Iris Murdoch and the Varieties of Virtue Ethics

Konrad Banicki

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues
University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom
T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865
E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

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Konrad Banicki
Jagiellonian University in Krakow

– Working draft – comments welcome (konrad.banicki@uj.edu.pl) –

> "In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly"
>
> (SGC, Murdoch, 1967/1997, p. 374)[1]

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The sources of the contemporary revival of virtue ethics are usually connected with philosophers such as Elisabeth Anscombe, Bernard Williams, or Alasdair MacIntyre who have, respectively, worded the famous criticism of "modern moral philosophy" (Anscombe, 1958), the analysis of "the peculiar institution" of morality (Williams, 1985) and the "disquieting suggestion" (MacIntyre, 1981/2007) that contemporary so-called moral philosophy is not moral philosophy in any proper sense at all. One another figure who could be easily placed within the context of this investigations is Iris Murdoch: a British philosopher and novelist, whose works bear a considerable resemblance to the ones of the three above-mentioned figures.[2]

1 SGC – *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts* (1967). All page numbers given for Murdoch's work, if not marked otherwise, refer to the reprints in *Existentialists & Mystics* edited by P. J. Conradi (Murdoch, 1997).

2 For the biography of Iris Murdoch see *Iris Murdoch: A Life* by Peter J. Conradi (2001). For philosophically informed account of her novels cf. *The Saint & The Author* by the same author (Conradi, 1986). Her strictly philosophical works will be briefly delineated in this paper with a special focus on their importance for virtue ethics. A more general introduction can be found in Antonaccio (2001).

Interestingly, however, one can rarely find her name mentioned in the usual accounts of the beginnings of nowadays virtue ethics. The mail aim of this paper will be to illustrate the general and particular ways in which the work of this Anglo-Irish novelist is parallel to the official predecessors of the virtue ethics as well as the differences between her account and the default perspective of today mostly neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. It will be attempted, importantly, to show that both of these points can be revealing in the context of virtue ethics' perspectives.

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The first, and the most general, resemblance between the philosophical thought of Iris Murdoch and those of more commonly recognised contemporary virtue ethics' predecessors is the focus of her analyses on two dominant currents of the early 20th century ethical theory, i.e. deontological and consequentialist one. These currents, importantly and contrariwise to what their original proponents would usually say, were considered by Murdoch as very similar in the context of some metaphilosophically and metaethically crucial features. "One can emphasize more justice (Kantians) or benevolence (utilitarians)," in the words of Charles Taylor (1996, p. 6) discussing the influence of Iris Murdoch, "but there is a shared perspective which is inimical to the ancient primacy of ethics.". This mostly metaethical and metatheoretical perspective, furthermore, is not only recognised by Murdoch as common to Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy but also to its continental, mainly existentialist, counterpart: "It is interesting that by a dissimilar paths the existentialists and the logical positivists have reached positions which are in some ways strikingly alike" (NAM, Murdoch, 1950/1997, p. 105).[3]

As early as in 1961, while describing the ethical thought of her times she uses a common name: "Linguistic and existential behaviourism, our Romantic philosophy" (AD, Murdoch, 1961/1997, p. 293)[4] and makes a claim which, in its general sense, is pretty much 'MacIntyrean': "We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him" (Ibid., p. 292).

Our "Romantic philosophy," in particular, is blamed by Murdoch for the substantial reduction of our ethical vocabulary and conceptual schemata, which in turn has led to the "simplified and impoverished ... view of the inner life" (Ibid., p. 293). This time in the

3 NAM – *The Novelist as Metaphysician* (1950).
4 AD – *Against Dryness* (1961).

Wittgensteinian spirit Murdoch emphasises *the descriptive function of ethical theory*, which, as she takes it, "should remain at the level of differences, taking the moral life as given, and not to try to *get behind them* to a single form" (VC, Murdoch, 1956/1997, p. 97).[5] The main problem with the "current view" or the "current model," as she writes in *Vision and Choice in Morality* published in 1956, is that it does not do a full justice to this descriptive function. Due to its strong attempts, more or less successful attempts one may add, at the construction of the unified conceptual and metaethical scheme it turns out to illuminate and describe "only a certain type or area of moral life" (Ibid., p. 92).

The general scheme arrived at, more particularly, is essentially *behavioural* and *voluntarist*: "This conception consists in the joining of a materialistic behaviourism with a dramatic view of the individual as a solitary will" (AD, Murdoch, 1961/1997, p. 287), morality "resides at the point of action" (IP, Murdoch, 1962/1997, p. 311).[6] Anything that occurs between specific *ethically problematic situations* (as only a sub-class of all situations in which the human creature may find him/herself), anything apart from the *moral deliberations* and *choices* made in these situations is more or less neglected. Especially, it is the stream of consciousness which is "of comparatively little importance" (VC, Murdoch, 1956/1997, p. 77) due to the standard position of *logical behaviourism*.[7]

The voluntarism embodied in this position, shared both by existentialism and British philosophy, can be criticised on the basis of offering "no barrier to romantic self-assertion" (Conradi, 1989, p. 14) and merely mirroring "men's illusion of power and grandeur" (Hauerwas, 1986, p. 31). In fact, it seems to grant the individual will with nearly absolute powers. "We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world" (AD, Murdoch, 1961/1997, p. 290). The values in this world, as far as they can be meaningfully thought about, are but "a function of free act of valuing, not an objective quality of the world" (NAM, Murdoch, 1950/1997, p. 106). Freedom, accordingly, is understood as "a value-creating activity of the human will rather than a cognitive response to a moral world that precedes the agent's act of choice" (Antonaccio, 2000, p. 14). The strength of this will, however, comes at the cost of its isolation not only from the world of empirical facts, but also from the rest of its subject's being including, crucially, "the personality and the huge and daunting power of its secret, fragmentary, opaque and

5 VC – *Vision and Choice in Morality* (1956). For the case for interpreting Murdoch as "a Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist" see Hämäläinen (2014).

6 IP – *The Idea of Perfection* (1962).

7 Cf. "it is and can only be through overt acts that we can characterise another person, or ourselves, mentally or morally" (VC, Murdoch, 1956/1997, p. 77).

obsessive inner life“ (Conradi, 1989, p. 22).[8] The modern existentialist, for instance, is so free and unconditioned, that in principle he “*might* do anything” (EM, Murdoch, 1970/1997, p. 225).[9,10]

An important point to make is that Murdoch does not claim that this metaethical position is *simply false*. Rather, and more crucially, she believes it to be misleading when taken as either neutral or universally applicable. When applied, which seems to have been often the case, as a universal conceptual scheme it fails to realize the descriptive aims of ethical theory. While it can easily, in particular, succeed at giving account of “the man who believes that moral values are modes of empirically describable activity which he endorses,” it is either incapable of describing or, to the worse, biased when applied to “the man who believes that moral values are visions, inspirations or powers which emanate from a transcendent source concerning which he is called on to make discoveries and may at present know little” (VC, Murdoch, 1956/1997, p. 96).[11] An “important and philosophically interesting difference” (Ibid.) between these two men is indiscernible for the position which presumes that any moral phenomenon can be reduced to the series of problematic situations and choices.

The main problem with the above-given metaethical framework, according to Murdoch, is that it does not offer any worthwhile moral psychology and, thus, seriously neglects the particular human agent. In *Against Dryness* written in 1961 Murdoch (AD, 1961/1997, p. 287, 289) refers to our “scientific and anti-metaphysical ages in which the dogmas, images, and precepts of religion have lost much of their power” and identifies “our dilemma” as the fact that “we have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality”, with philosophy which is not able “to offer us any other [other than Marxist, KB] complete and powerful picture of the soul.”

The behaviorist and decision-centered perspective on ethical life, as has been said, tends to ignore the whole stream of consciousness including not only the latter's affective dimensions but also cognitive ones, especially if cognition is to be directed at something other than empirical world. No metaethical realism seems to be easily conceivable. The default conceptual scheme with its presumptions of logical behaviourism, according to Murdoch, is able to depict our inner life only as far as the latter is identifiable “through the application to it of public concepts, concepts which

8 While discussing the novels written by Murdoch Peter Conradi (1986, p. 6) notices that one of the sources of pleasure offered by her plots „comes from our sense that ... people are secretly much odder, less rational, more often powerered by obsession and passion than they outwardly pretend or know.”

9 EM – *Existentialists and Mystics* (1970).

10 Murdoch (AD, 1961/1997, p. 293) claims that there are political reasons, for which we have been made to think of ourselves “as totally free and responsible, knowing everything we need to know for the important purposes of life.” With the reference to Hume, however, she adds that there are things that “may be true in politics but false in fact.”

11 Cf. „When she described Hare and other analytical philosophers as having accounts of the 'logic' of moral discourse that reflect their particular moral attitude, her point was clearly not that other moral views could not be represented by their theories. The point was that the method of representation itself was what embodied the moral attitude of analytical philosophers; the model itself embodied their liberal or protestant views” (Diamond, 1996, p. 88).

can only be constructed on the basis of overt behaviour" (Ibid., p. 288). This view is strongly influenced by Kant, with "the removal of Kant's metaphysical background" (Ibid.) obviously, and as such framed as transcending all individual differences. What it gives full justice to are not a "whole particular tangled-up historical individuals," but rather "the universal reason in their breasts."

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Apart from the general account of the criticism directed by Murdoch at "the current view" in ethical theory it may be worthwhile to mention two more particular issues, which this philosopher shares much of the current discussion. The first of them refers to a critical analysis of *the principle-based* (or just *universal*) *ethical systems* and so called *moral particularism*.

Both deontology and consequentialism can be characterised by the reference to their considerable *impartiality* and *universality*. In fact, these two features, and for a good reason, have been often considered as their advantage. Although Murdoch is far from denying their metaethical merits, she is even more ready to point to the 'blind spots' connected with any universal perceptive in ethics, especially if such a perspective is taken as *the perspective*. This point in her writing has been noticed by various commentators including Antonaccio (2000, p. 5) who believes that Murdoch's language "resonates intentionally … with Kierkegaard's protest against Hegel" and emphasises the Anglo-Irish author's claim that it is "the particular and individual [which, KB] are paradigmatic of the real." Conradi (1989, p. 9), similarly, refers to the dichotomy between a fox and a hedgehog, developed by Isaiah Berlin, and says that Murdoch is "much more of a fox than a hedgehog – one who knows many things before she knows one."

In *Vision and Choice in Morality* Murdoch (VC, 1956/1997, pp. 87-88) writes about people "whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct," about people among whom one can not only find the very proponents of deontological and consequentialists ethical theories but also the very 'target' of these accounts, people who will easily recognise themselves as the agents described within these theories. Still, however, there is 'a reminder': "other people whose fundamental belief is that we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual." This 'reminder,' crucially, can be covered by the default view "only by sharpening the universality model to a point of extreme abstraction." There are, in other words, "kinds of moral outlook which it seems pointless to crush at all costs into the universal rules formula … moral

attitudes which emphasise the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations 'taped', the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique."[12]

The emphasis on the particularities of human life and ethical domain together with the criticism of rule-oriented ethical perspectives affiliates Murdoch with the contemporary currents of *anti-theoretical metaethical thought*, which in its most extreme version is "directed against all kind of theoretical or systematizing normative efforts in moral philosophy" and claims that any "attempts to theorize, or systematize, our understanding is bound to distort the actual moral competence which we rely on in practical moral thought and action" (Hämäläinen, 2009, p. 541).[13] Similarly, Murdoch can be understood as having given "impetus to the development of particularism" understood, very generally, as holding that "general rules and principles are insufficient to capture what is important to morality" (Driver, 2011, p. 293).

The connection of Murdoch with *particularism*, however, is not easy, because of the ambiguity of her respective remarks and the diversity of the latter (for useful reviews of contemporary particularism see Kirchin, 2007; Sinnott-Armstrong, 1999; Väyrynen, 2011). A helpful attempt at the reading of Murdoch in the particularist terms has been made by Julia Driver (2011, p. 295) who moderately claims that the former can be interpreted as, at least, a *methodological particularist*, "a particularist about moral theorizing."[14]

Methodological particularism assigned to Murdoch by Driver can be understood properly when it is in a sense confined as directed not against any general investigations in ethics, but rather against the kind of general perspective characteristic to consequentialism and deontology.[15] This perspective seems to consider the general principles as the sole substance of ethics and identify the development of the ability of moral reasoning, i.e. of the reasoning going from these principles to the particularities of moral life, with the moral development as such.[16] Against such a background, Murdoch wanted to emphasise the importance of the particular experience in ethical development

12 The emphasis on the universal and principle-related character of ethical domain can be also, according to Murdoch (VC, 1956/1997, p. 90), understood "an attempt to secure us against the ambiguity of the world." Such a psychological dimension, interestingly, can be connected with the account of a neurosis offered by Paul Tillich (1962, p. 71) in *The Courage to Be*, according to which a neurosis is "the way of avoiding non-being [including, importantly, all the ambiguities of being] by avoiding being."

13 An instance of such a position, which is of particular importance to virtue ethics, can be found in Bernard Williams (1981, p. x) scepticism about "an ethical theory, in the sense of a philosophical structure which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning."

14 As far as the *substantial particularism*, i.e. the views concerning moral metaphysics and reasons, the evidence in Murdoch's writings is to be "mixed."

15 Driver (2011, p. 305) is obviously right to say that any rejection of "considering things in general" would rule out some crucial (cf. below) elements of Murdochian ethics including "a unified vision of the Good, of Love, which can inform our moral perceptions and help us to appreciate the moral significance of details."

16 A very revealing example of such an identification in psychology can be found in the theory of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981).

and ethical practice: "we must consider cases in detail in making moral judgments, and we consider them as singularities" (Ibid., p. 302).[17] While, the universalist accounts tend to refer to the abstract intuitions as providing the general principles from which reasoning faculties should yield a proper decision to be made, here there are moral perception[18] and imaginative reflection, with their necessarily particular character, which are called for. In Murdoch it is especially the importance attached by herself to love and attention as "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (IP, Murdoch, 1962/1997, p. 327) which is in a direct opposition to the emphasis on impartiality proper to the majority of contemporary theory.[19]

Apart from the subject of particularism there is one another detailed contemporary issue that seems to have been present in the thought of Iris Murdoch. The issue in question is connected with so called *fact/value distinction* (cf. Davydova & Sharrock, 2003; Putnam, 2002), which begins with some famous remarks in David Hume's (1978) *Treatise of Human Nature* and can be identified with "the claim that no valid argument can move from entirely factual premises to any moral or evaluative conclusion" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 56). The very idea of this distinction has been recently subjected to a harsh criticism and Iris Murdoch, as has been noted by Diamond (1996, p. 79), "was among the first" to voice it. Her discussion of this post-Humean concept starts as early as in 1956 with *Vision and Choice in Morality* and it subsequently developed until the very last philosophical work, i.e. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Murdoch, 1992). The very distinction in question, importantly, is understood by Murdoch in a pretty broad terms as a general "dictum" that one "cannot attach morality to the substance of the world," a dictum which importance lies in the fact that it "expresses the whole spirit of modern ethics" and "has been accorded a sort of logical dignity" (ME, Murdoch, 1957/1997, p. 65).[20]

The "spirit of modern ethics," embodied in the fact-value distinction, is obviously multifaceted. It reflects itself, for instance, in the account of human rationality which can be applied only to the world of empirical facts, with the domain of value completely separate and left to the caprices of subjective will: "Reason deal in neutral descriptions and aims at being the frequently mentioned ideal observer. Value terminology will be the prerogative of the will" (IP, Murdoch, 1962/1997, p. 305).

Also the ethical language becomes substantially impoverished and intentionally confined to

17 This kind of prescription, what is important, applies equally well to ethical study: "For the purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form" (VC, Murdoch, 1956/1997, p. 97).

18 For the reading of Murdochian particularism in the context of moral perception's importance cf. Blum (1991).

19 It does not seem to be an accident that the universalist moral psychology of Kohlberg has been criticised for its impartialism by so called ethics of care (see Gilligan, 1982), which can be connected with many Murdochian insights.

20 *ME – Metaphysics and Ethics (1957).*

the words which refer to the evaluation of decision, the words such as 'good' or 'right.' . Such a conceptual confinement, importantly, is recognised as mistaken by Murdoch who believes that these words are "the most empty and general moral terms" (Ibid., p. 333) and that some "less general moral words such as 'true', 'brave', 'free', 'sincere' … are the bearers of very important ideas" (ME, Murdoch, 1957/1997, p. 73). Her discussion of such "normative-descriptive words, the specialised or secondary value words" (IP, Murdoch 1962/1997, p. 324) is important also because of the fact that it bears a considerable resemblance to what will become known, about 30 years later, as a distinction between thin and *thick ethical concepts* with the latter expressing "a union of fact and value" (Williams, 1985/2006, p. 129).[21,22]

What is especially important about Murdoch's argument about "less general moral words" is its connection with a particular account of human consciousness, an account at odds with all "the current view" would be prone to admit. Diamond (1996, p. 79), while discussing this argument, uses the quotation from Samuel Johnson's *Life of Milton* saying that "we are perpetually moralists" and it is for a very good reason. What Murdoch claims, in particular, is nothing less that "thinking is always an activity of ours as *moral* beings. This is the theme of the cognitive as always moral" (Ibid., p. 82).

The consequences of such a view are crucial for the whole project of ethical philosophy. The post-Kantian and post-Humean thought could have presumed that the world of facts, or the one of phenomena respectively, is neatly isolated from the one of values (or things in themselves). As such in consequence, it could be believed as common and equally accessible to all agents irrespectively of their normative positions (how different these position could be). It could be believed, in short, that all the parties involved "inhabit the same world" (Ibid., p. 84). According to Murdoch, however, any conscious engagement with the world, including importantly any attempt at providing a philosophical account of this world and of human agency, is inevitably "the thought of a morally live consciousness, a consciousness with its own moral character" (Ibid., p. 102).[23] Obviously, as emphasised by Diamond (Ibid., p. 103), one is not going around constantly thinking 'This is good' or 'This is evil'. "Rather, in ordinary consciousness, in our desires, aversions, images, feelings,

21 Bernard Williams (1985/2007, p. 240), as a matter of fact, admits that it was during the seminar led by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in 1950s that he first heard the idea that "it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest" expressed.

22 Diamond (1996, p. 83) is careful to notice that the "'specialized' moral concepts" referred to by Murdoch include but are not limited to thick ethical concepts of Williams.

23 One crucial consequence of such a point is that any attempts at the development of the neutral view of human agency are necessarily failed: "Moral philosophy cannot avoid taking sides, and would-be neutral philosophers merely take sides surreptitiously" (SGC, Murdoch 1967/1997, p. 363). As far as "the current model" is concerned, what it provides is not a universal and unbiased perspective but rather the expression of "the particular moral style of philosophical attention: its direction *away* from the moral color of an individual's awareness, and *to* choice and principles of choice in a world conceived as simply there for cognitive judgment" (Diamond, 1996, p. 105).

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."

One of the consequences of the above-given account of human consciousness is that the ethical domain cannot be explained as a series of decisions made against the normatively-neutral world of facts. The world as experienced by the human creature is never neutral in this sense. Rather, as soon as the "moments of decision arrive we see and are attracted by the world we have already (partly) made" (DPR, Murdoch, 1966/1997, p. 200).[24,25]. It is because of this reason that our deliberation when the choice is to be made is often ineffectual – "We are obscure to ourselves because the world we see already contains values and we may not be aware of the slow delicate processes of imagination and will which have put those values there" (Ibid., p. 200). The faculties through which we construct the world which is always already morally laden are *imagination* and *attention* or, in those cases in which the values introduced into the world are false, *fantasy* or *wishful thinking*. The difference between imagination and fantasy is a point in which many themes crucial to understanding Murdoch meet. One of such themes is *realism*, which can be achieved by imagination and "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention" (OGG, Murdoch, 1969/1997, p. 352),[26] but not through fantasy which "constitute a barrier to our seeing 'what is really there'" (DPR, Murdoch, 1966/1997, p. 199).

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The analysis of the Murdochian perspective on principle-based ethics and the fact-value distinction shows that her affinity with the officially recognised roots of contemporary virtue ethics goes beyond the very general criticism of consequentialism and deontology. As soon as one turns to a positive alternative to "modern moral philosophy" offered by Murdoch, however, her affinity with contemporary virtue ethics turns out to be considerably more complex. The general features of this alternative indeed identify the Murdochian proposal as virtue ethical. Some particularities of her perspective, however, are either absent from typical contemporary virtue ethical approaches or even interestingly different form the 'default' neo-Aristotelian stance.

24 DPR – *The Darkness of Practical Reason* (1966).

25 In fact, if "I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at" (IP, Murdoch, 1962/1997, p. 331). The respective notion of will is the one of the will as "obedience to reality, an obedience which ideally reaches a position where there is no choice" (Ibid., p. 332).

26 OGG – *On 'God' and 'Good'* (1969).

As far as the points which Murdoch shares with the majority of today virtue ethicists are concerned, the first issue to be mentioned is her emphasis on the *theory of personality*. The account offered by the "current view," is obviously considered by herself as impoverished with its delimitation of personality to the will which is as free and undetermined that, in principle, "*might* do anything" (EM, Murdoch, 1970/1997, p. 225). Instead of such a minimalistic psychology, as stressed by Antonaccio (2000, p. 12), we need a comprehensive model including "the full range of human cognitive activity – from the fluid and momentary movements of consciousness associated with a person's reactions and perceptions of the world and others, to the more fixed or stable thought patterns associated with a person's political convictions or religious beliefs." Instead of a narrow and 'behaviouristic' model of agency focused on public actions and its correlates, such as choices or deliberations (of choices), Murdoch wanted to develop a fully-fledged complex psychological account including the internal life with the "phenomena of moral struggle and moral fault, the effort to become morally better, and the failure to become so" (Ibid., p. 14). It is such an emphasis on the comprehensive psychological model that let her say – while speaking at the University of Caen – that what she had was "philosophy in a very general sense, *a kind of moral psychology* one might call it rather than philosophy" (Conradi, 1989, p. 1, emphasis added).

The psychological model sought for by Murdoch was designed to fulfil two main purposes. At first, it was intended as a bridge connecting then moral philosophy with other potentially revealing fields including, importantly, psychoanalysis. What one needed, as Murdoch claims, was "a moral psychology which can speak significantly of Freud and Marx" (OGG, Murdoch, 1969/1977, p. 337). Out of these thinkers it is the founding father of classical psychonalytic thought who is more important in the present context. According to Murdoch, in particular, what Sigmund Freud had succeeded at was providing "a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man" (Ibid., p. 341), i.e. of most of us at least most of the time. The Freudian account is obviously pessimistic as it depicts our soul (the psyche) as "an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control" (Ibid.). This metapsychological picture, importantly, is based on the concept of psychic energy, the Freudian libido, which will have far-reaching consequences for the prospects and methods of transcending this condition of "the fallen man."

The second aim of the Murdochian moral psychology is positive and more directly connected with the views of traditional virtue ethics. What is needed, in particular, apart from the lesson from Freud (and Marx) is a connection between psychological terminology and a terminology of virtue (Ibid.), "a positive conception of virtue" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 47). Such a conception is especially in demand, if one remembers that "a professedly neutral and simple

ability for detached thought" (DPR, Murdoch, 1966/1997, p. 201), i.e. a sole 'virtue' promoted by the "current view", has turned out to be completely inadequate to account for the richness of human consciousness and its engagement in the always normatively-laden world. An account of virtue, furthermore, is needed in order to provide a convincing and substantial notion of freedom. An empty concept of a person who "*might* do anything" (EM, Murdoch, 1970/1997, p. 225), a notion of a "mediocre man who achieves what he intends is not," according to Murdoch (DPR, 1966/1997,
p. 201), " the ideal of a free man." To be free is rather "something like this: to exist sanely without fear and to perceive what is real" (Ibid.). In order to fully explain what enables one to exist in such a way and to perceive "what is really there" one needs a comprehensive account of the mental dispositions involved with a special place for the cognitive and perceptual capabilities. Against the dangers of our self-centered obsessions and fantasy "'pure reason' has little chance" (DPR, Murdoch, 1966/1997, p. 202). What one needs is "a willed imaginative reaching out towards what is real" (Ibid.), a *reliable attention* and *moral perception*.[27]

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The focus on the need of complex moral psychology as well as the positive account of virtue including cognitive and perceptual elements is obviously common to Murdoch and the majority of contemporary virtue ethical proposals. Such a general similarity, however, should not blur several particularities of the Murdochian philosophy together with pretty crucial differences between the latter and neo-Aristotelian mainstream.

The first aspect of her work that is relatively special, even if not surprising in the context of the extra-philosophical career of a novelist, is an importance, a philosophical one, attached by Murdoch to *arts* and, especially, to *the novel*. Not only does she believe, in particular, that the "story is almost as fundamental a human concept as the thing," but also goes that far to say that it "may be that in the end the novelist [not the philosopher!, KB] will prove to be the savior of the human race" (EM, Murdoch, 1970/1997, pp. 232-233, cf. Ibid., p. 241). While talking about "the novel"

27 The importance of the latter is very clearly emphasised by Lawrence Blum (1991, p. 701), the author often referring to Murdoch: "An agent may reason well in moral situations, uphold the strictest standards of impartiality for testing her maxims and moral principles, and be adept at deliberation. Yet unless she perceives moral situations moral situations as moral situations, and unless she perceives their moral character accurately, her moral principles and skill at deliberation will be for nought and may even lead her astray. In fact one of the most important moral differences between people is between those who miss and those who see various moral features of situations confronting them" (Blum, 1991, p. 701).

Murdoch usually means the novel of the 19th century, which was realistic and truth-revealing by its concern "with real various individuals struggling in society" (AD, Murdoch, 1961/1997, p. 291). Its 20th-centrury counterpart is recognised by her as clearly inferior, because it is either "crystalline," i.e. dealing with a pure and abstract 'human condition,' rather than with real and particular human characters, or "journalistic" as "a large shapeless quasi-documentary object ... telling, with pale conventional characters, *some* straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts" (Ibid.).

The attention paid by Murdoch to the novel is obviously hardly overestimated. In fact, it can be considered as one of the early signs of the recent *ethical turn in literary studies*. Still, however, it is not a feature that makes her an exception among her colleagues with Martha Nussbaum (1990) being probably the most obvious example. If one wanted to point to but one such a feature, to the very special characteristic of the Murdochian account it would be her *Platonism* (for a introductory review see Conradi, 1994), which clearly contrasts with more or less explicit Aristotelian stance of the contemporary virtue ethics.

Aristotle, obviously, is present in the works of Murdoch and his presence is far from marginal. As a matter of fact, he is even compared once to Shakespeare, but, not accidentally as it seems, he is reckoned as a "Shakespeare of *science*," (IP, Murdoch 1962/1997, p. 327, emphasis added) rather than philosophy. Clearly, it is not the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that provides the central source of philosophical inspiration. Plato, on the other hand, is explicitly considered by Murdoch not only as "the father of our philosophy," but also as "our best philosopher" (LP, Murdoch, 1977/1997, p. 6).28 In 1968, while being interviewed by W. K. Rose, she makes the issue clear and calls herself a Platonist (Conradi, 1989, p. 18).29

Freud, as one remember, was considered by Murdoch as a theoretician of "the fallen man." Plato, in short, with his imagery of *the Cave,* has enriched the picture not only by preceding, in a metaphorical terms, the insights of psychoanalysis but also by showing, or at least by making some hints about the way out. The condition of "the fallen" man imprisoned in the Cave is both a cognitive malady and an existential drama: "Most of the time we fail to see the big wide world at all because we are blinded by obsession, anxiety, envy, resentment, fear. We make a small personal world in which we remain enclosed" (LP, Murdoch, 1977/1997, p. 14).

The fact of being enclosed in "a small personal world" is so deep and far-reaching that it can be found in the very conceptual schemata we use. Within the "current model," for instance, it is the self-centered notion of sincerity (or authenticity) which is recognised as central. Whatever work it is

28 LP – *Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee* (1977).

29 Importantly, one should add, there are at least two further self-descriptions of Murdoch that should be mentioned. At some points, in particular, she calls herself "a Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist" (cf. Hämäläinen, 2014) or "a Buddhist Christian" (cf. Robjant, 2011).

able to do, it is not able to transcendence the privacy of self-imprisonment. One may rather suspect, as Hauerwas (1986, p. 34) does, that instead of "attempting to free each man from his paralyzing preoccupation with himself, modern moral philosophy has only increased and legitimatized this excessive self-concern."

Other frameworks, such as the "notion of a loving respect for a reality other than oneself"(SG, Murdoch, 1959/1997, p. 218)[30] or the "other-centred concept of truth" (AD, Murdoch, 1961/1997, p. 293), are needed. The concept of *love* is an obvious point which connects the energetic models of Freud and Plato. What is crucial, both for the Plato's allegory of the Cave and the latter's reading by Murdoch, is the omnipresence of the *perceptual imagery* of seeing, vision, attention, and looking.[31] Love is first of all constituted by the "loving gaze." Moral life, accordingly, "is more than thinking clearly and making rational choices. It is a way of seeing the world … the progressive attempt to widen and clarify our vision of reality" (Hauerwas, 1986, p. 36 & 44). This reality-directed and perceptual dimension, importantly, will be inevitably neglected by any account based on the notions of the will and choice, especially if the latter is not supplemented by the substantial model of the external reality. For Murdoch, as Blum (2011, p. 307) emphasises, "choice takes place only against the backdrop of the world of value, and *seeing* that world should be the prime task of the individual moral agent." The virtuous person, in a short phrase by Crisp (2011, p. 287), "will be someone who looks out rather than in."

The way out of 'the Cave' is, in a clearly Platonic way, a way towards *reality*.[32] The imprisonment of "the fallen man" can be understood as "his inability to bear reality … To be human is to create illusion" (Hauerwas, 1986, pp. 31-32). The attempt at the escape, in turn, including morality and goodness "is a form of realism" (OGG, Murdoch, 1969/1997, p. 347). What is crucial, and what has been convincingly shown by Snow (2005), is that realism and love do not rule out each other. Love, in fact, is understood by Murdoch as "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than ourselves is real" (SG, Murdoch, 1959/1997, p. 215). The very value of a "loving gaze," as Snow emphasises, "relies in large part on its accuracy with respect to the facts."[33]

30 SG – *The Sublime and the Good* (1959).

31 For a detailed and revealing account of the visual metaphors in Murdoch see Blum (2011).

32 The concept of reality together with the whole Platonic metaphysical framework entailed have inspired an interesting debate about whether Murdoch can be read as offering a more or less traditional metaphysical viewpoint. One of the well-established readings offered by Antonaccio (2000, p. 12) claims that Murdoch attempts to "frame a metaphysical ethic in an age that she believed is characterized above all by 'the elimination of metaphysics from ethics." It is opposed by some other interpretors such as Hämäläinen (2013a, 2014). For a revealing discussion see Antonaccio (2013), Hämäläinen (2013b), and Robjant (2013).

33 When discussing the famous example of a woman who overcomes her hostility towards her daughter-in-law, see IP, Snow (2005, p. 495) writes: "A loving gaze would allow the mother to see her daughter-in-law's whole personality for what it is, a complex constellation of good and bad qualities … to recognize the flaws for what they are, bona

All far-reaching dimensions and consequences of Murdochian Platonism cannot be given a full account here. Still, however, there are at least two of them that should be mentioned. The first of them is *the notion of Good*, which appears in Murdoch as a kind of substitute for the one of God. In *On 'God' and 'Good'* she defined the former as "a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*" (OGG, Murdoch, 1969/1997, p. 344). As far as such an object is concerned she makes it clear that, according to her, "there is ... no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense" (SGC, Murdoch, 1967/1997, p. 365). Despite of this fact, importantly, she still believes that we need an equivalent which would be able to fulfill of the crucial functions once connected with 'God.'[34] For such a "central explanatory image which joins together the different aspects of the picture" she has chosen "the concept of Good" (Ibid., p. 375).

The Murdochian notion of the Good, as read by Antonaccio (2000, p. 15) is "twofold" and consists "of a formal component with both transcendental and perfectionist aspects, and a substantive component specifying the content of the ideal of perfection." The Good is transcendental, as the condition of possibility of consciousness and cognition. In full accordance with the Platonic image of the Sun Murdoch writes that its idea is "the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are" (OGG, Murdoch, 1969/1997, p. 357). It helps us, in consequence, "to pierce the veil of selfish / consciousness and join the world as it really is" (Ibid., pp. 376-377). The Good, furthermore, has some clearly energetic properties. It's "a transcendent magnetic centre" (Ibid., p. 361), which provides the power to surpass the self-centered mechanical ego.

What is crucial in the present context is the concept of Good is, at least in a straightforward reading, clearly non-natural (for an alternative account see Hämäläinen 2013a, 2014). As such, additionally, it takes a place which contemporary virtue ethics usually grants to a naturalistic concept of *eudaimonia*. The nowadays neo-Aristotelians (as well as neo-Nietzscheans), as noted by Taylor (1996, p. 5), "take us beyond morality to issues about the good life" and "they stop there." Murdoch, on the other hand, not only takes "this first step," but also "one further." The non-natural character of the Murdochian Good lies in the fact that it "cannot be entirely or exhaustively explained in terms of its contributing to a fuller, better, richer, more satisfying human life. It is a good that we might sometimes more appropriately respond to in suffering and death, rather than in fullness and life – the domain, as usually understood, of religion."

Apart from at least seemingly non-natural notion of the Good there is one another feature

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fide characteristics of her daughter-in-law, instead of prejudiced distortions projected by the mother."

34 Cf. "I don't believe in a personal god and neither do the majority of people in your country, but they believe in religion" (Murdoch in: Sagare, 2001, p. 711).

that sharply separates Murdoch from the default virtue ethical position. The feature in question, in short, is the specification of the final aim of moral progress as *unselfing* or "pure 'selflessness'" (Crisp, 2011, p. 288), rather than the creation and cultivation of a virtuous self. The condition of the imprisonment in the Cave can be read as the imprisonment by (in) our own self. Our psyche, or "fat relentless ego" (OGG, Murdoch, 1969/1997, p. 342), in particular, is "a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself" (SGC, Murdoch, 1967/1997, p. 364). The life outside the Cave is in a sense unnatural, as it is "a part of human nature to be selfish" (Murdoch in: Sagare, 2001, p. 697). As far as the Cave is concerned, Freud was completely right.

What is crucial about our psyche is that it constitutes a hindrance to our true cognition: "Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world" (SGC, Murdoch, 1967/1997, p. 369). Even self-examination, which seems to be a part of the moral progress according to virtue-ethical stance, can all too often strengthen this system rather than undermine it. Love aimed at by the moral progress, on the other hand, is "to respect and to attend and be unselfish, to withdraw yourself and let other things exist." Such a state would provide one with a freedom, a state of "being more open and calmer, more able to understand what is surrounding one" (Murdoch in: Sagare, 2001, pp. 703-704).[35]

The idea of unselfing, importantly, seems to leads Murdoch beyond Plato and, in fact, it can be very closely connected with some of her inspirations which have not been hitherto mentioned. One very direct source of her thoughts was the French mystic Simone Weil, whom Murdoch started to read in the 1950s (Conradi, 1989, p. 16). And it is not only the thought of this author that influenced Murdoch, but also her own character. The personality of Weil, as she writes, "which emerges from these writing is not always attractive, but it compels respect," it expresses "the union of a passionate search for truth with a simplicity and austerity of personal living, which gives to what she writes an authority which cannot be imitated" (KV, Murdoch, 1956/1997, p. 159-160).[36]

The influence of Weil can been seen in some relatively particular issues, such as the inclusion of the notion of attention as an alternative to the conceptual scheme based on the will (AD, Murdoch, 1961/1997, p. 293), but more importantly in a general *mystical* (or 'mystical') bend her philosophy will come to exhibit. In 1969, Murdoch was pretty explicit when she wrote that the "background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience" (OGG, Murdoch, 1969/1997, p. 360).

35 It is not clear whether the condition of unselfing would involve the lack of considering oneself and one's interests (self-transcendence) or rather the recognition of the fact that "others have needs as demanding" as our own (Crisp, 2011, p. 288).

36 KV – *Knowing the Void* (1956).

Simon Weil is but one source of Murdoch's inspiration which is relatively alien to the mainstrean Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Apart from her one can mention some currents of the 20th-century Christian theology, especially (as well evidenced in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*) those focused around the theme of so called demythologisation, as well as Buddhism. Both of them can certainly provide a valuable source for the deeper understanding of Murdoch.[37]

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A short discussion of Iris Murdoch's Platonism as well as a brief indication of somewhat unusual themes and inspirations present in her thought can be summed up by saying that her moral philosophy is at least as different from the 'default' virtue ethical views as it is similar to them. Even though such a conclusion can seem a bit troublesome in the present context one still can address it in an intelligible and revealing way.

One clue concerning how it can be done is provided by the very philosopher discussed and it is the attitude of realism and particularism. The thought of Murdoch, as well as any other worthwhile theoretical model, is always specific in the sense that it cannot be fully explained away by the reference to a general term, such as the one of virtue ethics. At the same time, however, in the case of Murdoch such a reference is still non-trivial and informative as it indicates a *family resemblance* existing between her ideas and more conventionally virtue ethical perspectives.

The second attempt to conceive the slightly problematic status of Murdoch as belonging (or not) to the domain of virtue ethics can be made through the notion of the 'varieties of virtue ethics,' which can be understood in two distinguishable way. Firstly, in particular, this concept can be considered as referring to *the actuality* of all diverse currents which are present within the academia and commonly recognised as constituting the field of virtue ethics. Secondly, in turn, it can also denote *the potentiality* of the accounts which possess all the essential features of virtue ethics but, because of their uncommon characteristics, are rarely present in contemporary virtue ethical debate. And it is in the context of the latter meaning that the work of Iris Murdoch may turn out to be particularly revealing and inspiring.

37 Some analyses, in fact, have been already conducted. Cf. Grimshaw (2010) & Osborn (2010).

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