

Murdoch and Kant

Melissa Merritt

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Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence the more often and more steadily one considers them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*
(Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:161)

Is there, however, any true transcendence, or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need onto an empty sky?
(Iris Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”, 347[57])

Introduction

Murdoch’s relation to Kant is a delicate, complex topic. On what might be called the received view, Kant is Murdoch’s philosophical enemy: a moral universalist offering a skewed picture of the nature of moral activity and the chief substance of moral concern.¹ Some recent work pushes against the received view, either arguing that the centrality of love in Murdochian ethics has roots in Kant’s notion of respect,² or exposing, more generally, the Kantian lines that run alongside the far more frequently observed Platonic lines of her ethics.³ Much of this work focuses on the three essays in *The Sovereignty of Good*,⁴ where Murdoch at least appears more ambivalent about Kant than she is in earlier work — such as her 1959 “The Sublime and the Good”, where she unabashedly deems “Kant’s ethical theory [...] one of the most beautiful and exciting things in the whole of philosophy” (S&G 212). The context of this enthusiastic assessment is her remarking, more particularly, on the “suggestive, indeed intoxicating” connection between Kant’s ethical theory and aesthetic theory of the sublime that is mediated by his conception of respect or *Achtung* (S&G 212). My aim in this chapter is to examine Murdoch’s relation to Kant by following this clue: as we will see, it proves not to be a single-issue approach, but one that will lead us to central concerns of Murdoch’s distinctive conception of ethics as developed in *Sovereignty*.

Let me first say something about the basic difficulty of our inquiry, so that we set out in the right frame of mind. Our topic requires us to keep track of how Murdoch distinguishes Kant from the neo-Kantianism that constitutes her main target in *Sovereignty* and earlier essays. Although one might accuse proponents of the received view of failing to register this distinction, one might equally express frustration at Murdoch’s sweeping and idiosyncratic approach to intellectual history. She “roughly” characterises her main neo-Kantian target as “a Protestant, liberal, empiricist way of conceiving morality” (M&E, 70), an outlook that in Murdoch’s estimation includes Romanticism in her “own somewhat narrow sense” (SBR 271) as marked by “cult of personality and denial of external authority” (SBR 275), as well as existentialism and ordinary-language philosophy. To further complicate matters, Murdoch names Kant as the “source not only of this Liberal morality, but also of a modern version of its opposite”: the Natural Law morality she populates with “Thomists, Hegelians, [and] Marxists” and which sees “the individual [...] as moving tentatively vis-à-vis a reality which transcends him” (M&E 68 and

¹ *Locus classicus* might be Blum (1994).

² For quite different accounts, see Velleman (1999), Bagnoli (2003), and Merritt (2017a).

³ E.g. Broakes (2012), and Antonaccio (2012:pp.105-125).

⁴ These essays were first published between 1964 and 1969.

70). The sprawling genealogy is bound to raise the hackles of scholarly caution;⁵ but understanding Murdoch's genealogy on its own terms will guide our inquiry at various points along the way. At present, I simply want to draw some preliminary observations about the nature of Murdoch's engagement with Kant.

Once we recognise that Murdoch distinguishes Kant from her neo-Kantian target, we might then assume her project is one of retrieval: to restore the true Kant from however he has been misappropriated by neo-Kantians. But this cannot quite be the case, as we can glean from her telling suggestion that Kant's "handsome conception of the sublime" (SGC 367[79]) is "possibly even more interesting than Kant realised" (OGG 359[71]). The remark echoes Kant's own claim to have understood Plato better than Plato understood himself (*Critique of Pure Reason* A314/B370). Let me first say something about the spirit of these remarks, then their substance. They carry the sense of appreciating what a predecessor's position might look like if it were rendered consistent with its best thought. For Kant, this means taking the upshot of the Platonic theory of recollection to be that the idea of the Good can only have its source in pure reason itself; as a result, this idea cannot be assumed to be "chimerical" despite the fact that no sensibly given "pattern" of action or character can ever be fully adequate to it (A313-5/B370-2). Now, one of Kant's aims in the first *Critique* is to reconceive metaphysics under a principle of epistemic humility: knowledge, in the sense of theoretical cognition (*Erkenntnis*), is limited to objects of possible experience. Yet here Kant gestures towards the separate project of a metaphysics of morals, one that draws substantive ethical conclusions from the nature of practical reason. Surely it, too, must be consistent with the principle of epistemic humility. But how do we understand the reality of the good if no sensibly given pattern of action or character can ever be fully adequate to it? For Murdoch, I will argue, a consistent answer to this question lies in reworking his conception of the sublime.

Of course, the value of Kant's conception of the sublime for Murdoch does not consist in its being the solution to an interpretive puzzle. Her aims are not chiefly exegetical. Her project is not one of straightforward retrieval. Rather, thinking through Kant allows her to develop some of the distinctive features of her ethics. These developments begin with a proclamation: "The theory of the sublime ought to be Kant's theory of tragedy" (S&G 213). Explaining the boldness and significance of this move — both philosophically on its own terms, and interpretively vis-à-vis Kant, will occupy me throughout this chapter. But let me connect some dots in a provisional fashion. Tragedy is a story that denies us the consolation of seeing things turn out well in the end. Our need for consolation, by Murdoch's lights, is one of the central dangers of moral life. And yet, as we will see, the Kantian conception of the sublime — in its original context and formulation — offers some kind of consolation. Murdoch's reworking of the Kantian sublime as a theory of tragedy is therefore subversive, for two reasons: first, her reworking pointedly denies it any consolatory function; and second, she deploys the reworked conception to argue that "[a]rt and morals are [...] one" (S&G 215; cf. OGG 348[58]) — a thesis that, despite the genuine connection between sublimity and morality for Kant, she well recognises is a challenge to him.

By now we should have some sense of the complexity of our topic: not only do we need to keep track of how Murdoch distinguishes Kant from her neo-Kantian target, but we also need to see that her interest in Kant is not tidily sequestered in some one area of his thought. Next we must turn to the substantive issues of her engagement with Kant, which I have only notionally indicated here.

⁵ A full assessment of its interpretive and historical adequacy lies both beyond the scope of this chapter and my own ability; I will naturally weigh in on the adequacy of Murdoch's understanding of Kant, but only where doing so stands to improve our understanding of Murdoch.

Sublimity and consolation

Our first question is what consolation is, and what it has to do with the sublime. I begin by considering how they are explicitly linked by Seneca, and implicitly by Kant. I then aim to clarify what attracts Murdoch to Kant's conception of the sublime, and how she distinguishes his success from the general failure of the Liberal line of neo-Kantianism. But we must also understand how a charitably-interpreted Kant nevertheless goes wrong in her view. The answer, I propose, lies in the epistemic presumption required by the consolations of the Kantian sublime. Appreciating this point will allow us to understand the rationale of Murdoch's proposal to rework the Kantian sublime as a theory of tragedy, which we then examine in the following section.

Seneca and Kant

Consolation is a form of address that aims to reorient the perspective of someone grieving or suffering, to show that what seems bad isn't really. This conception of consolation is cued to Stoic philosophy, which admits virtue as the only genuine good;⁶ but such a thought is not — simply as such — utterly alien to Murdoch, who was prepared to countenance only an “austere” consolation that might teach “that nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous” (SGC 371[85]). The central argument of Seneca's *Consolation to Helvia* — styled as a letter to his mother from exile in Corsica — turns on the Stoic supposition that, as rational beings, we have a special place in the rational order of creation: to perfect one's essentially rational nature by becoming virtuous is to participate fully in, and in some measure to sustain, this order.⁷ Thus Seneca takes solace at the thought that the human mind “which surveys the world and marvels at it [...] is the most glorious part of it” (8.4). The paradigmatic manifestation of this order, in many Stoic writings, is the movement of the heavenly bodies. Seneca dwells on the sublimity of this outlook: “so long as my eyes are not directed away from that spectacle, which they can never look on enough; so long as I may watch the sun and the moon and fix my gaze on the other planets” (8.6) — he goes on in this vein — and eventually concludes that “so long” as he sustains his contemplation of “the kindred objects on high” it makes no difference “what ground” he treads (8.6). The spectacle is *sublime* — literally “uplifting”⁸ — because it directs his attention to his true calling as a rational being, *consoling* him for his present circumstances that form no genuine obstacle to it.

Kant's account of the sublime draws both from a neo-Stoic German rationalist tradition that conceives of sublimity as rational perfection that may be manifest in the magnificent *order* of nature, as well as from an Anglophone tradition that lacks these commitments about nature, and conceives of its sublimity as a “rude kind of magnificence”, in the memorable phrase of Joseph Addison.⁹ The Stoic-rationalist influence emerges in Kant's famous “starry heavens” passage from the 1788 *Critique of Practical Reason* (see this chapter's first epigraph), where he gazes out at “an unbounded magnitude with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems” (CPrR 5:162); but the Anglophone influence emerges in the examples running throughout his *Analytic of the Sublime* in the 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, where sublimity is a certain state of mind aroused by a raw, unformed, and violently indifferent nature. These dual influences partly account for an ambiguity in Kant's conception of the sublime — one that at least partly explains how Murdoch

⁶ On a mainstream conception without this evaluative commitment: consolation aims to show that what one suffers isn't *as bad as it seems*.

⁷ *Consolation to Helvia* (8.1-6) at Seneca (2014:pp.55-6).

⁸ The Latin and German words for “sublime” come from verbs meaning *to raise*, or *lift up* (*sublimo*, *erheben*), with English deriving from Latin.

⁹ Addison, *Spectator* no. 412 (Bond 1965:p.540). On the distinct influences of neo-Stoic German rationalist and Anglophone sources on Kant's account of the sublime, see Merritt (2018).

could place him as the progenitor of both Natural Law and Liberal morality, respectively. But my account will focus on the Kantian sublime as it animates Murdoch’s expansively conceived neo-Kantian Liberal tradition. Thus I will begin by outlining Kant’s account of the sublime in the third *Critique*, and then turn to its link to the moral feeling of respect — considering it both on its own terms, and in Murdoch’s charitable and critical assessment of it.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant considers two kinds of aesthetic judgment of nature: one in which we enjoy its beauty, the other its sublimity. While we enjoy beauty in a state of unadulterated liking, our enjoyment of the sublime is mixed: we are at once attracted and repulsed. Kant begins with the observation that “We call **sublime** that which is **absolutely great**” (CJ 5:248). But nothing in nature can be *absolutely* great: no matter how big or powerful something is, it can only ever be *comparatively* so. Thus our enjoyment of natural sublimity requires the right perspective: we need to be so situated that large and powerful objects *figure as* absolutely great. Kant distinguishes sublimity of size and of power as the “mathematical” and the “dynamical” sublime, respectively.¹⁰ While they can be comingled in any judgment of the sublime — e.g. of a massive and crushing surf — they work somewhat differently in each case. In the first, I try to take in (“apprehend”) a massive object, but continually struggle and just fail to hold it in my sights all at once — as in Kant’s outlier example of architectural sublimity, standing under the dome at St. Peters (CJ 5:252). In the second, I have a visceral appreciation of nature’s power to annihilate me in my physical existence — e.g. of the power of the surf to thrash me against these rocks and suck me out into the deep — while yet feeling in sufficient safety to dwell upon these sensations. These are disorienting, assaulting experiences that bring us face-to-face with our physical limitations. That is the repulsive element of the judgment. Yet we linger over natural sublimity. Attraction is its governing valence. Why should we enjoy such assaulting experiences?

Kant’s answer, in outline, is that these assaults throw our attention onto the power of our rational faculty, which is not held back or threatened by them. In the case of the mathematical sublime, this is our power to conceive totalities in mere thought that we could never apprehend through the senses. And the dynamical sublime, Kant explains, “calls forth our power” to regard the “worldly goods” with which we are typically preoccupied as “trivial [klein]”; and thus to regard nature’s “might” as something we are indeed subjected to, but “not as the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would have to bow if it came down to our highest principles and their affirmation or abandonment” (CJ 5:262). Moreover, our enjoyment of dynamical sublimity does not just lie in the relief that comes with recognition of our real safety from the threat;¹¹ it lies in a positive attraction to another standard of value, “a unit against which everything in nature is small” or trivial (*klein*, CJ 5:261). Here the third *Critique* points outside of itself, to the standard of virtue that can only be conceived in pure thought, through the moral law.

Now we come to the delicate question of the relation between natural and moral sublimity in Kant’s account. Our enjoyment of natural sublimity does not involve our having this standard actively in mind.¹² Yet we must have developed some attunement to this standard, and how it calls us to moral life, in order to take this enjoyment in the rude magnificence of nature.¹³ Kant, moreover, takes our feeling for natural sublimity to be an analogue of the moral feeling of respect, or *Achtung*: we, as it were, substitute the one for the other (CJ 5:257). Kant even allows that the enjoyment of natural sublimity produces an “attunement of the mind” which is what is truly sublime (CJ 5:250). This sublimity of mind is not identical with, but

¹⁰ The mathematical sublime is the topic of *Critique of Judgment* §§25-27 (5:248-60) and the dynamical §§28-29 (5:260-66); I argue for the unity of these two accounts in Merritt (2018:pp.32-4, 41-50).

¹¹ As it does for Burke and others in the Anglophone tradition: see Merritt (2018:pp.40-1).

¹² This has to do with the “disinterestedness” of aesthetic judgments of reflection generally, a technical issue I have bracketed here; for discussion see Merritt (2018:pp.27-32, 50-1).

¹³ This is what Kant means when he says it requires, as a precondition, “cultivation [*Cultur*]” (CJ 5:265).

nevertheless “compatible with that which the influence of determinate (practical) ideas on feeling would produce” (CJ 5:256). At the same time, Kant wants to avoid concluding that the enjoyment of natural sublimity can directly promote our moral development, since it does not involve any determinate idea of the good.

As a result, it can seem as if Kant takes our enjoyment of natural sublimity to be empty: our minds are moved in a manner that is like the moral feeling of respect, but with no substantive moral commitment of any kind. But this impression must be somewhat mistaken — it is certainly too crude — if our readiness to enjoy natural sublimity should require having developed substantive moral commitments of a Kantian sort.¹⁴ As we are about to see, Murdoch finds this mistake pronounced in the Romantic strand of the Liberal neo-Kantian tradition.

Kant and Liberal neo-Kantianism

Thus we need to return to Murdoch’s intellectual genealogy, and specifically the broadly conceived Liberal tradition that she sees as descending from Kant. In her telling, Kant “made systematic” a critique of metaphysics that was already part of the Anglophone philosophical tradition (M&E 64), the cornerstone of which is the principle that knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) is limited to objects of possible experience. For Kant, this yields a dualism of fact and value that treats the latter “as an object of faith (not knowledge)” (DPR 194); but for neo-Kantians who have lost this sort of faith, it entails any range of expressivist or constructivist positions where value is a function of the freely choosing will (DPR 195, SGC 366[78-9]). The neo-Kantian model combines an “unexamined” (scientific) “sense of the strength of the machine” — nature — “with an illusion of leaping out of it” at important moments of choice (OGG 338[47]; see also IP 319[24], 321[26], 329[36]). The model has catastrophic implications for ethics, in Murdoch’s view, beginning with its conception of the person as an “isolated will” — *isolated*, because in principle uncompelled by, its beliefs about the world (IP 304-5[7-8]), and thereby isolated from other persons as well: “Even the presence of others is felt, if at all, simply as the presence of rational critics” (SBR 268; see also AD 288). These commitments, Murdoch contends, are widely shared: “The younger Sartre, and many British moral philosophers, represent this last dry distilment of Kant’s views of the world” (OGG 338[47]).

But for Kant, human freedom is not ultimately conceived in merely negative terms, as *freedom from* determination by the causal order of material nature; it must fundamentally be understood in positive terms, as our power to determine ourselves to action simply through the moral law, which Kant analyses as the principle of the autonomy of a rational will.¹⁵ The moral law is the principle of personhood, i.e. of an ontological order distinct from the domain of material nature. Murdoch recognises this, and thereby reads Kant as a kind of moral realist — “Kant believed in Reason [...] and [...] this was a form of a belief in an external reality” (OGG 338[46]; see also IP 323-4[30]).¹⁶ For Murdoch, this is a large part of what Kant got right: there is a reality to acknowledge in the practical, will-determining exercise of reason. Respect (*Achtung*) is the felt appreciation of this reality.¹⁷ Kant sometimes suggests that the object of respect is properly the moral law itself, sometimes persons (irrespective of character), and sometimes persons exemplifying excellence of character, or virtue.¹⁸ These turn out to be facets of one view, with respect for the moral law as foundational: persons are owed respect simply as agents

¹⁴ I thus read Kant’s account of our enjoyment of *natural* sublimity as ultimately having a *moral* source (Merritt 2018); for an opposing view, consider Doran (2015) and Crowther (1989).

¹⁵ Chiefly in *Groundwork* II (4:406-45) and *Critique of Practical Reason*, Analytic, Chapter 1 (5:19-57).

¹⁶ Liberal neo-Kantian tradition retains the dualism of nature and freedom, but loses any substantive commitment to this reality: this is how existentialist *Angst* descends from Kantian *Achtung* according to Murdoch (IP 331[38]).

¹⁷ Merritt (2017b) develops this point along broadly Murdochian lines.

¹⁸ For discussion of these differences, consider Darwall (2008).

with a rational will, the constitutive principle of which is the moral law; and persons can respected — in awe-struck fashion — as evincing the perfection of the rational will, or virtue.

The sort of respect that is most readily linked to the feeling of the sublime is the awe-struck sort that takes the manifestation of human goodness as its object. Kant describes it in the following vignette:

[B]efore a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself *my spirit bows*, whether I want it or whether I do not and hold my head ever so high, that he may not overlook my superior position. Why is this? His example holds before me a law that strikes down my self-conceit when I compare it with my own conduct, and I see observance of that law and hence its *practicability* proved before me in fact. (KpV 5:76-7)

Kant explicates his feeling as having the same bivalent structure found in judgments of the sublime: there is something repelling in having his self-justifying worldview “struck down” by the example of another’s goodness, and yet he is attracted to this example — indeed, it *compels* him. Kant’s “man” is not the “isolated will” of neo-Kantianism: he is not “totally unguided and alone” (IP 324[30]). Surely this must be part of what struck Murdoch as “marvellously near the mark” in Kant’s conception of respect (S&G 216): Kant describes being compelled by the reality of another person. And so his *spirit bows*, which is something he full well *does* — though not through any empty assertion of self, and not in any publicly available domain of phenomenally given facts.

It all seems quite Murdochian, one might say — except that, on closer inspection, the “humble common man” does not obviously figure *as an individual*. The details of the vignette are not so much indications of the reality of *this person*, as devices to illustrate the indifference of moral requirement to social station. The compelling reality is not the “humble common man” himself, but the standard of goodness shown to be practicable through his conduct. And this standard lies in each of us — not, normally, in the actuality of virtue, but simply as the moral law that Kant takes to be constitutive of reason in its practical capacity. Yet we still hover over the spot where Murdoch finds Kant to be “marvellously near the mark”: for Kant, by her lights, understood full well that “that endless aspiration to perfection which is characteristic of moral activity” (IP 324[30]). Thus if Kant tells us to feel respect for “the universal reason” in our breasts (S&G 215), it is not so that we may each turn inwards and be awe-struck by our own perfection;¹⁹ it is rather because we thereby have some access to the idea of perfection that alone can guide any genuine effort to become good.

Unfortunately, the “humble common man” nevertheless seems like a mere occasioning stimulus to such reflection, rather than its substantive concern — and thereby uncomfortably akin to craggy peaks and crashing surf, and so on. For Murdoch, the stubborn difficulty of Kant’s legacy turns on this point. Murdoch repeatedly — one might almost say *obsessively* — marvels at Kant’s injunction in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* that “the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is recognised as such” (4:408): here is a religion with an individual at its centre, she muses, yet Kant tells us “turn back to the pattern of rationality in our own bosoms and decide whether or not we approve of the man we see” (IP 323-4[29-30]; see also SGC 78, VCM 91). His words, she allows, can make him seem like “a backer of the existentialist view” — but, she insists, this is an interpretive mistake: Kant was “not an existentialist” because he was committed to “a moral reality” that is the proper object of respect (IP 323-4[30]).

Here Murdoch draws a clear line between Kant and his Liberal descendants (specifically existentialists), which she does not draw in the case of the aesthetic judgment of the sublime.

¹⁹ That (uncharitable) reading of Kant’s view of the sublime can be traced to Herder; see Zuckert (2003) and Merritt (2018:pp.24-27, 45) for discussion.

Indeed for Murdoch, Kant’s “extremely interesting” conception of the sublime is nevertheless itself “a kind of romanticism” (OGG 359[71]), meaning that it involves an unsound presence of self (see SBR 275). On the terms of Kant’s own theory, the magnificence of nature *really is* a mere occasioning stimulus for the feeling that Kant takes to be an analogue of the feeling of respect. Any value in our enjoyment of natural sublimity ultimately lies in that analogy. The craggy peaks (and so on) do not, themselves, really matter. But the same cannot be said of the “humble common man”: he cannot be taken as mere occasioning stimulus for a feeling of respect, on the terms of Kant’s own theory. Kant’s mistake, Murdoch thus allows, may be more “a matter of tactics” than substance (IP 324[30]). Let us briefly consider this failure of tactics, which will help us understand why she proposes to rework the Kantian theory of sublime as a theory of tragedy.

Kant’s failure of tactics

While Murdoch praises Kant for basing his metaphysics of morals on an idea of perfection, one recognised as “a real though infinitely distant standard” (IP 324[30]), she remains concerned about Kant’s assumptions about our access to this standard. Inasmuch as Kant takes the standard to lie in the nature of reason itself, he will be inclined to suppose that we can in principle have a perfectly adequate grasp of it from where we stand. Our “sublime” calling to perfect our essentially rational nature in virtue lies before us;²⁰ and we may be consoled by the thought that we at least have that end determinately in view. But for Murdoch, this is a false consolation: a metaphysics of morals that has learned a critical lesson about epistemic humility — one, we might say, that is appropriate to its subject matter — should recognise that don’t quite know where we are headed. Our access to the idea of perfection can only go through the thick, obscure tissue of human particularity.

To elaborate this point, consider Murdoch’s premises in “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts”: “I assume that human beings are naturally selfish and that human life has no external point or τέλος” (SGC 364[76]). The first premise she takes to be “true on the evidence” (364[76]), and which, on reflection, shows that the human being “constantly seeks consolation either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature” (364[77]). Consolation-seeking is an expression of this basic selfishness. So she advances the second premise — “a view as difficult to argue as its opposite” (364[77]) — as a starting point for an ethical argument aimed to block some of the consolation-seeking impulses specific to philosophy. So far we have considered how Kant’s conception of the sublime offers consolation of the self-inflating sort, which is why Murdoch takes the Kantian sublime to be itself a kind of romanticism.²¹ Yet she also takes there to be genuine promise in Kant’s conception — a promise that lies that lies in its connection to the feeling of respect, and thus in its resources to draw us to “a moral reality” that exists independently of the discretionary choices of individuals. Now, Murdoch says that “one of the main problems of moral philosophy” is to find “techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish” (OGG 344[53]); and our enjoyment of the sublime — in broadly Kantian terms, but suitably corrected in its tactics — might turn out to be such a technique.

Murdoch’s supposition that we need such techniques presupposes some idea of the human telos: *good* is an idea of human perfection. And it performs some necessary sense-making role in moral activity: “reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and [...] increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity” (OGG 346-7[56]). But it matters how we arrive at this unity. If we suppose that we can grasp this unity simply by reflecting on the universal reason within our breasts, then we will console ourselves for knowing, at least, where we are headed;

²⁰ See Kant’s remarks about the “sublimity of our moral vocation” (Rel 6:50, 6:23n, and CPrR5:87).

²¹ “We experience the Sublime when we confront the awful contingency of nature or of human fate and return into ourselves with a proud shudder of rational power” (SGC 367[79-80])

and this is a self-aggrandising way of thinking that blinds us to the reality of human life. Yet we need some sense of direction, some sense of unity to our efforts, some understanding of *what we are doing*, morally speaking. Murdoch's proposal to rework the Kantian conception of the sublime as a theory of tragedy aims to answer that need, without falling into the presumption of easy sense-making, and the sorts of consolation it provides.

The Kantian sublime salvaged as a theory of tragedy

In a pair of 1959 essays, "The Sublime and the Good" and "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", Murdoch argues that the Kantian sublime should be salvaged as a theory of tragedy: "We may indeed look back to Kant, not only for the source of the error, but also for the clue to its solution" (SBR 282). We have been considering Murdoch's account of Kant's error: the Kantian sublime leads us back to the universal reason in our breasts, in a manner that promises consolation of a self-inflating, romantic sort. In these essays, Murdoch argues that the solution is to see that Kant's "theory of the sublime can be transformed into a theory of art" (SBR 282). Moreover, she takes this solution to be suggested by Kant himself (SBR 282). *Prima facie*, this is surprising since, as she notes, Kant's theory of the sublime has nothing particularly to do with art: "It is an uplifting emotion experienced in the Alps" (S&G 212).²² Her proposal, however, rests on the connection of sublimity with morality in Kant's account; and Kantian morality centres on the value of persons. Therefore we might retain the Kantian psychological model of the sublime, but "think of the spectator as gazing not at the Alps, but at the spectacle of human life" (SBR 282). We are talking being gripped by a "spectacle" — a variety that *captivates* us, and in morally transformative ways.

In "On 'God' and 'Good'", Murdoch talks about the "psychological power that derives from the mere idea of a transcendent object which is to some extent mysterious" (OGG 349[59]). The Kantian sublime is an example of how we can be compelled by "the mere idea of a transcendent object" — the object of the idea of perfection — in the manner of marvelling over it, awe-struck. In drawing our attention to that object, the Kantian sublime reorients our energy to what Murdoch appears happy to think of as "our supersensible destiny" (S&G 215; SBR 282). She alludes here to Kant's conception of the human vocation or destiny (*menschliche Bestimmung*) that consists in the perfection of our essentially rational nature, a destiny *he* was happy to call "sublime" since it involves radical transformation of our evaluative point of view.²³ This deserves emphasis: Murdoch does not think that "our supersensible destiny" is part of what needs to be purged from the Kantian model of the sublime. What she says, rather, is this:

What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and the most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man. (S&G 215; see also SBR 282)

We might take this remark as further evidence that Murdoch's claim that "human life has no external point or *τέλος*" (SGC 364[77]) should not be confused with the assertion that human life has *no telos* full stop. She is saying that it has no *external* telos: there is not some predetermined end to achieve, so that we fulfil our role in the universe. This allows for an internal telos, some kind of sense-making and direction that is internal to human life. In a different context, I would argue that Kant, too, denied that human life has any such *external* telos (arguably this is the point that most separates him from the Stoics), while recognising that there must be one internal to human life. But at any rate, Murdoch's conception of what that would mean remains distinctive, and methodologically opposed to Kant's. Murdoch denies that "our

²² Kant never went to the Alps; he was almost entirely reliant on travelogues and literature for his examples.

²³ See, e.g. Rel (6:50, 6:23n) and CPrR (5:87) on the sublimity of the human vocation (*Bestimmung*); for further discussion and notes on historical context, see Merritt (2018:pp.43-50).

supersensible destiny” comes into clear view simply by reflecting on the universal reason within our breasts and grasping the moral law.

Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here. And if there is any kind of sense of unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience that has nothing outside it. (SGC 365[77])

Again her point is not to deny there is a human telos, but rather to say what sort of inkling we might have of it: it is something we dream of, something that haunts us, something that we have to look for, and only by moving uncertainly within the jumble of concrete human experience. At the same time, she recognises that we need some sense of direction. The Kantian sublime offers a philosophical model for what it is to have some such *sense* of direction. But it matters what we look at: “Who [...] cares what sort of emotions Kant experienced in the Alps?” (SBR 264; also S&G 212). What holds our attention has to be of a suitable subject matter to allow us to sense the appropriate direction, in an appropriate way — that is, without inviting us to make the epistemically unwarranted leap of supposing that we know just where we are headed. Murdoch suggests that these desiderata may be best achieved through good art, and perhaps paradigmatically in “the great nineteenth-century novel” (SBR 271).

Philosophically, what chiefly interests Murdoch in these novels is “simply this: they contain a number of different people” (SBR 271). This is the “spectacle of human life” that she claims must be the focus of a reconceived Kantian sublime. The “great” novelist who presents us with this spectacle must herself be “essentially tolerant” since she “displays a real apprehension of persons other than the author as having a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves” (271).²⁴ A good novel is, for this reason, an “un-Romantic” art form (271), because it is not the expression of the author’s own personality, but rather an expression of respect for “the being and authority” of these characters (275). And if the sublimity of this spectacle can be appreciated, it will not be through some kind of breathtaking shock or instant vision: it will dawn gradually, and be appreciated slowly, by the very nature of the art form.

I allude to the contrast Murdoch draws between her own anti-Romantic position and that of the “Symbolist” movement associated with T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme and others (S&G 210; SBR 272-275).²⁵ On her reading, the Symbolist way of rejecting Romantic self-assertion is to argue that art “should be the creation of unique self-contained things” (SBR 273). Murdoch takes the Symbolist view of our appreciation of art to be a revival of the Kantian conception of the *beautiful* (SBR 273). In Kant’s account, a beautiful object presents a suitability to our cognitive capacities that is independent of any cognition or comprehension of the object through concepts; the apprehension of the object throws our cognitive capacities into a “free play”, as they are not occupied with the business of cognition, and we enjoy this suitability of the object to our cognitive faculties with a distinctive kind of reflective pleasure (CJ 5:217). In Murdoch’s plausible interpretation of Kant, the *enjoyment* of beauty is instantaneous with the apprehension of the beautiful object. But the theory is not obviously applicable to serious art, at least the sort that interests Murdoch: “This is [...] a picture that will suit our apprehension of a rose, but not our apprehension of *King Lear*” (S&G 210). The point, which she downplays, seems central to her claims for the genuinely un-Romantic, or un-self-asserting, credentials of the great novel. The Symbolist suggestion that we appreciate art instantaneously, in the moment of perception

²⁴ Ultimately, Murdoch decides “tolerance” is too tame a word for the virtue she has in mind, which is really *love* (SBR 275 and 283; see also S&G 215) — though she speaks this way to acknowledge that the great novel manifests “the Liberal spirit at its best and richest” before it succumbs to Romanticism (SBR 271).

²⁵ I am not in a position to provide independent assessment of her interpretation of Symbolist aesthetics; here I am simply reporting *her view*.

itself, suggests a sense of easy mastery that is at odds with respecting its purported independence: “one aspect of respecting something is being interested enough in it to try to understand it” (SBR 275) — and that takes *time*.

For Murdoch, aesthetic experience on an anti-Romantic model needs to progress slowly and uncertainly, holding our attention to the “unutterable particularity” of human ways of being minded. We are to be awe-struck by this spectacle of humanity, where this is no mere stimulus that throws our attention back upon the universal reason in our breasts. We well and truly *look out*. The subject of this reworked Kantian sublime,

faced by the manifold of humanity, may feel, as well as terror, delight, but not, if he really sees what is before him, superiority. He will suffer that undramatic, because un-self-centred, agnosticism which goes with tolerance. To understand other people is a task which does not come to an end. (SBR 283)

Apprehending the spectacle, if we do it at all truthfully, “is not easy” (SBR 282). This is not because its vastness is *assaulting to me* — as in the Kantian sublime — but because of the overwhelming intricacy and diversity of real human personality that it presents. But the difficulty is not only that there is more here than we can make tidy sense of; it is also that bits of the tableau elude our powers of sense-making. Murdoch later remarks on the “almost insuperable difficulty of looking properly at evil and human suffering” — of attending properly “without falsifying the picture in some way while making it bearable” (OGG 359[71]). One form of falsification is to suppose that it all makes some kind of sense, that evil and suffering have some proper place in the rational order of things. This is a form of consolation, an invitation to think that what seems bad isn’t on the long the view; and it rests on the epistemic presumption that “the inexhaustible variety of the world”, which of course includes evil and suffering, is systematic and comprehensible (see SGC 381[96]). Murdoch’s proposal to rework the Kantian sublime not just as a theory of art, but specifically of *tragedy*, is designed to block this presumption and the consolations it invites.

This brings us back to the fact that her reworked sublime sails under the motto “[a]rt and morals are [...] one” (S&G 215). Good art allows us to take in the human spectacle, and the unutterable particularity of the world more generally, with — as she later says — “a *sense* of unity and form” (SGC 371[84], my emphasis). This is another delicate point. Philosophy’s occupational hazard is to systematise under unifying principles, which can readily offer the impression of easy sense-making that is conducive to consolation. Yet something similar might be said about story-telling: “Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes a pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete” (SGC 371[84]). Good art allows us to “steadily contemplate” this fact (371[84]). But it cannot do this by *imposing* a pattern on the unutterable particularity. Such patterns could only come from the drearily “familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream” (371[84]). Good art is mysterious, but not fantastic: it helps us apprehend the spectacle truthfully, with a continually developing *sense* of unity and form. This is the inexhaustibility of good art, by which it provides “training in the love of virtue” (371[84]).

History and consolation

For Murdoch, consolation-seeking is an expression of our natural selfishness. As we noted, she suggests that we seek consolation in two basic ways: either through “imagined inflation of self” or “fictions of a theological nature” (SGC 364[77]). We have mostly been considering her relation to the Kantian sublime as offering consolation of the first sort, and thus as animating certain features of a broadly conceived Liberal neo-Kantian tradition. By way of conclusion, we might wonder whether Kant has any role to play in consolations of the second sort — and if so,

whether this changes anything about Murdoch's assessment of him. For in fact Kant never explicitly announces his theory of the sublime as serving a consolatory purpose — but he does say as much about the conception of human history he outlines in his 1785 essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” (see 8:30). The premise of that essay is a broadly Stoic conception of providential teleology, and particularly a conception of the human being as a creature endowed with everything that he needs to reach his telos, the perfection of his essentially rational nature (8:18-9). For Murdoch this would surely count as a “fiction of a theological nature”. Kant's move against the Stoic tradition in this context is to insist that our inevitable yet self-inflicted corruption — what he later elucidates in the *Religion* as “the radical evil in human nature” (6:18) — must be part of the story of how we develop to completion from these providential endowments. We can be consoled for human evil, and the suffering that we inflict on ourselves and others by its means, as bits of a story that might still turn out well. Indeed, for Kant what justifies the consolation and any “theological fiction” on which it rests, is that it encourages us to do the things we need to do to make this ending possible, to reach our telic goal of goodness.²⁶

Murdoch may then be too quick to assume that “Kant is afraid of the particular, he is afraid of history” (S&G 214). Kant has things to say about history, and even in this context waxes on about the stunning range of ways we find to be evil on the “great stage of the world” (Idea 8:17-8), pointing to “the scenes of unprovoked cruelty in the ritual murders of Tofoa” and “the perpetual war between the Arathapescaw Indians and the Dog Rib Indians” that aims only at slaughter for its own sake, to the “long litany of charges against humankind” that he lodged closer to home, like the “secret falsity in the most intimate friendship” (Rel 6:33). He means to convey a sense of the inexhaustibility of it all. Yet he does so with a distinct air of boredom. It all comes from the same place: the “radical evil” that he is in the course of theorising in the *Religion*. Thus in the end we have another example — indeed one that Kant explicitly offers as such — of how philosophical theorising lends itself to consolatory aims. Not only can we explain the astonishing variety of human evil on this principle, we can situate this principle and all the badness that flows from it in the context of a developmental story that explains how we are still capable of doing the things we need to do to become good. Therefore, if we should accept Murdoch's worries about the pervasive moral dangers of consolation, we would have another reason to endorse her provocative conclusion that we may need good art more than philosophy to develop properly as human beings.

²⁶ For an elaboration of the issues in this paragraph, see Merritt (forthcoming).

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Kant's texts are cited by volume and page of the German Academy edition; quotations are from the translations in Cambridge Edition, volumes listed below. The following abbreviations used: G= *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*; CJ= *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; CPrR= *Critique of Practical Reason*; Rel= *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited in the customary way by pagination of the first and second editions, abbreviated A/B.

Murdoch's writings are cited by the abbreviations standardised in this volume, and by the pagination in Murdoch (1999); the three essays collected in *Sovereignty of Good* are additionally cited, in square brackets, by the pagination in Murdoch (1970).

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