The true self-knower: central themes in Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy.

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Abstract

The central claim of the thesis is that Iris Murdoch offers a synthesis of views in moral philosophy which emphasise the self and views which emphasise the ‘other’. An important Murdochian distinction between true self-knowledge and the real world is articulated and itself distinguished from dichotomies between self and other, and egoism and altruism, with which Murdoch’s mature view cannot be equated.

Two further chapters assess Murdoch’s treatment of the concepts of duty and imagination. Murdoch regards duty as a ‘corrective’ to the idea that morality is self-regarding; but it is argued that her appeal to duty is unsuccessful and unnecessary because her mature view already has already transcended narrower interpretations of self-regard which give rise to such problems.

A discussion of imagination further explores the character of Murdochian morality, in whose light Murdoch’s appeal to duty appears unconvincing. Murdoch describes her conception of morals as “aesthetic”, implying broader connections between morals and art. The final chapter is an assessment of Murdoch’s claims about the relation of morality to art and, more generally, to the beauty that is found in the real world.

One of the central themes of the thesis is that Murdoch is engaged in re-defining the questions moral philosophers should address. Much of what is distinctive about Murdoch’s philosophical conception is shown to concern the breadth, variety and ordinariness of those human activities in which a moral commitment can be manifest.
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1. Introduction: Morality as a Whole

1.1 Aims

1.2 Platonism, Aristotelianism, Morality and the Good

1.3 Summary: the perspective of the Murdochian moral agent

1.1 Aims

This thesis engages with Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy.1 It is not the first attempt to do so, though until very recently many philosophers mentioned Murdoch more or less only in passing as they elaborated or defended their own accounts, without offering any sustained scholarly or exegetical account of Murdoch's philosophical position. However, within the last three years there have appeared two important works which explicitly address themes and issues raised by Murdoch's philosophy.2 The community of moral philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition appears to be examining Murdoch's work with a new enthusiasm, finding there an account of human concerns that is recognisable as a philosophy of morality, yet very distinctive also.

This thesis seeks to offer an extended and detailed account of

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1 References to Murdoch's main philosophical works will appear in the text in the following abbreviated form:


The latter two works are reprinted in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), *The Sovereignty of Good* appearing in its original form of three long essays.


Murdoch's philosophy of morals. It is a critical study: in particular, I identify aspects of Murdoch's thinking which appear to me to be problematic. I suggest in chapter three that her account of duty is based on a problematic appeal to Kantian imagery; an appeal borne of Murdoch's concern that her account of morality is too self-regarding and too "aesthetic". But I show in the early chapters that "self-regard", suitably disambiguated, is not the threat that Murdoch herself appears sometimes to think it is. In developing a conception of the true self-knower, Murdoch builds her philosophy of morals around a notion of ethical or moral self-concern which is not vulnerable to the charge that it defends egoism or that in being centred around the self it occludes or ignores reality, the reality beyond the self.

I do not claim to offer a definitive account of Murdoch's work, which I readily recognise as being multi-faceted, complex and open to differing interpretations. Nor is my account exhaustive since it examines in detail several of the most important themes that occur throughout Murdoch's writings. I explore some of the implications of Murdoch's position for our philosophical understanding of morality more generally.

The result of my engagement with Murdoch's work is a position in moral philosophy that owes much to her, but which is not simply a restatement of her own position. I offer a "Neo-Murdochian" conception of morality. The thesis is an appreciative but critical assessment of Murdoch's pioneering attempt to widen discussion about ethical and moral matters beyond questions of - to use the words of one of her most admiring contemporaries - what it is right to do, towards questions of what, or rather
who, it is good to be.

In this way, the thesis elucidates and evaluates both the breadth - the sheer largeness - of Murdoch's idea of what we mean by "morality" and "morals" and its philosophical attractiveness. Taylor has also suggested that Murdoch's philosophy addresses and gives rise to questions that moral philosophers have not always judged it sensible even to ask: Murdoch's work takes one into largely uncharted territory. Taylor uses a memorable image in order to demonstrate the nature of Murdoch's conception of morality and the fact that hers is a pioneering view:

we were trapped in the corral of morality. Murdoch led us out not only to the broad fields of ethics but also beyond that again to the almost untracked forests of the unconditional.

In the same volume, Cora Diamond expresses agreement in her use of a similar image: '[Murdoch] is still pointing us to better ground'. I discuss Murdoch's relation to contemporaries such as Taylor in more detail later in this introduction. For the moment, I wish to note how important to my account is a recognition of the fact that Murdoch has enlarged the field within which philosophical discussion of morality takes place.

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4 Charles Taylor, 'Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy' in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds, op. cit., 3-5.

5 Cora Diamond, 'We are Perpetually Moralists...' in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds, op. cit., 105.
Restricting the idea of morality to the notion of what it is right to do - of what one is obliged to do, or what it is one's duty to do - has been one approach in moral philosophy. It is an approach to which Murdoch is opposed. For her, the concept of morality covers the whole of the living of a life and questions about what makes oneself and the life one lives good. Morality is not an isolated set of imperatives, nor a self-supporting system of distinctive evaluative judgements. It is instead possible to find morality everywhere, and moral energy connects moral agents to virtually every aspect of the world - to other persons, to man-made beauty, especially in art, to nature and natural beauty and - increasingly in our times - to a concern for one's environment. Whilst I claim that this is an attractive, albeit an ambitious, conception of morals, it is true that in taking us to the point even where we can seriously entertain it as a conception of morality, Murdoch has done pioneering work. That she treats issues in moral philosophy from this perspective has profound implications both for her philosophy and my account of it.

Murdoch's perspective transcends common terms of debate. She is admired by secular and religious thinkers alike, and might be said to be offering a secular morality which owes much to religion. In so saying one means that she attaches importance to personal spiritual values in the form of aspiration and critical self-evaluation in relation to empowering, energising moral sources. In rejecting a restricted conception of the moral Murdoch has much in common with Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams.⁶

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However, Williams takes morality to be a peculiar institution which is by its very nature narrow: to offer a broader, more inclusive account of the good life is to move into "the ethical". Taylor's choice of words in the comment quoted above - 'trapped in the corral of morality' - suggests a similar conception. But Taylor agrees with Murdoch that morality need not be construed narrowly. Taylor regards Murdoch as having stretched the boundaries of moral philosophy very far indeed. My account articulates that breadth of vision in two ways.

First, I show that Murdoch cannot be understood in terms of a straightforward distinction between the self and the non-self; that her moral philosophy cannot realistically accord a central place to isolated imperatives of duty; and that she has a distinctive conception of the breadth of "the moral" in the form of the variety of moral sources and our imaginative, aesthetic relation to them. These ideas are discussed in chapters 2-5. In other words, I show how Murdoch's conception of the range of concepts and issues relevant to moral philosophy is distinctive. That is the first way in which I articulate Murdoch's breadth of vision.

The second way in which I explore Murdoch's distinctiveness is related to the first, but is a function of my argument about a particular aspect of Murdoch's philosophy. However, this has profound implications for her view as a whole. Murdoch's conception of the compatibility of self- and other-regard and - additionally - of the fundamentally self-regarding character of morality as such, provides a framework within which her treatment of duty, moral sources, moral imagination and so on is to be seen. Murdoch articulates a conception of morality in which the true self-
knower is an ideal moral agent. This agent is self-regarding but in ways which afford him a just and truthful vision of reality; not only his own reality, let alone the personal fantasies and illusions that, in Murdoch's view of the case, often parade as knowledge.

Thus, the true self-knower can appreciate the significance and the independence of other persons, without confusing them with his own reality. But since self-knowledge is central to the way in which he lives his life it remains true that he is fundamentally concerned with his own being. This, after all is his 'window' onto reality: his own perception and vision is in question for him not least because he is concerned to be truthful and just in his apprehension of the world. Murdoch sees this form of self-regard - namely, true self-knowledge - as being at the centre of the moral life. In this thesis, I explore what implications this fundamentally self-regarding conception of the moral life has for Murdoch's treatment of the topics of duty, imagination and our relation to beauty and other sources of energy and inspiration.

It is important to distinguish Murdoch's mature position with its vision of the true self-knower from several other concepts which focus on the self's place in morals. In chapter two I outline these concepts in the form of distinctions between egoism and altruism in the theory of reasons, self and non-self in a reflective account of our moral agency, and realism and non-realism in a reflective account of our moral knowledge. The true self-knower is to be distinguished from the real world: he seeks to understand that world and his place within it. But as self-knower the moral agent is not simply an egoist, so that a defence of altruism as opposed to
egoism will not capture what it is about this agent that puts him at the
centre of a realist’s view of morals. The self is not to be simply contrasted
with or opposed to the non-self, and the picture of the true self-knower
forces us to appreciate that self-knowledge takes place in the context of
knowing one’s place in reality. At the heart of Murdoch’s philosophy of
morality is something like the thought that we are part of the real world and
that we must learn the truth about the different ways in which this is so.
Murdoch famously believes that such knowledge is hard-won.

In chapter 3 I adopt a critical position with respect to Murdoch’s
account of the role of the concept of duty. Stated briefly, I contend that
Murdoch is unnecessarily sensitive to the charge that her account of the
ture self-knower emphasises the self at the expense of the real world and
that the way in which she accounts for self-knowledge is overly “aesthetic”
in its focus on art, beauty and imagination. Murdoch attempts to do justice
to the distinguished history within moral philosophy of the notion of an
obligation or duty. The greatness of “Kant’s picture” impresses Murdoch
and she aims to give voice to his famous articulation of the nature and
phenomenology of the moral imperatives that are upon us. But I suggest
that she tries unsuccessfully to attach Kant’s account to her own account of
morals.

This misguided line of argument takes the form of Murdoch’s
arguing that in addition to her picture of the true self-knower, we must
recognise the presence of strong external requirements which cut across
the self-knower’s ways of thinking, imagining and understanding. Rather
than seeing her own account as standing in need of Kant’s salutary
images of strong, focused, unique and external moral commands, Murdoch can agree that her picture of the true self-knower already provides adequately for recognition of the nature, importance and distinctness of certain types of moral consideration. Duty must be seen in context, Murdoch avers. But I argue that it is the true self-knower who sees the background or “landscape” onto which the “laser-beam” of duty falls. So far from opposing or correcting her account of the moral life, Kant’s picture is already accommodated within it in the form of the just vision of the true self-knower.

In chapters 4 and 5 I explore the imaginativeness, the “aesthetic” character and the ubiquity of Murdochian morality. Murdoch holds that moral value is everywhere and that morality is therefore a matter of every aspect of living a life. She is on largely uncharted territory when she accounts not only for morality’s closeness to art, but also the sense in which it both requires and sustains a vital life-force or energy in each of us. This is a conception of moral energy which explains what we mean when we speak of “demoralisation”. The everyday use of the idea that somebody is demoralised is not usually discussed in moral philosophy, yet Murdoch makes the issue a live one through her account of the Platonic Eros as the fundamental moral force. It is this aspect of her account in particular which Taylor has in mind when he suggests that she goes ‘to the almost untracked forests of the unconditional’.

Thus, one of my aims is to identify the range and variety of elements (“sources”, to echo Taylor yet again) that constitute the field of Murdochian
morals. Murdoch's moral philosophy is at the same time a discussion of important aspects of self-knowledge, art, imagination and of beauty in the man-made and natural environment. These phenomena are of interest independently of their place in morals: philosophy of art and mind are attempts to understood them more fully, often independently of their moral aspects. Murdoch brings such phenomena into a picture of morals that is at once thereby enriched and broadened as compared with accounts that look only to the field of personal relations and the obligations these generate. Murdoch has a distinctive and rich conception of the moral life.

Once again, however, this fact can be seen to follow from the central picture of the true self-knower. True self-knowledge needs carefully to be distinguished from degenerate forms of a concern for oneself. Once this has been done it becomes less difficult to see just how broad is the range of things to which the self-knower can look in order to understand himself in the light of reality. Rather than showing only that moral agents must demonstrate concern for the welfare of other persons, or that as self-knowers they run the risk of falling into fantasy or illusion, Iris Murdoch in my view develops a celebratory and compelling account of how as moral agents we are attached to what she picturesquely calls the fabric of the world. Morality is painted with deliberately broad brush-strokes by

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7 Taylor, op. cit., p.3-107. The idea of moral sources is central to Taylor's account.

8 An example of such a deliberately narrow approach is D. Z. Phillips's essay 'Morality and Purpose' in Interventions in Ethics (London: Macmillan, 1992). Phillips increasingly restricts his field of study, refusing to accept the idea that morality can be analysed in any terms apart from the idea of unconditional respect for other persons.

Murdoch: it involves the quality of one’s attachment to art, the natural world, ordinary life and living. It is realised by agents whose central concern is with truthfulness and reality, but a reality which includes their own self-being.

1.2 Platonism, Aristotelianism, Morality and the Good

With her emphasis on the transformation of self-being, Murdoch’s philosophical concern with what may be called “the good life” certainly has spiritual resonances which distinguish her account from others concerned with something similar. It is the Platonism in Murdoch’s work which gives it its spiritual, aspirational aspect. It is a large generalisation to say that writers concerned with questions of the good life for a human being have been more influenced by Aristotle than by Plato, but there is something in this. Martha Nussbaum and Bernard Williams are two examples, although Williams is more critical of Aristotle than is Nussbaum. But both are concerned, broadly, with a human being’s ability to establish for him or herself an answer to the question of what is the best sort of life that can be lived. I have claimed that Murdoch is interested in just this question, yet her work is usually judged to owe more to Plato than to Aristotle. Some critics judge that Murdoch’s view of the self in morals is taken straightforwardly from Plato’s pessimistic image of life in the cave before the release. But Murdoch in fact looks towards Plato’s idea that self-knowledge takes place

in the context of a concern for reality; or in the light of the sun, to use Plato's own attractive image.

In so far as Murdoch's work is Platonic, or at least inspired by Plato, special difficulties may arise. Some philosophers are concerned that ordinary moral realities (usually other persons) are liable to be ignored by an emphasis on the idea of the Good. Ordinary love and ordinary virtue are thought to be the locus of goodness rather than the unearthly (as it seems to them) Platonic source - Good - which seems in comparison to embody intellectualised and abstract conceptions of value.¹¹

In the final chapter I demonstrate that Murdoch's Platonic approach is innocent of the assumption that the idea of Good renders other sorts of value of merely secondary or subordinate value. Rather, the idea of the Good is made real to us via our engagements with the real world and the multiple sources of excellence and value within it. The concern of some critics to bring out how important Murdoch takes our altruistic concern or one another as fellow beings to be is at times one-sided and overlooks the broader sense of reality in the context of which true self-knowledge is facilitated. But it does at least suggest that a Murdochian approach in moral philosophy cannot straightforwardly be equated with an approach to

moral value which downplays the importance of particular individuals.\textsuperscript{12}

Platonic themes in Murdoch's writing are used to illustrate the \textit{breadth} of the moral task in the latter respect. Her concern with the living of a life thus brings her into relation with the Aristotelian concerns of many of her contemporaries; but in the final chapter (5.6), I argue that she achieves this generosity of moral vision through her insistence on the reality of the Platonic Eros. Murdoch's work thus straddles what is often thought to be a gulf between Platonism and Aristotelianism.\textsuperscript{13}

In short, Murdoch’s work addresses both the concrete realities of other individuals and the more abstract conceptions of goodness in whose light such realities, along with others, are seen as part of a concern for the whole of one's life and being. This is, I suggest, a reconciliation of what may be very roughly identified as Platonic and Aristotelian themes. But perhaps there is only limited point in labouring the question of whether her emphasis is best understood as Platonic or Aristotelian. Despite being driven at a deep level by a love for the work of the ancient Greeks, Plato in particular, and notwithstanding what I have already identified as her alignment with debates that constitute the central topics in the history of moral philosophy, Iris Murdoch is offering an account of the modern moral

\textsuperscript{12} It is a recurring theme in Martha Nussbaum's writings, for example, that a Platonic approach to questions of value itself undervalues the particular, individual and at times justifiably arbitrary or unusual attachments that we have as human beings and more especially to one another as human beings.

\textsuperscript{13} An exception is Alasdair MacIntyre who criticises both Coleridge and Peter Winch for their insistence on the radical difference between Platonism and Aristotelianism: see Alasdair MacIntyre 'The Form of the Good, Tradition and Enquiry' in Raimond Gaita, ed., \textit{Value and Understanding: Essays for Peter Winch} (London: Routledge, 1990).
agent. Where Platonic, Aristotelian or indeed Kantian themes occur in her work, Murdoch rarely intends herself to be construed as offering authoritative exegesis: she uses the power of what she calls their pictures of morality as a background for her own evolving account of what it is to be a moral agent in the contemporary world.

In chapter 5 (5.7-5.8) I argue that to love the Good in a Murdochian sense is to love the ordinary world, in which there is so much that is good and so many opportunities to pursue the Good and so become better. Eros is the energy by which one becomes morally enriched. Eros is the name for that part of us which is enlivened and sustained by an appreciation of what is fine, beautiful, just and worthy, that is to say, in the broadest sense, good. Reflection on Murdoch's treatment of Eros, I argue, brings out how broad is the range of the objects of Murdochian moral attention and the contexts of moral thinking and acting. For to be demoralised is to lack the ability to "find oneself"; importantly, to see things in relation to oneself and to have and maintain a just sense of the relative merits, values and disvalues of a very wide variety of things. Being moral, for Murdoch, is quite simply being in the world and trying, whilst being, to become a better sort of person.

Nothing in this admittedly quite ambitious account of morals seeks to deny that many of the diverse "sources of moral energy" are discrete activities. Art is an obvious example: though readily deployed to moral

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14 Perhaps this is true for a narrower range of human beings than the optimistic tone of much of Murdoch's work suggests. In Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, however, Murdoch says several times that the world is full of despair and misery: such conditions, she recognises, do not readily allow persons to be moral agents on her terms.
ends, it is not to be identified with morals. Morality is a general concern for the character of one's life and the overall manner of one's living. These are the concerns of the true self-knowner. Art and one's response to it inform one's moral thinking, yet artists are more than moral agents and both they and their audience appreciate art for reasons that are not essentially part of the moral quest. Although moral value is widely dispersed, excellence is also localised: Murdoch's conception of morality's ubiquitous presence and its very wide range of sources does not seek to deny this fact.

For this reason, I suggest that Murdoch's philosophy - through all its connections with ideas of self-awareness, consciousness, imagination, love of beauty in art and nature and the world more generally - can be pictured as a system of overlapping circles. One thing that is of special interest in this image is that it readily acknowledges that some parts of the system obscure others by the nature of their interrelation. Murdoch is not always a faultless guide to the field.

Moral agents themselves are appreciative of the nature of moral thinking. This idea may be obscured by Murdoch's insistence on the possibility of what she calls "selflessness". For selflessness is not a quality of the true self-knowner, even though he can - with an evident concern for truth - seek to distinguish between his conception of what is the case and what in fact is the case. The true self-knowner is the first to appreciate that one is not always, or perhaps at all often, capable of being honest and truthful even to oneself about oneself. In fact, it may be just that which is specially difficult. But Murdoch's use of the image of "selfless" agents does not mean that she rules out the possibility of self-knowledge. If anything,
her use of that term is an exaggerated statement of the sort of clarity, freedom and objectivity to which moral agents as self-knowers can aspire. As moral agents we need to know where to turn in order to become better and we need to remind ourselves of how this is possible.

1.3 Summary: the perspective of the Murdochian moral agent.

I now want to summarise the foregoing introductory remarks, which are designed to orientate the reader and offer him/her an overall sense of what I have in mind when I refer to Murdoch’s overall and developed conception of morality. In this summary, I shall not engage with Murdoch’s own work or with secondary literature: I simply want to say what a Murdochian moral agent looks like; that is to indicate what sort of things he/she can be conceived as doing and in what sort of ways. I am here offering what Murdoch herself would call a “background” in terms of which certain matters may perspicuously be discussed.

Murdoch’s moral agent - let me call her “M”, after the example in The Sovereignty of Good - is a self-knower. She is also perhaps somewhat selfish. But as important as her selfishness is the fact that she judges herself to be selfish whilst seeking at the same time more truthfully to understand herself. Thus, M already possesses a disposition to justice and honesty: for this reason and because her selfishness is the object of her critical self-knowledge, it is clear that although M is self-concerned, her selfishness (however highly developed it is) is not identical with or a function of that fact.

Of course, M is concerned about her selfishness largely because
she judges it to have obscured her moral vision of other persons. M is self-regarding and other-regarding in ways that are hard to separate or distinguish. True self-knowledge is achieved when M can see what she is like in the light of a conception of another person - a person whom Murdoch calls 'D' - which forces upon her the realisation that she is vain, prejudiced and jealous. It is obvious that this form of self-knowledge is inseparable from M's understanding that D is not after all the person whom M thought she was. Has D changed? Murdoch's point is emphatically that it is M who is changed and changing. It is M who is active morally and who reaps the not always pleasant harvest of efforts in the direction of self-knowledge. There is a reality to be distinguished from own's; and even as one's reality is known, the real world beyond oneself remains the goal of understanding.

M does not regard the idea of duty as a special, distinctive sort of moral requirement upon her. At most, and if she thinks of it all, it indicates that she must sometimes do things which she is perhaps not particularly inclined to do. But she also thinks of these things as "necessary" and "pressing" or "impossible", and not simply as things which constitute her "duty". M can certainly see that there are varying degrees of value and urgency attaching to the different things that she thinks about and evaluates: she is able to distinguish between importance and deliberative priority.15 But many things are morally important to her and the idea of duty has never struck her as having any special force in picking out things that

are important, which deserve deliberative priority or which are both important and deliberative priorities.

M's imagination is continuously active. She thinks about events in her own life and that of others; remembered events as well as imagined possibilities. She is able vividly to imagine the reality of other persons, and also able to form an accurate impression of her own relation to them in ways which reveal her failings as well as her virtues. If M does think of her life in terms of her duties, her imagination is also useful in assisting her as she discerns what exactly it is that she must do - in this particular situation - in order to do what is morally appropriate. But M's imagination is also importantly active at another level: she has sometimes quite abstract images through which she pictures her own being in terms of height or lowness on the scale of being. Yet she is not an artist and she possesses no developed specifically artistic talents or skills.

M does however try to deepen her understanding of the art which she appreciates. She recognises that her appreciation of the paintings she looks at and the books she reads is not a faultless guide to their merits and so she tries to attain an ever-greater mode of insight and wisdom. In so doing, she notices no difference between such efforts and her other efforts at becoming and remaining a better person, somebody for whom things of real worth and value are seen as such.

But to repeat, M is no artist. Her "moral aestheticism" consists in her ability to discern beauty and merit in many things: in acts of others, in art, in nature, in ordinary human activities such as sports and cooking and so on. Her moral being is enriched by her engagement with what she sees as the
best efforts from these diverse activities; and she aspires to appreciate and perhaps also to do something similar in and “with” her own life. In this way, her life has meaning for her. So far from being demoralised, M is morally alert and constantly awake to the call of the Good. In Murdoch’s account of M we have, I contend, a picture of what Murdoch means by the idea of the true self-knower: one who understands her own reality in the light of the real world.

My summary reveals something of Murdoch’s pioneering status. For one recognises questions of self, selfishness, egoism, altruism, compassion as topics in moral philosophy. The same is true of duty and obligation; but it is less true of art and still less so of the idea of goodness, of moral energy and the idea that “morality is everywhere”. Murdoch has indeed made some sort of journey beyond the normal terms of the debate: her vision retains them, yet it transforms them. One must see them in a new light. Where one can recognise this perspective in the works of others - Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond are some well-known examples - it is often a result of Murdoch’s influence upon them.

Having thus summarised the chief characteristics of the Murdochian moral agent, it is worth mentioning that there is indeed a question about the status of Murdoch’s vision of moral being. The question seems to be: is Murdoch’s moral philosophy descriptive or normative? My answer is that Murdoch’s account is both descriptive and normative, as she makes clear in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

what is a good man like? How can we make ourselves
morally better? Can we make ourselves morally better? These are questions the philosopher should try to answer (S, 52).

Thus, moral philosophy involves a blending of the normative and the descriptive, and our deepest ideals are a function of the way in which we already see ourselves. In offering her own vision of the human good, Murdoch's philosophy is not without problems, and there is much that is revealing in trying to discern what is unsatisfactory about her account. In this spirit, I turn now to the main body of my essay, asking what one is to make of Murdoch's apparently central idea that the moral agent is one who has his/her attention fixed firmly on other persons and directed away from the self.
2. Morality and self-regard

Introduction
2.1 Realism
2.2 Altruism and compassion
2.3 The true self-knower: self and other
2.4 Murdoch’s development of the concept of the true self-knower
2.5 The importance of other human beings for the true self-knower

Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to bring out the fact that self-regard is central in Murdoch’s philosophy of morals. But in order to appreciate Murdoch’s position it is necessary to disambiguate the concept of “self-regard”. I shall attempt to do this by contrasting three pairs of conceptual distinctions, and then accounting for each of these in the context of Murdoch’s work.

First, there is a distinction between moral philosophies which are realist and those which are non-realist. I shall call this, simply, the realism/non-realism contrast. Murdoch’s philosophy (or theory) is, famously, realistic. Murdoch takes there to be real moral properties of situations; features which are independent of the moral agent whose task it is to respond to such situations. This conception implies that since the features of moral situations are real and independent of the agent, the agent can judge himself, or be judged, to have responded either appropriately or inappropriately, correctly or incorrectly. The mark of moral excellence for realists is accurate responsiveness to moral reality. Realism
opposes non-realism, which is often expressed in the form of subjectivism and voluntarism; conceptions of *self-created* moral values.¹

Intuitively speaking, realism emphasises the reality beyond the self. As I shall show shortly, Murdoch certainly argues that the real and the true must be understood and that personal fantasy is a persistent threat to such understanding. But Murdoch often uses the term "self" in such a way as to focus on the self as self-obsessed, mired in fantasy. One is liable to be taken in by one’s fantasies and therefore often to fail to understand the real and the true. This idea marks out one of Murdoch’s distinctive contributions to the debate between realism and non-realism. Murdoch offers a “theory of error” to other realists. To the question why - if moral properties are real - agents who confront moral situations can fail to act as required, Murdoch’s implicit answer is that our habitual practices of selfish pre-occupation and indulgent personal fantasy prevent us from focusing on the real.²

In the context of moral realism Murdoch can therefore be understood as distinguishing the self from the non-self, or personal fantasy from recognition of reality. I shall argue however that this characterisation is insufficient as a means of understanding Murdoch’s mature position. It implicitly equates the self with the operations of self-centred fantasy and


² This is one aspect of Murdoch’s ‘theory of error’. Another is her claim that an agent may fail fully to understand a situation morally because of his/her shallow grasp of the concepts involved. See the discussion of Murdoch in Mark Platts’ *Ways of Meaning: an Introduction to a Philosophy of Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979). 261-262.
so prevents, or renders problematic, an appreciation of Murdoch's own interest in the ethical legitimacy of forms of self-regard and self-concern, most notably aspirations to become a better person. These aspirations constitute a significant part of morality in what I shall call Murdoch's mature view of the case, even though she does at times speak in ways which suggest that the self per se is a morally negative entity in that it readily produces reality-concealing fantasies.

The second major conceptual pairing necessary to appreciate the distinctiveness of Murdoch's achievement is a distinction between egoism and altruism as theories of the nature of moral reasons. The question of what counts as a moral motivation or a moral reason is answered in at least two different ways in this discussion, by reference to the psychological states that motivate an egoistic agent or an altruistic agent. The claim that Murdoch's moral theory finds a legitimate place for "self-regard" may be thought to imply that hers is an egoistic ethical theory, insofar as what will count as a moral reason or motivation is what satisfies or gratifies the self. But the egoism/altruism distinction is not the same as the self/non-self distinction. Egoists can acknowledge what is not self in their motives: in many of her novels Murdoch discusses cases where people enjoy helping and assisting others and who derive a sense of fulfilment from so doing. Such people may well be egoists: what counts as a motive for them can be traced back to what is personally satisfying, even if what satisfies the ego is responsiveness to the non-self.

It is evident that these first two distinctions do not simply align. That suggests that it would be misleading to characterise Murdoch's work
solely in terms of the egoism/altruism contrast. However, I shall now attempt further to clarify the latter distinction.

There are several ways of drawing a contrast between the egoistic agent and the altruistic agent in the history of moral philosophy. I shall shortly discuss Schopenhauer’s account of what counts as genuinely altruistic - and so, for him, moral - motivation. Briefly put, anything other than a direct and immediate concern for another person’s welfare will turn out to be egoistic on Schopenhauer’s reading. Altruistic motivation focuses directly on another person and what can be done to increase his weal and decrease his woe. I suggest that this distinction between altruism and egoism alone is insufficient to understand Murdoch’s moral philosophy.

The egoism/altruism contrast is too restricted to appreciate the distinctiveness of Murdoch’s conception of human goodness. There are influential contemporary accounts of Murdoch which construe her contribution to moral philosophy as a decisive vindication of altruism in the psychology of moral motivation. These accounts seem to me ultimately to be one-sided. What they occlude is twofold. First, in focusing upon - and rejecting - egoism they overlook or underestimate the ethical potentialities of self-regard: they wrongly equate the two. They take questions about moral selfhood to stop at the egoism/altruism contrast and for this reason they overlook Murdoch’s development of realism. Murdoch’s developed realism retains the valid distinction between self and non-self, yet ethical self-concern is vindicated and celebrated. Second, such accounts offer a parallel distortion of Murdoch’s view of altruism. Whilst rightly noting the
importance to Murdoch's thinking of concern for and attention to other persons, there is an occlusion of different senses of "other". Altruistic agents are motivated to behave in other-directed ways towards their fellow beings. But in Murdoch's philosophy, great importance is also attached to non-human "otherness"; the otherness of the natural world, for example. I examine this aspect of Murdoch's thinking in greater detail in the latter part of this essay.

It is important to note that a contemporary perception of a dichotomy between two different sorts of explanation of altruism is a sufficient motive for Murdoch to effect the "resolution" or synthesis found in her concept of true self-knowledge. The two approaches are, broadly, Neo-Kantian and Neo-Aristotelian. Thomas Nagel offers a good example of the first sort of view in his *The Possibility of Altruism*. Nagel articulates the thought that the bases of altruistic motivation are universal and impersonal. If there is reason to act altruistically, eg. to end somebody else's pain, then that is reason for anybody to end it, not just for me and not just for the person suffering the pain. The possibility of this sort of altruism is contrasted with a picture of what it is *not* to be so motivated: a picture of egoism. This either/or treatment may not appear problematic if one is rightly impressed by its ability to express widely held intuitions about the universality and impartiality of benevolence. But a problem for this sort of view lies in explaining how the self can have motives relating to itself.

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4 See, for instance, Taylor, op. cit., 4-5. Taylor says that virtually everybody in all societies now recognises the demands placed upon him by the rights to life, integrity and well-being enjoyed by other persons.
Thus, the legitimate self-concern of the Murdochian true self-knower simply cannot be accommodated in Nagel's model - all such reasons appear as "egoistic". The agent's reasons to promote his or her own ethical development can only figure as a special, or limiting, case of the idea of anybody's moral reasons. Murdoch's conception of the true self-knower is a conception of ethically legitimate self-regard, and it fits neither of Nagel's categories of egoistic or altruistic reasons.

By contrast, the Neo-Aristotelian approach appears well-placed to explain the possibility of non-egoistic, ethically legitimate self-concern in its articulation of the fullest and best lives that can be lived by social beings with a concern for one another. Nevertheless, it has been thought to lack the universality that is so well-explained by the Neo-Kantian approach. The Neo-Aristotelian focuses upon particular individuals and their personal acquisition of virtue in explaining the nature of altruistic motivation. Whilst it is clearly also the case that community and society is the context for this sort of personal development and that the Aristotelian agent is concerned with the interests of others, it has been thought that the boundaries defining the relevant moral community are apt to be drawn far more tightly than in the Neo-Kantian picture which includes all practically rational and finite agents.

The former approach offers a picture of universal benevolence (altruism) but apparently lacks the ability to explain ethically legitimate self-concern (identified with egoism), whereas the latter picture can

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5 Blum himself can be seen as a defender of this sort of approach. Martha Nussbaum, in *The Fragility of Goodness* and *Love's Knowledge* has also offered a powerful contemporary expression of this sort of 'eudaemonism'.

explain the possibility of ethical self-concern and its compatibility with altruism, but at the risk of too narrowly defining the social contexts in which it is possible for moral agents to develop an altruistic concern for the welfare and happiness of one another. But is it necessary to choose between these two approaches? Defenders of each sort of view may maintain with some justice that the views of Kant and of Aristotle are themselves sufficient to effect a resolution of the sort offered by Murdoch. Others may deny that there is a genuine tension between the two sorts of view.

The important point is that there has been perceived to be such a tension by Murdoch’s contemporaries. It is certainly the case that other moral philosophers have in recent years treated the question of the possibility and basis of altruism as an issue which must be resolved either in favour of a picture of universality, impersonality and impartiality or in favour of personality, locality and individuality. Murdoch has engaged with the issue throughout her philosophical career, and in her conception of the true self-knower shows that it is possible to combine the merits of each view in an attractive and plausible synthesis of their emphases on the importance of unbiased, unprejudiced benevolence and a concern

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6 This is a generalisation, it is true, but it constitutes the climate in which, for example, Murdoch disagreed so strongly with R.M Hare early in her philosophical career. See R.M. Hare, ‘Universalisibility’ in Essays on the Moral Concepts (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972) and Murdoch’s responses in ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’. Still more recently, Charles Taylor, in Sources of the Self, has noted the strength of these rival articulations of the nature of human goodness. Murdoch herself construes Taylor’s work as a useful contribution to individualistic approaches in moral philosophy, saying that he gives ‘much needed attention to the concept of the inner life’ (M, 150). For many years Peter Winch addressed the tensions between universalism and particularity in his essays on morality. See, for example, ‘Universalizability’ in Ethics and Action (London: Routledge, 1970); ‘Particularity and Morals’ in Trying to Make Sense (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). See also Blum’s Friendship, Altruism and Morality (London: Routledge & Kegan paul, 1980).
with the way in which one is living one's life more generally.\footnote{The question of how far the moral community extends in a view such as Murdoch's is addressed by Blum, op. cit, 3-6. He notes that Murdochian morality is normally manifest in, though not restricted to, close personal (familial, friendship etc.) relationships. Murdoch's view is universalist in the sense that the true self-knower can respond altruistically to complete strangers and those with whom he does not closely or immediately identify. More generally, however, Murdoch adopts the individualistic approach to the explanation of moral motivation though, as I am arguing here, she makes it very clear that this is not a picture only of selfishness or egolism.}

In short, I argue that the egoism/altrusim contrast lacks the resources with which to appreciate Murdoch's mature perspective on questions of morality. Nevertheless, this developed perspective is itself to be understood by means of marking a distinction. I have already indicated that the relevant distinction involves the self and the non-self, or the self and the other. But I have also suggested that Murdoch's account appreciates and celebrates the moral legitimacy of self-regard. What is evidently required is an account of how the self/non-self distinction maps onto a distinction in which self-regard is morally positive. I said that Murdoch develops realism in this direction. I propose to mark Murdoch's mature view by means of a distinction between what I shall call the true self-knower (a phrase of Murdoch's) and the real world.

The true self-knower/real world contrast - the third of the three pairs I said would be distinguished at the outset of my discussion - acknowledges Murdoch's realistic emphasis on the requirements of genuine understanding and truth-seeking in moral matters whilst allowing at the same time an appreciation of what she has to say about the true self-knower. There is a world beyond my own reality which forms an important part of what, morally speaking, I must understand; but there is
also my own reality, my own life and being and, indeed, my own quality of understanding of the world beyond myself. Indeed, the argument I shall present is that Murdoch regards the two parts of the distinction as being interdependent. This is compatible with her insistence that the two are distinct. I am not you, nor am I the kestrel seen from my window; but when I am moved by your suffering or the spectacle of that magnificent bird in flight, then I may also learn important lessons about myself. This does not mean that instead of responding compassionately to your suffering I spend time reflecting about myself. I can do both, at different times and in different forms. Nor is it the case that what I learn about myself is always positive: I am not guaranteed to judge myself a sensitive and appreciative lover of the natural world; I might also judge that I am in general too much given to selfish brooding. The shock of otherness - in various forms - can make that thought real to me and cast my preoccupation with myself in a new light.

At stake also is the question of the nature and sources of moral energy. “Otherness” - in the form of my fellow beings and the world in which I live - does not only teach me true self-knowledge. It also provides me with the spiritual energy I need in order to persist with this potentially discomforting self-examination. Sources beyond the self sustain the self in its efforts at self-understanding, as well as providing the materials and lessons for such understanding. These Murdochian themes can, I suggest, be appreciated only when the above distinctions have been put into place and distinguished from one another.

To summarise, Murdoch’s mature view celebrates the distinction between, and the interdependence of, the true self-knower and the real
world in which he lives. This distinction is a *development of* a realistic theme which marks the contrast between self and non-self, or between habitual preoccupation with oneself as opposed to recognition of the true and the real. Murdoch accommodates the contrasts between self and non-self in a higher-level picture of true self-knowledge. She overcomes or transcends the narrower distinction between egoism and altruism in the process, showing that a concern for oneself - that is, moral self-regard - need not be egoistic if it is borne of a disciplined attempt genuinely to understand the real and one's relation to it.

Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy accords a central place to self-regard, but it is not simply a vindication of egoism (or non-realism). It also defends the value of altruism, but without suggesting that "selfless" responsiveness to the needs of others is the whole of the moral domain. In Murdoch's moral philosophy there is no simple or straightforward dichotomy between self and other: attempts to explain this issue in the form of a distinction between egoism and altruism are superseded. The true self-knower/real world distinction represents a different perspective on the question of the self's relation to the non-self.

2.1 Realism

Murdoch's conception of morality is a realistic one. The form that Murdoch's realism takes is multi-faceted but consists in general in an emphasis upon the real as opposed to a vision of the world corrupted by the intrusion of personal, selfish fantasy. Murdoch opposes the (selfish)
“self” to the non-self and in particular to the reality of other persons, though not only that. Throughout her philosophical writings Murdoch emphasises the idea that as moral beings it is our task to understand the real nature of other people and their needs. Other persons are, according to her, important objects of the moral subject’s understanding, or what she also calls “vision” and “attention”. For example, Murdoch emphasises the moral importance of love, suggesting that for many people love is their most intense experience,

and most disturbing because it shifts the centre of the world from ourself to another place (M, 16).8

Murdoch suggests that the self is such a dazzling place that if one looks there one might see nothing else (S, 31). The proper direction for moral subjects to look (“attend”) is outwards, away from self. The aim of moral agency is a form of selfless love (M, 16). According to Murdoch the ‘characteristic and proper mark of the moral agent’ is a high degree of attention, which suggests is to be understood as a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality (S, 34). What moral beings require is ‘clear vision’ (S, 37) of a world that is compulsively present to their wills (S, 39). Attention and clear vision are ideas that suggest ‘a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one’ (S, 38).

Murdoch immediately adds that her philosophy connects morality to the idea of attention to human and other sorts of individuals. In the second section of The Sovereignty of Good, Murdoch discusses at length the

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8 Murdoch makes a very similar remark at F, 36.
question whether the idea of goodness can be the focus of sustained attentive scrutiny. Some critics have found in Murdoch's attraction to this religious or Platonic idea of Good an object of moral attention that is 'hopelessly abstract and obscure.' I will discuss this issue in detail in the final chapter of this study. Worthy of note is the fact that other commentators take Murdoch's remarks to point - on the contrary - to a thoroughly unambiguous notion: the moral reality which energises one is not some mysterious and abstract idea, but the very specific and concrete individuals for whom we care.10

But the overall context is an evidently realist conception of moral endeavour. What is required of Murdochian moral agents is a "self-less" mode of attention and understanding which will provide compulsive energy. Moral philosophy's difficult but important task is therefore to discuss and defeat the blinding energies of the ego (S, 52). As I indicated, with her frequent mention of the ego as a negative manifestation of selfhood, Murdoch may be taken as contributing simply to the debate over whether moral motives are egoistic or altruistic. I shall argue that Murdoch transcends these issues and the terms of the contemporary debate, shaped solely by the egoism/altruism contrast.

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10 Mullett, op. cit., later states this as if it is a consideration against which Murdoch's alternative view is to be judged. My argument is that Murdoch has a conception of the moral in which it includes far more than attention to others; but in this chapter, I am explicitly disagreeing with Mullett, in so far as it seems clear that Murdoch says more than enough to suggest that her view of the moral requires particularist modes of attention to other persons.
Much virtue aims at invisibility (M, 333). A good person ‘most obviously’ needs to be aware of ‘the existence of other people and their claims’ (S, 59). Murdoch here connects these tasks with the absence of fantasy, in its turn identified as the intrusion of self into modes of attention towards that which is not self. Murdoch is very often critical of the self. This can be misleading since, as I shall show, she develops her conception of realism in such a way that ethical self-concern becomes central.

A list of the qualities of the ideal Murdochian moral subject is as follows: he/she is unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objectively attentive, exact, with a suppressed self, and recognises through this externally directed and accurate form of attention the separateness and distinctness of other people (S, 66). This is certainly an attractive and plausible picture of a moral agent. Murdoch also comments pessimistically on the possibility of self-regard in the context of her philosophy:

in such a picture sincerity and self-knowledge, those popular merits, seem less important. It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power. “Self-knowledge”, in the sense of a minute understanding of one's own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion (S, 67).11

11 Murdoch speaks of refined sado-masochism: ‘one's self is interesting, so one's motives are interesting, and the unworthiness of one's motives is interesting’ (M, 68). In an early and well-known essay, self-knowledge appeared as an element in a philosophical picture against which Murdoch set herself. The moral agent on this view possesses a form of rationality which expresses itself in awareness of facts ‘whether about the world or himself. The virtue which is fundamental to him is sincerity.’ See: ‘Against Dryness: a Polemical Sketch’, in Encounter, January 1961; 17; reprinted in Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997). In the same article, Murdoch connects self-regard to the possibility of (mere) sincerity, whereas truth is a notion that applies to what is beyond the self: the former is said to be self-centred, the latter other-centred (20).
This would appear to be clear enough: there is a morally important distinction between self and other. What matters is not so much awareness or understanding of the self, rather of what is real and what lies beyond the self. Murdoch also notes that the source of vision is not in the ordinary sense seen (S, 98), which seems to augur badly for self-reflection, in so far as many of the objects of self-reflection such as one's own moral sensibilities and dispositions can be interpreted as also being the source of one's moral vision. Murdoch reminds her reader elsewhere of the proper direction of moral attention, saying that

we all, not only can but have to, experience and deal with a transcendent reality, the resistant otherness of other persons, other things, history, the natural world, the cosmos, and this involves perpetual effort (M, 268).

By 'transcendent' Murdoch means that which transcends oneself rather than that which exists in a dimension or world entirely different from that in which one lives. Murdoch expresses the fear that an exalted sense of self can occlude the reality of other persons who ought instead to be seen as separate centres of significance.12 But I suggest that there are two ideas at work here rather than one. First, other individuals constitute the moral reality an appreciation of which is a primary task for moral understanding. Second, in this light self-knowledge is, as Peter Conradi says, 'a dangerous discovery by which we may be ... distracted, fascinated

and delayed.” These ideas are distinct since, as I shall show, an ability to attend to others certainly does not require the complete absence of self-regard.

2.2 Altruism and compassion

I indicated in the introduction that the distinction between the self and the non-self, or more narrowly between the self as fantasy and recognition of reality (themes within realism), are distinctions which Murdoch develops and which appear in a new light in her mature view. It follows that they are not reducible to a straightforward contrast between egoism and altruism as a theory of moral motivation or moral reasons. But it does not follow that Murdoch's philosophy bears no relation at all to the distinction between egoism and altruism. Furthermore, her work may be thought to relate to that distinction via her realism. For if other persons are an important part of moral reality, it is natural to suppose that unselfish response to that reality will often be, in its human-directed modes, responses of compassion and altruism. Blum argues that Murdoch's philosophy brings into explicit focus the special value of altruistic response to other human beings. I want to outline Blum's account, having examined its Schopenhauerean basis. I shall then argue that Blum's account of Murdoch understands her work solely in terms of the egoism/altruism contrast, thus underestimating the scope and distinctiveness of her contribution to an account of the self's relation to the non-self and the picture of moral motivation and moral understanding which emerges from

this.

Nevertheless, a comparison of Murdoch's not fully developed conception of morality with Schopenhauer's is instructive. Schopenhauer suggests that the chief and fundamental incentive in a man is egoism, which is pursued systematically. Schopenhauer argues that everybody makes himself the centre of his world, except for a few people of genuine moral integrity among 'the numberless host of the unjust' (132-139). For Schopenhauer, only actions of voluntary justice and disinterested loving-kindness, free from all egoistic motivation, have real moral worth (139-140). Our actions have as their ultimate objects a being susceptible to weal and woe (141). One's own well-being cannot be a moral issue, since 'the moral significance of an action can lie only in its reference to others' (142). Though it may not seem so, it is egoistic to try to live up to an ideal even of perfection (142) since, for Schopenhauer, the true moral agent

simply and solely the weal and woe of another; he has absolutely no other object than that the other man will be left unharmed, or will even receive help, assistance, and relief. It is this aim alone that gives what is done or left undone the stamp of moral worth. This, then, depends exclusively on the fact that something is done or left undone merely for the benefit and advantage of another. Whenever this is not the case, the weal and woe that incite to or deter from every action can be only those of the doer himself; but then the action or its nonperformance is always egoistic and consequently without moral worth (143).
In other words, genuine moral motives are altruistic in a precisely defined sense. One is motivated morally only when one’s reason is exclusively directed towards the weal and woe of somebody else. This raises an issue with regard to Murdoch’s work. I said above that Murdochian moral agents are required to have appropriate understanding of others. The question is whether moral understanding is allowed to extend to other persons in an indirect fashion, via self-conscious efforts at improvement and increasing one’s moral sensitivity and so on. This could form part of an ideal of perfection, but would be ruled out of a Schopenhaurean conception of what is moral simply because it contains an element of self-regard.

Schopenhauer’s account rules out, as morally illegitimate (egoistic), forms of other-regard that go indirectly to other persons via an agent’s idealism, perfectionism and self-conscious efforts at improvement. Murdoch, by contrast, speaks of ‘the idea of perfection’, indicating that when a desire for personal improvement is coupled with a moral reality which can act as a criterion of personal success or failure in this venture, then self-regard is ethically legitimate and valuable. Thus, Murdoch does not simply contrast self with non-self, and she certainly does not construe the question of the relation of the self to the non-self as the question of egoism versus altruism. Murdoch’s position on the question of morality’s self-regarding features is more subtle, more wide-ranging and more sophisticated.

Murdoch apparently agrees with Schopenhauer on the following points: the self must focus on something other than itself, since it is
dazzling and affected by the powerful drives of the ego. One should be "selfless" in the sense of one's motives being completely free of egoism. But taken in this way, these emphases would cast a shadow over the idea of even the most conscientious self-reflection or self-regard, which may on this interpretation turn out to be a form of egoism. The self must focus on what is not self, especially on the reality of other people and their needs: compassion would be a good example of acts done for genuine moral reasons. In general, moral agents must be attentive, alert, open to the external realities which motivate them morally. Looking at oneself, inwardly, does not seem to be a moral activity. My central argument is that this is unacceptable as a complete account of Murdoch's mature view.

Lawrence Blum is influenced by Schopenhauer's account, and he has also acknowledged his debt to Murdoch.15 Blum offers a Neo-Schopenhauerean reading of Murdoch's moral philosophy and in so doing implies that she is exercised by the self/non-self distinction insofar as this illuminates the distinction between egoism and altruism. In my view, Blum thus loses sight of the basis of Murdoch's mature position, equating her treatment of the self with egoism and the non-self with altruism. Along with at least one other influential commentator, he loses sight of the prospect of the Murdochian true self-knower as well as the broad range of non-self

15 I take the Schopenhauerean themes to be most evident in Blum's, Friendship, Altruism and Morality (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980). Blum says, for instance, that 'acts of friendship are morally good insofar as they involve acting from regard for another person for his own sake'(67). Moral excellence is closely connected with altruistic motives; responding to others in the light of (a genuine knowledge and understanding of) their weal and woe (70). Blum makes clear his debt to Murdoch in Moral Perception and Particularity (Cambridge, Mass. : Cambridge University Press, 1994). References to Blum are to this text.
realities that are also known to the true self-knower. This is a constraining perspective upon Murdoch's work and it radically underestimates the breadth of her conception of the moral enterprise.

According to Blum's account of Murdoch, as outlined in *Moral Perception and Particularity*, her view is that the moral agent's central task is to manifest a true and loving perception of other individuals, who constitute particular realities external to the agent. The moral task is:

> to attend to the reality of individual other persons. Such attention requires not allowing one's own needs, biases, fantasies (conscious and unconscious), and desires regarding the other person to get in the way of appreciating his or her own particular needs and situation (12).

Blum immediately adds that it is very difficult to see another person as distinct and separate from oneself, since even one's love for them is bound up with their importance to one's own life. This is reminiscent of Schopenhauer's account of how widespread egoism is: even our love might be egoistic. Schopenhauer comes to mind again when Blum outlines what, according to him, Murdochian moral agency involves:

> one ought to help the friend simply because the friend needs help ... [one should act] from a genuine and direct regard for the good of this particular other person (or persons) (13).

The Schopenhaeuran ideas are those of directness and other-regard and the thought that these alone constitute genuine moral
agency.\(^\text{16}\) Blum says that on Murdoch's view, love or concern for a particular other person is a moral accomplishment and that this idea is not captured in philosophies that emphasize the idea of principles generated from an impersonal perspective, nor in those philosophies which argue directly against this claim (5). I think that Blum is quite right about this: principle-based conceptions of morality, and conceptions of morality which set themselves directly against the idea of principles, both differ from Murdoch's own distinctive view. But it does not follow that one can account for what is distinctive about Murdoch's work by focussing on the idea of altruism and compassion as an answer to the problem of egoism.

Blum draws attention to the importance of compassion, concern, love and friendship (13). He explores at some length the character of compassion, which he construes as an emotion-based sentiment (42). He says that compassion is a species of altruism (others being pity, helpfulness and well-wishing) (173). The object of compassion is usually, though not exclusively, another person 'in a negative condition' (173). When Blum gives an example of a Murdochian perspective on morality he chooses to discuss 'compassion for strangers or care for friend and family' (16). Blum suggests that Murdochian agents need not adopt an externalised perspective upon their own actions from which the issue of their justifiability is raised, since they are instead directly motivated by, for example, the distress of another person (23). Murdochian compassionate agents are not to be understood as helping because they have a prior

\(^{16}\) Blum says that only the motive to help one's friend simply because one's friend needs help 'will count as exemplifying morality in its Murdochian aspect' (12).
project or commitment to become a helping person; they respond instead to facts that are external to themselves, to another person, rather than to desires or interests that are personal (24). Much Murdochian moral action, Blum suggests, is connected with responding ‘to an unsought reality external to one’s explicit projects and endeavours’ (25). Murdoch accords moral value to actions and attitudes towards others that she would not accord to self-directed actions and attitudes (28). To sum up: Blum believes that Murdoch bids moral subjects to ‘focus on others ... without considering the self at all’ (28): much the same thing is said by Conradi, who speaks in this context of the total absence of a concern for self.\textsuperscript{17}

It is clear that for Blum the issue of realism and its distinction between the self and the non-self (or, more narrowly, between personal fantasy and recognition of reality) is addressed by Murdoch in the form of an account of “selfless” altruistic or compassionate concern for others. Egoism and the self are implicitly identified, but overcome through the possibility of altruism. To reiterate, I believe that this account is damagingly incomplete, in a way that obscures Murdoch’s distinctive philosophical achievement. It overlooks the way in which Murdoch develops the realistic theme of the distinction between the self and the non-self towards an account of morally proper self-regard or what I have called, following her, the possibility of the true self-knower.

\textsuperscript{17} Peter Conradi, ‘Platonism in Iris Murdoch’, in Baldwin and Hutton, eds, \textit{Platonism and the English Imagination} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); 333. Although there is nothing in the idea of altruism as such which denotes a complete absence of self-awareness or self-regard, I shall refer to the two ideas as if they form part of the same argument, since this seems to me to be what is involved in Blum’s and Conradi’s positions.
2.3 The true self-knower: self and other

It is far from clear whether the problem of egoism, either in the theory of moral reasons or in real-life cases where persons live their lives in egoistic ways, can be solved simply by emphasising the reality of the non-self and the fruitlessness of self-regard. Nor indeed does the issue of the importance of that which lies beyond the self and its relation to the self boil down to the question of whether one is an egoistic or an altruistic agent. Realism is an issue that is distinct from narrower questions concerning egoism and altruism in the theory of moral reasons.

This chapter argues in detail for the thought that altruism is not the only moral response to the real in Murdoch’s view of the case. Why is it incorrect to suppose that the Murdochian “self” is simply egoistic or prone to selfish fantasy and that the remedy consists in turning away from practices of self-regard towards reality in the form of “selfless” altruistic or compassionate response towards other persons? My answer to this question is that Murdoch evidently believes that we require a form of moral self-knowledge in order to overcome the problem of selfishness in its many forms, including the narrower problem of egoism. The realist’s intuition, namely that there is a moral reality beyond the self to which the self is bound to respond appropriately, is preserved: evidently, the problem of egoism and of fantasy is not addressed simply by emphasising the non-self as opposed to the self, nor by equating this answer with a vindication of altruism as opposed to egoism.
What is at stake is a more sophisticated view in which the distinctions discussed thus far - between egoism and altruism, self and non-self, recognition of reality and selfish fantasy - are acknowledged and accounted for in a higher-level distinction. This is a distinction between the agent and the world which nevertheless reveals how morally important forms of self-regard can be. Morally legitimate forms of self-regard are those directed towards understanding one's place in the real world. From the point of view of this distinction, moral agency is very largely a matter of reflectively discerning (coming truthfully to know) what sort of person one is, what sort of life one is leading and what future potential exists in this area. Some writers, such as Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, refer to this domain as 'the ethical' as opposed to a narrower domain focussed solely on obligation, called by Williams 'the moral'. In Murdoch's mature view, this picture conveys the permanence and the ubiquity of *morality* in our lives. Like Charles Taylor, Murdoch does not view morality in the same light as does Williams.18

It is unnecessary to attack subjectivity and reflectiveness as such in order to condemn the egoistic and selfish character of some forms of self-referring thinking. Consider the case of a selfish egoist: his egoism and his selfishness are moral failings, but he needs self-criticism, and the self-

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directed aim of improvement rather than an absence of self-regard. 19 His problem centres on a negative manifestation of selfhood, not the fact that his self as such is present to his thinking. The very obvious point is that he needs to be self-regarding in order to become less selfish.

This requires a picture of the true self-knower and the starting-point for this picture is, as I have already suggested, the differences between the self and selfishness, and between the self and egoism. Furthermore, the true self-knower is not only distinct from the reality of the real world: he also understands an equally important reality, namely his own. In order adequately to understand the real world, the true self-knower needs to have understood in what respects, if any, he fails to understand that world and why. It may sound paradoxical to say that an understanding of that which lies beyond the self can require true self-knowledge; but on reflection, this is not so. Indeed, this is, I suggest, the essence of Murdoch's mature view.

John Kekes has noted the importance of such reflective self-awareness, and that it is perhaps ambiguously expressed by Murdoch herself.

Iris Murdoch's view is that "only rarely does one meet somebody in whom ... one apprehends with amazement the absence of the avaricious tentacles of the self." In this, I think, she is right. But when we ask about what makes it possible

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19 I use this example to make the point that self-improvement is one obvious personal, reflective, self-referring response to egoism. However, the example does not address general difficulties with the idea of self-knowledge, or with the fact that people we think of as virtuous are not usually people who think about their virtues. For a discussion of the tensions inherent in first-personal reflection about one's own virtues, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985); 10-11.
for the rare few to acquire objectivity, her answer is less convincing. She is looking for "anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism." The way to improvement is progressive "unselfing" to be achieved through the experience of beauty, nature, love or the mysterious Platonic notion of the Good. No doubt, if we have these experiences intently, they displace our habitual self-preoccupation ... But the goal is much more than that, it is "acceptance of our own nothingness," the ultimate "unselfing" to be sought ... However, if meant literally, this cannot be right. The better we succeed in unselfing ourselves, the less there is left of us to act as moral agents, since our selves are the subjects of moral agency. And since the reason for making the attempt at unselfing in the first place is to become better moral agents, unselfing is a self-defeating strategy. It seems to me that the first step in the moral task of reaching objectivity is to develop a robust sense of the self.20

This perspective clearly requires something more than a simplistic distinction between self and non-self; at the very least it requires a development or refinement of that contrast. Kekes notes that Murdochian talk of "unselfing" is ambiguous: I agree with him that Murdoch is to be interpreted as referring to our 'getting into the habit of not allowing selfishness to distort what we see' (134). Noteworthy also is Kekes' mention of experience of beauty, nature, the Good and of love: it is not only the otherness of other persons that is recognised by the sensitised, objective and truthful self-knower. The concepts required for an appreciation of Murdoch's work extend beyond the egoism/altruism contrast.

The Schopenhaurean objection to my argument is that the

apparently benign forms of reflection are not in fact so, but instead
ernicious and insidious forms of egoism, the more so for masquerading
as moral conscientiousness and perfectionism. One can meet the
objection by observing that self-reflection is actually required, in may
contexts, for an adequate understanding of the reality of other people.
Self-reflection and an understanding of others can be seen to be
interdependent. As already indicated, for the purposes of my argument it is
important to note that the validity of the contrasts between realism and
non-realism (and, within realism, between self and non-self or reality and
fantasy) and between egoism and altruism is readily acknowledged in
Murdoch’s mature view but developed in a distinctive direction. Murdoch’s
significance to contemporary moral philosophy consists in large part in her
conception of a mode of self-understanding which is ethically valuable, not
least because of its role in facilitating understanding of the real world. This
is an important point, so I will discuss it in some detail.

Robert Louden has questioned the view that morality should be
construed as an exclusively other-regarding affair, suggesting the
alternative position that ‘morality ought rather to be regarded as a
fundamentally self-regarding project.’\textsuperscript{21} Louden voices the intuition that
‘self-perfection rather than the welfare of others is the most important
moral commitment’ (14). He defends this conception against the charge
that it is a form of egoism: as he reminds us, the project of self-perfection is
after all directed towards the acquisition of the requisite dispositions for

\textsuperscript{21} Robert B. Louden, \textit{Morality and Moral Theory: a Reappraisal and Reaffirmation}
morally right action (17).

One of Louden's intuitions is that self-regard is not simply selfishness. However, the way in which Louden expresses himself might be thought to give rise to special problems. Louden begins by attacking the apparently Murdochian notion of the moral centrality of other-regard; he then points out that a commitment to self-perfection is a commitment to perfection. In other words, self-regard is not mere, idle selfishness; it has a worthy end in view. I said earlier, however, that such a thought must face Schopenhauer's charge that self-regard and a commitment to perfection are forms of egoism. Louden does not explicitly build into the concept of self-regard an interdependent notion of care and commitment for others. Louden's account, with its mention of acquiring morally fine characteristics, suggests this possibility, but it does not develop the idea.

Julia Annas has also argued that agent-centred ethical theories do not equate agent-centredness with selfishness and thus fall foul of the charge of advocating egoism. To seek one's own moral good is not thereby to treat other people merely instrumentally, since seeking virtue is anyway likely to increase one's respect for others. 22 Annas seeks to defend an ethical ideal of self-concern.

It is when we think of the agent's motivation and concern over his whole life that we can see what he does as an expression of self-concern (261).

I think that Annas is right here, and I suggest that Murdoch's mature position - her picture of the true self-knower - accords a similar role to self-concern, self-knowledge or what Annas also calls self-love. Self-love is not merely one motive among many others, not simply a justification for the selfish or egoistic act done for gain here and now, but an expression of one's commitment, throughout one's life as a whole, to the morally fine and worthy. Annas suggests that 'ultimately self- and other-concern have a common source ... this common source is self-love' (288).

How do the accounts of Louden and Annas on the subject of the closeness and compatibility of self- and other-directed modes of moral attention relate to Murdoch's view?

2.4 Murdoch's development of the concept of the true self-knower

In The Sovereignty of Good, Murdoch gives an example of the true self-knower; one who acknowledges the real existence of the other - in this case the reality of another person - whilst at the same time devoting significant and ethically valuable efforts to the self and her own being. Murdoch's example is of a woman, M, deciding to re-assess her conception of her now dead daughter-in-law, D. M is said to have settled down over time with her hostile thoughts about D.

However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I
am certainly jealous. Let me look again’ (S, 17).

Murdoch says that we know what M is doing when she tries to be just to D, and that she (M) does too (S, 41). In other words, M sets about her re-assessment of another person with a degree of deliberation. Perhaps M is aware of what Murdoch says of her, namely that she is capable of self-criticism. She calls upon her self-awareness, judging that her thinking is obscured by certain vices. Her self-reflection - “I am jealous, prejudiced and snobbish” - is interdependent with her understanding of the other person, since it is her prejudiced and jealous conception of D that is now present to M’s thinking. M asks herself whether her conception of D is just, fair and accurate. M displays what Annas calls “self-love”, in the sense that she is eminently concerned for herself, yet not in a shallow or selfish way. M recognises that she is capable of more; of a better and higher mode of thinking and being. M is rightly concerned with her self-worth.

In terms of the three pairs of contrasts which I drew out and discussed earlier, I suggest that M’s case cannot be understood adequately in terms simply of the egoism/altruism distinction. It is certainly true that M can be construed as acting altruistically towards D (concerning this sense of “acting”, Murdoch’s point is also that M’s activity is inward, mental activity); but the egoism/altruism contrast just by itself cannot account for M’s concern for her own being. Thus, nor will it do simply to suggest, albeit correctly, that the example makes a point in an ethically
realistic theory by showing that the non-self defeats or renders the self ethically insignificant. But if one thinks in terms of the distinction between the true self-knower and the real world, one appreciates that M is attempting to distinguish D's reality from her own and in so doing at the same time to learn how it is that her own reality (selfish, prejudiced, vain, jealous) is nonetheless centrally important to the process.

Another illuminating case is described in Murdoch's novel *Bruno's Dream*.23 Bruno recalls having told his son that he did not want him to marry an Indian girl, Parvati, because she would give him 'coffee-coloured grandchildren'. Murdoch describes Bruno's having seen, after Parvati's death, a photograph of her with his daughter, in which the two evidently delight in one another's company, sharing a joke. Bruno reflects that the photograph might have brought him round.

Parvati's reality is now manifest to Bruno in a way that goes far beyond his former awareness. But his moral progress is not to be measured simply by the extent to which, without any conception or sense of himself, Bruno is able directly to apprehend the reality of another person. Indeed, the question of what it is to understand the reality of another person cannot even be asked by a person who lacks a degree of self-awareness. Conradi has suggested that Bruno is a character who is at the lowest stage of Platonic illusion.24 I disagree with this interpretation since I am arguing that Bruno's reflective sense of Parvati, coupled with

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his awareness of what he once thought and said about her, show the extent of his moral progress. I differ from Conradi in holding both that Bruno is improved and improving and that the reason for this is his capacity for self-reflection. Conradi believes that Murdochian morals imply the complete absence of concern for self. Of course, such reflection requires that Bruno has a good grasp of the reality to which, he now reflects, he might have been "brought round". My point is that this is not to be conceived as independent of Bruno's sense of his own reality; indeed, what he requires is more, not less, of a concern for the quality and character of his own thinking and being.

Elaborating on the connection between a conception of oneself and one's conception of others, Murdoch suggests that 'much of our self-awareness is other-awareness' (M, 495). It is this overlap of what, in accounts such as Schopenhauer's and Conradi's, appear as two independent elements of thinking (one moral, the other not) that is of interest here. However, it does not follow automatically from what Murdoch

25 Still, Conradi may be critical of Bruno because of the bitterness which Bruno feels. Bruno thinks that his family should have forced him to appreciate the error of his ways; should perhaps have made him look at that photograph earlier. Instead, they were, and still are, silent, distant and resentful at what he said. Bruno reflects that he has been made to carry the moral burden of his careless talk across the years. At one stage, Bruno indulges in a familiar form of self-deception when he thinks about what might have made the situation different: 'if only ... if only ... if they had only'. However, that does not show that self-reflection is invariably self-indulgent and a waste of time, since Bruno needs to be aware of the futility of his own bitterness and to see himself in the light of the idea that he is being self-indulgent. One way in which this might come about is if Bruno is able to see his own bitterness in relation to his changed and changing conception of Parvati. He might say of himself: 'I am capable of justice, but still inclined to pettiness.' Murdoch believes that there are degrees of freedom from illusion and moral error: see Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness: a Polemical Sketch', Encounter, January 1959, p.19; reprinted in Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997)
has said that other-awareness is a form of self-awareness. There might be forms of immediate, intuitive awareness of other persons that do not stand in need of reflective, self-regarding elaboration.\textsuperscript{26} Furthermore, what morally valuable self-reflection there is might derive only from a proper understanding of other people and one's relation to them. Much so-called self-awareness would be, as Murdoch says, awareness of others, whereas it would not follow that other-awareness was dependent upon, or even in some cases in any way connected with, self-awareness.

Still, I believe that this is the only point at which Murdoch comments explicitly on the compatibility and indeed the interdependence of thinking about oneself and thinking about the non-self; more usually, she appeals to a conception of the true self-knower (not usually named as such) which implies that the two are interdependent. It is true that Murdoch is not specially concerned to make the point explicit, nor does she try to give it detailed or extensive theoretical underpinning. What I describe as Murdoch's mature view, in terms of her conception of the true self-knower, is a developed interpretation of her conception of moral agency.

This developed distinction and its conception of the self emphases

\textsuperscript{26} In the next chapter I examine the idea of duty which, according to Murdoch, involves just such a form of moral awareness. Other sources for such a claim may be found in instances of unreflective and automatic responses to the reality of others, such as the one described in Murdoch's novel \textit{An Unofficial Rose} (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), 113: "his imaginings beforehand of what this moment would be like had been hazy, yet they had seemed sufficiently lurid. He had pictured himself swept by irresistible emotion into her arms. He had imagined loss of consciousness. He had imagined tears and nervous laughter and every form of grotesque embarrassment. But this terrible silent confrontation had a quality of the real which stripped him. It was not Emma related to him but Emma existing which was the shock which so almost threw him back into a greater solitude. It was more like the snapping of a cord than a reunion."

Some modes of awareness of others, such as the one described here, seem to owe nothing to personal reflection, but instead "defeat" or override the reflective consciousness.
that self-regard and other-regard have a common basis. The broader conception also concentrates on articulating the extent or range of the moral consciousness. In Murdoch's work, as I indicated in the introduction, the emphasis is on the variety of moral sources, the wide range of activities and commitments in which moral endeavour expresses itself, and on the continuity of morality with the whole of life and experience. For all these reasons, when Blum asks whether Murdoch in fact has a distinctive place for the idea of self-regard, and answers that she does not, it is incorrect to suppose that this indicates her lack of interest in the question of the place of selfhood in morality. 27

In what, then, does Murdoch's mature conception of morality consist? According to Murdoch, morality concerns consciousness as perceptions, feelings, streams of reflection and so on (M, 222); reflection and imagination must be actively directed (S, 40); what we attend to, how and whether we do so, matters morally (M, 167); this concerns our relation to the world (S, 39, 78) and the permanence, in different forms, of the task of reflectively purifying our moral understanding, truthfulness and

27 Blum, op. cit., 29. Blum suggests that it is compatible with Murdoch's view that there are self-regarding virtues, but that her perspective 'gives no articulation of or even distinct conceptual space for those virtues' (29). However, Blum acknowledges early on that his description of Murdoch's thinking does not take into account Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, but only The Sovereignty of Good. It may be that the former work is the place where Murdoch modifies the other-regarding emphasis of her earlier work. I think that this is only partly true, since there are in any case suggestions in the earlier work that a conception of morality as altruism and compassion is too narrow. Furthermore, Blum says more than once (27, 29) that Murdoch might not be offering a complete or comprehensive view of morality. That is again, I think, more true of her earlier work than her later. Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals is a more wide-ranging and speculative work than The Sovereignty of Good and it contains all the ingredients of Murdoch's conception of the moral life. Still, my suggestion is that something else accounts for the feature which Blum notices, namely the fact that Murdoch's vision is very broad. However, that is not to say that it is no failing on Murdoch's part to have left it in any way unclear that self- and other-regard are interdependent. Possibly, she should have made the point more explicit.
goodness (M, 242). In remarks such as this are the seeds of Murdoch’s conception of the agent who knows himself in the context of the reality which is not to be confused or identified with himself, but in which he finds himself immersed; the reality which in this sense transcends him.

At the end of the previous section I asked how Louden’s and Annas’s accounts of the relations between self- and other-regard compared with Murdoch’s view of this relation. It is clear that Louden believes that a morally self-concerned agent is likely to be, in general, a better sort of person than one who is not self-concerned. No metaphysical explanation claiming that there is no real distinction between oneself and another person is required. The same is true for Annas who appeals to a notion of self-love in which a lifelong commitment to one’s own moral worthiness is the source of an admirable concern for the reality of other persons.

Murdoch certainly appeals to the idea that morality is a lifelong process, a struggle aimed at goodness. Goodness involves a concern for others and for one’s goodness. It is proper to reflect on the quality of one’s own moral being for one’s own sake; as part of a concern for the quality of one’s life. But this very moral being includes having to understand the reality of others. Self-reflection can be prompted by thoughts about the self (as in the case of M) and by thoughts about another (as in the case of Bruno). This way of putting it already seems forced. I believe that Murdoch’s view is that moral thinking is seamless and cannot be split into different (self-regarding/other-regarding) components. The object of moral thinking, as well as the subject, is the self immersed in a transcendent
Another distinctive facet of Murdoch's developed view is its insistence on setting these questions regarding the moral self in the broad context of a concern for one's being in the world. In chapter 5 in particular I shall attempt to show how in this dimension Murdoch's account is distinctive, particularly in its conception of Eros as our moral and spiritual energy. This is not a theme found in either Louden or Annas.

The true self-knower/real world distinction surmounts and supersedes other contrasts and distinctions that have been drawn in discussions of Murdoch. I have indicated that one such is the self/non-self distinction. Both Blum and Conradi hold that this distinction is the key to Murdoch's realism and that Murdoch vindicates the non-self in the form of her positive account of "selfless" altruism and direct concern for other persons. Whilst it can be argued that Murdoch herself sometimes makes what seem on reflection to be one-sided comments about the self, I have suggested that such comments must be seen in the context of her overall development of realism. The following comment is a case in point:

[the] self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object (S, 67).

The question is: what relation does the self bear to 'clear vision',

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28 Bruno thinks about his moral being having thought about Parvati; yet his reflections concerning her are part of a stream of thought about his life in general. M thinks about herself, Murdoch tells us, because she wants to 'look again' at D; yet what makes her want to do this is surely her sense of D's reality. It is difficult to isolate and separate the motives that constitute an ability to think morally. Such thinking flows ceaselessly over a conception of the self as immersed in the real world. Such is the case, I contend, in Murdoch's view of the moral.
and can any vision of the self be genuinely clear? There are powerful
intuitions which suggest that clarity of moral vision will be achieved when
one is unconcerned with one's own ideals, into which fantasy can so
readily intrude according to Murdoch, and more concerned with
responding to others.

Blum distinguishes between idealists and responders. The
responder can be understood broadly as the counterpart to the saint; the
idealist as equivalent to the artist. Central to these twin conceptual pairs is
the assumption that philosophical questions about Murdochian morality
and moral goodness are apt to proceed in terms of the rival claims of two
conceptions of moral agency. But this assumption can be challenged.

Blum says: ‘the idealist's life has a quality of conscious self-creation
and self-direction; the idealist chooses her ideals and explicitly guides her
life according to them’ (84). By contrast, the responder simply ‘responds to
the situations she faces and to individual persons in a morally excellent
way’ (84), in this way manifesting her perceptive understanding of
particular situations. Blum's distinction is an interesting one. I agree with
Blum that some moral situations require a degree of abstraction or
distancing from the situation at hand (88). But is the achievement of a
responder, or an idealist? It is certainly unclear how the extirpation of the
self will help. The example of M and D shows rather what is at stake: an
ability to distance oneself from a situation goes with a self-regarding and
critical moral outlook that gives rise to improved understanding of others.

29 Lawrence Blum, Moral Perception and Particularity (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1994); 83-89.
Blum says that the optimum position to adopt is a sort of synthesis of idealist and responder (88).

Conradi suggests that the saint ‘urges and seems temperamentally suited to an austere morality which is ungrateful to the imagination’. He/she lives in an austere way, by unself-knowing codes and rules which keep him firmly in touch with the reality of others. The artist, by contrast, is said to love spiritual drama, self-creation and the renewal and manipulation of the elements of his world (117, 279). However, Conradi declares that these views of the artist and the saint are, by themselves, inadequate and partial (117). He suggests that the force of love, witnessed in the desire for perfection, mediates between these two extremes (117).

If Murdoch resolves any genuine tensions between rival conceptions of moral agency, how do the rival conceptions manifest themselves? Is Conradi’s Saint/Artist distinction and Blum’s Idealist/Responder distinction the best way of understanding Murdoch’s view of the relation of the self to moral worth? Any distinctions between genuinely rival conceptions certainly do not amount to the difference between worldly and unworldly conceptions of morality, since all Murdochian moral agents are attached to the world, albeit in different ways. I argue this point in the final chapter. Nor is the tension between an ascetic and an aesthetic agent, which might be thought to correspond approximately to the saint and the artist. Are Murdochian moral persons


detached from the fabric of the world; and is that what it is to be a Murdochian “saint”? It is not, since - as I have already implied - they are concerned about the nature of their own lives; the real nature of their lives, not some imagined or fictional one.

My suggestion is that there are only apparent rivalries between two conceptions of moral agency in Murdoch’s work. A self-regarding and an other-regarding dimension to moral activity is identifiable, but not in the form of a distinction, a rivalry or a tension: they are, rather, two aspects of a seamless ideal of moral agency. In Murdoch’s developed conception of the true self-knower, the moral agent sees himself and others as part of a world in which it is necessary constantly to improve the quality of one’s understanding. When Murdoch says that the self’s task is to achieve clear vision and so see itself as small and relatively uninteresting she is already concerned with a complex conception of moral agency. Whilst neither Blum nor Conradi takes the Responder/Idealist or Artist/Saint distinction to be irreconcilable, their analysis of Murdoch’s work in these terms underestimates the extent to which Murdoch already has something distinctive in place with which to show these dichotomies to be partial and limited.

Murdoch’s development of realistic themes resolves the apparent ambiguity in a position which seeks both to diminish the status of the self (as small and relatively uninteresting) and to emphasise that the self needs to see itself correctly (clear vision). The apparent ambiguity might give rise to the question: if the self is unimportant, why devote any time to it at all? This is what seems to me to be implied by Conradi in particular
when he takes literally Murdoch's Platonic insistence that many of us are trapped in the cave and so rejects the idea that the self can be legitimately concerned with itself. The point is, as I have already indicated, that whilst there certainly is a valid distinction between the true self-knower and the real world, it is not a distinction designed to show that the two are simply incompatible.

The true self-knower needs, seeks and is sometimes forced to attend to reality; a reality which, once understood correctly, can in turn transform his understanding of himself. There is a two-way movement between self-knowledge and the real world when moral thinking is disciplined. For Murdoch, the true self-knower is imaginative yet disciplined in his exploration of reality: I explore this idea in chapter 4. The true self-knower knows what reality is like and he knows too what relations the self can bear to reality, for good or ill.

Murdoch claims that respect for reality requires a disciplined overcoming of self (S, 95), which immediately prompts the question: who is the disciplinarian? The answer is that the self seeks self-understanding, often but not always in the name of a better understanding of other people, and it requires for this a form of moral discipline. Thus, Murdoch asks,

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\text{can we really imagine morality without an intimate relation with consciousness as perceptions, feelings, streams of reflection? (M, 222).}
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In her early work, Murdoch emphasised the importance of 'pictures of ourselves' which capture our imagination and which we try to
resemble. \(^{32}\) We create fables, self-images, visions of ourselves and our relation to the world; these are an aspect of our inner life, they are our importantly constitutive of our moral vision. For Murdoch, morality necessarily involves a central arena of self-evaluating reflection; the requirement of true self-knowledge. I have suggested that this central area connects such diverse phenomena as our awareness of the world (natural and man-made), of art, of other persons, and that it does so imaginatively. The idea of self-improvement, of living a better life as a better sort of person, relates one to a wide range of evaluative sources; things in terms of which one can measure one's progress. The availability of such sources is important because

as moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection (S, 40).

No doubt such activity will sometimes be prompted by one's sense that the needs of another person require one to be somebody better; or that one see more clearly than previously, and so on. So too might one think from the other way around, that is from a perspective in which the question of the quality of one's selfhood is the initial and guiding question. Reasons for feeling uneasy with the suggestion that moral subjects think about other persons when thinking about their own character include the thought that other people have needs that are such as to cut across one's

\(^{32}\) See; 'Against Dryness', op. cit.; also 'Vision and choice in morality', Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume, XXX (1956). Both essays are reprinted in Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997)
self-regard and demand instantaneous response. This is true, but it is not the whole truth and it can overlook the fact that temptation and prejudice obscure one's understanding of others. The only sort of solution, in this case, requires critical self-regard; the alternative is automatic and direct responsiveness to others, but which may hide deep prejudices and vices. An image of saintly selflessness is inadequate to a conception of morality such as Murdoch's. Nonetheless, many of the intuitions expressed here have a powerful appeal and explain why it can be tempting to misread Murdoch in a certain way.

Murdoch says that we lack a suitable philosophical articulation of the self (M, 84); not that the concept of selfhood is irrelevant to morals. At the beginning of her latest work Murdoch refers, via Hume, to the self as one of our most cherished unities (M, 1). Further, Murdoch says

I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being (M, 171).

Murdoch says that individuals have to learn to use the ways of enlightenment suggested by Plato's metaphysics (M, 148), and she points to the morality of an evaluative, reflective and potentially self-critical activity which inheres in awareness itself:

consciousness is a form of moral activity: what we attend to, how we attend, whether we attend (M, 167).

Murdoch elaborates:
we can seek for truth, we can imagine the past and test our imaginings, and we can do the same about other minds, and about our own [sic]. We have various methods of verification. We can examine our own states of mind and test them, we see 'into' them, we need not accept them at their face value (M, 265).

Understanding grows and deepens in relation to an ideal limit (S, 31); clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort (S, 37). Thus, when Murdoch says that, on her view, morality is connected with attention to individual realities (S, 38), it is wrong to construe this as straightforwardly indicating one's need - criterial of moral agency - to attend to other human beings without any awareness of self whatsoever. Quite the opposite is in fact the case: what Murdochian moral agents require is what I have identified as true self-knowledge.

Murdoch suggests that we cannot suddenly change ourselves because we cannot change what we see (S, 39). The point is not just that one must selflessly submit oneself to a reality which one cannot change; it is also the point that one can change who one is in relation to and through what one sees (values, evaluates, avoids, rejects). Obedience to this reality is something which it is hard to achieve (S, 40). Murdoch says that our consciousness is not a transparent glass through which we view the world (S, 78). In all these ways, Murdoch points to the fact that on her view of morals, self-regard is actually of considerable importance, however difficult it may be genuinely to "know oneself".

Kekes implied that the true self-knower may be compatible with Murdoch's frequent mention of the need for unselfing which, he suggested, might be shorthand for a requirement of truth-seeking moral
discipline. Thus, Murdoch uses the language of ‘unselfing’ (M, 54), but indicates that this is a form of change-of-being or ‘metanoia’; a long, deep process. The result cannot be something approaching a lack of self-awareness. For if one operates with goals and ideals, one needs some sense of one’s closeness to, or distance from them, and the degree of success one has achieved in relation to them at any given point in time. Plato's stages of enlightenment are developments in the understanding of truth, which are also developments in our confidence in our own inner life of thought and judgment and in our real existence as individual persons capable of truth (M, 221). Murdoch also suggests that

consciousness ... must contain an element of truth-seeking through which it is also evaluated (M, 241).

Some cognitions, Murdoch avers, are ‘purer’ than others, but we cannot systematise the various ways in which, and different levels at which, we reflect on truth and moral understanding; for the process engages the whole person, and ‘everywhere’ (M, 242). In short, Murdoch simply cannot be correctly understood as arguing that self-knowledge and attempts at it are irrelevant to the moral life. Self-knowledge is an idea that connects moral subjects with a world in which other people are indeed a part; an important part, but only one part. The true self-knower reduces neither to a distinction between egoistic and altruistic moral agents, nor to a form of realism in which what matters is that the self is able to see beyond itself in ways which make self-knowledge irrelevant.
2.5 The importance of other human beings for the true self-knower

I have attempted to distinguish between different senses of "other-regarding" and "self-regarding", suggesting that whilst Murdoch's conception of morals is, broadly speaking, self-regarding, this nevertheless requires further elaboration. I have argued that the distinction between the true self-knower and the real world accurately captures Murdoch's parallel arguments for the importance of an understanding of "otherness" and of self-understanding. I have also suggested that one of the disadvantages of reducing this distinction to a distinction between self and non-self or between egoism and altruism, is that it overlooks the different forms of "otherness" with which the true self-knower is concerned. In later chapters, especially chapter 5, I explore at greater length the moral significance of art, nature and the everyday world around us as it appears in Murdoch's mature view. For the moment, I should like to return to the theme of our understanding of other people.

Intuitively speaking, whilst there may well be more than one sort of "otherness" for Murdoch's true self-knower to concern himself with, it remains indisputable that other people are especially important and different in kind from the otherness of, say, a kestrel, a tree root, a cloud, mountain or river. I suggest that this thought can be honoured in Murdoch's view of the case, but only if one maintains the necessary distinctions between this idea and a conception of "selflessness" or pure altruism (and their respective contrasting pairs, self and egoism). The true self-knower - whose self-concern and self-love are manifest in his efforts to
become a better person - sees himself in the light of the real world and can judge that other human beings constitute a part of that world whose ethical significance is very pronounced.

Bernard Williams says:

> it is possible to use the word "ethical" of any scheme for living that would provide an intelligible answer to Socrates' question ['How should one live?']. In that sense, even the baldest egoism would be an ethical option. I do not think we should follow that use. However vague it may initially be, we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people, and it is helpful to preserve this conception in what we are prepared to call an ethical consideration.\(^{32}\)

Williams seeks to preserve the intuition that, in questions about right and wrong and their relation to the way in which one understands and lives one's life, questions about the welfare of other persons are central. Charles Taylor says that possibly the most powerful and urgent cluster of demands that we recognise concern 'the respect for the life, integrity, and well-being, even flourishing, of others ... Virtually everyone feels these demands, and they have been and are acknowledged in all human societies.'\(^{33}\)

Louden made the point that the project of self-perfection is not selfish, but instead directed towards the acquisition of the requisite

\(^{32}\) Bernard Williams, op. cit.; 12.

\(^{33}\) Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); 4. I have already quoted this passage in order to show the contemporary importance of the intuitions behind Neo-Kantian approaches to ethics such as Nagel's.
dispositions for morally right action (17). Annas said that a common source of self- and other-concern is love (288). These are good points, but I said that Murdoch’s reasons for affirming self-regard go beyond them. Murdoch’s broad conception of morality values self-regard for reasons that do not end with the point about interdependence. A less limited account of the place of others in one’s moral understanding does not see self-regard as important primarily in terms of an adequate conception of others; though of course this does not mean that it disagrees with the point.

One very clear way in which the true self-knower comes to understand the overall quality of his/her moral being is by considering the question of how well, how justly, how truthfully, he appreciates the being, needs and existence of other persons. Both Blum and Conradi rightly note the importance of such knowledge, but move too hastily to conclude that it is nothing to do with self-knowledge. One’s sense of the values which attach to other human beings and their needs is liable to be prioritised over other sorts of value. That thought only appears to generate a difficulty for the value of self-reflection and the conception of the true self-knower if it is understood reductively, in terms of the agent’s systematically prioritising his values (goals, aims, satisfactions, pleasures) over those of other people; a picture of egoism. The true self-knower is not simply egoistic; but then, nor is he simply altruistic as those terms are understood by Schopenhauer and by Nagel.

In saying that self-regard is the primary moral notion, I am not suggesting that an instrumental relationship is at stake. I am not saying that other-regard is instrumental to a prior project of self-understanding. It
is true that a rebuke from a friend over one's behaviour towards another person can give rise to self-reflection. In this way, other-regarding thoughts cannot be said to have sprung from a self-regarding project; they are not simply a means to the more important end of self-knowledge. Other-regarding considerations seem to be paramount in terms of time: they do not originate in or spring from a prior aim of self-regard. But this states the issue wrongly. Self- and other-regard are intertwined, whether it is a moment of other-regarding shock that prompts self-reflection, or a self-regarding project that gives rise to other-regarding considerations. This is what is demonstrated by Murdoch's account of the true self-knower.

Beyond the fact that self- and other-regard are interdependent in Murdoch's notion of the true self-knower is the point that a moral subject lives with a self-critical moral consciousness. Other-regarding considerations can enter into this consciousness, whereas the converse does not hold. At least, the converse does not hold in so far as the model of other-regard is saintly selflessness. My argument is not very far from the argument from interdependence; but it seeks to characterise the Murdochian moral consciousness in terms of the variety, the breadth, of its objects of attention, and to show that other-regard is only partly representative of its focus, as well as showing the compatibility of the self-knower's self-knowledge with his understanding of others. Moral agents do not evaluate themselves exclusively in terms of values that are given by thinking about others. There are unselfish - but not necessarily other-regarding - ways for an agent to think about his/her own moral being. I am suggesting that it is important to keep the idea of other-regard in its
broader self-regarding context. In this way, it is possible accurately to account for the importance of other-regard. Speaking of “selflessness” states the importance of other-regard incorrectly, as does Murdoch’s account of duty, to which I turn next.

How do the concepts of self and other relate in Murdoch’s mature view? Here I wish to state in summary form some of the features of the true self-knower/real-world distinction which have already been touched upon. It bears emphasis that there is a distinction between self and other at the heart of Murdoch’s conception of moral agency. The moral self must recognise realities which are non-self: that is a central theme of realism and remains at the heart of Murdoch’s conception of the self. However, that does not mean that the self-knower can only know such realities; the name implies, after all, that the self knows itself in Murdoch’s view of moral reality.

The point, then, is that the real world - or more simply put, reality - must be known by the self. But reality is “other” to the self in both an internal and an external sense. A truthful conception of oneself is as other to the selfish self as is the person, kestrel, mountain or whatever which selfishness prevents this self from apprehending. What is other to selfishness is what must be seen in order for the veil of selfishness at last to be pierced. The true self-knower is distinguished from the reality which he knows because there is always the possibility that selfish fantasy obscures the distinction between what the self takes to be the case and what is actually the case. The truth about oneself is as legitimate an object of self-knowledge as is knowledge of other things and persons. In
Murdoch’s conception, it is every bit as “other” to the truth-seeking moral imagination as are the many external realities which constitute the self-knower’s world.

Self and other are distinct in Murdoch’s mature view. “Otherness”, in various forms, makes claims upon a self which is prone, in her vision of the world, to selfishness and fantasy. Other persons provide particularly strong evidence of how it is that the self must realise what is true and be able to distinguish this from what selfishness and fantasy present as true. But central to the idea of the true self-knower is the point that the self can obtain a truthful understanding of its place in the real world; and this understanding is amongst the many things which are “other” to the selfish mind. The true self-knower has defeated his selfishness. Self and other are distinct, but they are certainly not irreconcilable.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have shown in this chapter that it is necessary, in order to understand Murdoch’s moral philosophy, to distinguish between various distinctions. The true self-knower/real world distinction is related to, but differs from, distinctions or dichotomies between realism/non-realism, self/non-self (reality) and egoism/altruism. The true self-knower knows a reality which includes himself, so that his altruism is married to a degree of self-concern. That is alien to “genuine” altruism as defined by philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nagel who cleave to the egoism/altruism dichotomy as an exclusive and exhaustive account of
moral reasons. Murdoch's conception is a development of the themes of realism in which reality includes truths about oneself. One must come to know these truths in order better to apprehend realities which are "non-self" and in order to live a richer, more fulfilling and worthy life.

Murdoch does indeed offer a famous and memorable account of the strength of the demands placed upon the self by external realities. It is also true that she regards the self as very often prone to selfishness, fantasy and so on ('dream-life' she also calls it). This is sufficient to make it clear that Murdoch is a realist: she embraces the themes of realism with a degree of enthusiasm which must not obscure the fact that she also insists upon the self's need to understand itself. This is important not only if one is accurately to appreciate what it is about one's vision of reality that needs to change if reality is to be understood, but also if one is to be satisfied as a being with one's own goals, aims and satisfactions.

Some critics, I suggested, underestimate the power of Murdoch's vision by implicitly equating her evident interest in the difference between the self and reality (especially when the self is selfish) with the distinction between egoism and altruism. This loses sight of Murdoch's importance insistence on the possibility and reality of an agent's legitimate ethical concern with himself. A further possibility, and the product of sustained and disciplined ethical self-concern, is Murdoch's mature view of the self-knower. Whether it is a reality is another matter. An abiding feature of Murdoch's moral philosophy is its intimation of possibilities which transcend us: there is an idea of perfection towards which we are bound constantly to aspire. But perfection, I argued, cannot for Murdoch be
manifest in the complete absence of self-regard, or “saintliness”.

Murdoch has a subtle, complex and compelling view of the relations between the self, selfishness and the non-self. She moves away from a dichotomous treatment of the relationships, perceiving that her contemporaries have analysed the issues narrowly, in terms of the inflexible distinctions that must be drawn between egoism and altruism, for instance. Nevertheless, I shall contend in the next chapter that Murdoch herself sometimes loses sight of the power of her mature view, and is exercised by distinctions which emphasise the absolute differences between self-knowledge and response to the world beyond the self. Her mature view already shows that self-knowledge is an integral part of a truthful vision of the world.
In this chapter I explore Murdoch's idea that the concept of "duty" is important to her moral philosophy. I examine the apparent connection between the idea of duty and compassion or altruism in her thought. My interpretation of Murdoch's discussion is that she takes herself to be vulnerable to the charge that her philosophy of morals places undue emphasis on the self and its "aesthetic" activities. For this reason she introduces 'Kant's picture' of duty as a "corrective" to her own view. This Kantian picture presents duty as an unreflective, unavoidable and immediate mode of response to the needs of other people.

I began with an account of several distinct conceptual contrasts: realism/non-realism, self/non-self, egoism/altruism and the true self-knower/real world distinction. Murdoch appears to think that her philosophy courts egoism, yet her response to this is not simply to emphasise the importance of altruism. She believes that the Kantian idea of duty represents a realist requirement, not least through its picture of immediate response to the needs of other persons. I ask what sort of response it is that Murdoch sees as response to duty, connecting my discussion with a distinction between primary and secondary motives which exercises some contemporary Kantian writers. I then subject the idea of duty to two related
critiques. First, duties -viewed as principles - must be contextualised by a
more important sort of moral reflection. Second, duty is “contextualised” in
the sense of being potentially seen as (merely) one consideration among
others. I focus throughout on the question whether Murdoch’s reasons for
speaking of the importance of duty can be sustained in the terms of her own
account. I close therefore by asking whether her account of duty can be
accommodated in Murdoch’s mature account of the true self-knower.

As I have already strongly implied, I believe that Murdoch’s picture of
the true self-knower is a picture of a moral agent who is already able to
recognise the force of moral demands which emanate from the needs and
existence of other human beings: the true self-knower does not stand in
need of what Murdoch identifies as the extra and different “outcry” of duty.
The true self-knower is concerned with both the self and with the non-self in
ways I outlined in chapter 2. The true self-knower is to be distinguished
from the real world; but is also essentially attached and committed to it.

3.1 The idea of duty

The Oxford English Dictionary defines duty as that which is owing to
anybody: it is that action which one is bound to do; an absolute obligation
in the moral sense of having ‘the binding force of what is morally right.’¹
The idea that duties are owed to anybody, i.e. that they are universal, is
coupled with the claim that they are very strong requirements. It is the latter
point more than the former which characterises Murdoch’s discussion of
duty in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals. Duty is introduced as a clear and

distinct moral notion which Murdoch thinks her philosophy needs as a corrective to its tendency to be overly concerned with the self and with the self’s discernment of the Good and the beautiful.

Murdoch certainly expresses doubts about the “vagueness” of her own account. She takes it to imply that morality is self-directed and concerned with the overall shape and meaning of one’s life (M, 311). Her fear is that such an account of morals is too relaxed. The obvious way in which to remedy this is to offer a stricter account of morality.

From many positions life not only ought not to be, but cannot possibly be, looked at as a whole, like a work of art (M, 292).²

In the preceding chapter, I attempted to explain what it is to look at oneself and one’s life and why Murdoch regards this as the central area of morality. The breadth of this conception and the diverse range of the sources that constitute its expanded notion of “the moral” are what, it seems, shock Murdoch into a self-critical frame of mind. Murdoch fears what she calls a ‘relaxed surrender to an aesthetic attitude, an ethic of “beautiful thoughts” ’ (M, 301). She discerns in the idea of duty something quite different.

² An interesting point about this remark is that it says two things. First, it claims that it is morally improper to think about one’s life as a whole and that one therefore ‘ought’ to be doing other things; second, it means that ‘from some positions’ it is impossible (not necessarily improper) to look at life in this way. On the first reading, we wish to know what makes it improper, whilst the second reading makes one want to ask what renders such thinking impossible. My attention in this chapter is on the first question. In the final chapter, I return to the second one, asking what would make it impossible for a Murdochian moral agent to look at his or her life as a whole, like a work of art. The latter idea is that such an agent will be suffering from a spiritual malaise and be unable to discern the reality of goodness - seen initially as beauty - in, for example, the natural environment, the built environment and so on.
Duty is supposed to be absolute and unconditional: duties are things that one must do whatever one happens to feel or think about them (M, 493-4). The idea of strict moral demands and pure (unreflective, unquestioning) responsiveness certainly attracts Murdoch. Murdoch is interested in the sharpness or clarity of duties and the idea that they do not require imaginative or reflective elaboration. Or rather, I shall argue that this is one facet of Murdoch's ambiguous account: duties are unconditional, unreflective, unambiguous and clear. Duties render self-reflection and metaphorical ("metaphysical") elaboration inappropriate. But it is not possible to understand why any of these intuitions matters unless one appreciates Murdoch's sensitivity about other aspects of her account of morals.

Murdoch says:

I look here at the question of duty in the context of the possible charge that the sort of Neo-Platonic moral view on which I have been reflecting is really a sort of aesthetic view, a kind of wander through pleasant groves of quasi-religious experience (M, 304).

Thus, the idea of duty suggests itself to Murdoch as a corrective to her own "sort of aesthetic view" of morals. Murdoch attempts to give the idea of duty an aura of strictness when she describes it as 'the idea of plain stark duty' (M, 301). Furthermore, duty is something that cannot be reduced or lost sight of: it is separate and rightly prized (M, 302); something that cannot be transformed or converted into another form of moral consideration. Murdoch says that there is a temptation to confuse the aesthetic and the moral. Philosophers might therefore wish to 'keep
morality safe from art':

the strictness, purity and simplicity of the concept of duty should be our refuge and prime safeguard \((M, 9)\).

Murdoch hopes to be able to indicate the clarity and simplicity of duty by comparing it to a laser-beam \((M, 34)\). Here, as elsewhere, Murdoch deploys the phenomenology of response to duty as she takes it to be present in Kant's famous account of obligation. The image of a laser-beam is an attractive one. Thus, duty's role is, at least partly, to reveal the contingent and particular realities of the world to which it is a moral agent's task to attend. Murdoch believes that contingent moral demands will be overlooked by the agent who thinks about his or her life overall, that is to the self-critical, self-regarding agent. Murdoch believes that looking in this way at one's own being and life is looking at them somewhat as if one's life were a work of art. For one needs to think of various sorts of goodness and in terms of various metaphors which elaborate moral concepts and ideas of

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\(^3\) 'A laser-beam: very clear, narrow, strong, coming from an unseen source, illuminating a point in a world which is otherwise valueless \ldots\ the contingent particularity of the world is hallowed, one might say, by becoming incarnate in moral maxims, in moral laws, in principles of action. Insights interact with rules' \((M, 34)\).

Murdoch's appeal to 'insight' which applies rules, laws, maxims (statements of duty) etc. is slightly problematic. Murdoch appeals to duty, before insight has worked on it, as already particularising, i.e. focussed on a particular point, hence the laser-beam imagery. Perhaps only some duties are like this, that is particular by their nature. But there is also the image of more general commands or statements of duty which arise in a particular context but which require a personal mode of perception if their evaluative point is to be grasped \((M, 34-5)\). With regard to this potential difference between general duties which are then particularised, and those which enter thinking already highly particularised, Murdoch's thinking is not entirely clear. I examine the modes of perception which "particularise" statements of duty below (3.5).
the relation of the moral self to the world. 4 In view of the possible loss of the world because of “aesthetic” self-regard she suggests that ‘the idea of a list of duties ... might seem attractive’ (M, 293).

My interpretation is that in thus exposing what she regards as the vulnerability of her account of the self and morals, Murdoch herself overlooks the fact that her picture of the true self-knower involves moving beyond more restricted and limited pictures of the self. In particular, it seems that Murdoch’s quest for a realist account of morals leads her to exaggerate the extent to which self is a threat to recognition of the real and the true. But this fails to do justice to the true self-knower, and is more at home with a straightforward distinction between self and non-self. In the previous chapter I showed that this distinction cannot be viewed as an entirely accurate account of Murdoch’s mature view of the self and its reasons.

Murdoch emphasises what she takes to be duty’s distinctiveness from other sorts of moral awareness, in particular from those which involve reflection on one’s own being. She suggests that we should reject an account of duty that makes it one’s “duty” to become a better or different sort of person. The idea of duty is not to be extended into the area of

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4 Perhaps the most famous contemporary expression of the idea that one’s life can be looked at as a whole, like a work of art, is MacIntyre’s account of the moral quest in *After Virtue* (2nd edition, London: Duckworth, 1982). Indeed, MacIntyre’s interest is in the fact that this perspective is akin to that of narrative artists. A similar conception, that is one which implies looking at one’s life as a whole, is expressed by Williams, op. cit., in his discussion of the ethical question of how one should live one’s life (1-21). Again, Charles Taylor is interested in the notion of a personal perspective on one’s whole life and its meaning: he speaks, for instance, of trying to see where one stands in relation to criteria of goodness and of how it is necessary to examine one’s past and future, to move forward and back, in order to do this. See *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
'generalised goodness' by making it a duty to have pure thoughts and good motives \((M, 482)\). But my point is that response to duty must indeed move into the area of generalised goodness. Principles of right action, such as duties and obligations, depend upon broader conceptions and articulations of the Good. These articulations are those of the true self-knower. Murdoch ultimately acknowledges this, but also tries to retain the force of Kant's picture, which she initially opposes to the picture of the true self-knower. Murdoch argues that duties are like interrupting points of insight rather than a light which always shines \((M, 432)\). My suggestion is that she acknowledges also that in the moral life, no such points of insight (or laser-beams) ever fall except in a context lit permanently by "background lights". The true self-knower emerges from Murdoch's account as able to acknowledge such insights. What I think is misleading in Murdoch's approach is that she ever thought that the self-knower was vulnerable to the charge of ignoring the constraints of duty because of an ethically improper concern with self.

Murdoch thinks that ideas of duty are perfectly familiar to us, suggesting that duty is 'the most obvious moral staring point' \((M, 52)\). In a similar way, Williams has argued that obligation can be felt as special, yet also as very familiar and rooted in other-regarding considerations.\(^5\) In all these remarks, I contend, one can discern Murdoch's desire to cast the idea

\(^5\) Williams discusses 'the sense, which so many people have, that moral obligation is at once very special and very familiar' (ibid, 188). He suggests that this may be because of the inclusion within ideas of obligation of the notion of practical necessity. Williams does not identify ethical considerations with compassion or altruism, nor with duty or obligation, but he is happy to discuss emergencies (186) and the rights possessed by those to whom one is morally obliged (186-7). For Williams, obligations are one sort of ethical consideration among others, an idea with which I am in agreement: see 2.5 below.
of moral duty in the role of something that offers strictness and directness and which is for that reason quite unlike and separate from her own "sort of aesthetic view".

3.2 Duty's connection with compassion and altruism

In the previous chapter, I argued that the distinction between the true self-knower and the real world is itself to be distinguished from the distinction between self and non-self, realism and non-realism, and egoism and altruism. Murdoch appears to hold that 'Kant's picture' of duty emphasises the non-self (as opposed to the self); but she also thinks that it has affinities more particularly with an account of altruism and compassion (as opposed to egoism).

There are certainly good reasons, intuitively speaking, for supposing that an account of compassion will differ from an account of duty. For compassion is immediate and direct, a sort of instinctive and simple identification with the suffering of another person, whereas the idea of duty, as thought of either in a particular instance or more generally, seems to separate - albeit temporarily - the agent and the subject to whom he/she responds. One thinks about one's relation to the other in terms of, and as mediated by, a concept which therefore appears to be quite abstract. One plausible objection to the claim that duty is a primary moral concept is to suggest that such "concepts" are not relevant to moral response, in the sense that thinking about what one is doing is not always the best way of responding to moral considerations. One should act simply as compassion or intuition suggests.
However, in the particular case of Murdoch's account of duty, such an objection is rendered complicated, because of the way in which she connects duty with altruism and compassion. I therefore postpone discussion of the substance of Murdoch's account and its relation to general critiques of the idea of duty. For the moment, my aim is to establish the controversial claim that she detects affinities between dutiful moral response and compassionate moral response.

My argument is supported by what Murdoch says about Schopenhauer's account of morality. Murdoch directs her criticisms of Schopenhauer towards his rejection of the concept of duty:

Schopenhauer's humane philosophy is marred, even contradicted, not only by the omission of the concept of duty, but by certain other equally firmly held views (M, 65).

In what respects is it true to say that Schopenhauer's philosophy is internally contradicted by his rejection of duty? Murdoch's discussion suggests the following answer. Schopenhauer rejects duty whilst nevertheless - and this is the contradictory point - insisting upon a moral agent's ability to achieve an immediate participation in (recognition of) the suffering of others. That is what the two ideas have in common: the thought that compassion and a sense of duty each arise from an agent's recognition of urgent and pressing demands deriving from the ethical reality of other persons.

Murdoch's view of compassion is that it is everyday and immediate (M, 63). Can duty be similarly conceived? Recall the Schopenhaurean
fundamental command of morality, namely to hurt nobody but rather to help everybody as much as one can (M, 63). The idea of commands, rules, requirements, principles and so on might be part of what is intended by speaking of “duty”, and seems to be in line with the emphasis on other-regarding moral activity. I suggest that Murdoch takes Schopenhauer's account of compassion to imply something similar to her account of duty. This claim is at certainly plausible in the light of the following remark:

Compassion impedes the sufferings which I intend to cause another person. 'It calls out to me "stop!", it stands before the other man like a bulwark, protecting him from the injury that my egoism or malice would otherwise urge me to do' (M, 63).

Duty, like compassion, acts as an immediate and effective bridle upon egoism. Related ideas include immediacy of response, unreflectiveness, involuntariness, strictness; all of which might be discerned in the ideas of both duty and compassion. The philosophical and practical salience of the idea of duty may be a function of the fact that it is clear, strict and immediate because it focusses on the reality of the suffering of other people.

In 'Kant's picture', Murdoch suggests, we recognise ourselves as sunk in egoism 'but able at times to notice the outcry of duty' (M, 172). Note that Murdoch uses the word 'outcry', a good image which is a clue to the fact that she regards duty as having an apparently external source and

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6 Murdoch is interested in the Kantian history of the concept of duty, and yet her own use of the concept certainly does not depend on it. I do not discuss Kant's account of duty and obligation: my interest is instead in the uses to which Murdoch puts the concept, and the problems that arise as a result.
force. This also reminds one of Murdoch's characterisation of the Schopenhaurean fundamental command which calls out "Stop!" when one intends harm or malice.

Thus, Murdoch holds that Kant and Schopenhauer potentially have something significant in common. The philosophical issue is the relationship between compassion and duty: one's tendency towards egoism can be overcome, temporarily, by a mode of insight or understanding - compassion or response to duty - which connects one immediately with moral reality.\(^7\) The idea that the moral realities to which duty and compassion connect one derive from the being and existence of other *people* has a powerful intuitive force.\(^8\) One's ordinary (extended, reflective, unclarified) form of awareness - that of the aspiring self-knower - is liable to be pierced or penetrated by a type of moral requirement (duty) which seems to come from elsewhere, from beyond the subjective, reflective realm of self-knowledge. Thus, in discussing Kant, Murdoch suggests that

> the command of duty enters from beyond. Moral agency consists in the switch to the activity of the moral (rational and real) will ...' \((M, 222)\)

It is true that Murdoch is here discussing Kantian images, and that my aim is not to engage with her exegesis of Kant. However, the

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\(^7\) As for the differences between Kant's and Schopenhauer's accounts of duty and compassion, Murdoch discusses these at *M*, 299-300.

\(^8\) I gave evidence for this view in the previous chapter.
significance of the images is beyond dispute. Murdoch approves of them and relies on them to a large extent. Indeed, the fact that the idea of duty so readily lends itself to being cast in the form of images such as "outcry", "being on duty" (being watchful, alert, sensitive) and "laser-beam", anticipates an important part of my critique. Morality and moral theory proceed largely in terms of "pictures"; metaphorical and metaphysical images of life and its requirements, of one's own character and one's relation to reality, truth, goodness and so on. But this picture of morality centres on the idea of the true self-knower and is the one which Murdoch criticises as "a sort of aesthetic view"; not just because of the place of art within it, but because of the way in which it requires and uses imaginative personal imagery. Murdoch may be aware of the distinctiveness of her philosophy of morality and so somewhat unsure of her own "pioneer" status. Yet her account of duty is supposed to counter the "aestheticism" of her account of a fundamentally self-regarding sort of moral agency. Again, my suggestion is that Murdoch does not need to counter her picture of the true self-knower with the image of an agent who is able to recognise demands from "beyond" his own reality and "switch" to them. The self/non-self distinction is already accounted for and superseded in the Murdochian conception of true self-knowledge. Murdoch is, in my view, addressing a concern that need not genuinely arise.

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9 See chapter 5 below for my account of the place of art in Murdoch's philosophy. I discuss imagination and its Murdochian moral uses in the following chapter.
3.3 Responding to duty

However, having said that this aspect of her account of duty reinforces the idea that Murdoch is very interested in the idea of pure moral response - as she is in the idea of "pure cognition" (M, 239-243) - it is necessary to note that Murdoch never rules out an important possibility. The possibility is that an agent can be aware of the idea, the concept, of duty as a means of describing his/her moral response, and what it is a response to, to him/herself. Such first-personal use of the idea of duty may well be compatible with pure compassion in the broad sense that some moral situations call for the former whilst others call for the latter. In other words, within a life there may be reasons for being purely compassionate and (other) reasons for reflective use of the concept of duty. However, this broad compatibility does not undermine my intuition that Murdoch (unnecessarily) intends duty to be a corrective to her emphasis on the self's centrality in morals. The true self-knower can know his duty in various ways, all of which undermine the idea that the self in morality necessarily opposes the non-self and that duty or obligation can successfully re-introduce the latter by circumventing the former. I suggest that Murdoch never rules out the prospect of the true self-knower knowing his duty; but it is also true that she is less than clear regarding this possibility.

Murdoch as philosopher is reflecting on the force of the idea of duty as a way of preventing the agents she is describing from becoming too reflective. That is only inconsistent if Murdoch believes that moral agency in general involves the exercise of modes of thinking which are broadly akin to philosophical, metaphorical and metaphysical modes of thinking. But that
is exactly my claim.

Murdoch's account is complex in more than one respect. Although she appeals to duty as a morally positive notion, she also appeals to the idea of moral paragons who are beyond or above "duty". To think about duty would be one thought too many for people as naturally good as these paragons. For "good men", duties are more like habits (M, 53). P. H. Nowell-Smith suggests that

> the sense of duty is a useful device for helping men to do what a really good man would do without a sense of duty'.

But Murdoch is not saying that such agents do not do their duty. Still, is she not suggesting that they do what is correct and what is required morally without thinking about it? The answer to this seems to depend on how one interprets the claim that duties can be performed habitually. Murdoch offers some clues as to how the idea may be interpreted. She suggests that

> one might say that morality divides between moral obligation and spiritual change (M, 53).

In suggesting this, Murdoch says, she is construing the will as connected only with strict obligations and not with the idea of moral change. She observes that the call of duty is often felt as an 'inhibiting

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11 Again, the comment confirms one in the thought that Murdoch believes that her account is overly aesthetic, that is overly concerned with spiritual change. She feels that she needs to re-state the claims of a large and important area of morality, namely strict obligations and duties.
factor' (S, 67) and that there is a degree of strain that can be associated with recognition of duty (M, 53). In other words, the will and obligations are related. For these reasons, one might suppose that "good people" (those whom Murdoch sometimes refers to as "saints") do not feel the strain or inhibitions that lead us to speak of an external call, outcry, command, rule and so on. The idea that such persons' duties are performed more as if they were habits means that they do not exercise their will-power, or struggle to do what is morally right. Good persons are naturally disposed to do what is right.

But I suggest that this is not enough to show that good agents can be said to do their duty without being aware of it. At least, my argument is that Murdochian agents are potentially aware of what they are doing, of reasons why and how it might be described, challenged and so on. In saying that a good person will do his duty as if it is a habit, Murdoch is not thereby suggesting that he is unaware of the fact that he is doing his duty. It is instead simply the case that such persons do not have to think in a certain way about, that is force themselves to do, what they see as their duty. It may be that the true self-knower has, precisely, to struggle to do what he perceives it to be right to do (his duty) within the context of his knowledge of his own motivations and visions of the good. This shows, not that the true

12 Murdoch says that although the concept of will 'seems to belong with duty rather than with spiritual change', nevertheless 'the concept of duty does not require the concept of will, innumerable duties are performed without any place for it' (M, 53; my emphasis). But having made this distinction between will and response to obligation Murdoch does not go so far as to claim that there can be unknowing response to duty. Looked at from another angle, my suggestion is that Murdoch is not conflating the fact that one's will is not required for duty with lack of awareness on the part of the agent that what he or she is doing is, or can at least in principle be described as, responding to duty or obligation.
self-knower obscures the real world beyond the self by focusing on the self but rather that, with many of us, he has to struggle to understand his own relation to the real world and the requirements upon him generated by reality.

3.4 Primary and secondary motives

Marcia Baron claims that

at times the very good motives of very good people need to be tempered lest they act wrongly.13

The way in which to understand Baron’s meaning is to compare what she says with Nowell-Smith’s comment. For Nowell-Smith, truly good people do not need the sense of duty. Baron’s point is that if such people can do what is morally right without thinking of duty, they nevertheless require some way of assessing therightness of their actions.14 It is not enough to leave moral rightness to chance. In Baron’s terms, we need a sense of duty operating as what she calls a secondary motive, a commitment to doing what is right and good in terms of a conception of

13 Baron, op. cit., 126.

14 Blum made the same point when he said that on a Murdochian view, one sometimes has to realise that what one can best do for one’s friend is not to provide, as it were, a shoulder to cry on, but to get him/her to help him/herself. See Blum, op. cit., 13. One should step back from the promptings of compassion in order to see if such a response is appropriate to the situation. This is the opposite of the argument that I voiced earlier, namely that reflection is often inappropriate as a mode of moral response.
one's whole character and life (128). This idea is clearly in line with the suggestion I just made whereby the self-knower tries to understand his relation to moral reality: he may see it as his (long-term) duty to achieve and maintain fidelity to that reality. Another possibility is that instead of having a commitment to duty at this secondary level, the self-knower also attempts to understand primary-level (here-and-now) duties in relation to his own reality and mode of being in the real world.

Whether or not one calls such a secondary motive a sense of duty, it is clear that I have been arguing for just such a picture of moral agency, wherein a critical reflective perspective upon the things that he does, the way that he does them and the reasons why he did them (and so on) is available to the true self-knower. In particular, my suggestion is that this perspective is the one that Murdoch sees as having relaxed, "aesthetic" connotations which threaten the strictness of some moral commands. The latter needs to be built into the picture of moral agency in the form of an account of duty (as "laser-beams"), and so differs from Baron's idea that the broader or secondary realms of moral commitment can be representative of duty. In other words, Murdoch's treatment of the idea of duty suggests that she regards it as a primary rather than a secondary motive.

For Murdoch contends that the idea of duty is not to be extended into

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15 Barbara Herman has made a similar claim: it is possible for acts to be done which are according to duty but which were not performed explicitly from the motive of duty. See Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 3. Persons of sympathy are, on this reading, morally indifferent since their dutiful actions are 'the product of a fortuitous alignment of motives and circumstances (5). For acts to have moral worth, they must spring from an interest in the rightness of moral action, or a commitment to duty which operates at a level above one's immediate and direct reasons for action.
the area of general goodness in the form of a suggestion that it is one's
duty to have good thoughts and good motives (M, 482). This observation is
crucial. Murdoch can hardly allow Baron's point that duty may operate as a
secondary motive. Yet my suggestion thus far has been that Murdoch is
aware in her philosophy of the need for motives and moral reflections that
operate at just this level, and that her recognition of this fact is a function of
her conception of the self-knowledge that is at heart of the moral life. Baron
can see duty operating as a secondary motive, whereas for Murdoch, duty
as a laser-beam is supposed to enter from beyond the field of secondary
motives in so far as she associates these with a far less strict field of
reflections about oneself ('the inner stream'). The true self-knower can
recognise primary and secondary duties, I suggest. But when she feels
vulnerable to the charge of over-emphasising the self, Murdoch neglects
the idea of the self-knower and appears to be thinking of the self and its
distinctiveness from the non-self. The non-self is, in this account,
represented by primary rather than secondary duties.

Thus the distinction between primary and secondary motives with
respect to the concept of duty certainly bears upon Murdoch's treatment of
the topic. Murdoch suggests that duty is, in her philosophy, something
recognised 'abstractly and as it were externally' (M, 53). At once, this seems
to be in tension with her appeal to the concept in its primary mode. The
suggestion that duty is recognised "abstractly" is in tension both with the

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16 It is the task of the final chapter to show how this level of moral thinking brings in
connotations of beauty and aesthetic appreciation of art and nature and one's
surroundings: until then, I shall continue to cite Murdoch's own description of her account
of this level of moral thinking as implying 'a sort of aesthetic view'.
claim that it is an immediate motive (one of the reasons why Murdoch appealed to it) and also - relatedly - with my suggestion that the notion may be connected with ideas of pure altruism and compassion. Blum suggests that in a Murdochian account of morality an idea such as a 'duty of friendship' is irrelevant as compared with manifestations of 'direct concern' for another particular person.\textsuperscript{17} His concern is that the idea is too abstract. But Murdoch is implying that a moral agent has access to just such abstract self-descriptions. It is for this reason that I suggest that Murdoch does ultimately acknowledge the compatibility of duty and self-knowledge.

The suggestion that duty can be recognised abstractly and as if it came from outside, external to personal moral reflection, would appear strongly to imply that the moral agent has first-personal access to the concept. Murdoch frequently calls for moral philosophy to be a sort of aid to general moral practice (see, for example, \textit{S}, 47, where Murdoch says that 'a moral philosophy should be inhabited') so it would indeed be surprising to find her claiming that a concept which has great moral significance is one that is not, or not even normally, available to the vast majority of moral agents who are not also moral philosophers.

Again, Murdoch says that the sharp call of unwelcome duty seems to come 'from elsewhere' and that this can give rise to a struggle against

\textsuperscript{17} Blum, op. cit., 17. Elsewhere (21), Blum is content to use the term 'obligation' in the context of friendship, although he takes care to say that acts of friendship are not reducible to concepts of obligation. Baron, op. cit., frequently states the charge that acting 'for the sake of duty' disconnects agents from love, tenderness, fellow-feeling and so on (see, for example, 112, 118). As will be clear however, Baron believes that there is a way of reconciling thinking about oneself in terms of duty and being a person who is loving and sensitive. In this I think she is right, since it follows from an ability to assess oneself morally. The question of course is whether or not to describe the reflective assessment as a sense of duty.
one's normal mode of being, one's 'preformed consciousness' \((M, 300)\). Once more, this suggests to me a picture of agents being aware of the idea of duty; moreover, of agents consciously deploying the concept in broader reflections describing themselves and their acts.\(^{18}\) This picture of a broader context of self-knowing personal reflection is the one that is defended by Marcia Baron as a picture of responding to duty, but to duty at a secondary level. Baron explains that

> the value that Kant attaches to acting from duty attaches primarily not to actions done from duty as a primary motive - to individual actions prompted by the thought 'This is morally required' - but to governing one's conduct by a commitment to doing what morality asks (7-8).\(^{19}\)

It is unclear whether Murdoch can allow duty to be seen in this way, because of the lengths she has gone to suggestively to associate it with the image of laser-beams which cut through more general "background lights". But to say that duty can be recognised as "external" and "abstractly" is at least on the face of it to take a step in the opposite direction, acknowledging the primacy of agents' first-personal perspectives upon their own being and the moral situations they encounter. Thus, I am suggesting that duty is not simply a Murdochian way of appealing to selfless goodness from the standpoint of second or third parties describing good acts. What role does it

\(^{18}\) Such reflections are of course compatible with unreflective compassion: one may reflect retrospectively on what one did. Michael Stocker suggests that such retrospective descriptions of oneself in terms of duty are sometimes 'a polite form of self-deprecation' (see Michael Stocker, 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories', \textit{Journal of Philosophy} 73 (1976), 462).

\(^{19}\) Baron, op. cit.: see also 129 ff.
play in moral thinking? Furthermore, what does the role it plays reveal about Murdochian moral thinking more generally?

3.5 Moral perception

A critique of a conception of morality as founded on rules or principles, such as that offered by Martha Nussbaum, relates to Murdoch’s discussion of duty since Murdoch claims that philosophers need to retain a concept of duty construed as moral rules of a certain generality (M, 302; my emphasis).20 Murdoch’s account of duty can thus be compared to what Barbara Herman has called the ‘rule-as-duty-model’.21 For these reasons, in what follows I take Nussbaum’s critique of the priority of rules - and her counter-argument for the priority of what she calls “perception” - as bearing upon Murdoch’s account of duty.

Nussbaum’s argument is directed at establishing that claims for the importance of ethical rules and principles must be seen in the light of the point that they are often so generally formulated as to have no obvious or clear relevance to a particular situation. It is thus mistaken to suggest that practical rationality may be characterised in terms of unchanging rules, principles or statements that have been formulated prior to actual deliberative experience. Nussbaum’s point is open to the objection that a

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21 Herman’s discussion is more complicated than Murdoch’s treatment of duty, and her conception of moral rules differs somewhat. Herman is interested in how moral salience is picked out by general rules deployed in the process of comparing the categorical imperative with the maxims of individual actions. See Barbara Herman, op. cit., 80.
rule may be very particularised or detailed, that is, very much tailored to specific instances with their individuating characteristics. Not all rules need be vaguely formulated since, as R. M. Hare famously argued, principles may be universal without being general.\textsuperscript{22}

Nussbaum's response has two facets. First, new and unique - and so not covered by existing, even detailed, formulations - situations can always arise and must be adequately accounted for; second, the agent still has to exercise a mode of insight in order to determine whether such a detailed principle applies to this situation, in what ways, and so on. For these reasons, "perception" is prior to principle, where "moral perception" may be very briefly summarized as a mode of thinking that is attuned to particularity, context and contingency and founded in actual deliberative experience (68).

The intuition on which I wish to build is that what Nussbaum refers to as moral perception is strongly akin to the sort of moral deliberation that I have characterised and defended thus far; namely the picture of the Murdochian self-knower. The features of this picture of moral experience that seem most important are its reflectiveness, its ability to build upon experience and to take into account past events, responses and so on and to relate these to a new situation, a new requirement, a new call to be or become a morally astute person. But in so far as moral perception is all these things, it differs greatly from duty as Murdoch tends to characterise it. If duty requires perception, then, the laser beam is indeed "diluted" by

background lights. The supposedly isolated and independent force of an imperative depends instead upon a self-regarding, imaginative and possibly aesthetic conception of the Good. Nussbaum's argument suggests that principles are compatible with perception. But when Murdoch offers similar arguments she appears to be inconsistent. Or perhaps that is uncharitable: it may instead be the case that one witnesses Murdoch moving towards recognition that the self-know the self-knower does not have to be "corrected" or "opposed by" the picture of duty at all.

Thus Murdoch herself recognises that rules are 'surrounded by some degree of explanation' \( (M, 302) \) and that duty cannot stand alone \( (M, 303) \). She observes that

one could agree that 'do not lie' casts its light upon the whole world and must always be kept in mind. But many duties arise in particular complex situations, for instance where rational maxims conflict, and where we have to use our reason to create more particular (fitting this situation) moral rulings for ourselves \( (M, 34) \).

This sounds very similar to Nussbaum's argument but, as I have just indicated, whilst Nussbaum can accommodate perception within an account of the relevance of principles, for Murdoch to try to render perception compatible with duty is problematic since she herself has exaggerated the separateness and difference of response to duty as a mode of moral understanding. Nevertheless, Murdoch declares that

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\[23 \text{ Murdoch mentions "Do not lie", "Be helpful", "Do not steal", as instances of duties} (M, 302), \text{ so I am confident in supposing that the idea of an ethical principle can be closely associated with Murdochian duties, since the examples look very much like general principles or rules.}\]
the concept [of duty] is indispensable, though it cannot stand alone; it is a formal way of asserting both the orderly pattern-like nature of morality, and its uniquely absolute demand, quite different from that of inclination (M, 303).

Again, Murdoch says that we do not have to choose between attention and duty, for we live with both (M, 219). There is certainly something ambiguous in this. How can duty be described both as ‘uniquely absolute’ and as not ‘standing apart’ from that relative to which it is judged to be unique? Either it is unique and independent, or it is not. It might be contended that all that is at stake here is the way in which Murdoch expresses what she sees as the special character of duty. Perhaps she means to say simply that it is indeed unique but that it is never seen only by itself, but always in relation to broader considerations. This may be so, but it is still open to question - and in Murdochian terms - whether duty is in any case a unique moral requirement or whether it partakes of those self-regarding sorts of thinking that Murdoch - despite the plausibility of her picture of self-knowledge - pejoratively identifies as “a sort of aesthetic view”. That view is one in which a vision of the Good is the permanent background to moral activity. Duties might enter that background, or they might not. But when they do they are radically contextualised. They are not independent and they are not unique: they overlap significantly with the self-regarding moral thinking of the self-knower.

The Murdochian compromise which recognises that duty must be contextualised has further difficulties and ambiguities. Consider the following claim:
there are ‘moral judgements’, which may in some ways resemble judgements in law courts, or which take place at stated times and initiate clearly visible new courses of action or the embryos of new dispositions. But there are also ways and states in which value inheres in consciousness, morality colours an outlook, light penetrates a darkness. We have senses of direction and absolute checks. There are qualities of consciousness (M, 238)

The absolute checks (duties, obligations such as “do not lie”, “don’t do it” etc.) differ from another category of moral insights and perceptions (imaginative, picture-making) which are analogous to a sense of direction. Here Murdoch seems to be claiming that there is more than one sort of moral awareness, rather than building an element of perception into her account of duty. At other times, however, Murdoch comes closer to arguing that there is indeed a single, unified moral consciousness in which both aspects are of import.

The sharp call of an unwelcome duty seems to come from elsewhere; but it descends upon a countryside which already has its vegetation and its contours (M, 241).

Murdoch is here deploying metaphors to suggest a conception of morality. Elsewhere, she is more explicit:

response to duty demands an enlightened assessment of the relevant world; and to this ‘seen’ world the colours of morality and value are restored by the discerning look... (M, 261).

As a moral agent faced with the idea of duty, one is in need
not so much of a sudden straining of unpractised will-power, but of a calm vision, a relaxed understanding, something that comes from a deep level (M, 301).24

Marcia Baron gives voice to much the same thought:

[s]omething, some sense of what is right and some concern to act accordingly, is needed if the agent is to notice that here is something she really ought to do ... What is needed is something that heightens one's awareness of moral considerations, makes one morally sensitive, that is, attuned to moral nuances that are easy to miss and alert to moral considerations that should be attended to. What is needed is something that expresses and reinvigorates one's commitment to acting morally, to being a good person ... How it does this becomes clearer if we think of acting from duty as acting from a commitment to act morally. Part of being committed to something or someone is reflecting on the object of that commitment and one's relation to the object (127-28).

Thus I contend that Murdoch herself can agree with my claim that her appeal to the idea of duty is problematic. What makes this appeal problematic is, I contend, the picture of the self-knower. For in this picture we already have a model of a moral agent capable of judging, sifting and weighing the force of different sorts of moral requirement, whether they are to do with self, or with the non-self, or with the self's appreciation of the non-self. Murdoch need not have opposed duty to a picture of morals as self-regarding. Indeed, in spite of this opposition, Murdoch came ultimately to accept that the two need to be brought into closer relation, though this

24 'The exercise of duty is not a cold look at the facts and a jump to a moral intuition or dictate of reason' (M, 304).
acceptance is itself instructive. It was open to her to show from the outset that moral philosophies which emphasise the importance of the claims that reality has upon the individual are not in opposition to her account of the true self-knower. In so far as Murdoch took duty to be representative of what lies "beyond" the self, she exaggerated its distinctiveness from the understanding that characterises the true self-knower.

3.6 "One consideration among others"

Murdoch observes that we should all be humble enough to realise that we are subject to detailed and unpredictable problems of duty (M, 35). This image of humility in the face of strict moral commands - perhaps grounded in other-regarding considerations - might encourage one to suppose that Murdoch ultimately intends a picture of simple virtue; of unquestioning, unreflective goodness, quite unlike the more sophisticated and worldly-wise "perception" of which Nussbaum speaks. But Murdoch's comment may also be looked at in another light. If one is indeed supposed to realise that one is subject to duty, then one has an externalised perspective on the notion: one looks at and reflects on the idea of duty from the outside, rather as Murdoch does in giving her philosophical account of it. Good Murdochian agents may have something like Murdoch's own perspective on the notion of duty.

This argument is supported by an intuition about ordinary uses of the word "duty". Up till now, I have said relatively little about perfectly ordinary and familiar admissions on the part of agents that something or other is
their duty. Philosophers are possibly more sceptical of such a claim than are moral agents, who would probably understand by it nothing more controversial than the idea that an act is required of them, where "required" may indeed be taken to have an emphasis deriving from its being an appeal to necessity. One problem here is that notions such as those of a moral requirement, necessity, impossibility and so on do not simply lie behind the alleged force of "duty" as Murdoch describes it. They may instead be interpreted as different - but equally valid - ways of understanding the relative force and strength of different moral considerations.25 I shall return to this thought presently. My point here is that a sense of being "required" to do something because it is "one's duty" may mean nothing more controversial or less familiar than that although one is inclined not to do something, one ought in fact to do it.

There may be many considerations behind a sense of moral requirement, and some of these will require a high degree of deliberative sensitivity - of the sort described by Nussbaum - if they are to be acknowledged. My suggestion is that such deliberation is a reflective assessment of the nature, status and relative importance of a variety of moral claims upon one. For example, I may see it as my duty to help you even though I am tempted to devote my time to an activity that will be much more personally fulfilling for me. But Murdoch thinks that the idea of duty cuts across reflective imagination: its authority is somehow not open to question. It is this idea that seems to me to be so problematic. A similar

thought is found in Bernard Williams's critique of morality's attempt to make obligation the centre of ethical life.\footnote{Bernard Williams, \textit{Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy} (London: Fontana, 1985), ch. 10 (174-96). All further references to Williams are to this text.}

Williams's argument is like Nussbaum's in that it offers a critique of principle-based ethical theories: it is unlike Nussbaum's in respect of the different sort of contextualisation of the idea of duty that it envisages. Williams's position is different again from that of Murdoch, since his argument that duty or obligation is one consideration among others is directed against what it is certainly a distinctive conception of "morality" on his part. Williams's critique of morality might be thought to undermine philosophies such as Murdoch's, in so far as Murdoch does seem to want to place the idea of moral duty in a special place, apart from other notions and with a special, unique force. However, it is also possible that Williams and Murdoch are working with different conceptions of morality. Murdoch is not simply embracing the sort of "morality" which Williams criticises; not least since, as I have indicated, she is sensitive to the need to contextualise the idea of duty or obligation, even though this admission is not consistent with other aspects of her account.

Both Williams and Nussbaum may be said to be arguing that the idea of duty requires \textit{contextualisation}: Nussbaum argues that a statement of duty must be adapted to suit a particular moral context; Williams's position may be characterised as the view that duty (or obligation) is a concept that is reflectively available to moral agents within a broader repertoire of such concepts. Here I am returning to what I earlier said is the
possibility of one’s being critical - and sceptical - of the idea of duty as such. Such scepticism, which often takes the form of the thought that the idea of duty is an historical curiosity with no practical salience, comes from this perspective. But the perspective does not have to be so sceptical. It is a critical, externalised position. The idea is that there are many ways of describing the ethical nature of situations and one’s relation to them. It is not clear why ideas of “duty” or “obligation” should have a special status, entering moral reflection with a final, authoritatively binding force.

Williams’s position is of course related to Nussbaum’s in the sense that “perception” may judge a so-called duty or principle to be inapplicable to a particular situation. The insight required sensitively to apply the rule appears to be continuous with the insight that concludes that, after all, the idea of “duty” is irrelevant. I am supportive of Williams’s view that duty is one consideration among others, and of what this view implies about the reflective status of moral agents. But Williams is most critical of duty, actually becoming sceptical of it, when he sees it in the guise of what he distinctively characterises as a “moral” consideration. This scepticism is informative, and sheds useful light on Murdoch’s account.

Williams believes that morality wrongly overstates the importance of obligation and turns it into a dominating structure that can then seem to dominate life altogether. It would be wrong simply to claim that Williams is sceptical of the idea of obligation/duty as such, since he does believe that - issues of “morality” aside -

there is an everyday notion of obligation, as one consideration among others, and it is ethically useful (174).
In his discussion of “everyday” obligation, Williams does not explicitly focus on the idea of the Murdochian true self-knower. But Williams has a notion that is certainly similar to this, and he defines it partly in terms of how a specifically “moral” perspective does not permit a reflective frame of mind that can ask - of the idea of duty for instance - ‘How useful is it that I think and feel like this?’ (178). Once outside morality, however, Williams believes that reflection on such a question is possible. The idea of obligation has definite ethical value, but it is one ethical consideration among others, rather than the special, overriding consideration that Murdoch describes.27

Williams claims that

what is ordinarily called an obligation does not necessarily have to win in a conflict of moral considerations (180).

Williams connects obligations in the everyday ethical sense with ideas of importance and with deliberative priority. He also suggests that obligations consist of considerations that have been given high deliberative priority in order to secure reliability. The idea is that one has certain obligations to others, corresponding to which are those others' rights: the others benefit from one's honouring such obligations (185).28 Emergencies

27 The possibility of this sort of ethical reflection is suggested when Williams says that although ethical life is itself important, 'it can see that things other than itself are important' (184). However, I think it is also true that judgements about the relative importance of different sorts of pursuits, thinking, and so on are reached through moral reflection, in ways that I try to make clear in the final chapter. I do not think that my position is vulnerable to the simple charge that I take what Williams calls “morality” at face value: I articulate and defend a different conception of the moral enterprise that is much more akin to Murdoch's than to Williams's.

28 'People need help but (unless they are very young, very old, or severely handicapped) not all the time. All the time they need not to be killed, assaulted, or arbitrarily interfered with' (186). This analysis reminds us of Taylor's claim that although
can impose a high deliberative priority on some obligations: Williams
describes these as 'obligations of immediacy' (185-6). Promises are
another case he discusses (187), along with the notion of practical
necessity (188) which does not necessarily indicate an obligation, even
though the idea of necessity is one element that has gone into the idea of
obligation (188).

Perhaps Murdoch simply wants to say that the idea of duty is
important, possibly because it is itself representative of ethical or moral
importance. It does not follow that ethical/moral importance is
overwhelmingly important, nor even that its importance is overriding as
experienced within the moral life. Nor does it follow that the concept of duty
is the most important representative of moral importance. Murdochian moral
subjects can differentiate between demands and considerations in terms of
their relative importance. The problem is that Murdoch wants the idea of
duty to cut across just this very activity of reflective assessment of the
different spheres of one's own moral life. The vision of the Good required
strikes her as liable to lead to failure of moral attention. But Murdoch is here
apparently narrowing the gap between two sets of distinctions which I have
argued require to be kept apart, namely a distinction between the self and
the non-self which regards the self as a threat to understanding the non-self
(Conradi's and Blum's view) and between the true self-knower and the real

morality does not consist solely of obligations, yet it does include as a central "cluster" of
considerations those which concern the welfare and security of other human beings (op.
cit., 4). Of course, Taylor and Williams use the term "morality" differently: see Taylor's
essay and Williams's response in Altham & Harrison eds, World, Mind and Ethics: Essays
on the ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1995).
world. Duty as a means of tackling problems generated by the first distinction looks different when seen in the context of the second distinction, which in Murdoch's thought replaces and transcends the first.

Can Murdoch use the idea of duty to represent the idea of ethical importance? Williams distinguishes deliberative priority from the idea of importance: the fact that something is important does not automatically secure it deliberative priority (183). I can recognise the nature of your suffering and its importance, but I am not automatically bound to give it priority in my practical deliberations. Is Murdoch saying that duty reveals importance, or that it is a manifestation of the deliberative priority of a consideration, or both? It might be that Murdoch intends both since, as Williams says, an obligation is an ethical consideration that directly connects importance and deliberative priority (185). However, as I have already argued, the imagery surrounding Murdoch's account of the idea of duty is supposed to rule out reflection. The image of a laser-beam implies that duties enter the moral scene ready-made and with instant, particularised application. Thus, the idea of deliberative priority is problematic in terms of Murdoch's account since it appears that on her account duty implies the absence of deliberation. 29

I have outlined Williams treatment of the idea of obligation at length

29 Williams suggests that some important ethical concerns are best embodied in deliberative silence: it ought not to occur to somebody that it is their duty not to kill a rival, for example (185). Deliberative silence implies that the agent has other deliberations: the agent who does not deliberate over a particular matter because it is silenced is thus not the 'selfless mother of a large family' who does not deliberate ethically at all. She just loves, automatically and unreflectively. However, given the formal importance of duty to which Murdoch is appealing, it is to be doubted whether the idea of deliberative silence accurately represents the Murdochian idea of response to duty or obligation. Murdochian agents, by contrast, are aware of the existence of a claim in the form of a duty: Murdoch implies that the moral subject will be rightly aware of the formal demand upon him or her.
not only in order to explore its relation to Murdoch's position, but also in order to show that he is not simply sceptical of it. This is important. Williams is highly critical of morality's making obligation 'the special centre of ethical experience' and, thereby, 'building ethical life around an illusion' (191). In what, then, does our freedom from delusion consist? The answer is: in a reflective understanding of the idea of recognising an obligation. Williams explains why it is that although the idea of obligation bears a 'general relation to importance and immediacy', that is nevertheless insufficient reason for unquestioningly or unreflectively accepting it at face value, or for feeling remorse if one fails to fulfil one's obligations.

Obligation works to secure reliability, a state of affairs in which people can reasonably expect others to behave in some ways and not in others. It is only one among other ethical ways of doing this ... These kinds of obligation very often command the highest deliberative priority and also present themselves as important ... However, we can also see how they need not always command the highest priority, even in ethically well-disposed agents. Reflecting that some end is peculiarly important, and the present action importantly related to it, an agent can reasonably conclude that the obligation may be broken on this occasion ... [and] this conclusion may be acceptable in the sense that he can explain within a structure of ethical considerations why he decided as he did (187).

My contention is that Murdoch's mature conception of the true self-knower is akin to Williams's affirmation of what he calls the ethical life; one in which agents ask what is the best sort of life for them to lead and in whose terms duty is seen as one consideration among others.

For Murdoch herself argues that 'we are all capable of criticising, modifying and extending the area of strict obligation which we have
inherited' (S, 74), and she suggests that part of 'popular or semi-popular moral argument' is the thought that

we must internalise the demand of duty, understand it, judge it, make it our own, be autonomous not heteronomous. Duty is not a rigid external code, it is a rule I impose on myself, felt as external by my mixed and imperfect nature (M, 137).

Murdoch is right to imply that this thought is familiar. The idea is not simply that one must contextualise the idea in the sense of adapting to suit particular circumstances. This is Nussbaum's point, but it seems very close to a still more critical position. For what is familiar to us is not simply the experience of witnessing, as a sort of laser-beam, a duty and then applying it to ourselves and our own situations. As Murdoch obliquely implies, we judge the idea itself. Moral judgement and discernment consists not simply in finding a way of making a blunt statement of duty "fit" a local problem: instead one wants to know if one has understood one's situation in the best way, all things considered. What is familiar, then, is the situation described in one of Murdoch's novels as follows:

It was not that she had from this derived some decisive command of duty which she now saw, because her poor heart was elsewhere, as an empty form. She could have borne this comprehensible pain more easily. She suspected she had not been moved by the command of duty at all.30

Being a Murdochian character, this woman is an aspiring self-

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knower. Presupposed is the moral agent’s critical perspective upon the idea of duty as such; seen from the outside. This case reveals the sense in which the concept of duty is reliant on the agent’s actively admitting it into the arena of her deliberations and as seeing it, possibly favourably, as one consideration among others.

Murdoch suggests that the moral agent who lacks a clarifying mode of thinking can fall back on a rule or command or principle felt as external (M, 302). However, that seems to imply that duty is of use when reflection and self-assessment fail. In the case just described, by contrast, the agent seems to have a clear sense of the sort of moral illumination that the idea of duty possesses and so too a truthful sense of the nature of her own ethical being. It is implied that she regrets not having been moved by the idea at all. Truthfulness in matters of moral self-assessment must include this sort honesty with oneself about what moves and motivates one. The agent sees the idea of duty playing an “external” role, but sees also that it was not, in this role, something that was available to her. She has not fallen back on an idea in the sense of having had to resort to something that really is external to her own efforts, in the same way that an acrobat hopes to be saved from a fall by the safety net. In an obvious sense, Nussbaum is right to accord priority to deliberation: my suggestion is that it goes further than Nussbaum envisages and in ways that Murdoch herself indicates.

In a sense, I have agreed that duty is an “external” consideration: it is always to be externalised (rather than itself coming from an external source) in the form of being seen as a way, one way, of making sense of the life one is leading and the particular situations within it. But this externality
is not the stark, strict and unquestionable authority which Murdoch’s suggestive imagery claims for it. In fact, it is quite the opposite: the sort of externality that I have vindicated is an aspect of the moral consciousness that Murdoch originally wanted duty to cut through or run up against and reveal as being too relaxed. That consciousness belongs to the true self-knower.

What, then, is one to say about Murdoch’s evident admission that duty must be contextualised? Is she ultimately resolved to acknowledge that moral consciousness can accommodate the idea of duty, or is it simply the case that Murdoch’s account is inconsistent? Murdoch appears to want to retain the instrumental efficacy of the image of duty as an external “laser”, whilst at the same time maintaining her picture of a multi-faceted and complex moral consciousness as the basis of the moral life. This strategy is unconvincing, but informative: it reveals that Murdoch’s account is self-regarding, as I suggested it was in the second chapter, but also that she is sometimes overly critical of her account and unsure of its ability to withstand the charge that is too self-regarding and not strict enough.

3.7 Can duty be resolved with “a sort of aesthetic view”?

At least one other critic has been more charitable towards Murdoch’s account of duty than I have. Murdoch declares that the concept of duty, ‘though not constituting the whole of morals, cannot be dispensed with’ (M, 302). It is effective because separate and yet, in order to be effective, it must be utilised by a mind that is reflective.
She seems to be saying, as she does elsewhere, that whilst duty is essential to her broader conception of morals it is certainly not as wide as the latter notion. Murdoch’s position appears to be akin to that of Charles Taylor when he notes that although morality can be and often is defined ‘purely in terms of respect for others’, nevertheless

if we adopt this definition, then we have to allow that there are other questions beyond the moral which are of central concern to us, and which bring strong evaluation into play.\(^{32}\)

In other words, it might look simply as if Murdoch wants to offer and defend a broad conception of morals within which a more limited idea of moral activity - be it “respect for others” defined in terms of duty or in terms of compassion - is seen to be of special importance. This is an attractive picture: in terms of the explanatory image that I used in the first chapter, it places one circle within another, broader one. There are certainly grounds for thinking that this is what Murdoch is attempting to do. She says

I have been discussing the idea of consciousness (also experience) as indispensable. But from here one can also see the necessity of the idea of duty as something alien, the outer not the inner, the command whose authority may be recognised as running against the stream of the inner life (M, 294).

If duty is essential to the broader conception of morality, my image of “overlapping circles” could accommodate duty in a simple way; as one sort of moral consideration, recognition of which forms part of one’s repertoire of concepts and images (located in the central overlapping area) in terms of

\(^{32}\) Taylor, op. cit., 14.
which one thinks about and evaluates one's life and moral character. I suggest that the place of duty in Murdoch's philosophy cannot be accounted for in such simple terms for the reasons I gave above; namely, that she construes duty as a corrective to this very picture of moral agency.

In saying this, I differ from Maria Antonaccio who has recently given an account of Murdoch's discussion of duty which strikes me as being too charitable to Murdoch. Wherever Antonaccio places Murdoch's account of duty in the context of a successful resolution of a tension in her account, I have suggested that no tension need have arisen, given the independence of the several distinctions discussed in the previous chapter. The self is not opposed to the non-self *per se* in Murdoch's picture of the self-knower, and so there is no genuine need for Murdoch's account of duty as a consideration which cuts across self-reflection when such reflection is not seen as true self-knowledge.

Antonaccio brings out very well some of the reasons why Murdoch may have chosen to refer to her own broad conception of morals as "a sort of aesthetic view", since metaphysics and its associated body of metaphors and images is - in the moral life as well as in the philosophy in terms of which Murdoch describes the moral life - designed to bring formal, aesthetic unity to life. Metaphysics is "one-making", like the works of art that Murdoch discusses at the beginning of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Moral consciousness seems to borrow from metaphysical thinking on Murdoch's

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33 See 'Form and Contingency in Iris Murdoch's Ethics' in Antonaccio and Schweiker, eds, op. cit..
view of the matter. Antonaccio notes the importance to Murdoch's thought of 'immediate moral instincts which may resist formulation into abstract principles' (127). But whereas I have detected this thought both in Murdoch's account of compassion and in her account of duty, Antonaccio takes precisely the opposite line.

Within both morality and moral theory, according to Antonaccio,

the one-making aspect of consciousness is reflected in morality as obligation or duty, which tends to reduce the diverse phenomena of morality to abstract principles or rules regarding conduct (130).

This is similar to Williams's critique of the way in which "morality" elevates the idea of obligation to an unjustifiable status. My dispute with Antonaccio is therefore not with her claim that Murdoch is worried that the desire for form and meaning may prevent adequate moral attention to other individuals, but with her thought that it is duty which represents this danger in Murdoch's thinking. My claim is instead that Murdoch thinks duty will, as it were, de-unify her over-unified conception of morality.

Antonaccio's suggestion is that Murdoch counters the strongly one-making impulses of duty by placing them in the context of her belief that moral change and improvement is the most significant aspect of an account of morals (130-131). For Antonaccio, Murdoch is finding 'a place for the notion of duty within the more comprehensive notion of the moral life as a pilgrimage' (131). In other words, Antonaccio sees the one-making

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34 Antonaccio puts it very well: 'consciousness is naturally one-making: it creates unities, it intuits wholes from fragmentary truths, it seeks order among random detail, and is a continuous unified stream that is part of our total fabric of being' (129).
tendency of thinking about duty and obligation as being tempered because placed in a broader account of life as a spiritual journey of aspiration and moral improvement, or what Murdoch calls transformation.

(Murdoch) insists that duty must be thought of against the more general background of our changing quality of consciousness (131).

To reiterate, I do not see duty as the one-making aspect of moral thinking. Furthermore, I disagree with Antonaccio on another matter. Leaving aside the issue of whether it is duty or the idea of seeing and evaluating oneself and one's life as a whole that represents for Murdoch the dangerously unifying aspects of moral thinking, Antonaccio is overly optimistic about how Murdochian duty can be accommodated.

Antonaccio and I agree that Murdoch does indeed try to place duty in the context of what she calls “background lights”, these being the “aesthetic” reflections of the true self-knower through which the lasers of duty are supposed to cut. But as my way of putting it already shows, I am not convinced that this can be successfully done in Murdochian terms. Antonaccio seems to be saying that Murdoch's account of duty - with all the claims for duty's difference and distinctness which I have cited thus far - is simply laid over or placed within her account of moral thinking which partakes extensively in metaphysical and metaphorical thinking. Thus, Antonaccio speaks of duty and the metaphors of self-change as interdependent, since for Murdoch general moral principles are apprehended within an inner moral landscape which is
constantly being built up by the continuous truth-seeking activity of consciousness as it perceives particulars (132).

But the truth in that picture threatens the role of duty as Murdoch herself characterises it. Duty represents contingent, unsought moral considerations of the sort that cannot be anticipated in the construction of ideas and pictures of oneself. It is thus what Murdoch tries to use to counteract the “one-making” implications of a morality that is founded on the ability to think about oneself and the life that one is leading, hence the sort of person one is. This may not be a wholly satisfactory way of dealing with the concept of moral obligation, but I believe that I have shown that it is Murdoch's approach.

To summarise, Murdoch thinks that the idea of duty which is strict, pure and simple (M, 9) and like a laser-beam (M, 34), will keep moral subjects in touch with the world (M, 293). Duty is unlike personal thinking about one's own character and life (M, 482). Duty feels different: one notices it in the form of an outcry (M, 172); it is an authoritative command whose force runs against the stream of the inner life (M, 294). Murdoch regards duties as connected with statements of rules, again as a sort of externalisable consideration (M, 302), and is inclined to view the situation with regard to duty as an either/or matter: morality divides between obligation and spiritual change (M, 53).

Then again, and in a way that is suggestive of a tension in her account, Murdoch says that we must internalise the demand of duty (M, 137) and that we must use our reason to create more particular moral rulings for ourselves (M, 34). There is the sharpness of duty, but this is felt
by a consciousness that has, to put it picturesquely, its own geography and localised features \((M, 241)\). Morality, including proper response to duty, calls on the discernment of perception, the sustained look and not just the sudden intuitions of duty alone \((M, 261)\).

My contention in this chapter has been that Murdoch's account of the true self-knower renders unnecessary her appeal to duty as a means of defeating the self where "self" may be understood as a manifestation of fantasy, egoism and, in general, an inability to be in touch with the true and the real. But these failures of the self are recognised and avoided by the true self-knower. Most of us do not avoid them completely because we lack the ability of the self-knower to see himself justly in relation to the real. Our task is to grow in self-knowledge of the sort that is central to Murdoch's mature view; and in terms of that view, Murdoch's appeal to duty as a force which countervails the negativity of selfhood strikes me as implausible.

I began this chapter by trying to characterise Murdoch's own unease about her account which she sees as overly "aesthetic". Morality is aestheticised if it is expressed in artistic forms (novels, pictures, etc.) and if it is claimed that those forms themselves offer a distinctive conception of morality.\(^35\) Murdoch herself is a successful novelist. But I believe that something else is at stake in the claim that morality is aesthetic. If the same imaginative empathy which allows artists successfully to portray person (including persons engaged in their own moral reflections) is what is required in the moral life, there is clear point in claiming that the moral is

aestheticised.36 In the final chapter I explore in detail what the various aesthetic sources for Murdochian agency are. In the next chapter I concentrate on the imagination that allows artists and moral agents to think about and depict other persons. Is imagination a way in which Murdoch can remind her audience of the very great importance of other-regard? Or does it instead have a major role in the fundamentally self-regarding conception of morals?

36 Eagleton makes this claim. It is also found in several of the essays in Martha Nussbaum's Love's Knowledge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See in particular 'The Discernment of Perception...', 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible...' and the introductory essay on the relation between form and content in the novel and philosophy.
4. Imagination

4.1 Is there a place for imagination in morality?
4.2 Imaginatively particularising moral rules
4.3 Imagination's other-regarding role
4.4 Imagining oneself in relation to others
4.5 Creative imagination
4.6 Imagination and truthfulness
4.7 Morality, imagination and art

I have suggested that Murdoch is a pioneer who is broadening the range of questions which moral philosophers can ask. Imagination is a topic which Murdoch uses to experiment with bold ideas about moral agency. Since she can show that there is a form of regard for oneself which is in any case the context of other-regard - for it is the basis of moral being - she is not vulnerable to the charge that to emphasise the role of imagination is simply to indulge the idea of Romantic self-assertion. The true self-knower can and does display a concern for truthfulness in the form of a discriminating, understanding of the world beyond himself, including other persons. In short, he is recognisably a moral agent. In this chapter I shall suggest that the true self-knower needs imagination in order to understand, celebrate and appreciate all these realities.

Imagination's moral uses are, in Murdoch's view, uses which facilitate true self-knowledge, which I described in chapter 2. This means that the moral role of imagination cannot be analysed only in terms of its role in altruism, that is, in forming states of mind which can themselves be described as altruistic or which prepare the agent for altruistic acts. But the imaginative moral agent is not an egoist: his imagination facilitates moral thoughts and actions which a Murdochian realist in moral philosophy will
identify as responses to genuine moral properties. Murdoch believes that imagination makes each of us a sort of artist, where this is not to be confused with the more familiar and narrower meaning of that term, and where it is thought to be compatible with realism and moral truthfulness. In this chapter I shall try to show what imaginative moral artistry consists in for the true self-knower.

I therefore begin this chapter by asking whether there can plausibly be any sort of place in morality for imagination, since in many guises the exercise of imagination appears to be incompatible with truthfulness and realism. My aim is to show that several roles performed by imagination establish that it is a moral faculty, but that even in terms of the true self-knower - whose self-concern transcends egoism/altrusim and self/other contrasts - its role is broader and more unusual than one might think. At least, I suggest that Murdoch conceives imagination in this way. Thus, I ask what Murdoch means when she claims that moral imagination is a place where morality is “aestheticised”. Introducing the idea of art proper, I ask what sort of connections Murdoch takes to exist between morality, imagination and art. Throughout, I try to show what these connections reveal about her philosophy of morals more generally.

4.1 Is there a place for imagination in morality?

Murdoch says that

the conception of “too aesthetic” is recognisable and frequent.
On the other hand to distinguish a moral from an aesthetic use of the imagination may be *in general* difficult and indeed undesirable (*M*, 335).

Murdoch appears to be saying that the imagination is both moral and aesthetic, but that it is possible to be "too aesthetic". However, it is not then an easy matter to use imagination less "aesthetically" but more "morally": for Murdoch, this distinction will appear somewhat forced. All this raises the question of imagination's place in morality. What role does imagination and its "aesthetic" character have in moral thinking, and how is this to be conceived given the threat of one's thinking being *too* aesthetic?

In the previous chapter I suggested that Murdoch need not have appealed to "Kant's picture" of duty as a consideration which cuts across ordinary reflection. I suggested that the true self-knower can already acknowledge the different force and character of various types of moral demands and considerations. For this reason there is no need to introduce duty's strong focus on particular external requirements *as if* the true self-knower is in danger of being confused with an egoist, or with an entirely negative definition of "self". In a similar way, I shall argue that Murdoch has a distinctive conception of imagination in its moral uses which vindicate it against the charge of being "too aesthetic".

The true self-knower does not need duty in the way he needs it in "Kant's picture"; and in being imaginatively aesthetic he is not therefore being overly aestheticised in his approach to morality in a way that might require Kant's picture of duty as a corrective. Imagination plays a central role in the mental life of the true self-knower. Since self- and other-regard
are compatible, if one is a true self-knower, then the fact that imagination is often self-directed is not problematic. Equally, the fact that imagination can be used to make real to oneself the reality of other persons does not mean that its major moral role consists in its deployment at the service of altruism.

But in addition to revealing the actual role played in morals by the faculty of imagination, one needs also to account for how it can have any sort of place in Murdochian morals. Murdoch herself is at times apparently sceptical of its nature, believing that it relaxes the mind, allowing it an undisciplined freedom that is not rooted in the particular, the contingent or the real. Thus, Murdoch notes that

the modern self-conscious concept of 'imagination' as something generally rather exalted is Romantic. Shakespeare uses the word to mean the production of imagined appearances, mental images or fictions, he also connects the faculty with poets and madmen (M, 316).

The Romantics held that the "real" person is the person of emotion and feeling, the person of imagination, and that this is a matter of the "inner" self which is to be asserted in the face of accepted truths. The focus on inner being is at times a source of concern to Murdoch, representing exactly what she wants her philosophy not to be accused of over-emphasising. The reference to fictions, poets and madmen adds to the aura of potential scepticism surrounding the idea that imagination can have any substantive moral role. How can something that is so deeply

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associated with the “inner” person be compatible with realism and truthfulness? The answer requires Murdoch’s conception of the true self-knower, whose inwardness, and so whose imagination, are integral to his ability truthfully to understand - and act on the basis of his understanding of - the real world of which he is a part.

Murdoch notes that ‘imagination provides essential fusion’; but she acknowledges that it is also involved in ‘gratuitous creation’ (M, 309). Gratuitous creation represents the negative facet of imagination, something unadmirable whether it be manifest in art or one’s general frame of mind or consciousness. Intuitively, one can think of many examples of both uses; of cases where imagination overcomes an apparently intractable problem, but also of where it feeds obsessions and delusions. However, it is not clear what the reference to ‘essential fusion’ means. It is possible to construct an interpretation of this idea, and in what follows I shall do so. I will develop an account in which it is argued that life must be lived and understood in such a way that, from the agent’s own point of view, it makes sense as a whole and can be evaluated in terms of its overall direction in relation to the Good. Something like “fusion” is necessary here since to think in this way is to be able to make sense of the diverse aspects of one’s experience and to join them together in ways that make the idea of goodness - and of growing ever-closer to it - a reality. But this position is Neo-Murdochian: Murdoch herself merely asserts that imagination is oriented towards truth and reality.

Murdoch tries to distinguish fantasy from imagination by suggesting
that the latter is cognitive whereas the former is not.\textsuperscript{2} In chapter 2, I accounted for a distinction between the self and the non-self in terms of the idea that we are prone habitually to indulge our fantasies rather than attending to reality. Is it, then, that we require a distinction between fantasy and imagination which will map onto a distinction between self and non-self? But I have already suggested that the true picture is more complex, since the truly imaginative agent understands both self and other. Murdoch suggests that Plato discerned two facets of the imagination. This is not to have distinguished fantasy from imagination \textit{per se}. The two Platonic facets are as follows: a lower level which is the producer of base illusions and a higher level which embodies a creative, stirring spirit (\textit{M}, 320).

Murdoch comments:

\begin{quote}
we can make sense of a scale or series with egoistic fantasies at one end and creative imagination, culminating in genius, at the other ... To mark the distances involved we need, for purposes of discussion, two words for two concepts: a distinction between egoistic \textit{fantasy} and liberated truth-seeking creative \textit{imagination} (\textit{M}, 321).
\end{quote}

But Murdoch does not always honour this distinction, sometimes speaking of a distinction between 'creative imagination' and 'fantasy imagination' (\textit{M}, 334) as opposed to a distinction between fantasy on the

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{2} This is Murdoch's approach in her essay 'Against dryness: a polemical sketch' \textit{(Encounter}, January 1961, 19), reprinted in \textit{Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature} (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997). Speaking of the Kantian, Liberal, post-Romantic individual, Murdoch says: 'his truth is sincerity and his imagination is fantasy ... Neither grapples with reality: hence "fantasy," not "imagination."' It is revealing that, even whilst making the distinction between imagination and fantasy, Murdoch identifies the two terms: his imagination is fantasy. Without constituting an argument, this suggests that Murdoch is in general sceptical of the claim that imagination is cognitive.
\end{footnote}
one hand and imagination on the other. Murdoch's argument seems to be ambiguous: she begins by saying that we can make sense of a scale, which is a continuous entity, but then asserts that distinct words are required for distinct concepts. There might be a considerable difference between "high" and "low" imagination, but both are forms of imagination and the latter cannot therefore be identified with "fantasy" where this is supposed to be conceptually distinct from imagination. Murdoch says that imagination can become too personal and 'go too far': she suggests that one must avoid the temptation to simplify this problem 'by a general reference to the distinction between good creative imagination and fantasy imagination' (M, 334). But Murdoch does not offer any detailed or convincing account of the respects in which imagination is truth-seeking. It might be that one has to construct a Neo-Murdochian account of how this is so.

There are at least three roles that imagination performs, each of which can account for the claim that imagination is truth-oriented, a revealer of reality and in this sense a positive moral faculty. I shall discuss each of these roles in turn, and suggest that although Murdoch is apparently sceptical of imagination, she both accommodates these roles in her own philosophy, and in a sense moves beyond them. Each role is one which will be exploited by the true self-knower. But in Murdoch's picture of the morality of imagination, we begin to see how distinctive and generous is her conception of the real world and the true self-knower which together form the subject matter of morality. The three roles are as follows:

i) imagination contextualises otherwise vague statements of duty or
moral principles and thus allows them to be applied to actual moral situations;
i) exercise of imagination facilitates strongly altruistic and compassionate frames of mind, allowing one really to understand the nature or situation of another human being;
iii) imagination allows one to understand the reality of others within the context of reflection about oneself and one's own mode of life.³
In other words, the true self-knower needs imagination in order to understand both his own being and that of other people.

There is a fourth position or role in which imagination, despite Murdoch's own apparent concern over the notion, has a positive aspect; one that is substantially aesthetic (that is, connected with art and beauty) and moral. It is difficult to characterise imagination in this role, and difficult to show what place it has in Murdoch's thinking. But my suggestion is that imagination is a fundamental aspect of Murdochian morality and that one can begin to see what is distinctive in Murdoch's conception of morality when one understands the nature of moral imagination in her philosophy. What is at stake is what the true self-knower knows about and takes to be the world in which he lives, and the way in which he knows it and his own place in it.

4.2 Imaginatively particularising moral rules

Here I discuss the first of the three roles listed above. H.A. Prichard

³ The third role is of course required by my argument since I argued in chapter one that self- and other-regard are interdependent in the form of Murdoch's conception of the true self-knower.
suggested that if doubts arise over the question of what one is obliged to
do, then

	the only remedy lies in actual [sic] getting into a situation which
occasions the obligation, or - if our imagination be strong enough -
in imagining ourselves in that situation, and then letting our moral
capacities of thinking do their work.⁴

Prichard identifies the problem as one of identifying the obligation,
and he sees exercise of imagination as a potential remedy to this. But a
related, though different, problem may be that of ascertaining the specific
content of a statement or principle where this is expressive at a general
level of one's duties and obligations. On this question, imagination is also
seen by some philosophers as a potential means of moral enlightenment.

Thus, Robert Louden argues that imagination enters into moral
judgement

i) 'when we selectively highlight certain details of a situation in order
to declare that a moral principle is relevant to the case at hand',
ii) 'when we weigh similarities between the situation at hand and
others where the rule has proved to be applicable'
iii) 'when we interpret the underlying metaphors involved in the
formulation of the principle (e.g., "Treat all human beings as ends in
themselves")' and
iv) 'when we tailor the metaphorically understood moral precept to
this particular state of affairs, thus making the situation determinate

⁴ H. A. Prichard, 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?', in Mind, 1912; 36-
37.
Louden's point is that imagination allows one to focus in detail on a particular situation, to compare that situation with others and to think about the nature and efficacy of moral rules, as well as to apply them to a particular state of affairs. (The latter two points depend on construing the idea of moral rules as practically significant in the moral life, which is itself debatable.) Louden also suggests that moral principles involve underlying metaphors and that imagination offers an understanding of these metaphors. Overall, the picture that Louden develops is of moral agents who deploy imagination when faced with a particular situation and who sense that moral rulings or principles are practically salient. Murdoch's fears about the aesthetic and personal nature of imagination can be countered with Louden's observation that imagination acts in service to moral rules that have the greater authority.

Mark Johnson has emphasised the importance of imagination in a Kantian account of morality. Johnson discusses the problem of how to apply general moral rules to particular moral situations (265), and of moving from one supreme moral principle to particular moral imperatives (266). Johnson speaks of the importance of an ability imaginatively to envision a non-existing world, as a means of judging the efficacy of a proposed maxim (273). He emphasises that imagination is a metaphorical process whereby 'some object, event or person of one kind is understood

5 Louden, op. cit., 152-158.

in terms of another object, event or person of a different kind' (273). Metaphorical imagination is interpreted as reflective and creative, personal and highly context-sensitive (277). Imagination is like aesthetic judgement, at least closer to this than it is to 'seeing simpliciter that some case falls under the principle we have already at hand' (278).7

Johnson appeals to the practical efficacy of imagination as follows:

determining proper action involves the reflective (imaginative) capacity to see a concrete cluster of circumstances as fitting with some basic metaphor embodied in a formula of the categorical imperative. Of course there will be rules and other values and skills to guide us part of the way. But there must come a moment when all of the relevant elements coalesce into a unified whole, where we "see" our circumstances under a certain aspect (279).

Johnson's account is evidently Kantian and in this respect it differs from Murdoch's.8 I shall elaborate presently how Murdoch is closer to Johnson when he says simply that 'genuine understanding is permeated by imaginative reflection' (280), that is without attaching specifically Kantian ideas (the categorical imperative) to the suggestion. Nevertheless, Murdoch agrees that 'metaphors ... are fundamental modes of

7 The sense in which imagination is aesthetic is elaborated thus: 'in judging works of art there is no fixed canon under which we operate. There is no well-defined set of rules for assessing the merits of a given object. Instead, we must experience that object by means of what Kant calls our "free" (not controlled by concepts) reflection on its formal properties and relations' (278).

8 That claim might be disputed. At best, I have shown that the most obviously Kantian element of Murdoch's philosophy, namely her attraction to the idea of duty, is deeply problematic. It might still be contended that Murdoch's work embodies important Kantian themes and assumptions, such as are found in her account of the aesthetic in 'The sublime and the beautiful revisited', Yale Review, Winter 1959, 247-271, reprinted in Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997)
understanding' \((M, 306)\). She too is interested in the notion of moral judgement and its relation to imaginative consciousness. Murdoch observes that

> our deepest imaginings which structure the world in which “moral judgements” occur are already evaluations. Perception itself is a mode of evaluation \((M, 314)\).

For Murdoch, the idea of imagination suggests

> the searching, joining, light-seeking, semi-figurative nature of the mind's work, which prepares and forms the consciousness for action. In a context of reflection, one elaborates a distinction and defines a concept, so as to see further \((M, 323)\).

Thus, Murdoch evidently agrees with Johnson and she has also observed that many generally expressed moral requirements can appear to be ‘unclear in their limits' \((M, 302)\). What is necessary is an ability to tailor such requirements to one’s particular situation. As she observes elsewhere

> one could agree that “do not lie” casts its light upon the whole world and must always be kept in mind. But many duties arise in particular complex situations, for instance where rational maxims conflict, and where we have to use our reason to create more particular (fitting this situation) moral rulings for ourselves \((M, 34)\).

In short, Murdoch recognizes that imagination plays a role in applying rules and statements of duty, by rendering them concrete and workable and to this extent at least her account is in line with those of both
Johnson and Louden. However, I have already argued (chapter 3) that Murdoch's account of duty is deeply ambiguous, and my suggestion here is that Murdoch's interest in imagination goes beyond its role in applying statements of duty or moral principles. Murdoch wants to isolate duty from what she sees as the "aesthetic" and over-personal aspects of her account, of which imagination is an instance; but my point is not simply that Murdoch is wrong in this and that imagination is after all an ally of duty. For imagination's primary role in Murdochian morality is not characterised in terms of its connections with duty, even though Murdoch's account can readily accommodate insights such as those offered by Louden and Johnson.

I turn now to look at imagination as a faculty that allows the moral subject to focus very clearly on the reality of other persons. In this role, imagination is an aspect of a more general theme that emphasises the place of altruism and compassion in the moral life. My argument is that Murdoch is misunderstood if regarded as a spokesperson for this conception of morality.

4.3 Imagination's role in altruism and compassion

In the context of discussing Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Martha Nussbaum observes that

by cultivating our ability to see vividly another person's distress, to picture ourselves in another person's place - and this, [Smith] makes clear, is something that we can set ourselves deliberately to do - we make ourselves more likely to respond with the morally
illuminating and appropriate sort of response. ⁹

Murdoch suggests that

we would ordinarily say that rational judgement must involve, for instance, an ability to imagine various situations (M, 310).

She speaks elsewhere of imagining the needs of other people (M, 331). She says that imagination's role in politics is to

imagine the consequences of policies, to picture what it is like for people to be in certain situations (unemployed, persecuted, very poor) ... (M, 322).

Where art overlaps with morals, Murdoch identifies it as having a role in the discernment of the real. But she appears to draw particular attention to its altruistic or compassionate role:

an ordering activity is fused with an ability to picture what is quite other; especially of course to picture and realise, make real to oneself, the existence and being of other people ... Imagination appears as a restoration of freedom, cognition, the effortful ability to see what lies before one more clearly, more justly, to consider new possibilities ... This effort may be compared with that of 'composing' and 'holding' a difficult work of art in one's attention, an effort which is similar in the good artist and in the good client. (Teaching art is teaching morals.) 'Be more sympathetic, imagine her situation, see it from her point of view.' Fairly everyday advice. Imagination is here a moral discipline of the mind ... (M, 322; my emphasis in italics).

⁹ Martha Nussbaum, 'Love and the moral point of view' in Love's Knowledge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 339. Nussbaum also quotes Smith directly: 'the spectator must ... endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded' (338).
Murdoch's use of the words 'especially of course' is liable to mislead. Murdoch begins with the intuition that it is especially important that one is able to imagine persons other than oneself, but she does not restrict herself to that theme, immediately broadening imagination's area of activity to the idea of the real world more generally, and then to art. She goes still further, suggesting that to teach art is to teach morals: Murdoch's thought seems to be that art and morals are more than analogous. But Murdoch then returns to the first theme, i.e. that of compassion and altruism, giving an example of an everyday attempt to imagine something from the point of view of another person.

If one reads such a comment in the light of what Murdoch says elsewhere about the perils of self-regard and the problem of the egoistic nature of most of one's motivations and attachments, it might be thought that she is again promoting a form of altruistic and compassionate "selflessness" and urging that one should imagine only the reality of other persons and their ethical situations.

The claim that there might be a genuinely selfless form of other-regarding imagination is vulnerable to a criticism that stems from the picture - already developed - of the Murdochian true self-knower. The objection emerges from the intuition that the most effective forms of compassionate and altruistic response are often those in which one has taken account of one's capacity for response and the best way of responding. In short, effective altruistic action is in fact dependent on
imagination which has an element of self-regard built into it.

There is another difficulty attaching to the idea that imagination can be selfless in the sense of being entirely directed towards the realities of other persons. The point here is simply that imagination can prevent those very modes of altruistic responsiveness which are genuinely, entirely directed towards other persons' needs. In short, one must often desist from imagining something in order to do what is required, which may in turn require "selfless" compassion and altruism. This will often, though not always, be the case when one's imagination is directed towards egoistic ends and the satisfaction of the self. The problem for the idea of "selfless" forms of imagination is therefore, according to this objection, that it is an internally inconsistent idea.

The latter objection might be related to Murdoch's own fears and doubts about according to imagination any sort of positive moral role at all. In an extreme case, imagining another person's plight can be completely detached from that person's actual situation and needs.¹⁰ The two criticisms thus differ in so far as one ascribes a positive role to imagination, but suspects that in order to be properly focussed on the ethical reality of other persons, imagination needs to have a degree of self-regard built into it, whereas the other is concerned that imagination is by its nature

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¹⁰ 'Perhaps in some kinds of moral thinking imagination, in anything like its ordinary senses, is out of place. Imaginative speculation about the consequences of an action may in some cases be irrelevant. (For instance in a straightforward case of keeping a promise.) In some decisions we should not 'think too precisely upon the event'. The doubter is called back from imaginative speculation toward the required form of the act. Imaginative reflection upon a moral choice can become too aesthetic, can tempt us to be stylish rather than to be right. The conception of "too aesthetic" is recognisable and frequent. On the other hand to distinguish a moral from an aesthetic use of the imagination may be in general difficult and indeed undesirable.' (M, 335).
detached from immediate altruistic response. The picture of the true self-knower lies behind the first criticism of the idea of imagination being genuinely "selfless". It takes the idea of moral selflessness to be borne of exaggerated distinctions. The distinctions between self/other, more specifically between egoism and altruism, lie behind the second criticism, which is sceptical of imagination because it regards imagination as incapable of achieving selfless altruism.

I wish to discuss an example drawn from one of Murdoch’s novels in order to demonstrate that the true self-knower exercises imagination. Imagination is not the medium through which the agent's egoism finds expression, but then nor is it the means through which the agent is simply altruistic. The agent's predicament is not that he thinks too much about himself and not enough about the non-self. The relevant distinction is that between the agent as true self-knower and the real world which he understands. The distinction remains valid: the agent is not the world beyond himself. However, the distinction is not absolute: between the self and the other lies the possibility of true self-knowledge in the light of truth and reality.

In Murdoch’s novel The Good Apprentice the character Edward Baltram is suffering inwardly because of the unintentional evil he has done.\(^1\) His imagination is truthful and realistic insofar as it dwells on the friend he killed and makes real to Edward the gravity of his crime. But that is not the whole story; and it is far from representing the only significant moral dimensions of the case. Indeed, the extent to which Edward dwells in

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imagination only on his friend’s reality to the detriment of his own reveals what is negative, damaging and possibly untruthful about his moral understanding. In order to demonstrate this, I need briefly to consider what Murdoch says about despair.

In the chapter of Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, entitled ‘Void’ (M, 498-503), Murdoch discusses a condition which closely resembles that of the character Edward Baltram. Despair and affliction mark the mind of the moral agent in the void. One cannot conceive of a future, yet Murdoch implies that just this may be what is most urgently morally required. What is required is what may be called re-joining the real world. One has a life to lead and one must go on living it in sober responsibility and acknowledgment of the things one has done. This requires a perspective upon oneself and one’s life. But the suffering of those in the void is fruitless and will not allow itself to be seen in this sort of perspective. It prevents true self-knowledge and its modes of moral reflection rather than being definitive of moral response. Murdoch is clear that there is here a requirement to return to moral reality. How does this illuminate the case in question?

12 A different perspective on the concept of void is found in Murdoch’s ‘Knowing the Void’, in The Spectator, 2nd November 1956; 613-614, reprinted in Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997). Here Murdoch construes void in Simone Weil’s terms as something which one must suffer as a result of love of the good, for which there is no reward and which thus appears ‘negative and empty’ (613). The difference between the two treatments seems to amount to this: the earlier one appeals to a spiritual revelation of the need for emptiness in love of the Good, whereas the idea as it appears in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals suggests that void is an inability to love the Good or to relate oneself to it at all. The later emphasis is compatible with the fact that moral aspirations are subject to luck and ill fortune: one can fall into the void because conditions have conspired to make one’s life miserable; whereas the earlier account seems to urge a sense of “emptiness” as part of an ‘apprenticeship’ (613) in goodness.
Edward's imagination stifles his moral energies and prevents him from seeing the Good and his own relation to it. For Edward's imagination tells him that his moral being is shattered and no longer worth thinking about. This is not, then, self-knowledge, but a surrender to despair. It is an inability to deploy imagination in order to find a way forward; a way which both acknowledges one's moral responsibility and the reality of the person one harmed as well as one's own capacity for response in the light of this truth. Edward ought to use his imagination to see his own affliction, his alienation from other people and from himself and the world in general, as an aspect and consequence of the evil he has done. Edward needs to see himself and his act in the context of a broader moral horizon. True self-knowledge - calling upon the powerful resources of imagination - will provide him with that horizon. Thus, I suggest that in a Murdochian context the question of imagination's morally beneficial uses is not simply a function of whatever altruistic and compassionate or more generally non-self-regarding features it possesses.

The comment discussed above (M, 322) also introduces the idea of moral discipline: Murdoch says that imagination is a moral discipline of the mind. This is an interesting comment and the idea is one that I shall return to later in this chapter. I suggested that the idea of moral and mental discipline might justify the claim that imagination is truth-oriented. Although imagination is not simply representative of events, persons and so on that exist independently of the imaginative mind, it can nevertheless be understood as essentially oriented towards reality and truth in displaying discipline in its role of facilitating true self-knowledge. As in the case of
Baron’s discussion of duty as a secondary motive, true self-knowledge requires a long-term - a life-long - picture of truthfulness and the moral struggle to achieve it. Murdochian moral agents know that imagination can be untruthful and they can attempt to be disciplined in their use of it: their sense of the potential distance between themselves and reality lends imagination an authority which derives from the fact that it can - in what Murdoch calls its “high” forms - narrow that gap.

My argument in this section has been that Murdoch does acknowledge that imagination has a role in altruism and compassion where these are forms of attending to the non-self, but that her overall conception of imagination does not stop at this point. Murdoch has a conception of imagination that accords it a broader sphere of influence in the context of her picture of the true self-knower.

At this point, it is worth pausing briefly to re-consider the distinctions I drew in chapter 2, in order to make explicit the claim I now wish to make for imagination. First, there is a distinction between realism and non-realism as approaches in moral philosophy. I have suggested that, despite some strong countervailing intuitions, imagination does have a place in a realistic account of morals. Realism implies a distinction between self and non-self: it is broader than a distinction between egoism and altruism in the theory of moral reasons. Imagination does facilitate knowledge of the non-self, but not of a sort which can be contrasted absolutely with the self. Murdoch’s true self-knower is imaginative; but his imagination is neither simply egoism in disguise nor only his means of being altruistic, or of being able strongly to identify with another person. I
shall now demonstrate that the true self-knower knows his own reality and that of other persons in ways which are interdependent. I shall then proceed to show that the distinction between true self-knower and real world requires something more, namely a broader conception of the real world, the non-self. Imagination is particularly active at this level.

4.4 Imagination and the interdependence of self-knowledge and knowledge of other persons

My discussion of the case of Edward Baltram in Murdoch’s novel revealed that imagination’s uses are open to question. They are not always positive and must indeed be reflectively assessed and creatively deployed by the moral agent. Edward needs to evaluate his obsessive imaginings of his dead friend in the light of his own continuing self-being and his capacity for moral atonement and improvement. The point is that Murdochian true self-knowledge does involve understanding the reality of other persons in ways which are interdependent with knowledge of one’s own reality. Edward does not genuinely understand who he is or what he has done without a conception of his dead friend’s reality. What is wrong about what he has done is made vividly real to him through his imagining the person whose life he has cut short. Part of what he must understand is that doing what he did means that he has strayed far from what it is to be a good person. That is a piece of self-knowledge.

But my suggestion is that Murdoch says more than this. Her account of what true self-knowledge is, along of course with her account of the real world in whose light the true self-knower understands himself, requires her
to accord to imagination moral uses which extend beyond interdependent understanding of self and of other persons. I think that one can see this when one compares her philosophy with that of others who have acknowledged that imagination is a faculty which allows one to “depict” oneself and other people in morally useful ways. Richard Wollheim has addressed the topic of imagination in this way. What is revealing, I think, is precisely how much further than even this accommodating account Murdoch's thinking about moral imagination goes.

Wollheim's account of imagination clearly demonstrates that it is both self-regarding and other-regarding. He notes that mental activity can give rise to mental states which are iconic: he is thinking in particular of the visualising imagination. Iconic states are about things, events, persons; they have intentionality (62). Such states represent things (63) and they have what Wollheim calls “psychic force”; that is, a causal power over the behaviour and mental dispositions of the person who has them, in virtue of their complex phenomenology (63). Intuitively speaking, it seems that these features of iconicity ensure that imaginative activity furnishes the moral agent with access to reality. People, persons, events and places are knowable through imaginative mental activity, which provides a window onto the world outside the self. Wollheim says:

iconic mental states are those mental states which do most to recommend the traditional comparison of the mind to a theatre (65).

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13 Richard Wollheim, The Thread of Life (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 72. All further references to Wollheim are to this work.
In terms of the theatre analogy, an important role is accorded to the dramatist who creates characters as well as actions and lines to distribute amongst them (65). Wollheim calls this two pieces of invention, whereas it might be thought that if imagination is to be a cognitive moral faculty then it needs to be strictly representational rather than inventive. The word “invention” implies that imagination is subjective, whereas - runs a potential objection - moral sensitivity involves the discovery of truths external to the self. Wollheim does say that actions, lines and characters ‘can be modelled upon prototypes in the real world’; but he adds that they can also be entirely original, or an amalgam of the invented and the real (65-6). Something can be aesthetically imaginative and still directed towards human reality, as Wollheim’s theatre analogy and his account more generally shows particularly well.14

Wollheim establishes that imagination can be a form of knowledge by emphasising the idea of general requirements of understanding that are imposed upon the imagining subject. The subject must be capable of forming what Wollheim calls a substantial repertoire for the things imagined (74). A repertoire is assigned to a character in the light of one’s awareness of what is and what is not possible in terms of broadly

14 Certainly, it seems to matter less that a scene which one imagines actually happened, (or which might yet) than it does that such a scene and the characters within it are representative of human life and values. In its moral uses, imagination is not necessarily attempting to describe exactly what has happened, or to predict things that might happen.
conceived human values.\textsuperscript{15} When Wollheim speaks about a form of imagination that is inventive, this does not mean that the dramatist, actor and audience within one is absolutely free, i.e. without responsibilities and constraints. In this respect, imagination must honour the real and remain truthful. There are connections between Wollheim's characterisation of these broad requirements on imagination and what Murdoch refers to as moral discipline. Over extended engagements with the real world, (moral) agents learn when imagination is truthful and when it is not.

Wollheim argues that imagination can actively exploit the interdependence of self-regard and an understanding of other persons. He distinguishes a disposition's simply giving rise to a mental state with psychic force from one's bringing it about such a state through deliberate intent (83). The latter notion seems to explain well the case of "M" and "D" in \textit{The Sovereignty of Good}: 'some end that the person pursues ... coincides with the psychic force of the mental state' (83). One can deliberately initiate an imaginative project in order to reap the benefit of its psychic force.

Wollheim explains that the condition in which an iconic mental state leaves a person derives from what the mental state is of and that this 'is probably the most important single fact about them so far as their contribution to the way in which we lead our lives is concerned' (70):

the mental states, the imagined mental states, of the protagonist,

\textsuperscript{15}For example, one could not be said realistically to have envisioned the moral aspects of a situation if one imagines the people in it to be as moved by the death of a pet animal as by a friend or lover and to imagine that this is justifiable.
act, in virtue of their intentionality, as windows open to the world, through which characters other than the protagonist can climb into the story (77).

In other words, one can imagine not only other persons, but also what they in turn think of others. This sort of imaginative activity is a plausible candidate for what Murdoch describes as the effort to see oneself as other people see one (M, 331). Wollheim notes that if I imagine you in relation to certain other people, then I imagine your beliefs about the repertoires of others (77). I can at least attempt to imagine what you think about me.

Thus, one can put one's imagination to uses that are both self-regarding and directed towards understanding other people (interdependently) in at least two different ways. First: imagine another person's reality and then reflect on how that imagined reality differs from previous mental states, and see oneself in the light of this reality and one's own moral progress (or decline). Second: imagine what another person thinks of one; this may reveal that one's understanding of him/her and of oneself was or is inadequate. In both these ways, imagination can offer knowledge of the interdependent realities of oneself and other persons, so long as it operates under broadly conceived requirements of a general knowledge of humanity and does not indulge fantasy. Wollheim comments:

that I can centrally imagine someone other than myself is a fact of major importance ... It remains undisputed that, in the majority of cases, the person whom I centrally imagine will be myself (76).
This does not undermine my suggestion that the Murdochian true self-knower can be said to appreciate the nature and importance of the reality of other persons. One can imagine oneself in relation to other people, and Wollheim’s point about characters other than the centrally imagined protagonist being able to climb into the story is important here. There is a different and a broader sense in which imagination is focussed on the self, but I shall argue that it is a notion found in Murdoch’s work rather than Wollheim’s. It is a form of imagination that belongs to the true self-knower; and it is central to the picture of the true self-knower that there is no simple distinction to be drawn between the non-self and the sense of “self” that is central to his self-knowledge.

However, Murdoch’s account is certainly in line with Wollheim’s. Murdoch speaks of an ‘ideal picture’ wherein the good moral agent, or at least one who is becoming better, is

liberated from selfish fantasy, can see himself as others see him, imagine the needs of other people, love unselfishly, lucidly envisage and desire what is truly valuable’ (M, 331).

Note that Murdoch says ‘see himself as others see him’: the moral value of trying to see (understand) oneself from the perspective of another person is of major significance. How does it work? A good example is “M” from The Sovereignty of Good who, in trying to “look again” at “D”, may well judge herself to be vain, old-fashioned and snobbish because she can imagine how and why D might have thought (or imagined) her to be like this. M imagines words (“snobbish”, “vain”, “jealous”), other persons (D),
and other person's states of mind (D's judging M to be snobbish, vain and jealous). M can also inwardly hear what D might have said about her; she might picture D talking to somebody about her. There are many possibilities, and they are not mutually exclusive.

My suggestion is that Wollheim's account is compatible with Murdoch's, but that it does not go as far. Murdoch's thinking clearly accords value to the imagination in so far as it can facilitate true self-knowledge in the light of the realities of other persons. However, as I have indicated more than once, Murdoch's account of the moral uses of imagination goes beyond even this attractively broad picture of its role.

But it is difficult to characterise Murdoch's broader conception of moral imagination. As I noted in the introduction, many of Murdoch's contemporaries are impressed by the extent to which her philosophy ranges over previously uncharted territory. I suggest that, broadly conceived, the role that Murdoch gives to imagination is one in which it furnishes a moral agent with what I shall call a "scale of being"; a picture or set of images and metaphors describing the self, its history, its current being and its future in terms of the relation between the self and the Good. This scale of being is a major weapon in the armoury of true self-knowledge and it is furnished largely through imagination.

The scale of being may be quite abstract: it need not be iconically representative in Wollheim's sense, though iconic elements may well form part of it. The scale allows one to know oneself in the context of the real world through reflection on oneself, one's past and one's possible futures. The scale of being is a moral scale; Good is imagined as the goal, the
principle of perfection. Without imagination, there would be no such scale and so no Murdochian moral agency. The scale of being is the product of aesthetic, or creative, imagination.

4.5 Creative imagination

I wish to reflect on Murdoch's suggestion that 'moral imagination is partly aesthetic, it is a place where the aesthetic is moralised' (M, 329). It may mean simply that imagination has its aesthetic uses, and here one naturally thinks of the creative artist. For as Roger Scruton has pointed out, although the term "imagination" is ordinarily used simply to signify the capacity to experience mental images, it is also - and here he speaks of 'the true sense of the word' - used to express the idea of creative thought. In the paradigm case of fiction, for instance, imaginary worlds are created which are not only unreal, but known to be so. I suggest that beyond its uses in art, imagination may still have what could be called an aesthetic function or role, and one that is at the same time moral in Murdoch's terms. The interpretation of this suggestion depends upon what Murdoch means by "aesthetic", but it clearly demands the picture developed thus far of the true self-knower.

Put simply, my point is that Murdoch takes many of the moral uses of imagination to be very like the aesthetic uses of imagination, so that where a moral agent is exercising moral imagination, he/she is close to the

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16 Roger Scruton, 'Imagination' in Modern Philosophy: a survey (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), 343. (See also Art and Imagination [London: Methuen, 1974]).

17 Ibid., 349.
position of the creative artist. Murdoch is particularly interested in 'the way in which our moral experience shares in the peculiar density of art, and in its imaginative cognitive activity' (M, 341). Murdoch here outlines apparently rival claims in order to acknowledge the force of each and so to determine where her own sympathies lie, saying that

of course art and morals have a different status, altogether a different place in human life. Moral and aesthetic imagination are different from each other though often on reflection hard to distinguish (M, 333).

Murdoch quite literally sets up a picture in which art, imagination and morals overlap, and then reminds us of their distinctness. Nevertheless, her position is that art and morals have something in common because each is imaginative. To put it another way, without focussing only on imagination's role in works of artistic merit, Murdoch believes that its moral aspects share something of the character of creative artistry. It is in this sense that she believes that as moral agents we are all artists. This is, at least, true for those of us whose moral agency is to be conceived on the model offered by the picture of the true self-knower.

Murdoch suggests that clear vision is the result of imagination (S, 37) and that the imagining mind can achieve an end of images and shadows (M, 320).¹⁸ She adds that

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¹⁸ Scruton, op. cit., 343, notes that mental images are like thoughts in being open to the test of truth: 'a true image of your friend's face is one that shows him as he is; i.e. which corresponds to the reality.' But then in saying that Murdoch does not regard imagination as a truth-oriented faculty only in so far as it is iconically representative and so susceptible to the sort of test of which Scruton speaks, I do not mean that she denies this possibility altogether.
discussion of the place of imagination and metaphor in our lives is not just about figurative writing or clarified metaphorical speech or explicit virtually verbal thought, but (also) about what our private unclarified but often very strong and present thinking and experiencing is like. At deep levels metaphor and perception merge. Perception is a mode of evaluation (M, 328).

Murdoch appears to be saying that imagination is not only active in the context of public works of art (e.g., figurative writing) or public speech, but also in the individual moral subject's own mind. This point seems obvious, but Murdoch's argument is that imagination penetrates all of 'present thinking and experiencing' and that this is somehow connected with evaluation and so, one assumes, with morality.\(^{19}\)

Murdoch apparently makes the additional claim that the nature and presence of images illuminates the idea of "experience" and that this in turn illuminates the idea of evaluation. She is interested in the way in which evaluative structures inhere in the mind in an imaginative form. This interest is not restricted to the idea of the representation of persons, which nevertheless appears to be a strong candidate for imagination's specifically moral uses.

My claim that Murdochian imagination is not restricted to the depiction or portrayal of persons is a claim about moral and mental

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\(^{19}\) Scruton agrees that mental images are like thoughts in some respects; they are intentional, for example. However, he suggests that they are not merely thoughts. He compares mental images to perceptions and notes that visual images are irreducibly analogous to the things that they are about or which they represent: 'one is simply the imagined version of the other' (ibid., 344). Scruton will surely assent to Murdoch's general point that conscious experience is full of images that are neither perceptual states nor explicit thoughts.
representation. Imagination does not operate solely at the level of presenting persons as if in a theatre, or as actors on a stage, to use Wollheim's image. Wollheim said that the iconic character of imaginative states recommended the traditional model of the mind as a theatre. I suggest that in addition to this use, imagination performs a moral role when it is, deployed more abstractly in order to illuminate and explore the idea of the general nature of one's self-being, including the quality of one's own consciousness.

For example, Murdoch notes that what she refers to as "high" imagination's creative and "stirring" spirit can be construed as trying 'to express and embody what is perfectly good but extremely remote' (M, 320). The Murdochian moral Good is, as Charles Taylor notes, an object of our love or allegiance\(^2\): my claim is that it is largely imagination that facilitates conceptions of the moral Good. What I have in mind is the familiar idea that experience offers one with a variety of measures of goodness and excellence, a range which goes well beyond the sort of examples which I discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2. However, the question currently under discussion is why such moral experience is to be called "aesthetic".

One answer is that since Murdochian true self-knowers reflect about and evaluate their lives as a whole, they are already thinking abstractly and metaphysically; seeing their lives as something in the same sort of way in which artists deploy metaphor, simile and so on. This sort of thinking is certainly not morally suspect: the fact that it is "aesthetic" does not mean

that it can be rejected as an overly self-indulgent - at least an insufficiently other-regarding - way of thinking. Recall that at the outset of this chapter, I mentioned Murdoch’s thought that a “too aesthetic” deployment of the imagination might constitute a form of moral failure. But when is imagination too aesthetic in this sense? Agents who experience goodness in its many varieties need to relate these experiences to the way in which they live as a whole; to a past, a present and an imagined future. The future is imagined, but so also is the “whole” in which past, present and future are seen by the Murdochian agent as his/her own life and being.

This idea that living the moral or ethical life involves a perspective from which one’s past, present and future are unified in the same way as a narrative artist unifies the life of the individuals whose life he/she narrates is not philosophically unfamiliar. It is a major theme of Alasdair MacIntyre’s After Virtue and is also present in Richard Wollheim’s The Thread of Life. However, the Murdochian themes about imagination are less familiar, more ambitious and rather unusual. Murdoch’s treatment seems to be very relaxed in that it ascribes to imagination various powers in which it creates and sustains images of different sorts and at various levels. This seems to be correct at a phenomenological level. However, assessing the philosophical significance of this for an account of the moral life presents difficulties. I hope in this chapter to go at least part of the way towards making the issue more tangible.

That I have described a Murdochian conception of the moral uses of imagination as “abstract” does not mean that it is unfamiliar. Murdoch certainly thinks that we are to construe the related uses of imagination to
which I have referred as perfectly familiar:

such persuasive shifting about among concepts, such metaphorical picturing of their mutual influence and function, is characteristic of metaphysics, and also of ordinary moral and aesthetic thinking (M, 327).

Murdoch finds these related ideas both familiar and uncontroversial:

a consideration of the place of imagination in morality ... makes clear the need for a reflective 'placing' of consciousness. Imagination is an (inner) activity of the senses, a picturing and a grasping, a stirring of desire. At a more explicitly reflective level, in everyday moral discussion as well as in metaphysics, we deploy a complex densely textured network of values round an intuited centre of 'Good'. We imagine hierarchies and concentric circles, we are forced by experience to make distinctions, to elaborate moral 'pictures' and a moral vocabulary (M, 325).

The point is not just that moral agents can, if they choose, imagine their lives in the particular way described here, that is, literally in terms of networks of concentric circles. Instead the image of the circles stands for the variety of ways in which, in everyday experience, one is able imaginatively to reflect on the value of something and inwardly to relate that experience to others, to evaluate one's experience, to discriminate between good things and less good things. One can create abstract structures that allow one to think about and assess oneself, even though they could not be said to represent anything in the iconically representative sense which Wollheim elaborates. This is, I think, what is at stake in the knowledge of the true self-knower.

As for the question why such reflection is moral reflection rather than
simply aesthetic appreciation, my suggestion - to be explored at length in the next chapter - is that Murdochian morality manifests itself in terms of a very wide variety of evaluative activities, whose objects are the diverse forms of value in human experience of the world. Stated broadly, my point is that Murdoch agrees with Scruton about imagination's *creative* role. Imagination creates structures in which human values, ideals and excellences are ranged on a scale of being and interdependent with a conception of self. According to Murdoch, such activities of consciousness are fundamentally moral.

The true self-knower deploys a scale of being that is the product of disciplined form of imagination. That this area of moral activity is imaginative is compatible with Murdoch's realism, with the idea that there is moral truthfulness and with the claim that the true self-knower knows the real world as well as himself and his place in the world. Imagination's moral role is abstract and imaginative, but no less real for all that. If it is truthful, it is so in virtue of its being utilised by the agent in ways which accurately describe his/her own moral being and possibilities of future ways of being.²¹ I have not denied that imagination is also of import in its more ordinary representation of the realities of persons, only that this is not the whole of the story as Murdoch sees it. Murdoch's picture of the true self-knower transcends simplistic distinctions between egoism and altruism.

²¹ Scruton, op. cit., 350, observes that the truly imaginative object both produces and controls one's response to it. In this sense it is to be distinguished from fantasy, whose objects are dictated by the passion which seeks them. In a Murdochian sense, we do *seek* the good, but being self-critical we learn of our own height (or lowness) on a scale of being as a result. In Scruton's words, the imagined Good educates our passions and sends them back to the encounter purified of vanity.
and between self and non-self. In taking on a distinctive form of its own, “the true self-knower” also draws heavily on the abstractly aesthetic character of imagination.

The assumption behind a Murdochian account of morals is that agents can and do desire to become morally better: Murdochian morality is aspirational, as the essay ‘The idea of perfection’ - which forms the first chapter of *The Sovereignty of Good* - makes so clear. When speaking of moral improvement, Murdoch suggests that

> it is a matter of deepening the concepts in question through a relation to each other. There is a continuous and spontaneous interplay. ‘Becoming better’ is a process involving an exercise and refinement of moral vocabulary and sensibility (*M*, 324).

This might give rise to the objection that moral thinking is not “abstract” as I have suggested. It might be objected that Murdoch is simply pointing out that one can inwardly reflect on the significance of - and the differences between - various concepts in one’s moral vocabulary. M’s case is again a good example, and the relevant terms are “snobbish”, “vain”, “pert”, “vulgar”, “delightfully youthful” and so on. But Murdoch speaks of spontaneous and continuous interplay and of general sensibility, suggesting that something more than the ability critically to deploy and evaluate moral words is at stake. Pursuing this line of thought may lead one back towards the account that I have been defending wherein imagination certainly does possess abstract and creative features.

Nevertheless, I am not claiming that all moral thinking is always abstract and creative in this Neo-Murdochian sense. There are simple
cases of an image in one's mind which is representative of something and which can be tested against an independent reality in order for its truthfulness or accuracy to be assessed. Nevertheless, none of what I have said in defence of imagination's claim to be a moral faculty hides the fact that it could well lead one away from the truth. Imagination often involves the indulgence of belief, opinion, wish and desire at the expense of truthfulness. There are moral pitfalls in the region of imagination. Thus, a question remains: how can one be aware of the dangers and seek to avoid them?

4.6 Imagination and truthfulness

Murdoch is far from wishing to deny that imagination can be a dangerous faculty to engage in the moral life. Murdoch is sympathetic to the idea that there is a danger in 'giving imagination a prime moral function' (M, 310). She speaks of imagination as “playing” or “frolicking” with the understanding without being governed by empirical concepts, and goes on to speak of the contamination of morality by aesthetic religiosity (M, 311). However, it is easier to admit the potential untruthfulness of imagination than it is to specify exactly in what respects it can be truthful.

It seems that imagination has at least two major facets: positive and negative uses. As we have seen, Murdoch favours thinking of this in terms of a distinction between imagination and fantasy. Given that Murdoch tends to use the term “fantasy” as a term of criticism, for example when she speaks of what is bad about bad art, one intuitively supposes that in so far as imagination is a moral faculty, or rather a faculty that has some moral
uses, this will be in virtue of its positive aspects, the sense in which it is able to connect an agent to moral reality. I have outlined and defended a morally positive conception of the self and its attempts to understand itself in terms of Murdoch's idea of a true self-knower. Thus the reality which imagination can work towards understanding truthfully is not exhausted by the independent realities of other persons, but centrally includes the agent's own life and being, his/her personal reality. But again, the philosophical difficulty consists in saying how, for Murdoch, this can be so.

It is possible that under certain conditions one's imaginative states can be tested against reality, and also possible that one's imaginative states about another person's state of mind can be tested against their actual mental states, providing a test of the truth or falsity of one's imagination.22 One could give voice to one's imagination, as could the other person, and the two beliefs could be compared to see if the former were correct in their suppositions about the latter. However, if one imagines one's own being on a scale of the sort which Murdoch described in terms of imagined concentric circles clustered round the centre of goodness, there is no such reality to test against. However, in terms of imagination's moral truthfulness it is not obvious that this is a problem.

Imagination has non-moral as well as moral uses, and it is susceptible to tests against a mind-independent reality in both cases. It is no less a moral use of imagination to imagine another person's plight accurately and truthfully than it is to think about one's closeness to the Good. When I say that, in terms of truthfulness, it is not obviously

22 This is the point that Scruton makes; op. cit., 343.
problematic that imagination in its moral uses cannot always be held against independent reality, I am not arguing that a *special* test of truth applies to imagination because it has some *moral* uses. I recognise both that imagination is a non-moral as well as a moral faculty and that in both senses it may be necessary to distinguish ways in which its truthfulness - its fidelity to reality - can be assessed. My point is that where moral imagination is abstract ("aesthetic"), it seems that assessment of truthfulness cannot proceed in terms of holding imaginative states against a reality that is independent of the agent's mental life.

My account may well give rise to an objection that is aimed at its very core; the notion of the true self-knower. I am arguing that Murdoch offers a distinctive conception of the moral life in terms of the possibility of true self-knowledge - a possibility which goes beyond issues of egoism versus altruism or self versus non-self - and I am arguing here that imagination is a central faculty of the true self-knower. But I am acknowledging that many imaginative mental states are not and cannot be tested against an external reality which they purport to represent or depict. My claim is that these states have moral uses in Murdoch's developed theory of the positive role of the imagination. The objection is that if imagination consists in part of a range of mental phenomena that does not admit of empirical verification or testing, then whatever else he does have, the moral agent envisaged by Iris Murdoch does not have true self-knowledge. The epistemological objection goes to the heart of Murdoch's supposedly realistic conception of morality.

The Murdochian response is to say that although in many forms of
imagination nothing corresponds to or is iconically represented by the series of circles and the centre of goodness, yet the imaginative activity in which the image is deployed is part of a broader evaluative moral project that is oriented towards reality and truth. The epistemological objection is here challenged in the form of a conception of the sort of truthfulness of which the true self-knower - Murdoch's philosophical conception of the moral agent - is capable. The goal of true self-knowledge is after all just that; an ideal of knowing the truth about oneself as opposed to, say, merely having false beliefs about the self or being able to give an account of various features of the self which might - famously in Murdoch's view - turn out to be forms of personal fantasy. None of this alters the fact that for the true self-knower it certainly does matter that there are independent other persons whose reality is not a matter of conjecture or creative personal thinking. Moral imagination is deployed to understand these more fully and to relate them to oneself and one's own life. The true self-knower sees himself as part of the real world.

Thus, although nothing in the real world corresponds to an imagined scale of being there is nevertheless a substantial sense in which the imagined scale of being can assist one in knowing one's own reality. Murdochian moral agents need to be aware of the difficulty of judging the truthfulness of their own imaginative mental states. That does not mean that all imagination is thereby vindicated, but nor does it mean that it is bound to be untruthful. Imagination's knowledge arises from its relating them to one another in ways which consciously seek to avoid fantasy and which are in this way disciplined.
An example such as that of M imagining D, and herself in relation to D, is an example of moral discipline, since M is sensitive to her own faults. M has no guarantee of success in her effort truthfully to see D and in so doing to understand the truth about herself. M has no techniques or special skills that will make it more likely that she arrives at the truth. M must simply try: her task is to make the effort of moral discernment in the name of justice and goodness. In re-imagining D, M is aware that there is a real danger of her original faults continuing to pollute her new imaginative states. Through self-knowledge and self-control, manifested in imaginative effort, M sets herself not only to imagine D’s reality, but to struggle against her own distance from the real and the vices that might maintain that distance. ‘Imagination is here a moral discipline of the mind ... (M, 322)’.

When Murdoch suggests that ‘we can picture a proper effort to examine an imaginative picture to the point of at least seeming to exclude “imagination” ’ (M, 315), she cannot be construed simply as arguing for straightforward, rigorous testing of one’s own mind against the realities which are independent of it. Her celebratory but critical account of abstract moral imagination is the context in which this remark about non-imaginative tests of one’s own mind must be seen. We can indeed picture the activity Murdoch describes, but as her own account shows, we also picture imagination operating in quite other ways which have positive moral aspects.

Furthermore, although it is possible to distinguish original imaginative states from states of mind which then reflect upon the original states, it is not the case that this always takes the form of testing states
against the world. The reasons why are as follows: there is not always a represented reality at stake; and strictly perceptual states do not in any case represent one’s moral reality. Self-knowledge, the fundamental Murdochian moral phenomenon, is dependent upon the exercise of imagination, since it is a notion that appeals to the idea of the quality of personal being and not simply the visible, audible world. Scruton makes this point about the creative imagination, observing that it is voluntary and ‘always involves the summoning or creating of mental contexts which are not otherwise given (as they are given, for example, in perception and the judgements that spring from it).’ Imagination mediates between subject and world: it is a necessary borderland between them and a central arena of Murdochian moral activity.

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23 Wollheim, op. cit., draws a distinction between the position of an observer and one's original imaginative states.

‘If I centrally imagine someone or other doing something, then I shall, as internal audience, tend to find myself in the condition in which being in the protagonist's overall position would leave me. But when this happens, so much are we, in Montaigne's phrase, chose ondoyante that this condition is likely to be overtaken by some new feeling. But, when this in turn happens, this new feeling will be no part of the original imaginative project in the way in which the condition it overtook certainly was. In feeling what I then feel, I shall have abdicated the role of internal audience: I shall have adopted that of internal observer. The internal observer does not belong to, though it belongs to the context or falls within the orbit of, iconic imagination’ (81).

Wollheim gives an example wherein his imagination is interrupted: he pauses and reflects. He notes that a range of reactions or responses might be possible; surprise, relief, disgust or embarrassment (82). Wollheim emphasises that whatever such feelings might be, they are not part of the original imaginative states. It may be that the difference between the two sorts of states depends upon the idea of representation, which I discussed above. In other words, original imaginative states are to be distinguished from the states that assess them because the former are representative or iconic in a way in which the latter are not (though in assessing the originals the latter may well assess the degree of fit between the iconic states and reality).

24 Ibid., 346.

25 Murdoch comments on the ubiquity of metaphorical vision, “seeing as” (M,305), saying that metaphor is a fundamental mode of understanding (M, 306): ‘we have to ‘talk’ and our talk will be largely ‘imaginative’ (we are all artists). How we see our situation is itself, already, a moral activity...’ (M, 315).
My Murdochian defence of imagination's claim to truthfulness depends upon understanding imagination in the context of a first-personal and disciplined effort to achieve height on the scale of being. That is also how the following remark should be interpreted:

there is a continuous breeding of imagery in the consciousness which is, for better or worse, a function of moral change (M, 329).

One imagines in order to understand, and one understands that, in imagining, it is both important and difficult to remain truthful. The moral effort to become more truthful and to understand oneself more truthfully thereby is irreducibly imaginative. The true self-knower needs imagination in order to understand other persons and in order to interpret those moral imperatives whose force he feels. He also requires an imaginative sense of his own reality in relation to other persons: but Murdoch, I suggest, surprises us with her account of how abstract and therefore personal the self-knower's imaginative states are. It is not the case that Murdoch is unable to offer this picture as a picture of self-knowledge.

4.7 Morality, imagination and art

When I spoke above of the creative imagination, I did so in the context of Murdoch's claim that imagination is a place where the aesthetic is moralised. I construed her claim as being about the minds of individual moral subjects. However, it will be objected that there is a more obvious way of interpreting her remark, namely as a claim about the moral
achievement of artists. Although one might claim that any moral agent, according to Murdoch, has something in common with an artist, there is nevertheless an obvious sense of the word “artist” in which the vast majority of moral agents are not at the same time artists. What then, if any, are the connections between the artist (in the usual sense of the word), his/her imagination (for it is here that the aesthetic is moralised) and morality?

When one thinks of a case such as Murdoch’s own where a philosopher is also a highly successful artist (she says that ‘philosophers are artists’; M, 37), the distinction between art and philosophy seems forced. Does not the area occupied by metaphor, metaphysics and imagination unite the philosopher, the artist and the ordinary moral agent who is neither philosopher or artist? In Murdoch’s thinking, this is certainly so, and she is not alone in holding this view or at least something very like it.

Louden claims that ‘moral theories are indispensable aids in the cultivation and enlargement of moral imagination’.26 Moral theorists - and, it should be added, reflective moral agents - envisage and articulate new conceptions of moral life - possible moral worlds. Imagination, as Louden understands it, refers to our ability to form meaningful mental images ‘that are not directly derived from either sensation or standing propositions in any rule-governed manner’ (153). Louden discusses the charge that it is not moral theories (I prefer the term “philosophies”) that do this best, but works of literature (154). His response to the charge is complex: however,

he does say clearly that it is not only art that stimulates the moral imagination, and that art and theory complement one another in enlarging the moral imagination (155). Louden further develops the argument by suggesting that moral philosophy can be a sort of art; a kind of creative writing (156); a view which he shares with Murdoch. He concludes with an appeal for what he calls 'a negotiated settlement in the battle between literature and philosophy concerning who is the rightful servant of moral imagination ... we require the powers of both theory and fiction in order to “imagine that which we know”’ (158). Louden is offering a fairly straightforward interpretation of the relationship between art and morality and imagination: moral imagination is enlarged through art, and also through philosophy when the latter is creative.

But this is not the only way in which one may suggest that art and morals overlap or connect. Consider the following comment of Murdoch’s:

the knowledge and imagination which is virtue is precisely the kind which the novelist needs to let his characters be, to respect their freedom, and to study them themselves in that most significant area of their activity, where they are trying to apprehend the reality of others.27

Murdoch’s comment is compatible with Louden’s point, but it is different. Murdoch’s remarks remind one of the suggestion that morality is aestheticised when the empathy of the novelist is of the same sort as that required in real life and in the sorts of situations which good novelists describe. In other words, Murdoch’s view of imagination goes beyond the

role here given to it by Louden. Imagination is not a moral faculty only in the sense that it acts as a means for moral agents to reflect on and understand moral situations or possible moral situations. The artist’s virtues are, for Murdoch in this passage, moral excellences. The artist exercises these virtues in particularly clear ways when he/she displays persons in the activity of apprehending others who are not oneself. This sort of depiction is itself an instance of what it portrays; when it is done well, it is done virtuously, not least because it is a form of respect for reality. The thread running through these interconnecting themes is the exercise of aesthetic and abstract imagination.

My interpretation of Murdoch’s position is supported by her discussion of a passage from Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*. Murdoch cites James’s account of Maggie Verver’s realisation ‘that her husband is having a long-standing love relationship with her best friend’ (*M*, 170).28 I have argued that, in addition to the ability to depict other persons, oneself and to discern one’s duty, imagination also operates at the level of creating more abstract structures in the mind; pictures that do not strictly represent anything, but which nevertheless allow one to understand the reality of oneself and one’s context in the real world. James describes just such an abstract feature of Maggie’s imagination: a situation at the very centre of the garden of her life... like some strange tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard bright porcelain,

28 In what follows, I quote from Murdoch’s quotation of James (*M*, 170-71) rather than from James directly since Murdoch gives no details of the edition of the text she uses.
coloured and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs.

James is not merely describing Maggie's state of mind in his own terms; Maggie herself lives with these imaginative states. James describes her sense of having walked round and round the structure, living with it and looking up at it, 'but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered had she wished'. Maggie realises that she has not, till now, wished to enter and so realises, only now, that there is no door permitting access from her 'garden level'. Yet, her reflections reveal also that she has approached the structure and come nearer than previously to it; her knock on the structure's walls has produced a responding sound from within, 'suggesting that her approach had been noted' (M, 171).

There is no suggestion that Maggie's imagination essentially prevents her from understanding the reality of a situation in which the ethical considerations centre on the love, trust, betrayal and despair connecting herself, her husband, her father and her friend. These human realities are illuminated by the imagined pagoda, not obscured by it. They are real possibilities in a way that the pagoda is not, yet the latter helps reveal and illuminate the reality of the former. Maggie is continually discriminating her own position in relation to the "views" from the pagoda; the views of the scene that she has - she now understands - for too long enclosed in the impregnable structure.

Murdoch's comment quoted above implies that James himself needs virtues in order to show respect for Maggie's reality as she exercises
her virtue in moral discrimination. But my argument remains valid despite the fact that Murdoch mentions apprehending the reality of other persons as specially significant. For the passage quoted reveals that Maggie's virtue inheres in imaginative activity in which human realities indeed figure, but which is also metaphorical, creative and abstract. Maggie and James himself are related to one another in a complex fashion, as artist, subject and moral agents, in ways which seem to overlap. Imagination is "aesthetic" in morality because all moral agents are artists in their exercise of imagination, and also because artists seem to show this fact in particularly clear and compelling ways.

Why is this "moral"? James's moral sensibility rests in his understanding of how something like Maggie's situation can arise and what it is like to be living with moral difficulties and problems (problems and difficulties in her life, involving herself and the people dear to her) of that sort. James knows that his imagination is also blessed with an artistic talent which most people do not possess (the sense in which most people, including Maggie Verver, are not artists). The possession of artistic talent is something that singles the artist out from among the rest of us who remain moral agents. Thus, although the artist is also a moral agent, and we moral agents are "artists", I shall show in the next chapter why it is necessary to observe that art and morals may overlap at certain points, but are certainly not to be identified.

Murdoch suggests that the best model for all thought might be the creative imagination (M, 169). She brings together several of the themes I have discussed when she comments as follows on the passage:
Do we understand? Yes, of course, we follow, in context, these descriptions of states of consciousness with no difficulty. We are able to think of the imagery as something which the character is continually, like the author, coining as she goes along ... figurative language, metaphor, is everywhere in our thinking ... we recognise ... these levels, these differences of style and image, in our own thinking as we understand a writer and as we are at other times led to reflect upon what the stuff and quality of our consciousness is (M, 171).

Thus, I contend that imagination is of fundamental importance in Murdoch’s moral philosophy. It is more than a matter of rendering statements of duty more appropriate to particular situations than they are in their general form; more than simply a matter of understanding others, or oneself in relation to others. Imagination facilitates reflection about oneself and one’s own moral being. It is an essential element in Murdoch’s picture of the true self-knower. Imagination has a central place in facilitating vision of the Good. It allows one as a moral agent to ask about the sort of person one is and the sort of life one is living; the central Murdochian moral questions. It does so by means of complex, multiform mental states and imagery, phenomena that are not literally representative of realities external to personal consciousness.

The extent of imagination’s aesthetic character suggests analogies and perhaps identities between parts of the moral life and the artistic life. In the example from James, and in Murdoch’s own case, one might suppose that it is in the field of art that moral qualities are most needed and best described or revealed. In the following chapter I do two things. First, I turn my attention to these and similar ideas as they feature in Murdoch’s
treatment of the relation between morality and art and, second, I extend the discussion beyond the question of art alone into an area best described as a concern for Good in the form of the beautiful. The issue is one of moral agents' relation to moral sources and the energy that is needed for moral endeavour.
5. Art, beauty and Eros: their place in morality

5.1 Art and morals: identical, analogous, or simply different?
5.2 Virtues: the same in the artist and the good man
5.3 Depicting moral matters
5.4 Art and life: authoritative limited wholes
5.5 The moral value of good art: Murdoch on Plato
5.6 Beauty and Eros
5.7 Love of the Good, the world and of individuals
5.8 Morality: ‘value is everywhere’

My argument throughout this thesis has been that Murdoch’s moral philosophy presents us with a conception of the central importance of self-regard. Since morality is self-regarding, other-regard must be compatible with self-regard. More distinctively still, Murdoch holds that it is not only other persons who constitute the range of objects to which a moral agent must attend if he/she is to achieve what Murdoch regards as true (moral) self-knowledge. Thus, self-regard does also require an outwardly oriented form of understanding and cannot be equated with egoism or selfishness. In this chapter, my aim is to indicate how broad is this context of attention in Murdochian morals. The variety of “moral sources” in Murdoch’s picture makes for a distinctive, and rich, conception of moral endeavour. Murdoch also has a conception of moral energy which is rarely discussed in moral philosophy. She follows Plato in calling the energy Eros.

I begin by exploring some of the conceptual relations that may hold between art and morality, asking what sort of philosophical positions it is possible to hold on this question. My focus is on Murdoch’s sense that there is a large area of overlap between the two. I examine in more detail certain ideas as to how art illuminates morality, such as that the qualities of
the artist are the same as those of the morally conscientious agent, that artist directly explore matters of moral significance, and that both art and the moral life aspire to an authoritative and unified status. I examine Murdoch's engagement with Plato's critique of art and extend the discussion beyond art to that of beauty and Murdoch's account of the force which attracts us to it, namely Eros. I conclude by noting the implications of Murdoch's view that Eros is active in everyday living, a moral force that binds agents to nothing less than the whole world.

5.1 Art and morals: identical, analogous, or simply different?

Murdoch suggests that art and morals are aspects of a single struggle (S, 41). It is not clear that this position conflates art and morals. Compare Wittgenstein's declaration that ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.¹ The latter claim can be seen as a drawing of two circles in which one is precisely over the other; a single circle drawn twice. Murdoch's claim is different, since it seems to locate ethics and aesthetics within a larger sphere (the "struggle") which Murdoch does not name or describe.

Murdoch's view is ambiguous since she states that 'the aesthetic can image the moral as well as fusing with it' (M, 339). It is not clear what Murdoch means by "fusing"; she evidently means more than that art and morals are analogous, since the idea that the two can fuse together is an additional claim: art "images" the moral as well as "fusing" with it. But as I

have already indicated, Murdoch’s claim does not seem to be that art and morals are identical. I shall argue that Murdoch answers the question: how do art and morals fuse together? in more than one way. Murdoch offers several different conceptions of possible connections between art and morals, which I outlined in my introductory remarks.

Murdoch certainly believes that art acts as an image of morality; she says elsewhere that ‘ethics and aesthetics are not one, but art is the great clue to morals.’² Here Murdoch is steering clear of any suggestion that art and morality are identical. Although one might assent to this strategy, it is still possible to ask whether art can be, though not identical with morality, an aspect of it. This idea implies a broad conception of morality and moral activity of which art is one aspect. The sphere of art is within the larger sphere of morals. In terms of my argument thus far, for this to be so would be for all art to be somehow connected with a range of questions concerning the sort of person one is and the sort of life one leads, in the light of a conception of the Good. It is far from true that all artists have conceived their art in these terms, and unclear how all works of art could be the vehicle for moral activity in this sense.

But construing art as an aspect of morals seems correctly to highlight the importance within morality of reflective engagement with works of art, such as in the examples of Henry James’s The Golden Bowl and certain of Murdoch’s own novels which I discussed in the previous chapter. To use Charles Taylor’s words, art can act as a “moral source” for

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The potential objection that not all art has an obvious moral aspect must avoid construing the idea of a “moral aspect” as meaning simply that artists and their works of art can depict matters of moral concern. As with imaginative states, art is not only iconically representative of reality, and it embodies different sorts of reality: consider the differences between landscape painting, portraiture, realistic novels, musical emotion, and so on. What sorts of “moral aspect” can art have?

One idea that Murdoch favours is that artists, audiences and moral agents require the same virtues: from this position it is possible to argue that every work of art requires virtues (for its existence, and for appreciating its relation to life) and so has, in this respect at least, a moral aspect. However, I shall argue that the personal qualities in question cannot be equated with virtues of the same sort as those attributed to moral agents.

The claim that art and morality are analogous seems reasonable enough, and I shall argue that Murdoch renders this claim plausible in more than one way. Another idea, not obviously contentious, is that art and morals, whilst not being identical, have certain features in common, or at least features so similar that to claim merely that they are analogous would be to underestimate the nature of their connection. One might hold, for example, that in both art and morals requisite personal qualities are so similar as to be virtually identical.

The claim that art and morals overlap or “fuse together” may also be

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3 This is not the same as the claim that art is an aspect of morality, since it involves only one aspect of art itself, namely the qualities required for its creation and enjoyment.
in terms of more obvious and simple ideas. For, quite simply, artists sometimes address the most pressing and serious matters in human life, i.e. matters which are unambiguously moral. For example, Malcolm Budd has argued that

in the experience of tragedy our emotions are engaged by a world in which evil, misjudgement, suffering, luck and irresolvable conflicts of values play crucial roles in the lives of the protagonists; and it is our implicit acknowledgement of the fact that these are factors intrinsic to human life that renders the experience of a tragedy valuable for the insight it provides (an insight contained within the experience itself), if the tragedy manifests a superior understanding of how a person's life might be shaped by and ultimately come to grief because of such factors.4

This is perhaps the most obvious way in which to understand Murdoch when she notes that art

creates an authoritative public human world, a treasury of past experience, it preserves the past. Art makes places and opens spaces for reflection (M, 8).5

However, this is not the only way in which to understand Murdoch's view of the closeness of art and morals. She means more than one thing when she comments on the relation of art to morality.

Murdoch makes relatively little of the idea that the claims of an


5 With something evidently similar in mind, Murdoch also suggests that 'art, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered' (F, 86). This point is clearly not restricted to the genre of tragedy.
artistic life can be in radical conflict with moral claims. At most, as I show presently, she appears concerned that art can sometimes act as a consolation in the face of practical and harsh moral realities. Yet she does not present this as a clash of irreconcilable values and demands. In the context of making a point about the closeness of artistic and moral discernment, Murdoch observes that one may have to ask whether to neglect one's family in order to practise one's art (S, 91). So Murdoch does accept that the artist's life can conflict with moral standards; art and morals are therefore not identical. But Murdoch makes this point in the context of commenting on the closeness of aesthetic and moral discernment. For Murdoch, the agent who asks whether art should have priority over the needs of his/her family, friends and so on is already deploying a mode of moral discernment that is deeply analogous to, perhaps identical with, the discernment of the artist. Thus, I claim that art and morals are never very far apart in Murdoch's thinking.

I have highlighted some of the ways in which one may interpret the claim that art and morals are closely related to one another. From among these, Murdoch singles out two related themes for special treatment. Her bold claim is that the virtues of an artist are the same as those of the spectator and also of the moral agent; the related idea is that art and morality both require an outward-looking orientation, both are other-regarding.  

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6 There is self-regarding art, of course: self-portrait and autobiography. I return to this point. But Murdoch will probably say that in such art it is the task of the artist to "objectify" him or herself.
5.2 Virtues: the same in the artist and the “good man”

Murdoch says

Goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure ... so that aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals. Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature: something which it is very easy to name but very hard to achieve (*S*, 41).

There is much of interest in these comments. I said earlier that Murdoch does not name or describe the “broader context” in which art and morals exist; but she indicates at least that beauty as well as art is in question in some sort of moral struggle. I return to this later. I want to focus now on two connected ideas: first, that the artist and the good person have virtues which are very nearly, or at bottom, the same and, second, that this is a function of (or rather *is*) an ability selflessly to attend to what Murdoch calls, apparently in line with the idea of beauty in general, nature.

The problem with Murdoch’s claim is that although it may be understood in two ways, one of these is trivial, while the other is controversial, indeed apparently false. The claim that virtue consists only in an ability selflessly to attend to what is beyond the self is a separate issue, but highly problematic in ways I described in chapter one. But that still leaves a claim about the virtues held in common between artists and moral

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7 Murdoch’s interest in art is an interest in, to use her own words, ‘art in the context of beauty’ (*F*, 9) and this is central to her thinking. Murdoch sees both art and morality in the context of beauty, in a manner which I attempt to describe in detail below.

8 I have already argued that moral achievement and moral thinking, leading to change in self-being (activity that calls upon and develops one’s virtues) can be fruitfully self-regarding, not least when conceptions of persons less self-regarding than oneself act as moral ideals or models. On this basis, I reject Murdoch’s inference from virtue to selflessness.
agents. In fact, this claim is not independent of the idea of selflessness, since Murdoch explicitly connects the two. Still, one can for argument's sake treat it as an independent claim, and give Murdoch the advantage by temporarily overlooking her exaggerated sense of the possibility of "selflessness". This strategy has the advantage of bringing to light the point that Murdoch seems to be running together two ideas that should be kept separate.

For the claim about virtue is, I think, controversial and probably wrong if it is understood as a claim about what makes the artist an artist. In other words, it is not clear that virtue is common to both art and morality where no additional account is required of what makes the artist a successful artist. On the contrary, one can imagine cases where excellent art is produced by a person who is far from morally worthy. In short, saying that art and morals overlap where both require virtue can wrongly imply that virtues is sufficient for artistic agency. Murdoch herself acknowledges this point, namely that virtue and artistic skill might be quite different qualities.9 My suggestion, then, is that it is necessary to distinguish artistic skill from moral virtue. That leaves room for the claim that artists and non-artists both have some virtues, and this is the trivial sense of the claim mentioned above.

Murdoch's claim is trivial if it is simply the point that artists are, as well as artists, moral beings (as in the case of the artist who feels the rival

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9 'Good artists can be bad men, the virtue may ... reside entirely in the work, the just vision be attainable only there' (F, 84). I shall argue that what Murdoch here intends by 'virtue' is better understood as artistic skill. Nevertheless, Murdoch takes herself to be making the point that achievement in art is not simply achievement in morals: something makes the two different.
claims of his/her art and his/her family) and so have some virtues. In this sense, the virtues of good persons are the same as those of artists. All this means is: artists, like non-artists, can be people with moral cares, concerns, values etc. which they seek to refine, make worthy, closer to the Good and so on. It also seems clear that if an artist chooses to address themes of a moral nature, which is anyway not always the case, he/she will need imaginatively to reflect on virtue in order convincingly to portray virtue. Furthermore, artists, unlike most of us, are blessed with a means of expressing their moral commitments and reflections in particularly inspiring and powerful ways; in poetry, literature, music and so on. Artists’ moral commitments can be manifested in their art, and so - indirectly - can their virtues: in this case, again, it is obvious that artists are not alone in having some virtues (and, of course, some vices).

Thus, art and virtue (morals) can and do come together, but the mistake is to identify the particular skills of artists with moral virtue. By “moral virtue” I mean a conception of virtue along lines suggested by Murdoch, even though it is she who seems to conflate the two ideas, namely the ideas of artistic skill on the one hand and moral virtue on the other. I shall attempt to retain a conception of “moral virtue” which applies to those of us who have no significant artistic skills but which does justice to Murdoch’s intuition that we nevertheless have much in common with an artist. The clue lies partly in what I said about imagination in the previous chapter.

Murdoch’s position is strange. She distinguishes art from morals in order to make the additional substantial and controversial philosophical
claim that they are in fact identical. In other words, Murdoch is not merely claiming that artists have moral as well as artistic matters to attend to in the living of their lives. Her claim is that virtue is the same in the artist and the good man where this means, roughly, that the possession of virtue is what makes each agent what he/she distinctively is. I have suggested that this is mistaken, but is there a correct way of expressing the closeness of what Murdoch calls the artist on the one hand and the "good man" on the other?

We recognise somebody as an "artist" if he/she has, to a fairly high degree, well developed artistic skills and qualities which manifest themselves in works of art which we recognise as such. But the question in hand is how to understand these qualities and whether Murdoch thinks that they are virtues, that they are akin to virtues, or, perhaps, that they require virtues in order to develop. Murdoch gives her answer to this question when she comments on the tests of truth that apply to artists:

truth is not a simple or easy concept. Critical terminology imputes falsehood to an artist by using terms such as fantastic, sentimental, self-indulgent, banal, grotesque, tendentious, unclarified, wilfully obscure and so on. The positive aspect of the avoidance of these faults is a kind of transcendence: the ability to see other non-self things clearly and to criticise and celebrate them freely and justly ... the analogy with virtue is here very plain; and of course the artist's discipline includes the exercise of virtue: patience, courage, truthfulness, justice (M, 86).

I would argue that although the artist may indeed exercise patience, courage, truthfulness and justice, these qualities are not identical with his/her specifically artistic skill. It may be true that for artistic merit to manifest itself, the virtues which Murdoch mentions must also be exercised.
But the presence of the latter is not sufficient for artistic excellence. To this extent at least, the overlap between art and morality appears to be at best partial. It seems to me that this is a function of art’s irreducibility to questions of morals and virtues.

It might well be the case that the acquisition and development of specifically artistic skills requires some moral qualities, or virtues. Maclntyre says that

it belongs to the concept of a practice ... that its goods can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners. We have to learn to recognise what is due to whom; we have to be prepared to take whatever self-endangering risks are demanded along the way; and we have to learn to listen to listen carefully to what we are told about our own inadequacies and to reply with the same carefulness for the facts.¹⁰

Maclntyre thus establishes that the successful pursuit of any practice requires justice, courage and honesty. But Murdoch appears to imply that possession of these qualities is what it is to be a successful artist. This cannot be correct; but then I also suggest that Murdoch does not always imply this particular view of the matter.

It may also be true that virtues and artistic skills share a common quality which may be, very roughly, identified as a discerning sensibility. (Whether, as Murdoch implies, this sensibility is to be characterised as strongly other-directed is a further question.) If virtues and artistic skills share the quality of (potentially) highly developed discernment of the real

world, then it will indeed be true to say that art and morals lie very close together. Murdoch suggests that

learning an art ... is learning how to make a formal utterance of a perceived truth and render it splendidly worthy of a trained purified attention without falsifying it in the process (F, 83).

Malcolm Budd quotes Henry James on the same point:

there is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer.

But that is not to say that the artistic skills are identical with the virtues. What is at stake is the artist's ability to express the quality of his/her thinking, with which his/her virtues and vices are bound up, in the form of his/her art.

Martha Nussbaum quotes Henry James as saying that the

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11 ‘The careful responsible skilful use of words is our highest instrument of thought and one of our highest modes of being' (F, 87). This implies that the poet and the novelist are, when successful, high on the scale of being. Most of us are neither poets nor philosophers. However, I have argued that one's moral self-awareness can be illuminated by an appreciation in such literature of just this care and skill. This is true even where the artist is not deploying words in order to make an explicitly moral point. The care and skill of the artist is partly an aspect of his/her artistic achievement, but also an aspect of his/her moral self-being: the two things come together in great art.


13 Budd mentions, in particular, the tragic artist's ability 'to recognize and contemplate the most painful facts of human life without giving way to despair or pessimism' (op. cit., 123). Despair and pessimism are vices, and they might enter into the work of art with negative effect largely because tragedy deals with moral issues. Artists may deal with despair and pessimism, but they must avoid despair and pessimism entering into the execution of their work because this may obscure their message. My argument here is that the avoidance of despair is thus a moral achievement of an artist, but that this will be manifest in his/her art in ways which will distinguish the artist from the non
attentive deliberations of the novelist are 'the projected morality'.

Understood as the claim that an artist's aesthetic attitude is identical with his moral thinking - that "attentive deliberation" is what accounts for both and is identical in both - the claim is once again misleading. I shall argue that moral commitment may be manifested in various forms of attention and reflection, and that art (also in many forms) is a medium in which it may be particularly clearly manifested. However none of this alters the fact that most of us are not artists and do not have, at least not in any substantial sense, the skills of artists in addition to an ability to express, articulate and defend our moral thinking. Most of us lack this particular means of "projecting" our moral sensibility.

Nussbaum's quotation of James may be interpreted in this latter sense, as claiming that an artist can project his moral understanding in the form of art. Thus, rather than identifying artistic skill and virtue, I suggest that it is better to distinguish moral virtues from the specific skills that are constitutive of an artist's being an artist. The claim that virtue is what makes a good artist a good artist and also what a makes a successful moral agent a successful moral agent potentially obscures the more plausible connections that exist between art and morality. Artistic activities can after all manifest a moral commitment without being reducible to moral

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categories.\textsuperscript{15}

5.3 Depicting moral matters

A combination of moral understanding and artistic ability allows an artist to deal with matters of moral import and so to illuminate the moral understanding and experience of the spectator. The claim is not that art only illuminates one's moral experience: art has many facets which illuminate many aspects of human experience, not all of which need be tied to morality. But when Murdoch offers 'a hymn of praise in gratitude for the joys and consolations and general usefulness of art' she notes how, among other things, 'art makes places and opens spaces for reflection' (\textit{M}, 8). There is a very obvious reading of this remark: one's moral thinking is assisted by art which depicts or represents moral situations and personal moral being. However, even art which treats of moral matters is not judged only on the basis of its moral content.

I have already suggested that one can admire in a work of art the coming together of an artist's moral sensibility and artistic skill. In this respect, what one admires is not simply the plot, story or picture and so on, but also the way in which the artist has told the story, constructed the plot and painted the picture. Thus, art's relation to morals is not simply a matter of its depicting scenes of potential moral import, such as, for example, a murder, an execution or a war. Nevertheless this point is compatible with

\textsuperscript{15} Murdoch suggests that 'learning to detect the false in art and enjoy the true is part of a life-long education in moral discernment' (\textit{F}, 83). Murdoch here brings together art and morality without identifying the two: it can indeed be the case that part of learning about moral virtue involves attending to the virtues that are manifest in great art.
the fact that, within the moral life, moral agents can have a need of pictures, stories and other aesthetic forms that deal with matters of moral interest and concern. This need, and its fulfilment, is what Murdoch has in mind in her 'hymn of gratitude to art'.

The moral value of art that describes or depicts moral events or situations is a value that depends upon a distancing from real life. I do not wish to suggest that art never bears any relation to "real life", only that we readily understand the difference between things featured in art, however realistically, and the real world which continues to exist independent of our experience of works of art. Moral reflection in the presence of works of art differs from immediate and directly practical forms of moral response.

The simplest way of expressing the point at stake is to say, as Malcolm Budd has done, that one difference between reality and a picture of reality is that 'the one is entirely free from the constraints of responsive action; the other is always of possible practical interest and may be pregnant with demands'.\textsuperscript{16} Christopher Janaway has also argued that art can give one the freedom to think and reflect and that it is, in this respect, often unlike everyday reality.\textsuperscript{17} Art can allow one to see 'the world as we were never able so clearly to see it before' (F, 78). The distance between art and moral reality is partly a function of the fact that experience of the work of art involves specifically aesthetic concepts as well as moral ones. Budd notes that the picture is in this sense "greater":


\textsuperscript{17} Christopher Janaway, Images of excellence: Plato's critique of the arts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 200.
not only in its duration and all that this makes possible for the beholder, but also in possessing an additional aspect - the pictorial field, the nature of which penetrates the significance of the depicted scene - and in the variety of features that can accrue to it in virtue of the fact that it is an experience of a pictorial work of art, requiring awareness of its thematic, expressive, referential or other artistically significant characteristics.  

As I noted above, art's engagement with morals is complex, partly because of the fact that virtue and artistic skill are not identical. But this fact can now be seen as adding to the potential *moral* value of reflective engagement with art. For one knows that artistic works are not the same as moral situations and that moral thinking is not simply artistic thinking, but also that this is where part of art's significance lies. One may admire precisely this translation of moral themes into an aesthetic medium, and the moral qualities as well as artistic skills that this required of the artist. Spectators are free from the normal requirements imposed upon witnesses.  

However, it is perhaps precisely because art's moral value depends upon a frame of mind that is in this way "distanced" from real life that Murdoch displays concern about art. Murdoch seems to think that art can be defended as being of *moral* value so long as it can be shown that it aids an understanding of real life and ordinary moral matters. Murdoch's sense 

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18 Budd, op. cit., 82.

19 Budd, ibid., 120.

20 I have not denied that some moral situations do impose constraints upon the agents who must respond, only that compassion and altruism are definitive of - or the dominant mode of - Murdochian moral response.
of how this is so takes the exaggerated form of implying that art, like morals, can be completely other-regarding. However, when one bears in mind what I said a moment ago, namely that appreciation of the techniques of the artist as well as the content of a work is relevant to aesthetic experience, it becomes clear that her claim is too simplistic.

Speaking of the quality of detachment in art, Murdoch says 'nothing exists except things which are seen' and implies that detachment is the same in nature, art and morals (attending to natural objects, art and human beings) (S, 65). Once again, Murdoch over-estimates the value of the idea of self-effacement. One obvious category of art that Murdoch will have difficulty explaining or justifying in these terms is art which deals with the self, specifically oneself, from the artist's point of view. But just such art - an obvious example is that of self-portraiture - can have immense moral value. Although the moral value of such art cannot be said to consist in its depiction of matters of moral concern - the simple reading of Murdoch's "hymn of praise to art" which I discussed a moment ago - there is nevertheless a sense in which the artist of a successful self-portrait can indirectly portray his/her own moral being. Malcolm Budd has argued that certain of Rembrandt's late self-portraits are concerned to present not so much a conception of himself as an artist, but a revelation of himself as an ageing man. They give the spectator a vivid sense of having been painted by a man who was capable of looking at himself without vanity or illusions and who was prepared to show himself as he was. In presenting this unvarnished appearance they are free from the self-deception, wishful-thinking, posturing, affectation or glamorizing intent that so readily enter the presentation of the self ... they are paradigms not only of truthfulness, but of an especially difficult form of that virtue - truthfulness about
Budd's praise for Rembrandt is praise for the man as well as for the depicted man. Of course, the two are interdependent since this picture is representative of Rembrandt's conception of himself. Budd trusts Rembrandt's conception of himself because he detects the absence of many common vices: this is what Murdoch said counts as a test of truth in art (M, 86). Rembrandt's self-conception might have been the self-conception of a person who was not an artist. However, in his case, Rembrandt can express his sense of self through his art. The excellence of the latter makes more vivid than usual this man's understanding of himself.

But is Rembrandt aiming to depict his own moral qualities? It seems that he is not. He paints himself as he appears physically: what Budd sees is a picture that is truthful because it shows what it is really like to be growing old. However, this picture of physical reality indirectly reveals moral qualities because of the seamlessness between self and picture as mediated by moral and artistic self-knowledge. Budd admires the work of art and the artist who painted it. Rembrandt's self-portrait is an expression both of his artistic skills and his physical reality. The reality as depicted is dependent upon a developed personal moral sensibility in which honesty and truthfulness prevail over vanity and affectation. In this sense, one learns from the self-portrait something of the nature of virtue, although it can only indirectly display moral qualities.

The example is compelling, and in discussing it I have re-visited
several Murdochian themes. The example also reveals the way in which Murdoch can only superficially explain the moral value of art by appealing to the idea that in artistic and moral attention “nothing exists” except that which is beyond the self. Self-knowledge can be manifest in art (and not only in self-portraits) and art can thus indirectly illuminate the nature of the virtues and vices that constitute what Murdoch herself calls moral consciousness. Murdoch has suggested that ‘the artist’s “freedom” is hard won, and is a function of his grasp of reality’ (F, 79). The self thus has a more fruitful role to play than Murdoch appears to allow it when she says that virtue is the same in the artist and the good man in so far as it is a selfless attention to nature (S, 41).

5.4 Art and life: authoritative limited wholes

Murdoch implies that human life can be looked at as a whole like a work of art (M, 292); and she analyses in some detail what is involved in the idea of seeing a work of art as an authoritative limited whole (M, 1-25). I have argued that the ability to reflect on one’s own life and personal being, an ability to see oneself and one’s life overall or “as a whole”, is the central feature of Murdochian morality. Art and morals therefore seem to be analogous in the following sense: both require a perspective which unifies, organizes, compares and evaluates in a manner that is disciplined and revealing. Some personal skills will doubtless be required for this activity, but I have argued that artistic skills are not to be identified with virtues. The claim is that there is a perspective that unifies experience, both in art and in morality, and that the two are thus analogous. Maclntyre has expressed
the idea at stake as follows:

human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story. It is not just that poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and sagas capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate.22

MacIntyre brings to light a valuable point, namely that some art (for example poems and sagas) is not only contingently used in the moral life, but also mirrors the moral life in that it sometimes has a narrative form. In saying that poems and sagas capture something that was 'already present' in life, MacIntyre is not making the strong claim that the form of each is identical: he is instead referring to the appropriateness of narrative in relation to a human life. He distinguishes this from the weaker idea that narratives can, just as a matter of chance, describe certain aspects of human life. However, the fact that narratives capture something in the lives of people should not lead one to suppose that life has a narrative form. Again, what is at stake is an analogy and the question is: how revealing, or not, is this analogy? Murdoch is certainly highly sceptical of the idea that life can be understood as a narrative, as I shall show presently.

What is this unifying perspective that is akin to narrative and which is central to Murdochian morals? My suggestion is that it is the perspective I have sometimes described as "looking at one's life as a whole". MacIntyre describes a fascinating case wherein a narrative artist describes agents who lack this perspective themselves and who are thus, in my Neo-

Murdochian terms, not full moral agents.

what the poet of the *Iliad* sees and his characters do not is that winning too may be a form of losing. The poet is not a theorist; he offers no general formulas. His own knowledge is indeed at a more general and abstract level than that even of his most insightful characters. For Achilles in his moment of reconciliation with Priam has no way of representing to himself what Homer is able in his account of Achilles and Priam to represent to others. Thus the *Iliad* puts into question what neither Achilles nor Hector can put in question; the poem lay claim to a form of understanding which it denies to those whose action it describes.23

In thus describing the nature of the artist's perspective, MacIntyre has rendered explicit the terms of the analogy in question. Murdochian moral agents have a form of (self-)knowledge that is more general and abstract than the sort of knowledge they may seem to have if their actions are described by a second or third party. But I have argued consistently that agents themselves need and have the broader perspective, that this is a moral perspective upon one's life and self-being and that Murdoch is in fact aware of our need for it. A unifying perspective upon a life, awareness of its history and its possible futures is possessed by both artists and moral agents and is therefore another place where art and morals appear to overlap.

Homer's perspective is strongly akin to that needed by a Murdochian moral agent. But even where the moral perspective seems so close to the artistic one, there is reason to maintain a distinction between them. For one thing, as I have already said, Homer denies his characters a

mode of moral self-awareness that they do possess if they are real moral agents. Homer is doing what the creative and imaginative artist does best, namely creating a world which is, in Roger Scruton's words, unreal and known to be so. Maclntyre himself says that no fifth-century Athenian could behave just as Agamemnon or Achilles behaved. Even though the narrative artist has much in common with the Murdochian moral agent, the role of each is at least potentially quite different.

The point is that the purpose of a description of oneself may differ according as to whether one is producing a work of art (an autobiography, or a self-portrait, for example) or refining one's moral self-awareness. This is compatible with the fact that, as I have already suggested, moral commitment can be manifested in aesthetic activity. For not all art is thus directed towards the expression of moral concerns, and some moral commitment (that of most people) cannot find authoritative expression in works of art. Earlier, I quoted Budd as suggesting that the distance from life of art makes it somehow "greater". However, moral consciousness is equally privileged in the sense of being sensitive to the dangers of artistic form (as art may also be). At least, Murdoch certainly regards it as a desirable feature of moral consciousness that it be sensitive to the dangers of form in art. That is what I mean by saying that the role of the artist and the moral agent is, notwithstanding their similarities, potentially quite different.

Murdoch regards as potentially problematic the fact that art and

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morality share a need for form and unity. I discussed this idea in chapter 3 (3.7) above. She warns of the consolations of art and suggests that such consolations are not found in real life:

the art object as false unity is an image of the self. The bad story is the sentimental untruthful tale of how the brave attractive ego ... triumphs over accident and causality and is never really mocked or brought to naught. It is difficult for any artist not to falsify \((M, 86)\).26

Murdoch says that

any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete \((S, 87)\).27

And she repeats the point, saying that 'art offers some consolation, some sense, some form whereas the most dreadful ills of human life allow of none' \((M, 93)\).

Thus, speaking specifically of tragedy, Murdoch says both that it is a potent aesthetic conception and that it plays an ambiguous role in moral thinking \((M, 85)\). She explains that 'tragedy belongs only to art, where it occupies a very small area' \((M, 92)\). The danger as Murdoch sees it is that agents turn to aesthetic conceptions such as tragedies in order to make

26 But then an artist might very plausibly attempt to deal with just that theme. Murdoch herself does so in many of her novels, such as, for example, The Sandcastle (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957) which describes the case of a portrait painter.

27 However, art can legitimately attempt to elaborate this very idea. As Murdoch says, the subject-matter of great art is 'what is hard and necessary and unavoidable in human fate' \((F, 79)\). Again, she suggests that 'art can rarely, but with authority, show how we learn from pain' \((F, 82)\),
sense and seek solace whereas their true situations do not permit of either. But I suggest that there is here no direct connection with morality. For the consolations of art are not problematic if one is simply seeking entertainment or enjoyment. Again, the various values of art are not reducible to moral values alone. From the other direction, in ordinary moral thinking, one tells stories about oneself which are neither works of art nor always problematically formal. A sense of irony and the ability to tell self-deprecating stories about one's failures are not only admirable and amusing qualities, they are also an important part of one's repertoire of moral tools. The tales may be formal unities, but they relate failures which one is coming to terms with rather than seeking to "mask" with aesthetic structure.

Nevertheless, Murdoch's argument presupposes that art has a moral role, and I have accepted that the two partly overlap. Agents might delude themselves by use of art, but much of what Murdoch says implies that such agents are mis-directing their moral energies. The idea that the problems inherent in artistic formality are also potentially injurious to moral consciousness, along with the idea that really great art which avoids the perils of form can be genuinely morally illuminating, defines Murdoch's approach in her well-known engagement with Plato's attack on art.28

28 In an interesting perspective on this whole issue, Maria Antonaccio discusses the tensions between form and contingency in Murdoch's philosophy. See Maria Antonaccio, ‘Form and Contingency in Iris Murdoch's Ethics’ in Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness, edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996). She takes Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals to be not so much a unified metaphysical system, but rather 'a transcript of a brilliant thinker's stream of consciousness' (135) with all the tensions that go with it. Antonaccio makes the interesting suggestion that by ending with 'Void', Murdoch's book on metaphysics embraces some
5.5 The moral value of good art: Murdoch on Plato

In *The Fire and the Sun* Murdoch discusses Plato's hostility to various forms of art. Murdoch has her own reasons for being somewhat sceptical about the aesthetic. Thus, Murdoch relates Plato's charge that art can degrade what is good, and both express and gratify further badness (5-6).

Art localizes the intelligence which should be bent upon righting the proportions of the whole life (66).

The idea of righting the proportions of the whole life is one to which I have frequently appealed. Plato's charge (as Murdoch construes it) is that the creation (and presumably also enjoyment) of art diverts moral thinking from its proper path. Art 'fakes truthfulness', 'cherishes itself not the truth' and 'makes us content with appearances' (65-66). A disanalogy between art and morals is suggested by the fact that Murdoch does not read the Platonic critique of art as an attack on efforts to become a better sort of person. Yet Peter Conradi interprets Murdochian Platonism as the view that fake truthfulness and mere appearance are most obviously a function of the open-endedness and incompleteness of art. The refusal of closure in her theory points also to a deferral of closure on human moral struggle in the light of the Good (137).

The fact is that the condition of void is one of demoralisation, and so one where it is not possible to see one's life as a whole. That Murdoch recognises that moral agency is not always possible in one's life (not least because of factors that are sometimes beyond one's own control) does indeed tend to suggest that art and morality cannot always aspire to the status of "authoritative limited wholes".

29 Unless otherwise stated, the quotations which follow are from this work.
of the (largely irrelevant) effort to understand oneself and become better.\textsuperscript{30} But although Murdoch might agree with Plato that art sometimes offers dangerous products from 'the private store-room of the personal unconscious' (67), her engagement with the Platonic charge reveals that Conradi's interpretation of her position is too simplistic.

Murdoch describes the difficulty as follows:

> enjoyment of art deludes even the decent man by giving him a false self-knowledge based on a healthy egoism: the fire in the cave, which is mistaken for the sun, and where one may comfortably linger, imagining oneself to be enlightened (66).

I contend that the implication is clearly that art can engage with or cause the wrong sort of self-awareness, namely ignorance of one's true self parading as true self-knowledge. In other words, true self-knowledge is possible. Murdoch continues:

> art thus prevents the salvation of the whole man by offering a pseudo-spirituality and a plausible imitation of direct intuitive knowledge ... a defeat of the discursive intelligence at the bottom of the scale of being, not at the top (66).

Mention of the scale of being is a reminder of the background basis of Murdochian morality; namely the potential for reflective self-assessment and improvement, seeing oneself and one's life as an organic unity rather than only focussing on specific acts or omissions. Art too, despite its form

and the illusory temptations which it thus creates, can be seen in terms of some sort of scale which, if it works with discipline and self-control, can be profitably utilised: ‘images must be kept within a fruitful hierarchy of spiritual endeavour’ (41). And Murdoch's developed response to Plato is a defence of the potential moral value - “moral" in the sense just indicated - of successful art:

good art ... provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention ... our relation to such art though ‘probably never' entirely pure is markedly unselfish ... Beauty is, as Plato says, visibly transcendent (76-77)

I have argued throughout that Murdoch's familiar emphasis on the idea of awareness of that which is independent of oneself is compatible with my claim that her philosophy of morals regards moral vision as fundamentally self-regarding. I have also suggested that Murdoch herself recognises the need for a “broader view“ of morality.31 Murdoch says:

31 The tension in Murdoch's philosophy between ideas of self-directed, imaginative appreciation of art, beauty etc. and the idea of directly altruistic, other-directed practical action is brought out very explicitly in the following passage. 'Good art ... provides work for the spirit. Of course morality is quite largely a matter of action, though what we look at profoundly affects what we do ... And of course the practice of personal relations is the fundamental school of virtue. The spiritual revelations involved in dealing with people are in an evident sense more important than those available through art, though they tend to be less clear ... But art remains available and vivid as an experience of how egoism can be purified by intelligent imagination' (77).

Murdoch thus resolves the tension by suggesting that art can show how the release from egoism is possible. But if this is not a lesson for the self-reflective and potentially morally self-concerned agent, it is unclear just for whom it has any relevance.
one is tempted, and partly in order to do justice to Plato’s argument, to try to explain just how great art is good for us, and in doing so to take our best material out of Plato himself (78).\textsuperscript{32}

And, as the remark I quoted prior to this one implied, Murdoch is interested in the moral salvation that may be forthcoming from beautiful things in general; works of art, but also things other than works of art.\textsuperscript{33} Murdoch’s engagement with Plato is marked not only by her polite refutation of the argument that art corrupts morals, but also by the seriousness with which she treats the related ideas that art is an aspect of the beautiful; that beauty and goodness are inextricably interwoven; that there is a fundamental spiritual-moral force that inclines human beings towards the Good and that this is moral activity.

So far from being interested only in compassion and altruism, Murdoch’s Platonism celebrates the diversity of those aspects of personal experience that give rise to self-awareness in relation to the scale of being, and which are thus constitutive of the moral life. We are now close to the distinctive conception of the breadth of the moral life and the “moral sources” within it which makes Murdoch’s philosophy so original and compelling.

\textsuperscript{32} Murdoch says this despite also saying that ‘Plato never did justice to the unique truth-conveying capacities of art’ (85).

\textsuperscript{33} For instance, Murdoch mentions mountain ranges (77): I shall return to the idea that the natural environment is profoundly important to the Murdochian moral life.
5.6 Beauty and Eros

Murdoch says that

great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of detachment is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or sound. Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen. Beauty is that which attracts this particular sort of unselfish attention (S, 65).

Although the passage is especially noteworthy for its potentially misleading emphasis on the idea that the self vanishes during the appreciation of beauty in art and nature, I am here interested in the evident expansion of the concept of the beautiful beyond the idea of art as discussed thus far.

In moving from art to beauty, Murdoch said that she wanted to take her best material from Plato himself. She says that Plato’s philosophy ‘is largely concerned with how the attractiveness of beauty turns out to be the moral pull of reality’ (F, 73). Janaway has also discussed Plato’s attitude to the arts, and identifies a category that is broader than both art and beauty, a category which he calls “kalos”, meaning fine or admirable.

People, actions, political constitutions, and humble artefacts such as a soup-ladle, can without strain be described and thereby praised, as kalos.34

Murdoch, I believe, shares this sense of the very wide variety of

34 Janaway, op. cit, 10.
things that can be admired or loved for their fineness. Furthermore, Janaway is making essentially the same point as Murdoch when he observes that there is a category that is possibly best described as "aesthetic" which is not restricted to art, though it may not be as broad as the concepts of beauty or kalos.

although Plato has no word for "aesthetic", he recognizes that there is aesthetic fineness or beauty ... He acknowledges that people place value on the arts because they are fine things in which we take great pleasure. But he is not swayed by this ... Not all aesthetic things are art-products; and besides, the analysis of the aesthetic may not reveal it to have any peculiar value that overrides Plato's other concerns.35

Janaway explains that Plato insists that art be subservient to moral aims.36 Murdoch has also said that Plato regards the aesthetic as the moral since art is of interest only in so far as it provides therapy for the soul (F, 12). There can be no doubt that art is not only of interest in this respect; and no doubt either of the fact that it is not even in this respect identical with the moral. However, the point is that an interest in the moral uses of art seems to require an examination of the nature of beauty more generally, in so far as art can be regarded as an aspect of the beautiful. What is the nature and significance of beauty's relation to morals?

Murdoch discusses Plato's treatment of 'art in the context of beauty' (F, 9), quoting the Philebus:

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36 Ibid., 58.
the power of Good has fled away into the nature of the
beautiful; for measure and proportion are everywhere
connected with beauty and virtue (F, 11).

This is both a reminder of Janaway's use of the term *kalos* and of the
fact that it is indeed possible to see in perfectly ordinary and familiar things
(people, places, objects) a measure of proportion and harmony, of
fittingness and so of beauty. The idea that this has a connection with virtue
is, however, far less obvious. Murdoch suggests that 'the Good comes to
us in the guise of the beautiful' (F, 35). It is possible, in response, to think of
examples of persons who are both beautiful and evil. But it is also possible
to think of good persons who are certainly not beautiful. Yet the question is
not necessarily one about physical beauty: there is perhaps something
beautiful about human goodness. Murdoch may also be suggesting simply
that physical beauty is a good in the sense of something to be admired,
praised and highly valued. The question is what relevance this has to the
moral life, and the answer is that the things we value - of which the things
we judge to be beautiful constitute a large and familiar class - attract us
and are morally beneficial:

a sense of beauty diminishes greed and egoism and directs
the energy of the soul in the direction of the real and the Good
(F, 37).

Murdoch is more generous to art than is Plato, for whom the spiritual
power of beauty is too important a matter to be trusted to art (F, 32).
Murdoch wittily explains that 'nature educates us, art does not. This means:
ot statues, but boys' (F, 43). Local disagreements about the value of art
aside, Murdoch's view is Platonic in so far as it locates the objects of moral effort and aspiration, such as truthfulness and realism, in the realm of the beautiful and in explanatory images of forms of goodness which describe our relation to things of beauty, excellence and worth.

We are attracted to the real in the guise of the beautiful and the response to this attraction brings joy (F, 45).

Murdoch thus describes what she calls 'the saving Eros' (F, 66). Eros is the fundamental moral energy that inclines one towards beauty and so towards goodness:

Plato's Eros is a principle which connects the commonest human desire to the highest morality and to the pattern of divine creativity in the universe ... Eros is the desire for good and joy which is active at all levels in the soul and through which we are able to turn toward reality. This is the fundamental force which can release the prisoners and draw them toward the higher satisfactions of light and freedom (F, 33-4).

That we are naturally attracted to what is beautiful is plausibly explained by Murdoch in terms of Plato's idea of Eros as transformed sexual energy (F, 33). The conception may sound lofty, exalted and otherworldly; yet Murdoch is evidently keen to emphasise that it concerns the manner of one's understanding of potentially any aspect of one's world, one's life; simply one's engagement with the world in which one lives. As a being who necessarily exists in the everyday world, one's moral commitments and aspirations may naturally find expression in everyday modes of thinking such as reflecting on one's career, one's achievements
in pursuits which one enjoys, on the art one appreciates and - of particular importance to Murdoch - on religious themes and ideas. These are some of the many aspects of human activity in which moral activity may be manifest.

My suggestion is that Murdoch takes Eros to be the fundamental and unifying aspect of moral sensibility. One's moral commitments originate in and are sustained by one's Eros, understood as a source of emotional, mental energy. The plausible idea is that the force of love - the love of many things - is what inclines moral beings towards the idea of the Good, in terms of which they understand themselves. The goodness - truthfulness, beauty - of many things makes the idea of Good real: it promotes desires to do and be more good. Eros, love, is moral commitment dispersed among the many things in human life that are worthy, and reflectively judged to be worthy, of commitment.37

5.7 Love of the Good, the world and of individuals

Murdoch says that

we can all receive moral help by focussing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps ... the idea of goodness itself' (S, 56).

Just what she means by 'goodness itself' is far from clear, though I hope to make it more so in what follows. I have argued that there are tensions in Murdoch's philosophy between the idea that morality is

37 On this and many other points, Murdoch has inspired Charles Taylor to argue that orientation towards the good is a fundamental aspect of moral being and so of human identity. See Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially section one. Taylor shares the view that moral commitments are manifest in diverse sources which provide strongly evaluative criteria in terms of which a relation to the good is articulated, defended and developed.
austerely other-directed and the idea that it is reflective, imaginative, self-directed, and connected with art and the beautiful more generally. A very rough way of expressing this tension is to say that it is a matter of balancing the ascetic with the aesthetic aspects of morals. Where Eros is concerned, the tension re-surfaces yet again. It takes the form of the idea that love is a strongly other-directed force, having little to do with self or with analysis of one's mode of personal being. It also takes the form of a fear to the effect that if we can be said to love many things and not just other people, then we run the risk of losing sight of the special worth of other people. After all, the word "love" is most naturally and commonly used in the context of interpersonal relations. These fears are a function of the ascetic conception of morals to which Murdoch so often gives voice. It may be thought that to the extent that Murdoch tries to correct her own aestheticism with this form of asceticism, she has in mind as her target the distinctly unworldly Platonic conception of moral value. 38

Murdoch says, for instance, that love is for many people their most intense and disturbing experience since it shifts the centre of significance from self to another place (M, 17). Murdoch also observes that love is knowledge of the individual (S, 28), which sounds like a reminder of the rather stoical Schopenhauerean aspect of her thinking, wherein "freedom" is the freedom to overcome egoism and to love, truthfully and accurately, another person's reality. But as Murdoch also readily notes, love is the

38 The unworldliness of Platonic value has been noted by many philosophers: a recent example is Bernard Williams in Altham and Harrison, eds, World, Mind and Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1995), 203, in an explicit criticism of the "Murdochian" Platonism in Charles Taylor's work.
general name for the quality of attachment (S, 103). I suggest that it is in this sense that one is to understood the importance of Murdoch’s commitment to love, which she takes moral philosophers to have forgotten or ‘theorised away’, but which she thinks is ‘a central moral concept’ (S, 2).

Murdoch thus acknowledges that in love ‘we are not always the individual in pursuit of the individual’ (S, 43). The Platonic Eros here reveals what else and what more is involved in human loving; its role is to be a revealer of something described no more precisely than as ‘the world’ (M, 47). The objects of Eros are thus “worldly”; so too is Eros continuous with ordinary human energies and commitments: ‘Eros is sexual energy as spiritual energy’ (M, 24). Eros is an energy that exists in degenerate forms: it is a basic energy which we each possess and which may be used for good or ill (F, 37). The idea is clearly that Eros is to be understood as a form of energy. So too do we readily understand the idea that love can be directed towards things which are not as worthy of love as other things. To be used in morally positive ways, Eros must be purified. Furthermore, its purification is itself a central moral task.

An example will help at this stage. Suppose I have a desire to become less selfish. This desire is the result of my self-reflective sense that I am selfish. This self-reflective realisation will have come with other intimations of the truth about myself, possibly in the form of things that other people have said about me or to me. But my personal commitment to change already reveals an orientation towards an image or conception - of the sort which Murdoch thinks art so clearly displays (F, 41) - of goodness; of something higher up the scale of being. That I am so oriented is in turn a
function of my loves, of the fact that I can understand the difference between things that are worthy and those that are less so, or which are downright unworthy. None of which means that I am guaranteed success when I try to become better. The very passions which drive me to self-improvement may also be my drives towards degenerate pleasures (in particular, it seems, sexual ones). My task is to purify and re-direct them; to work continuously upon them.

This is an austere picture of morality, but it is not simply a picture of altruism or compassion, though there is a place for these. Nor is it "austere" because it involves denying the pleasures of everyday life in the name of an ultimate higher and unearthly value. on the contrary, one understands the idea of the Good in terms of what Janaway calls "images of excellence"; in art, religion, nature and in one's day-to-day surroundings. The austerity of Murdochian morality consists in her idea that personal Eros must be continuously checked, re-directed and purified. Part of what accounts for Murdoch's hesitancy in according the self an unambiguously central place in morals is the fact that Eros is the basis of self-being. In other words, Eros is not an energy that can be controlled by some superior moral force or moral sense. Since our energy is singular (what drives me to self-reflection may be, finally, what also drives me towards my degenerate pleasures) there is no clear or easy way of proceeding. Morality is not something in which one opts to participate as and when the need arrives. It is something with which one constantly lives.

Murdoch speaks of Plato's idea that the Good is central and that a human approach to Good
comes through a difficult disciplined purification of intellect and passion wherein passion (Eros) becomes a spiritual force (M, 11).

Eros seeks Good in the form of knowledge, truth and beauty, as distributed throughout human variety (M, 50). But it is by now clear that the sense of love which Murdoch takes to be central to morals is not simply everyday, ordinary human love, but a more exalted sort. Taylor begins *Sources of the Self* by referring to Murdoch's view that the Good may be the object of our love or allegiance. Many people associate Murdoch's work with this quasi-religious emphasis and regard Murdoch as believing that the Good has a metaphysical existence of its own: it is real and she is a realist. The particular worry which I have already voiced is that this idea of love overlooks the importance of the love of human beings for one another.

For Murdoch to speak of 'a sort of contemplation of the Good' gives rise to the suspicion that, so far from attending to particular individuals, her agent is involved in 'a turning of attention away from the particular' (S, 101). This worry has been dealt with, though not in relation to Murdoch's work, by A. W. Price. Price argues that to be an object of love, Good must enjoy some relation to the Form of Beauty - as Murdoch says, we are naturally inclined towards the beautiful - but he voices the question of what happens to the individual as an object of love when a person is said to love Good.39 Price's suggestion is that one should not confuse

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the loved one's role as an object of contemplation (in which he is soon largely superseded) with his role as a recipient of thought.\textsuperscript{40}

Price is saying that the loved individual can become involved in one's spiritual life.\textsuperscript{41} The idea is plausible: friends and lovers express to one another and, to a certain extent, share their deepest concerns, commitments and so on. Price concludes that union with the Forms does not imply indifference to other people: on the contrary, 'personal love, of a kind, is thereby not supplanted, but glorified.'\textsuperscript{42}

Murdoch characteristically expresses herself in terms of the tension between rival intuitions: on the one hand the thought that love of humans is unique and so most important; on the other hand that one's loves take the form of many different attachments to one's surroundings and within one's life. Murdoch notes that ' "love" can be used to mean any desire or tendency. In a more solemn sense we speak of love for people' (\textit{M}, 342). Love for humans thus seems different, more important, but remains an aspect of love more generally.

Human love, the love of persons for other persons, is \textit{sui}\

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{41} Price explains:

my interpretation of the ascent [is] intended to reconcile the recognition of the universal with a kind of respect for the particular: the person one loves becomes a drop in the ocean \textit{qua} object of contemplation, but a major investment \textit{qua} recipient of a mentality (208).

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 51; 54.
generis, and among our natural faculties and impulses the one which is potentially nearest to the highest divine attributes (however these may be understood) though in practice often remote from them. It is unlike our more detached and unthreatened loves for art objects, for work, for nature, for the furniture of the world generally; but art and the world form its natural and proper context and habitat (M, 346).

Price's treatment also shows that it is possible to love - be morally attached to - both the world in general and to particular individuals. In a similar fashion, Nussbaum has sought to reconcile erotic love with a Murdochian conception of morals, but she is far more sceptical than Price with regard to the compatibility of love for the Good and for the individual. She is also directly critical of Murdoch on this very point, arguing that insofar as the Good itself is love's focus, there is bound to be much that is unsatisfying in a mere human being. We see this in the loves that Murdoch describes ... [wherein agents] look beyond the real people whom they love to the obscure image of a metaphysical source of reverence and awe.

Whereas I regard Murdoch's account of Eros as able to accommodate the individual and the Good, Nussbaum takes Murdoch's point about love of the latter implying a turning of attention away from the particular more seriously: 'in loving the image of the divine good in a person, there is a sense in which we love the human particular in spite of

43 This echoes Murdoch's questioning of whether or not human love constitutes more obvious evidence than does art of 'a transcendent principle of good' (S, 75): Murdoch says that the importance of love is indisputable, but that it is also piecemeal and often selfish, so that image of the Good remains 'the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections upon the moral life.'

But a different strategy suggests itself here. I suggest that instead of viewing the tension between the individual and the Good (as objects of love) in terms of always seeing the loved one in the context of the Good, we should view it as the *difference* between the commitments (loves) one has in terms of which one (imaginatively, aesthetically) understands one's relation to goodness and the sheer impulsive and unique attachments one has to other persons. It is such attachments to others which Nussbaum wishes to defend against a high-minded disregard of their worth because of a fixation with ideals of goodness. The point is that there is a place in one's life for both sorts of love. The two also come together in the way that Price indicates, but it is not always so; and Nussbaum need not fear that all personal love happens "in spite of" higher more worthy loves. Thus, I maintain that Murdoch is right to suppose that love of the Good and the individual are compatible.

I have yet to mention the question of Murdoch's realism in relation to this idea of the Good. Bernard Williams has argued that outside ethics, or as he puts it 'elsewhere in philosophy', there is a genuine question whether the objects of philosophical study are to be understood "realistically." 46 Williams highlights a philosophical disposition to think that if ethics is "realistic", then something potentially quite shocking and unusual follows. Realism implies that statements can be true and, 'further, that there is something for them to be true of' (561). What seems surprising

45 Ibid., 46.

or shocking about the idea as applied to ethics is that (putting the matter very roughly) since Murdoch speaks so openly and so enthusiastically of the Good and its reality, one might suppose that for her realism is a commitment to the view that goodness is a real quality; some thing. Realism implies (again roughly) that statements can be true and command rational agreement and, further, that they refer to objects 'that exist independently of our thoughts about them' (561). When Williams elsewhere expresses his scepticism about the Platonism inherent in Murdoch's view, it is clear that he supposes her committed to views about the special reality of some metaphysical qualities.47

But what I am trying to show is that "goodness" is a notion describing a range of moral sources through which one evaluates oneself and one's life. It inheres in the ordinary world of ordinary living and experience, though Platonic notions of the Form of the Good may well be fine images and imaginative tools through which to understand our essential need of such sources.48 My discussion of Price and Nussbaum suggests that there is no genuine danger that thought about the good life or even, as Murdoch

47 This is what is so surprising about the issue. See Williams's reply in J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison, eds, World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 203 and note 16. One is here surprised to find oneself recalling a character in Murdoch's novel The Philosopher's Pupil; the philosopher John-Paul Rozanov, who is asked at one point to confirm his belief that goodness is a golden ball on a marble pillar in heaven; or something very like that. The idea is shocking; yet Williams is surely right to have traced the philosophical instincts that lead one to it. The issue raises the question of what sort of reality Murdoch thinks Good does have. I shall argue that her position is that it is dispersed throughout the world in a variety of things of value, rather than being a separate metaphysical quality.

48 Here, my concerns are closely related to those of Charles Taylor in Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Taylor himself readily acknowledges his debt to Murdoch.
puts it, thought about 'the idea of goodness itself' (S, 56), need obscure one's concern with the more particularised realities of other human beings.

It is also true that discussion of realism can go in another direction, namely towards the thought that is focussed on just those particular realities with respect to which I just argued that the sense of "realism" identified by Williams poses no real threat. The problem with this interpretation of ethical realism is the opposite of the problem just identified, namely that it underestimates the power of non-particular, universal and metaphysical sources of goodness in Murdoch's thinking.

It is this aspect of "realism" which has been addressed in relation to Murdoch's work by Mark de Bretton Platts and Sabina Lovibond.\(^{49}\) Platts connects Murdoch's views with the idea that moral concepts have a semantic depth to which features of the real world "answer" (261-2).

Precisely because of the realistic account given of these concepts and of our grasp upon them - precisely because they are designed to pick out features of the world of indefinite complexity in ways that transcend our practical understanding - this process of investigation through experience can, and should, improve without limit; we must rest content with the thought that at death approximate understanding is all that we can hope for (262).

The picture is austere, but it relates us to the everyday real world rather than to a metaphysical one.

Lovibond has made much the same point, noting the importance of the fact that Murdoch takes the world to be compulsively present to us (13);
that is, not present merely as a result of choice or personal predilection. Lovibond sees Murdoch in the context of a renewed philosophical interest (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) in ‘the possible application to moral life of such notions as humility, sensitivity, submission to reality’ (9). This picture has its merits and, of course, its place in Murdoch’s developed conception of morals. But as I tried to show early on in the essay (chapters 1 and 2), it is tempting to construe Murdoch as giving far greater weight to these particular objects of moral attention than her developed position actually suggests. For Murdoch, the Platonic Good is a radiant moral source that is certainly real; but equally real are everyday realities such as those of other persons, and this fact is of great importance in the moral life. One must be realistic in the sense of recognising them as genuine claims upon one.

Murdoch sums up as follows:

love is the general name for the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good. It is a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun (S, 103)

But this still leaves a question. Although love of the Good - in the form of love of the world - is compatible with love for particular human individuals, is it nevertheless true to say of Murdoch that she has an unrealistic and lofty conception of morality? My answer is that Murdoch's
point can be interpreted as a familiar claim in the sense that it is neither controversial nor problematically mystical.\textsuperscript{50} The point is that Murdoch refers us to the world, not to some other world. Murdoch is, in essence, claiming that the things one loves constitute one's sense of the possibility of goodness, and that they are thus the backdrop to a permanent moral-evaluative consciousness. That love is a central force in morals means that morality is a matter of one's most familiar experiences. The field of morality is the whole of personal being and experience.

5.8 Morality: ‘value is everywhere’

So far from ascribing moral value solely - or even primarily - to other-regarding modes of thinking and acting, Murdoch analyses and celebrates the diversity and the ordinariness of the objects of moral commitment and understanding. I have indicated that the relevant field is nothing less than “the world” in the sense of almost anything which one may do, look at, study and so on. Murdoch is at pains to emphasise that moral value is potentially everywhere and is a function of an ever-present moral sensibility; something that does not arise at certain points and then vanish until it is next required, but which is much more a function of general (everyday) consciousness, imagination and evaluation. Murdoch says that

our life-problem is one of the transformation of energy ... Plato uses this concept of energy to explain the nature of moral

\textsuperscript{50} As for the question of the extent to which the idea of goodness or ‘the Good’ itself is to be thought of as a moral source, Murdoch discusses this question in \textit{The Sovereignty of Good} in terms of the relation between God and Good, suggesting that attention to both may be understood as a form of love (S, 55).
change ... there are innumerable points at which we have to detach ourselves, to change our orientation, to redirect our desire and refresh and purify our energy (M, 24-5).

There is much that is of interest in this comment: several ideas directly illuminate my argument thus far. First, Murdoch regards moral agency as a life-problem, not a passing or temporary problem or set of judgements, but an endless process of moral change. Second, this requires what she calls 'detachment', which I have argued is a reflectively self-knowing effort to understand one’s life and being as a whole. Third, there are very many ways in which this happens, ways in which it is prompted: morality is not a specialised technique or skill (another difference with art). Fourth, in thinking about morals, one is thinking about the uses of energy; mental or spiritual energy, or what we sometimes refer to as moral energy. Morality, understood in Murdochian terms, is bound up with the phenomenon of consciousness.

Thus, Murdoch notes that 'almost all our concepts and activities involve evaluation' (M, 25). In opposition to a familiar philosophical conception of evaluation, Murdoch says that moral discrimination is not a survey of the facts followed by an evaluative judgement: instead 'a survey of the facts will itself involve moral discrimination' (M, 26). Cora Diamond has discussed this idea as 'the theme of the cognitive as always moral'.

In a detailed discussion of the history of a philosophical distinction between fact and value, Diamond endeavours to show that Murdoch broke new ground with her argument that 'a view of what we are as moral agents

51 Cora Diamond, '“We are perpetually moralists”: Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value' in Antonaccio and Schweiker, op. cit., 79-109. Further references are to this article.
could itself be a moral view ... and that a view of what the world is like could be a moral view' (89). Moral differences are not just differences of principles or of choice, but of ways of seeing self and world and the moral task itself; differences of "vision". Diamond thus notes that 'our thought about anything is the thought of a morally live consciousness, a consciousness with its own moral character' (102) and she connects this with the idea of self-understanding (101).

In ordinary consciousness, in our desires, aversions, images, feelings, attachments and perceptions, values are at work, are being shaped and reshaped in ways which never lose their attachment to the common world but which are our own, and which give our awareness its own particular character.

This idea is compatible with Murdoch's view that morality is sui generis; she means that there is nothing else like it in the world. But morality is ubiquitous as well as unique (M, 26). Murdoch's philosophy of morals is 'a picture of the omnipresence of morality and evaluation in human life' (M, 39).

\[^{52}\text{Ibid., 92. This echoes Taylor's observation, stated at the very outset of Sources of the Self, that morality is not only a matter of what it is right or correct to do, but also of what or who it is good to be.}\]

\[^{53}\text{Ibid., 108. Diamond's analysis reveals that Murdoch's picture of the ubiquity of value is, in one sense, a refusal to distinguish between fact and value since it is borne of the belief that value is everywhere and in every activity. But as Diamond rightly notes, 'if value is in a sense ubiquitous, if one wants to speak of it as tied to "quality of consciousness," one is distinguishing it from whatever can form a subject matter among others' (108).}\]

My account of art was based on a similar intuition that it is one skill among others. In this respect, it differs from the ubiquity of morality as Murdoch sees it.
It is here worthwhile to remind oneself of how much broader a conception of morality this is than the one I outlined and attacked in chapter 2. If moral evaluation is omnipresent, this requires omnipresent objects of evaluation and omnipresent moral sources (to use Taylor's terminology) in terms of which to orientate oneself to an idea of the good human life. Furthermore, what sustains one in these never-ceasing efforts is the moral energy which Murdoch calls Eros, and which needs - for a task so large and variously manifest - continual sources of inspiration and means by which to become or remain worthy of the things it values. This is certainly not a picture of selfless altruism piercing the veil of egoistic selfishness; the defeat of selfishness and self-delusion is a lifelong task of efforts at purification according to Murdoch. But these efforts - our moral and spiritual "pilgrimage" - are self-knowing. They are both facilitated by and aim at ever-improving self-knowledge.

Plato makes the assumption that value is everywhere, that the whole of life is movement on a moral scale, all knowledge is a moral quest, and the mind seeks reality and desires the Good, which is a transcendent source of spiritual power, to which we are related through the idea of truth (M, 56).

On this view, what I have referred to as "the world" - the everyday context of our moral sources - 'is a system of truths and values' (M, 53). Within this context, the equally broadly conceived moral agent is permanently engaged in attempts to understand his/her life, world and self as a whole, as a unity. One's life is to be seen as a whole because of its "essential orientation" (Taylor's words once more) towards the Good. There
are of course false ways of taking one's life to have a single point or purpose; but Murdoch's idea is that the unity of a life underlies the unity of morality. There are no unique methods or techniques of evaluation and no special moral objects of understanding: one attempts to understand oneself and one's place in the world in terms of the everyday sources that allow one to make sense of the idea of goodness.54

Murdoch observes that Platonic morality pictures

the whole experience of a whole person ... immersed in a reality which transcends it, failing or succeeding to learn, in innumerable ways, the difference between true and false, good and evil (M, 148).

Consciousness is a value-bearing continuum. Virtually everything has potential moral value: all learning is moral education (M, 179); morality is consciousness, perceptions, feelings, streams of reflection in which one is 'ceaselessly, momentarily' aware of one's world (M, 222). Morality is 'a refinement of desire in daily living' (M, 175). It bears emphasis that Murdoch takes any activity - in her terms any sort of "looking" or "perceiving" - to be of moral relevance, since any activity can be evidence of the possibility of goodness (because beautiful, truthful, worthy and so on).

The activity of Eros is orientation of desire. Reflecting in these ways we see 'salvation' or 'good' as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars, and not just as 'an abstract idea'. 'Saving the phenomena' is happening all the

54 'This is our everyday existence where spiritual energy, Eros, is all the time active at a variety of levels' (M, 507).
time. We do not lose the particular, it teaches us love, we understand it, we see it, as Plato's carpenter sees the table, or Cezanne sees Mont Ste Victoire or the girl in the bed-sitter sees her potted plant or her cat (M, 497).

Here I should like to emphasise that Murdoch has brought us to a picture of the diversity and ordinariness of moral sources. She has a thoroughly distinctive conception of how things such as cats, plants, clouds, mountains and so on provide contexts of moral attention. In the previous chapter I argued that imagination contributes a further dimension to such moral reflection even when it is abstract and not devoted to the depiction of the reality of persons. What interests Murdoch is how many are our opportunities to be self-critical (self-regarding in this morally positive sense): to examine the life one is leading, the things one does and values; the sort of person one is. My argument is, as it has been throughout, that there are two related reasons why we are afforded such a new and attractive perspective on morality.

First, Murdoch has a distinctive conception of morals which alters our sense of the sorts of topics that can be discussed within moral philosophy. The idea that everything one does can manifest a moral commitment is not an immediately recognisable theme in moral philosophy, but then Murdoch is stretching the boundaries of the subject. Second, this perspective springs from the successful resolution of a tension at the heart of Murdoch's approach, namely that between the idea of self-regard and other-regard. Having shown that the former is accommodated within the latter, where the latter is construed as a description of morality as such, Murdoch can move on to show what else
(and how much else) constitutes the context of moral attention. It is not just that within moral thinking, self- and other-regard are compatible or even interdependent: instead, the moral outlook is fundamentally self-regarding. Although she is not always sure of this herself, the point is that Murdoch is not vulnerable to the charge that her account ignores the significance of interpersonal responsiveness. It is just that morality involves a very much broader outlook.

I said earlier that the natural world is one of the sources of morality in Murdoch’s philosophy.55 For my own part, I should like to suggest its importance in our times where concern for the quality of our environment are growing more pronounced. A Murdochian view of morality regards the natural environment (but not only this) as morally relevant, not only because its resources have utility for us in terms of the alleviation of human suffering, nor simply because its despoliation violates moral duties, political maxims or laws, religious codes and so on. More broadly, the natural world is a moral source for us. One turns to nature in order to see in what goodness and beauty consist, and in order to gain an energy thereby that will assist one in the pursuit and better understanding of the same.

The Platonic image of the sun as both the source of light and so of all vision, and as the ultimate object of such vision is an appropriate one in

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55 So too is art, also religion and any sort of human endeavour. Art and nature seem to be two of the most potent of our moral sources, however. Nature has a special power whilst various sorts of art (many of them not as good as Murdoch would wish) are almost permanently present in our lives in the form of television, film, novels, poetry, drama, music and so on.
terms of which to understand the nature of Murdochian moral sources.\textsuperscript{56} The harm we do to the natural environment is a moral matter on many fronts. But in terms of what I want to say about the breadth and nature of moral sources, I want to suggest that failure to value it deprives us of a source of inspiration and Eros. There is much talk today of renewing community ties, of re-awakening a sense of neighbourhood, citizenship and simply “belonging”. It seems to me that when our open spaces, our trees and wildlife, our rivers and our air are sacrificed to profit, greed or to the sense that to change the way we live would simply be too costly (politically, economically), then we overlook the importance of these things to any sense of “rootedness” and belonging. One cannot draw from a road the same spiritual strength that can be drawn from even a single tree.\textsuperscript{57} These are political matters and moral matters. But they are not “moral” simply because they constitute an evaluative dimension in terms of which public policy and legislative decisions can be evaluated. These matters concern the inner life and the spiritual well-being of each and every one of us.\textsuperscript{58}

The very broad context of Murdochian morality is the whole life of a

\textsuperscript{56} Murdoch suggests that Plato deploys ‘an important principle of literary criticism: that which militates against self-knowledge is suspect. To know oneself in the world (as part of it, subject to it, connected with it) is to have the firmest grasp of the real’ (F, 84).

\textsuperscript{57} John Fowles's \textit{The Tree} (The Sumach Press, 1991) has, it seems to me, Murdochian overtones. Fowles brings out both the analogy between the human psyche or moral sense and the habits of trees as well as our ordinary human need to be in and among these havens of peace, tranquility and stillness. From this position, Murdoch's interest in Buddhism and broader questions of spirituality is recognisable.

\textsuperscript{58} For a very similar argument, see Thomas E. Hill Jr., 'Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments' in \textit{Environmental Ethics} 5, (Fall 1983), 211-224.
human individual. The life of the individual is the context of his/her moral efforts: the object of his/her moral efforts is that same life. Nagel says that

the admission of a variety of motivational elements among the sources of morality results in a system that reflects the divisions of the self. It does not resolve or eliminate those divisions. 59

My argument is that Murdoch does not see the picture as a matter of "divisions", but instead as rich field of sources which, whilst they may differ, are aspects of the ubiquitous and familiar moral activity of the individual human consciousness.

I have spoken of the way in which this conception of morality is, plausibly and attractively, very much broader than a conception of pure altruism and compassion. Murdoch argues that

if we consider how multiform and unpredictable and huge is the ambiguous borderline between subject and object, us and world, and how consciousness is at all times unavoidably active in evaluation and in control and development of desire, we are 'forced' to see how a larger picture is required. The felt need for this picture, or field of force, is answered by metaphysics and religion, and by general moral values, our sense of right and wrong. This is not a matter of specialised isolated moments of moral choice, appearing in a continuum of non-moral activity. These movements and responses are occurring all the time. The reality of the moral requirement is proved by the world (M,297).

My argument throughout has been designed to reveal this aspect of Murdoch's thinking. Morality does not stop with altruism and compassion,

nor in a combination of altruism and duty, nor even a combination of these along with art and imagination. Self-knowing moral improvement renders the whole world full of potential moral relevance. In this attractive picture of morality, the central theme concerns the relations which hold between a self-knowing moral agent, a sense of the moral sources available to him or her and an active mode of being conscious and dwelling realistically in the ordinary world. Murdoch says that 'the true self-knower knows reality and sees, in the light of the sun, himself as part of the whole world' (F, 43).
6. Review and Conclusions

I began this essay by offering a summary of the main elements of Murdoch's account of morality, and I explained at a general level how they interact and relate to one another. This involved explaining that, beyond the idea that morality is a matter of other-regarding acts, it is also a self-concerned and reflective quest to relate oneself to the Good. This idea is to be understood not only as the claim that self-regard is compatible or even interdependent with an understanding of other persons (because in order to achieve a good quality of understanding one must be self-critical), but also as the claim that morality is fundamentally self-regarding. Morality involves self-evaluation in relation to a conception of the Good, or what Murdoch calls true self-knowledge. It concerns the whole manner of one's way of living and being. I offered a summary of Murdochian morality from the point of view of a Murdochian agent's moral activity.

Throughout the thesis, my central theme has been that Murdoch's conception of the true self-knower is such as to allow her to offer a distinctive and very broad conception of a self-regarding morality that involves imagination, art and beauty: areas which are not usually thought of as having specifically moral relevance by most philosophers. So far from denying that this emphasis is unproblematic, I have brought out - especially in chapters 2 and 3 - how Murdoch herself is attracted to a conception of morality built around ideals of compassion, altruism and "selfless" forms of response. This gives rise to ambiguities in her account and a sense on the part of her reader that she has not fully or confidently
embraced the distinctiveness which she also seems to offer.

This persistent seam of tension - a tension, broadly speaking, between aesthetic and ascetic conceptions of morals - can be frustrating. I claimed also that it can be fruitful. The tensions in Murdoch's writing are very often testimony to the extent to which she has, to use Charles Taylor's image, moved so far beyond the traditional boundaries of moral philosophy that the questions she asks and the answers she gives can appear very surprising.

Thus, Murdochian morality accords value to duty in ways which apparently underestimate one of Murdoch's most important and distinctive claims, namely that moral agency requires a permanent creative and evaluative activity of relating oneself to a conception of Goodness. This activity is manifest in one's thinking about and relation to many things: to art, to one's environment whether it is man-made or natural (city-dwellers are no less moral agents than those who are fortunate enough to live in areas of great natural beauty), of a fundamental energy which "unifies" one's existence, and of a mode of imagination which does not end with the accurate depiction of persons, be they other persons, oneself or some combination of the two.

I argued in chapter 2 that in her concept of the true self-knower Murdoch certainly does recognise the importance of other persons and other things to moral thinking and action. But I argued too that Blum's tendency to suppose that altruism is definitive in understanding what Murdoch regards as morally worthy activity is constraining. It constrains one's sense of morality and of Murdoch's philosophy. I argued against this
view and showed how it relates to Murdoch's more developed position. I suggested that Murdoch in fact holds that self-regard and other-regard are interdependent. Self-regard is necessary to morals not only because it is interdependent with thinking about what is not oneself, but because Murdochian morality involves legitimate reflection about oneself and one's manner of being in the world. As an aspirational activity, morality is about seeking to relate oneself ever more deeply to a wide range of moral sources that can be identified as the focus of reflection in the question: what is the best sort of life that I can lead? Morality is a concern for the good life and one's Good.

In chapter 3 I turned to the question of duty, which is seen by Murdoch as an aspect of moral thinking which balances or modifies the "one-making" aspect of her account, namely its "aesthetic" emphasis on the variety of the sources which are deployed in the moral life of the true self-knower. Although Murdoch is well disposed to the idea of unity (as in her discussion of works of art as 'authoritative limited wholes', M 1-25) she also believes that it is important to recognise the contingent nature of much human activity. Morality can never be wholly unified since it is full of unsought realities which defy the naturally one-making mind. Murdoch's overall conception of morals is, I argue, one-making. Murdoch fears that it loses sight of the importance of the individual who is the object of the moral agent's other-regarding thought and action. Expressed very roughly, Murdoch regards duties as clear and simple "laser-beams", whereas art, imagination, beauty (and other overlapping realms of moral being) can refract and diffuse one's sense of being subject to moral demands.
I argued that Murdoch's appeal to the concept as a moral demand that is \textit{completely different} from the aesthetic conception that is central to her conception of the true self-knower is untenable. The true self-knower can already acknowledge the importance of the things Murdoch thinks the idea of duty states so aptly and clearly. Murdoch feels the force of philosophical conceptions of duty but is engaged in offering a distinctive picture in which such a self-contained and narrow notion has but a small role, and one which cannot simply be accommodated in the form of being seen as an aspect of the moral life overall. I analysed how Murdoch conceives agents responding to "the call of duty." Through an engagement with Bernard Williams's account of ethical obligation, I established that duty (or obligation) is to be seen as one consideration amongst others, its meaning and importance requiring reflective elaboration and evaluation. Response to "duty" requires a vision of the Good. It is not independent of such a vision. Murdoch is uncertain in her account of how this is so. In short, the idea of duty cannot and need not do the work that Murdoch wants it to do. There are several occasions on which Murdoch herself seems to recognise this.

To view some considerations as things that really do represent a moral requirement upon one - and here "duty" is not the only relevant concept - is not to have suspended one's sense of self. On the contrary, it is to have seen oneself as a moral being who is part of a world where \textit{various} values of \textit{differing} degrees of urgency and importance make themselves felt. I discussed Martha Nussbaum's account of "perception" in order to make clear what sort of thinking this is, and then to show how
response to duty requires perception. It will not do simply to suggest that Murdoch needs to locate her account of duty in the broader context of ethical reflection, since she herself is clear that this strategy is not what she desires. Thus, I exposed the tensions inherent in Murdoch's account of duty.

In that chapter, my central claim manifested itself in the form of the observation that Murdoch appealed to the idea of duty because she regards it as having affinities with intuitions concerning the priority of compassion. Thus, my argument was that since she had successfully demonstrated that a self-regarding conception of morals is not in any straightforward tension with the importance of an understanding of other persons, she had no need to prioritise other-regard (as "duty") on the grounds that a self-regarding conception of morals is too relaxed, vague or "aesthetic". My scepticism about the success of Murdoch's appeal to duty is borne of my central idea that she transcends the terms of a debate in which it becomes necessary (in terms of her own image) to interrupt or counteract aspects of broad and generous conception of morals in order to give special weight to more limited conceptions of the nature of moral agency.

In chapter 4 I continued to build up my picture of Murdoch's overarching conception of morality. I focused on her account of the moral uses of imagination. I began by exploring the intuition that imagination is an unlikely candidate for a Murdochian moral faculty. I then went on to show that each of three suggestions of a moral role for imagination is necessary but insufficient for an appreciation of Murdoch's overall conception of imaginative morality. Nor are the three together sufficient.
Murdochian morality needs to be imaginative not simply in order to:

i) particularise statements of duty or broadly formulated ethical "maxims" or principles, nor

ii) simply to focus vividly upon the reality of other persons, nor

iii) even to see oneself in relation to those others who were seen so vividly.

Imagination is also a means of moral orientation. It is involved in placing conceptions of oneself in relation to an abstractly imagined mark or measure of goodness; a principle that shows that it is always open to question whether one can live in a better way and be a better sort of person. Imagining one's moral being is thus complex and involves considering what Taylor calls "directional" questions and one's relation to the Good. A good example is given by Murdoch herself: one may see one's own being on a scale of circles with Goodness at the centre. I suggested that this ambitious and unusual picture of imagination's moral uses suggested something of the breadth of the field of Murdochian morals. Imagination engages moral sources which are very diverse. Thus, imagination's role in Murdoch's philosophy is a function of her equally broad conception of the whole moral enterprise. I also discussed the suggestion that imagination has moral uses by focussing on its more obvious connections with art and art's connections with morality.

Once again my central claim was that this faculty, this area of Murdoch's broad conception of the diverse but overlapping sources of morality, was not to be reduced to the theme of other-regard. Imagination readily presents itself as something which allows the moral agent to
apprehend the reality of other persons; but Murdoch cannot and does not limit imagination to the performance of this role. She acknowledges that it has such uses, and her acknowledgement does not have the problematic status of her appeal to duty since Murdoch appears ready to accept that imagination stretches the limits of our conception of what it is to be morally active. Murdoch offers a conception of moral imagination as an abstract faculty because she can both acknowledge its more limited and familiar uses whilst offering at the same time a distinctive and refreshing perspective of how it is required to furnish truly self-knowing moral agents with their conceptions of the Good.

In chapter 5, I explored the range of connections which Murdoch takes to exist between morality and art. I argued that art and morality are clearly not identical, but explored Murdoch’s suggestion that they overlap and share some common features. My suggestion was that Murdoch wrongly regards moral qualities, or virtues, as identical with the particular skills and qualities of artists. Her thought, I proposed, is that since the moral life involves asking oneself whether or not one is, for example, as truthful and honest as one can be, and since artists can ask the same question in relation to their work (and audiences in relation to their responses to a work of art), then the two activities are identical. I revealed what is wrong with this thought, whilst at the same time trying to remain faithful to the intuitions behind Murdoch’s claim.

I also discussed the more plausible proposal that art’s connection with morality consists in its being able to depict matters of moral significance, and the less obvious idea that the connection is a function of
both works of art and individual lives having authoritative unified forms. Such proposals again fail by themselves to express the distinctiveness of Murdoch's developed position. I explained Murdoch's position by exploring her engagement with Plato's critique of the arts. This required a broadening of the terms of discussion since not only art is relevant: art is of moral interest as an aspect of beauty. Murdoch is fascinated by Plato's account of the life-energy - fundamentally oriented to the Good in the guise of the beautiful - which she follows him in calling "Eros".

Through Murdoch's account of Eros, we are offered a picture of moral energy. I discussed the charge that Murdoch's account of Eros and of how it relates agents to the Good (in the form of a variety of moral sources) neglects the more ordinary, but intuitively more important, love of human individuals for one another. I showed that Murdoch takes love of individuals to be compatible with love of "the world" more generally. In speaking of love of the world and love of the Good, I identified a main tension running through Murdoch's account, namely that between an aesthetic and an ascetic account of morals. In its turn, that tension is cast by Murdoch in terms of a general tension between self-conscious love of the Good and everyday attention to human individuals. The emphasis on other-regard is familiar enough, but in speaking of the love of the Good, Murdoch is, as Taylor pointed out, touching on questions which some regard as hardly making any sense at all.

Chapter 5 was my opportunity to explore ideas which lie beyond a conventional conception of morality, as suggested by Murdoch's discussion of imagination. This is the ground to which Murdoch was said
by Diamond to be "pointing" and the "unconditional" limits to morality which Taylor implies she establishes. The whole world is of potential moral relevance and we are related to it by a principle of moral energy. This conception again derives from Murdoch's contention that morality is self-regarding and directed towards the reflective evaluation of a whole life. The range of morality's sources, I suggested, appears less controversial, and less in need of the sort of "corrective" which Murdoch herself offers in the form of her appeal to duty, if it is accepted that the sense in which morality is self-regarding is one in which the apparent asymmetry between self and other has been transcended.

I should like in concluding to note how closely allied is this position, or set of related positions, to that of one of Murdoch's contemporaries. Charles Taylor seems to me to have articulated a Murdochian or Neo-Murdochian conception of the moral life, though it is to be noted that this is not his primary aim. ¹ Taylor is close to Murdoch in the following respects. He has a sense of the breadth of morals and of how this is a function of our spiritual nature: the variety and breadth of what he calls "moral sources" is a function of our need to question and strongly evaluate ourselves and our lives on a range of fronts. What is at stake is our personal identity, not just our obligations to other persons. There are imaginative, artistic and other sorts of "backgrounds" in terms of which we understand ourselves and remain essentially, spiritually oriented towards goodness in its many forms. It would be worthwhile to explore on another occasion some of the

relations between Murdoch's and Taylor's work with the necessary detail.

This thesis has attempted to bring out the distinctiveness of Murdoch's philosophical vision. It has tried to be both critical and appreciative. I have readily admitted that there are tensions which run throughout Murdoch's work; between the idea of self and other and between a conception of aesthetic and ascetic moralities. But my main contention has been that Murdoch successfully resolves what often appears as a dichotomy between the idea of thinking about oneself and thinking about others. This tension can appear to be expressed in its clearest form in Murdoch's own work, but I argued that this is not representative of her developed conception. Her resolution of the terms of the self/other dichotomy allows her to move on - not always confidently - to explore what else is relevant to the moral life.

Murdoch ignores none of those important but more limited issues which her broad philosophical vision can readily include. In terms of the Platonic imagery which she herself favours, Murdoch is like a traveller who returns, crossing ground that is familiar to her, to tell a somewhat incredulous audience of what lies beyond the limits of their own imagination. This observation operates at the level of the way in which Murdoch does philosophy; but it also indicates the nature of what she sees as the moral quest itself. Images and metaphors overlap, and metaphysics is a guide to morals. At the centre of metaphysical imagery is a conception of the Good. Good is not a narrow matter of duty or attending to other persons. It is about the whole life of individual moral agents who try to understand themselves in the context of their whole world.
For Murdoch, one's relation to the world in general is what furnishes one with a conception of the Good; a goal or principle in terms of which self-regarding moral evaluation takes place. So far from the important but limited ideals of compassion and altruism, love of the Good, and the possibility of true self-knowledge which this offers, turns out to be the distinctive and central component of Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy.
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