases added)

In the passages from his 'Reply' on which Murdoch relies, Anselm seems to be talking of experiencing Godliness in created objects.<sup>xv</sup> But Murdoch herself seems to want to go further, locating degrees of goodness even more generally:

Those who do not want to save the traditional God, but want religion to continue... as an assertion of an absolute (necessary) moral claim upon humanity, will need to see the *whole of human experience* as indicating this. (MGM, p. 418, emphasis added)

[W]e can see the argument as one from the *whole of experience*, showing how the unique and special and all-important knowledge of good and evil is learnt in every kind of *human activity*. (MGM, p. 418, emphasis added)

In the passage discussing Anselm's understanding of the experience of degrees of goodness, Murdoch seems to express sympathy with the idea that degrees of goodness can be discerned in *objects* (in 'ourselves' and 'all the world'). But then she goes on to express that they can be discerned in *any human activity or experience* whatsoever. We can begin to spell out and evaluate her ontological argument by seeing how she takes us to discern degrees of goodness in these places and why she may be led from Anselm's narrower proposal to her own, broader one.

To begin with, consider the suggestion implicit in her reference to Anselm's understanding of the experience of degrees of goodness: that degrees of goodness are experienced in 'objects', whether human or otherwise. According to this suggestion, we perceive evaluable things in the

world and perceive that some of those things are better than others.<sup>xvi</sup> And such a view certainly seems plausible: pre-theoretically, we do take some objects to be good, and we take ourselves to be able to identify some things as better than others. If that's right, we perceive degrees of goodness in the sense in which Murdoch intends.

It's initially difficult, however, to square this understanding of our experience of degrees of goodness with the second premise of Murdoch's argument as we've sketched it: the point that the experience of degrees of goodness is ubiquitous. We might agree, for instance, that a person is an essentially value-laden object, and that when we perceive them, we perceive degrees of goodness. But what about a stone or a hill? It may be difficult to see how stones or hills could be essentially value-laden things. However, to be truly ubiquitous, degrees of goodness will need to be experienced in them as well.<sup>xvii</sup> That is clearly part of why Murdoch goes beyond Anselm in locating degrees of goodness in *any* human experience or activity whatsoever – though we will eventually see that this broadening may help to identify the sense in which even a stone or hill is a value-laden thing.

We can introduce her broader conception of the location of degrees of goodness with what can initially seem to be another overly narrow conception. Murdoch sometimes discusses degrees of goodness as located in all of our 'moral activity'. This can again seem too narrow because on the standard conception of morality, only some activity is morally evaluable. But Murdoch claims a much broader scope for the 'moral'. She insists that the *whole* of human life is moral, that the moral should not be narrowly defined in terms of occasional, discrete choice-points which we stumble upon in moments where we are confronted with a pressing obligation. Rather, the moral 'aspect' of life is the whole of life:

The area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world. (TSG, p. 95)

In that case, even the most innocuous-seeming of activities are moral activities. And the presence of degrees of goodness in what she understands as moral activity thus entails the initially seemingly broader claim that degrees of goodness can be discerned in all of our activity as such.<sup>xviii</sup>

So, what would it mean to discern or experience degrees of goodness in *all* of human experience and activity? How could such everyday activities as going on a walk involve the experience of degrees of goodness? We think these questions are best answered by reference to Murdoch's claim that *vision* is the continuous basis of all moral activity:

Here the idea of *truth* plays a crucial role (as it does also in Kant) and reality emerges as the object of truthful vision, and virtuous action as the product of such vision. This is a picture of the omnipresence of morality and evaluation in human life. (MGM, p. 39)

I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort... [O]ur freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. (TSG, pp. 35–36)

In these passages Murdoch suggests that moral life is continuous and inescapable, and she connects this to the ubiquity of moral vision.<sup>xix</sup> In every activity we develop and either strengthen or weaken a picture of the world around us, and this picture can do more or less justice to the things it depicts. As such, our vision of the world is never morally neutral: truthful seeing requires honesty, justice, patience and so on. All activities, for Murdoch, are thus exercises in virtue, and thus themselves exemplify varying degrees of goodness.<sup>xx</sup>

It is easy to see why there would be degrees of goodness in our perception of other people, since we often fail to see others well. Our own fears, failings, and unthinking adherence to social conventions or stereotypes can prevent us from seeing other people as they truly are, and, plausibly, this can be both a moral and an epistemic failing. For example, it can be *difficult* to discern good

qualities in those we personally resent or fear, and there can be social dimensions to this blindness, too.

What, though, about our vision of other kinds of thing, such as the kinds of thing mentioned earlier: hills and stones? Does our vision even of them manifest degrees of goodness? Murdoch answers affirmatively:

All just vision, even in the strictest problems of the intellect...is a moral matter.

The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person. (TSG, p. 68)

Here, Murdoch insists that *all* vision is moral, even when that vision may initially seem to be purely intellectual or to concern morally neutral objects. Our anxious fears can prevent us from noticing the natural world, and from recognising its real value, or what it might demand of us. Our egoistic fantasies, she claims, can distort our whole vision and prevent our clearly seeing a blade of grass just as they can prevent us from clearly seeing another person. As such, she affirms that the experience of degrees of goodness is truly ubiquitous. The activity of vision is continuous in waking life and experienced in every aspect of it; and this activity is a thoroughly ethical one, in which we realise and manifest varying degrees of goodness.

That degrees of goodness are discerned in the ubiquitous activity of (moral) vision sheds light on Murdoch's initially peculiar-seeming claim that the Good, unlike material objects, cannot be 'imagined away' and thus has a more central role in human existence. She writes:

The definition of God (the necessity and sovereignty of Good) is connected with the definition of a human being. We can 'think away' material objects from human existence, but not the concepts of good, true and real. (MGM, p. 425)

Murdoch here suggests that the concepts of good, true and real are essential for human existence; no such experience could be had without them. Whether or not she is right that we can think away material objects from human existence, the idea that human existence is unimaginable without the

just-mentioned concepts seems right. We cannot conceive of human consciousness without conceiving of something evaluable in terms of goodness, truthfulness and so on. If degrees of goodness are inherent in the activity of vision, then there can be no experience, and thus no human existence, in the absence of the concept of good.

This understanding of degrees of goodness as pertaining to our vision also makes sense of Murdoch's idea that the argument is *first-personal* (MGM, p. 392). If degrees of goodness were found primarily in objects in the world, the argument could be given final and definitive assent by anyone: we would only need to look *outwards* at objects in the world to assess its truth. But it is only 'from the inside' that we can see that the activity of vision and its evaluability really is ubiquitous: to assess her argument, we must look *inward* at our experience to see whether we discern degrees of goodness within it. Murdoch thus suggests that it is our first-personal experience that gives life to the argument, rather than any theoretical assertion that it must be so.

This reading of the notion and location of degrees of goodness is well placed to explain why Murdoch insists that degrees of goodness are experienced in the whole of human life. It also explains her claim that degrees of goodness are discerned in moral activity, since vision in this sense *is*, for Murdoch, an essentially moral activity. Can it also make sense of Anselm's implicit thought that degrees of goodness can be discerned *in* objects, rather than merely in our vision of them? Are these two kinds of value wholly unconnected?

We can understand their connection by seeing the progressive activity of moral vision as revealing to us the way objects of vision *deserve* to be seen. On this view, morally good vision progressively enables us to see objects (even hills and stones) in ways which do justice to the respects in which the things perceived are good or fail to be good. Such recognition of degrees of goodness may take the form of seeing a hill or a blade of grass, for instance, simply as good or bad. But it may more commonly consist of seeing the *beauty* of a hillside (in bloom) or the *tenacity* and *vigour* of a blade of grass (growing out from a crack in the pavement). No objects, Murdoch insists, are perceived in value-neutral ways, and we can fail to do justice to the beauty of a hill or

tenacity of a blade of grass just as we can fail to do justice to the goodness of a person (even if the latter temptation is more common). That all objects admit of degrees of goodness, on this view, means that not only is our *vision* of them essentially value-laden, but *they* are essentially value-laden.<sup>xxi,xxii</sup>

On this view, Murdoch thinks that degrees of goodness are involved in human activity twice-over. The first sense in which they are involved in human activity is that all human activity involves an exercise of moral vision, which is continuous and basic in human life. Our vision exhibits goodness in particular insofar as it is just, loving and so on towards the objects perceived. All human activity is thus morally evaluable. Secondly, the morally good kind of vision will reveal to us the morally rich ways in which objects deserve to be seen. Refinement in the activity of perception will thus entail a refined perception of objects, including the respects in which they are good. This is not necessarily to say that we will discern a greater number of things as valuable, nor that we will discern a higher degree of value in those things. Rather, the idea is that the better our vision, the better a sense of their value we will have.<sup>xxiii,xxiv</sup>

This point has close connections to Murdoch's insistence that focusing on our engagement with art can help shed light on our engagement with moral goodness.<sup>xxv</sup> She makes much of our engagement with art and repeatedly turns to it to elucidate the nature of our moral life. She writes:

Art and craft are formal images of all our busy activities wherein we do well or badly. In general, in the 'combing-through' of experience, good art can figure, not only as an image, but as a kind of evidence, a sort of Ontological Proof, since here we may see more clearly on display how when we connect what is real with what is good we find out what truth means, and how in seeking truth (the right formulation, the better work) we also understand virtue and the 'feel' of reality. (MGM, p. 429)

Why might art be a particularly good image of *all* of our activities manifesting degrees of goodness? First, art seems like a good image of our activities in general because, as she understands it, art shows us (whether pictorially or otherwise) a particular way of looking at the world.<sup>xxvi</sup> That is,

works of art manifest a certain vision of the world and make that way of seeing the world accessible to those who properly attend to it. These ways of seeing are not merely epistemic states for Murdoch; they *are* or *make possible* morally rich ways of being within it.<sup>xxvii</sup> Art teaches us a way of seeing what confronts us, and good art, she insists, will teach us *truthful* ways of seeing the world: ‘We demand truth from art, and great works of art refine and extend our conception and grasp of truth’ (MGM, p. 313). Novels that make a certain kind of use of pernicious stereotypes, for example, both exemplify and teach us pernicious ways of seeing people, and we might rightly deem such novels to be the worse for this. Like all our activities, then, artworks manifest a vision of the world that may be good to various degrees and in different ways, but in art the idea that we evaluate the truthfulness of the vision is especially clear.

Art is also a good image of the activities in which we manifest degrees of goodness because the more we attend to art, the more refined our perception of degrees of goodness in works of art, as well as in the world read in their light, will be. Even great artists, Murdoch insists, are imperfect: ‘An understanding of art involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority. There are very evident degrees of merit, there are heights and distances; even Shakespeare is not perfect’ (TSG, p. 86). Attending to art allows us to recognise that even the best works are *imperfect*, and gives us a sense of the different ways in which they can be good and of the relations between these kinds of goodness (‘hierarchy’). Moreover, there is no obvious endpoint to this: we are willing to attend to great art again and again, and we expect our understanding of them and their excellence to continue to deepen. As with ourselves and our actions, such works will always be imperfect, but they can nonetheless be supremely valuable in attempting to capture something that will always transcend our grasp.

We have explored, then, the idea that we experience degrees of goodness, and in doing so, have explained the second premise of Murdoch’s argument as well, namely that this experience is ubiquitous. One might of course resist these claims. Much contemporary moral philosophy implicitly does. Still, we find something very appealing in the expansion of the moral domain to

cover our wider relations to the world and each other. It also seems like a coherent and plausible theory of the moral realm, and thus, even for those who are unsympathetic to it, it should be philosophically illuminating to examine where such a conception of the moral leads.

## 5. Goodness and Perfection

Murdoch, then, claims that we experience degrees of goodness in all of our activities, because, for her, all such activities involve moral vision. Our way of seeing the world will be more or less kind, loving, honest, and so on. The third claim of Murdoch's argument is that there must be an idea of perfection underlying our experience of degrees of goodness: 'We *know* of perfection as we look upon what is imperfect' (MGM, p. 427). Why would the experience of degrees of goodness point towards perfection?

Murdoch's basic thought here seems to be that degrees of goodness give us the idea of a scale or series. When we do something imperfectly, for instance, and recognise that we could do it better, we view the two performances as belonging to a kind of scale of goodness with one higher up on the scale than the other and, therefore, as more desirable. But the world being as it is, we do not think (at least in maturity) that the better performance is *perfectly* good. Instead, we recognise that had we ourselves been better, we would have been able to discern and perhaps perform a still better alternative. We may even have an inkling of what the still better performance might look like, though probably not a worked-out idea of it.<sup>xxviii</sup>

This seems like a plausible claim about our experience. We do generally take it that our vision of and performance in the world is improvable and that it is endlessly so (even if we rarely consciously think this): we know that we will never properly grasp all that there is to be grasped and are well aware that there are limitations and distortions to our vision and performance. No way of picturing or being in the world could do full justice to the things within it, and we take it that we should seek to improve, to more adequately understand and appreciate the things within it.

This possibility of continual improvement, according to Murdoch, points toward an idea of perfection. She conceives of the Good as binding up every kind of perfection within itself and thus thinks that the scale of goodness ultimately points towards the Good, the ultimate aim of our desires for improvement. Dissatisfied as we are with our imperfectly good activities, we recognise that we ultimately strive toward the not merely good but absolutely perfect, although we recognise that we will never attain it. Perfection thus transcends not only our achievements but even our conceptual grasp of what is possible, whilst nonetheless being continuously pointed toward in all our activity.<sup>xxix</sup>

This brings us to two of the outstanding questions mentioned earlier: Why think that degrees of goodness point to *absolute Good* or *perfection* rather than to merely high levels of goodness? And why think that the different kinds of goodness which we experience all point to a *single Good*?

On the first question, one might agree with Murdoch that we experience degrees of goodness in all of our activities, and that these degrees of goodness imply a scale or series. Still, one might doubt that this scale points toward perfection, rather than a merely relatively highest thing in the series.

Murdoch's argument against this alternative seems to depend upon the idea that no *imperfect* stopping-point on the scale of goodness – nothing on that scale which does not point up and beyond itself – is possible. With any 'merely best' (less-than-perfect) thing, it is possible to ask in what regard it is less than perfect, and how it might be better. And even if one has no answers to these questions, we know that there are answers, not least because experience indicates that what initially seems perfect, with further attention, gets revealed as limited and imperfect. It would thus always be possible to extend a scale of goodness beyond any imperfect thing on it, stopping only with the idea of perfection.<sup>xxx</sup>

This thus leaves Murdoch (as with Anselm) with a series of degrees of imperfect goodness pointing towards something different: perfect goodness itself. From the idea that we discern degrees of goodness *in* all of our activities, we get to the somewhat different conclusion about the

reality of perfect goodness simply as such. Is this plausible? If Murdoch were claiming that imperfect things pointed towards the existence of a perfect *thing*, we might be particularly sceptical here. But she is careful to distance herself from such a claim: ‘Good is not a particular, it is not a thing among others’ (MGM, p. 405). Moreover, she frequently refers to an *idea* of perfection. She is not claiming that some separate object exists that instantiates perfection; rather, her claim is that there really is a standard of perfection, the object of our best desires in whose light we act and make our ordinary judgements of degrees of goodness. We may in fact disagree about what that standard is, but it is sufficient that we all continuously work with some evolving idea of perfection, and that we must do so.

Next, then, why think that the different kinds of goodness we experience all point to a *single* Good? Imperfectly truthful things point towards perfect truthfulness; imperfect kindness points toward perfect kindness. But why think that there is a *single* perfect Good, rather than many distinct perfect goods? For Murdoch, it is the goodness of our vision (or experiences, activities) that is the most basic kind. Given this, the claim that the different kinds of goodness we experience all point to a *single* Good seems tied up with her acceptance of the unity of the virtues:

We may seem to compartmentalise value, but if we look more closely these divisions take place against a base of possible further, better, deeper, understanding and achievement. (MGM, p. 427)

All I suggest here is that reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity. What is it like to be just?

We come to understand this as we come to understand the relationship between justice and the other virtues. (TSG, p. 56)

Here Murdoch claims that a close look at ways of being good reveals that they are not distinct and wholly separable (‘compartmentalised’). Rather, they are inherently intertwined: we cannot understand any kind of moral goodness in isolation, and this is because possessing each requires

possession of the others. This is not to say that Murdoch thinks one cannot possess a given kind of goodness to *any degree whatsoever* without the others, but that the *best* and *fullest* form of that goodness will involve other kinds of goodness, and that becoming increasingly good in one respect will require developing many intertwined kinds of goodness. For example, becoming more just may require also becoming kinder, wiser and more merciful, since perfect justice plausibly cannot be separated from the exercise of these other virtues.

If such a conception of the unity of the virtues is plausible, then Murdoch's contention that the distinct kinds of degrees of goodness point towards a single unified Good seems plausible as well.<sup>xxxii</sup> If there are no discrete perfect versions of each distinct way of being good because they are themselves interconnected, then the perfect version of any form of goodness must involve *all* virtues, or *all* kinds of goodness. As such, there could not be distinct perfect goods, but must be a single Good, which unifies all of its kinds.

The reading which we have given of Murdoch's argument makes clear why she understands it as relying on knowledge that at least some of us *already* possess, and as aiming to *clarify* this knowledge rather than to establish it. Murdoch does not take herself to be introducing new and esoteric metaphysical ideas.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Rather, she thinks that the ordinary person's moral experience presupposes degrees of perfection, and thus that this experience, however implicitly, already points toward the idea of perfection. As she understands it, the role of the ontological argument is thus to draw out the implications of what is (if only inchoately) already known to everyone, and to provide an image to help clarify our experience and make salient its true significance. She writes: 'All one can do [in metaphysical arguments of this sort] is to appeal to certain features, and using suitable metaphors and inventing suitable concepts where necessary to make these features visible' (TSG, p. 73). Here, the image or concept of 'the Good' points toward features of the world that are implicit in our experience and yet difficult to discern. The argument is thus not intended to convert the moral sceptic but to provide the possessor of moral experience with greater understanding of and commitment to the reality implied by that experience.

## 6. The Necessity of the Good

We have seen that Murdoch's ontological argument begins with the claim that degrees of goodness are ubiquitous in human experience. It proceeds by claiming that there must be an idea of perfection underlying such experience. And, finally, it concludes with the claim that the Good exists, and necessarily exists. So, in what sense might the Good be *necessary*, and why does Murdoch think that it is? We'll begin to address these questions by discussing a recent proposal as to their answers.

In a recent paper, Jessy Jordan (2022) suggests that Murdoch's claim that the Good is necessary should be read as a 'modest' one (p. 6). He suggests that Murdoch's view is that the Good is necessary *for human thought and experience*, not that it necessarily exists *per se*. He writes:

Murdoch's transcendental argument is a modest one insofar as it merely aims to establish something about what is necessary for human thought and experience.

(*ibid.*)

Having begun with observations about the way in which degrees of goodness figure in our thought and experience, Jordan thus claims that Murdoch's conclusion also refers only to the way in which the Good figures in our thought and experience. That is, he reads the 'necessity' in question as the necessity of thinking in terms of the Good, arguing that Murdoch is best read as thinking that in order for our experience to be what it is, the Good must be believed in, a claim that is compatible with our experience in fact being misleading or mistaken.

His argument rests on the claim that this reading makes sense of a number of things Murdoch says. First, she claims that moral value cannot be '*thought away*' from human experience (MGM, p. 396). Second, she resists the claim that a metaphysical *object* called 'the Good' exists. Thirdly, she talks of a '*unique form of necessity*' as applying to the Good (MGM, p. 406). And finally, she sometimes speaks of *certainty* in a way that is seemingly interchangeable with *necessity*, suggesting that the latter may be understood as reducible to the former.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

As we have already noted, Jordan is certainly right to emphasize that Murdoch does not consider the Good to be an object, and that any conception of the ‘necessary existence’ of the Good that implied its existence as an object would be mistaken. However, we think that there is good reason to think that Murdoch is aiming for a less modest form of necessity than Jordan ascribes to her. Moreover, we think that the above features are also well-explained on the less modest view.

The less modest view can be indicated by noting a tension in Jordan’s reading of Murdoch. As he notes in discussing her philosophical method, she believes that ‘once we attend to the ordinary person’s lived experience of value...what we will find there manifested is that value presents itself as a reality to be discerned’ (Jordan, 2022, p. 5) and that this experience should be taken at its face value. That is, he holds that Murdoch is happy to talk about the reality of value, and to talk about this ‘reality’ as substantial: that it is real does not mean merely that we need to think about the world in terms of degrees of value, but that ‘value is a part of the “fabric of the world”’ (ibid.).<sup>xxxiv</sup> If this is right, then his modest reading of the necessity of the good for Murdoch is at least unsatisfying. Having asserted that value itself is a part of the fabric of the world, it would seem overly cautious if Murdoch were to hold merely that we must *think* in terms of the Good.

That Murdoch’s view of the necessity of the Good is instead ‘immodest’ is initially suggested by the fact that she frequently refers to the Good as ‘real’ (e.g., MGM, p. 430) and, more strongly, as ‘necessarily real’ (TSG, p. 54). And the following, from the conclusion of the chapter ‘The Ontological Proof in *Metaphysics as Guide to Morals*, seems to imply a stronger view than merely that we must *believe* in the Good:

What is perfect must exist, that is, what we think of as goodness and perfection, the ‘object’ of our best thoughts, must be something real, indeed especially and most real, not as contingent accidental reality but as something fundamental, essential and necessary. (MGM, p. 430)

Here, Murdoch claims not that the Good is something we must think in terms of, but that it must be especially real. Moreover, Murdoch seems elsewhere to explicitly reject the weaker reading of her claim:

What is formulated here seems unlike an ‘as if’ or a ‘it works’. Of course one must avoid here, as in the case of God, any heavy material connotation of the misleading word ‘exist’. Equally, however, a purely subjective conviction of certainty, which could receive a ready psychological explanation, seems less than enough. (TSG, p. 62)

Here, she rejects the idea that her philosophy should be read as a claim merely about human psychology or as suggesting merely that it must appear to us *as if* the Good exists. Her argument is not intended to conclude simply that experience implies, *perhaps wrongly*, that the Good exists. At the same time, she is careful to suggest that the Good’s existence is unlike that of other things; we are not simply discussing the existence of an extra material object. A satisfactory interpretation of her claim, then, must make sense of both of these worries; it must show how and why this claim is not merely the claim that it is ‘as if’ the Good exists, whilst not implying that the Good is an object.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Rather than the reality of the Good being in tension with her claim that the Good is not a material object, the two are essentially interwoven. As Murdoch sees it, no *particular object* could exist *necessarily*, and this thought has much in common with her rejection of the idea of a personal God (any particular object, she thinks, must be contingent and imperfect).<sup>xxxvi</sup> But this point implies not that the Good does not necessarily exist, but that it is not a particular object. The Good, that is, is not a particular object about which we can ask what it would be like *if* it existed, and to which we might then ascribe necessary existence. Rather, it is a different kind of ‘thing’ altogether, a necessarily existing thing.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

On our reading, Murdoch is claiming that the Good – an idea of perfection – exists necessarily in that this external standard genuinely exists and could not fail to exist. It is an external

standard in that it transcends our every conception of it but is a standard which is nonetheless ubiquitous in, and exercises authority over, our lives. To claim that this standard or idea of perfection is necessary is to claim that things really could not be otherwise; it would be impossible for such a standard not to exist, not to exercise authority over our lives. Of course, the reality of the Good thus understood would be very different from the reality of hills, stones, or people. But this is in keeping with Murdoch's insistence on the *unique* reality of the Good.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

What might the reality of this ideal consist in? Most basically, we take it that the reality of the ideal, for Murdoch, consists in its reality *as an ideal* – in the fact that it is a real ideal, as opposed to a false one. Since the Good is not a material object, its reality cannot be the sort of reality had by hills, stones, or people; but it can nonetheless have all the reality that *ideals* can have. The opposite of the real ideal in this sense is the hollow or shallow ideal, an ideal that fails to be truthful to or sufficiently ambitious for that *for which* it is an ideal. A real ideal is a worthy ideal.<sup>xxxix</sup>

As we have seen, Murdoch claims that degrees of goodness are ubiquitous in and cannot be thought away from human experience and thought, and also that they point towards and rely upon an idea of perfection. This idea of perfection is thus itself understood as necessary; it makes possible our necessary recognition of degrees of goodness, degrees of goodness which we do not simply bring to the world but which we truly discern in the world. For our experience to be of *actual* degrees of goodness, the Good must itself exist. Moreover, for such experience to be unable to be thought away from human experience, it must be the case that it exists necessarily. Even if Jordan is right that Murdoch's argument is a transcendental one, then, it is not modest.

We can see that the reasons Jordan offers in favour of his alternative approach are also well-explained by this view of the necessity of the Good. First, Murdoch claims that moral value cannot be '*thought away*' from human experience, because the Good really is necessary, and its existence is implied by the existence of every particular experience. Second, this view avoids saddling Murdoch with the claim that a particular metaphysical *object* called 'the Good' exists, a claim she wants to resist. Thirdly, it explains why she talks of a '*unique* form of necessity' as applying

to the Good: because the Good binds up every perfection in itself, there could not be more than one ‘thing’ with this kind of necessity. Finally, though Murdoch sometimes speaks of *certainty* in a way that is seemingly interchangeable with *necessity*, we should be hesitant about identifying the two, because at other times she clearly distinguishes them: ‘Certainty here is the subjective aspect of the necessary aspect of God’ (MGM, p. 426) – that is, our being certain of the existence of degrees of goodness and thereby of the Good is only one aspect of the necessity of the Good. The other aspect is objective: its unique kind of existence.

## Conclusion

Murdoch’s ontological argument, then, proceeds from the observation that degrees of goodness are ubiquitous in human activity and experience, to the conclusion that underlying these imperfect instances of goodness must be a necessary standard of perfection. Whilst her argument of course does not preclude every objection, it should at least be appealing to those who share her wider ethical convictions. In explaining her argument, we hope to have shed light on how best to understand some of those convictions. The reconstruction we have offered should also ease any worries that Murdoch is a ‘Platonist’ in the sense of that term which many contemporary ethicists wish to avoid. Murdoch speaks of the Good as a ‘thing’ only metaphorically, and her argument that the Good exists at least does not seem to rely on any esoteric metaphysical assumptions.

It may nonetheless be the case that Murdoch’s argument rests on faith: faith that things really are as they morally seem to be. In particular, she seems to be happy to adopt a kind of philosophical naïvete, assuming that our moral experience really does reveal the reality of degrees of goodness in the world and, thereby, of the Good.<sup>xl</sup> This conviction is largely unargued-for, and thus seems like a kind of moral faith akin to Anselm’s faith that our religiously imbued experience of the world reveals God. Importantly, this seems in keeping with her wider philosophical methodology, in which she seeks to take seriously ordinary moral experience.

Yet, finally, the kind of faith required for Murdoch's argument is quite minimal compared to Anselm's. Anselm does not conclude merely that something 'than which none greater can be conceived' exists, but that *God* exists. His argument, as commonly understood, presupposes faith that God *is* that than which none greater can be conceived. There is no parallel in Murdoch's argument, since she concludes merely that perfection ('that than which nothing greater can be conceived') exists. So, though her argument is couched in highly religious language, and though it does rest on a certain inescapable kind of faith, it avoids the particular leap of faith which she believes has become impossible. The faith which her argument requires is thus a kind that we might all much more plausibly already possess.

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<sup>i</sup> Murdoch (2012, p. 94). In referring to other of Murdoch’s texts, we use “MGM” to refer to *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) and “TSG” to refer to *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970).

<sup>ii</sup> Tillich (1957, Section I); quoted in MGM, p. 391.

<sup>iii</sup> Some recent scholarly work on Anselm has been fairly positive about his argument(s). See, e.g., Smith (2014) and Campbell (2019). Though also see Kearns (2021) for a recent parody.

<sup>iv</sup> It is worth noting that not all scholars agree that there is a single ‘ontological argument’ to be found in Murdoch. Hämäläinen (2022) argues that ‘[t]here is in fact no systematic argument concerning the reality of the Good, modelled on Anselm, to be found in Chapters 13 and 14 of MGM’ (Hämäläinen, 2022, p. 213). Though it can be difficult to discern such an argument, we will be arguing that it is there.

<sup>v</sup> We won’t be concerned here to defend Murdoch’s understanding of what counts as an ‘ontological argument’. We take as sufficient just that she calls her argument (and her interpretation of Anselm’s) ‘ontological’.

<sup>vi</sup> Leftow, for example, writes that ‘[t]hese arguments all try to prove God’s existence a priori, via reasoning about the entailments of a particular description of God’ (Leftow, 2007, p. 80). The point that the argument is wholly *a priori* is a matter of debate. As will be seen, the third premise of a common reconstruction of it is at least not obviously *a priori*. We will nonetheless refer to that common reconstruction as the ‘logical’ or ‘*a priori*’ reading.

<sup>vii</sup> As, e.g., McGill (1965, p. 45) points out, it’s plausible that much of Anselm’s reply elaborates claims made in *Proslogion* III. It’s also worth noting that whereas most interpreters take the *Proslogion* III and ‘Reply’ arguments to be distinct from the argument of *Proslogion* II, Murdoch seems to understand them as *clarifications* of the earlier argument. The idea that they constitute a distinct argument for Anselm has been defended by Hartshorne (1941) and Malcolm (1960). (See also Adams (1971) and, for an overview of and objections to this kind of interpretation, Smith (2014)).

<sup>viii</sup> For the portion of Anselm of which this is primarily a summary, see his ‘Reply’, Section VIII. It might seem in this summary of Murdoch’s that the fact of instinctive faith is treated as distinct from the fact of seeing God in all the world, but we take it that Murdoch understands them as essentially coextensive, both in her interpretation of Anselm and, later, in her own argument.

<sup>ix</sup> This and the following point are not wholly unique to Murdoch, but she makes unique use of them. See, for comparison, Campbell (2018), especially chapter 12.

<sup>x</sup> See Asiedu (2002) for further discussion of Murdoch’s reading of Anselm.

<sup>xi</sup> See Mulhall (2007) for a critical discussion of this point.

<sup>xii</sup> For more on Murdoch’s conception of the Good, see Mac Cumhail (2020) and Broackes (2012). Robjant (2012) further discusses connections between Plato and Murdoch.

<sup>xiii</sup> In one sense, her argument is thus straightforwardly ‘linear’. Hämäläinen (2022) suggests that ascribing a linear argument to Murdoch is mistaken, and that her argument is essentially circular. As will be seen, we think that this is a false dichotomy and that the argument can be linear in an important sense whilst avoiding the need to be ‘conclusive, independent of perspective, and equally available to any rational person’ (Hämäläinen, 2022, p. 217).

<sup>xiv</sup> Murdoch writes: ‘... *perfection* (absolute good) and *necessary existence*. These attributes are indeed so closely connected that from some points of view they are the same. (Ontological proof.)’ (TSG, p. 60).

<sup>xv</sup> He quotes Romans 1:20 – ‘the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen through the things that have been made...’ (Anselm, 1965, pp. 187).

<sup>xvi</sup> Drawing Murdoch towards her philosophical companions such as Foot, Anscombe and Midgley, one might even draw upon a neo-Aristotelian kind of function-argument to suggest that any object can be good to a certain degree. That is not the kind of interpretation we offer here, but for a proposal along these lines, see Lipscomb (2020; 2021).

<sup>xvii</sup> Burns (2013) suggests a different reading on which Murdoch offers *two* arguments here, one from the ubiquity of goodness and another from degrees of goodness.

<sup>xviii</sup> For more on this broadening of the moral, see the essays by Blum (1986), Diamond (1996), Taylor (1996), and Bagnoli (2012).

<sup>xix</sup> See Murdoch’s ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ (1956) for further discussion of the centrality of vision to our moral life. “Vision” here is not meant in terms of literal visual perception, but our wider grasp of the world.

<sup>xx</sup> Antonaccio (2003; 2012) seems to understand degrees of goodness in a similar way.

<sup>xxi</sup> For an alternative view, see Broackes, who suggests instead that Murdoch may think of ‘good’ as having ‘its primary application only in the domain of persons’ and that there may be a ‘deep Kantianism’ to Murdoch’s metaphysics (Broackes, 2012, p. 68).

<sup>xxii</sup> The foregoing does not entail that there is only a *single* way in which every object deserves to be seen. An artist and a botanist might see a blade of grass in different ways, but this is compatible with their both doing justice to it.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Murdoch’s much-discussed example of M and D (TSG, pp. 16–17) is the classic Murdochian example of how refinement of vision eventuates in refined perception of degrees of goodness in the object of perception.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Despite our finding this to be the most plausible reading of Murdoch's view of degrees of goodness – as well as being independently plausible – the claim that degrees of goodness are present in objects themselves is not essential to our overall interpretation of her argument. The argument plausibly works even without that point.

<sup>xxv</sup> It is worth noting here that Murdoch seems to think of art primarily in terms of art-forms such as novels or paintings. For example, it is not always clear that what she says about art is true of music.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See Mac Cumhaill (2020) for further discussion of this point.

<sup>xxvii</sup> And see especially Mac Cumhaill (2020, pp. 243–245) for discussion of this point.

<sup>xxviii</sup> The importance of having an adequate set of concepts is clear here – a good set of concepts will make it easier to discern how and why some things are better than others.

<sup>xxix</sup> Her focus here is thus very much on absolute ideals. Gleeson criticises Murdoch for this emphasis on ideals and her relative silence regarding 'implacable moral demands' (Gleeson, 2019, p. 196).

<sup>xxx</sup> Here there may be echoes of other arguments for the existence of God, particularly cosmological arguments.

<sup>xxxi</sup> The unity of the virtues is a much-discussed claim, so we will simply assume here that it is at least a live option. See Sreenivasan (2009) for doubts about it. Badhwar (1996) and Wolf (2007) offer defences of limited versions of the claim. Toner (2014) defends a strong version. Murdoch's sympathies seem to lie towards the stronger view.

<sup>xxxii</sup> This does not mean, however, that her ideas are not *philosophically* unorthodox.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> There are other arguments implicit in his paper, but these seem the most relevant here.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> A phrase he takes from Mackie (1977).

<sup>xxxv</sup> This reading also throws some doubt on Adams' (1999, p. 42) claim that Murdoch understands the Good as a 'real being', unless this "being" is itself understood metaphorically.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See Mulhall (2007) for more on this point, and for doubts as to whether Murdoch's worries really need apply to God.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Of course, this line of thinking is similar to the common idea that *God* is not the kind of being who could exist contingently. Given Murdoch's starting-point in arguments for theism, that seems to be an advantage of this reading.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> This reading of the reality of the Good seems to contrast with Hämäläinen's reading of it as an affirmation merely of a certain 'metaphysical orientation' (Hämäläinen 2022, 215).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Note that the worthiness of an ideal is thus in some sense understood with reference to the Good. Where the Good itself is the ideal in question, issues of circularity of course arise, similar to those that arise when asking traditional questions about God's goodness. It is less obvious, given Murdoch's understanding of the Good, that the spectre of so-called Third Man Arguments also arises.

<sup>xl</sup> This is the case even where what is perceived is a *lack* of goodness. Such a lack can itself point towards something better and, ultimately, toward the Good. One important aspect of Murdoch's conception of moral experience which we have not discussed here is that of the experience of 'void' (e.g., MGM, p. 492). This aspect of her thought certainly complicates the reading we have given, but insofar as the experience of void is experienced as the *absence of goodness*, it may itself help to reveal the ubiquity of an ideal of Goodness in our experience, since this absence is itself understood in relation to the Good.