

Murdoch's Platonistic virtue ethics

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If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing
would appear to man as it is, infinite.
(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,
Plate 14)

καταβατέον οὖν ἐν μέρει ἐκάστῳ εἰς τὴν τῶν ἄλλων
συνοίκησιν καὶ συνεθιστέον τὰ σκοτεινὰ θεάσασθαι.
(Plato, *Republic* 520c2-3)¹

ABSTRACT

In this paper I develop a thesis about normative ethics that we might call Platonistic virtue ethics (PVE): Good agency in the truest and fullest sense presupposes the contemplation of the Form of the Good. I explore PVE as an alternative to the more familiar Aristotelian virtue ethics, asking what it might mean, for us to day, to do anything like contemplate "the Form of the Good". In particular I suggest that Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy has at its heart a conception of contemplation or attention that genuinely is, as she thought it was, an inheritor of Plato's key ethical concerns, and give some examples to show what is involved in this conception².

KEYWORDS

Plato, virtue ethics, attention, contemplation, the Form of the Good, Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil

I

Something very familiar in contemporary moral philosophy is a view called Aristotelian virtue ethics, which says this:

AVE: Right action is action in accordance with the virtues and contrary to no virtue.

Compare a far less familiar view, which we might call Platonistic virtue ethics:

1 "Each of you in his turn must go back down to the community where the others live together, and learn, by practising together with them, to have contemplative understanding even of the things of darkness." (PLATO, *Republic* 520c2-3) The (rather free) translation is my own, as are the other Plato translations in this paper.

2 The present paper is substantially the text of Chapter 12 of my recent book *Knowing What To Do* (OUP). Many thanks to the publisher for having given the permission to republish it.

PVE: Good agency in the truest and fullest sense presupposes the contemplation of the Form of the Good.

The historical Aristotle certainly held AVE, and at times comes close to this very formulation (e.g. NE 1104b27, 1106a23-24). Fairly clearly the historical Plato likewise held PVE, at least at the time when he wrote the *Republic*. His clearest enunciation of PVE is at *Republic* 517 b8-c6:

In the realm of the known, what is seen last of all - and with difficulty - is the Form of the Good. Once that is seen, we can reason about it: it is the explanation of all that is right and beautiful. In the visible realm, the Form of the Good gives birth to light and the power of light, the sun. In the intelligible realm, the Form of the Good is itself the power which brings about truth and understanding; and it is what anyone who is to act wisely (*emphronôs*), either for his own ends or for the public good, must see.

PVE raises all sorts of obvious questions. Here are six of them.

First, I call the view ‘Platonistic *Virtue Ethics*’. But its defining formula PVE does not even mention virtue. Is PVE a *virtue* ethics at all?

The answer according to Plato is yes, insofar as contemplating the Form of the Good both causes and expresses in us the four cardinal virtues that he recognizes - wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. (Though if we could confront him with this question, I suspect he might add that names aren’t everything, and that it isn’t that important how PVE is *classified*.)

Secondly, PVE speaks of *good agency* rather than of *right action*. Why?

Good, not *right*, in order to focus on goodness as the prior and more basic concept. Rightness, according to Plato, is simply perfect goodness applied to the world’s indefinitely many contingencies; it thus “partakes of the indefinite” in a way that goodness does not. *Agency* not *action*, in order to focus on characters rather than on single decisions. This shift of focus from deeds to doer seems congenial to virtue ethics, which - as has often been pointed out - is not all that naturally recruited into the common contemporary practice of wrangling over definitions of ‘the right’.

Thirdly, it might occur to the reader that there is no reason why someone should not hold both PVE and AVE. I set them up as alternatives, and many readers will assume - contemporary philosophy rather tends to teach us to assume - that this means *exclusive* alternatives. But are these two positions really inconsistent?

The answer is no, they’re not inconsistent, nor is it important that they should be. The proponent of PVE can affirm AVE too. The reason why he is not an Aristotelian virtue ethicist in AVE’s sense may only be because he doesn’t think AVE is where the emphasis should go. AVE is not according to him the *key* thing to

say in ethics, or the thing to say if you only have time to say one thing. (Though why would that be?) Conversely the defender of AVE can defend PVE too: it seems likely to me both that Plato held AVE, and also that Aristotle held PVE (or something close to it that didn't commit him to believing in Platonic Forms).

Fourthly, PVE uses the rather weaselly phrase 'in the truest and fullest sense'. What does that phrase mean?

The idea is that agency guided by the contemplation of the Form of the Good is the ideal case of good agency. The thesis sets a *target* for good agency not a *baseline*: it defines good agency as agency that approximates that ideal, not as agency that surmounts this or that threshold test. (Which is not to say that there are no threshold tests in ethics; but if there are, they won't be part of the definition of good agency.) The claim is not that contemplation is sufficient for good agency: of course you can engage in such contemplation and act badly, or even be a bad person. Nor is it that contemplation is necessary for good agency: of course you can act well, or even be a good person, and not be a contemplator in this sense. The claim, to repeat, is a *target* claim not a *baseline* claim. It is that the ideally good agent is a contemplator; that the closer you get to ideal goodness the closer, *ceteris paribus*, you will get to being a contemplator; and that this tells us something important about good agency. (But why think even that is true? Read on.)

Fifthly, PVE uses the rather unclear word 'presupposes'. What does this word mean?

'Presupposes' means that the agency that PVE mentions proceeds out of, is caused and conditioned by, the contemplation that PVE mentions. It is, so to speak, the *fruit* of such contemplation.

And sixthly, the biggest and most obvious question of all: what does 'the contemplation of the Form of the Good' mean?

Undoubtedly many readers of Plato will think that this question is unanswerable: that there is nothing that 'the contemplation of the Form of the Good' means, or even could mean. Therefore, very probably, they will give up on PVE. They will conclude that PVE is unworkable, because it depends essentially on Plato's incoherent notion of 'the Form of the Good' - an incoherence which naturally transmits into the incoherence of the notion of 'the contemplation of the Form of the Good'.

We might respond to this - as Plato does in works later than the *Republic*³ - by trying to develop a notion of the Form of the Good that is not only coherent but clearly coherent, so that it becomes a feasible basis for a view of ethics such as PVE

³ I would say that vindicating the Forms is at least part of Plato's project in the *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Philebus*, and *Timaeus*. I cannot develop this idea here, but for a lot more about how it applies to the *Theaetetus* (and a little about the *Parmenides*) see my *Reading Plato's Theaetetus*; for the *Sophist* see my "Making sense of the *Sophist*".

suggests. It is highly controversial whether Plato ever succeeded in this project, or succeeded in stating his central claims in a way that might command reasonable assent. Many contemporary scholars share Jonathan Barnes's pessimistic dismissiveness:

Plato's philosophical views are mostly false, and for the most part they are evidently false; his arguments are mostly bad, and for the most part they are evidently bad. Studying Plato will indeed make you realize how difficult philosophy is, and the study has a particular fascination and a particular pleasure. But it can also be a dispiriting business: for the most part, the student of Plato is preoccupied by a peculiar question - How and why did Plato come to entertain such exotic opinions, to advance such outré arguments?⁴

Whether or not we are thus pessimistic, an alternative and less metaphysically committing response seems attractive - seems at times to attract Plato himself. This alternative is to try and develop a more metaphysically modest version of PVE.

For though Plato's version of PVE involves him in what have seemed to many critics, both ancient and modern, to be hopelessly far-fetched metaphysical views, yet the heart of the "theory of Forms" as Plato presents it (especially in the *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*) is not metaphysical or logical. It is experiential; and the experiences to which it appeals are meant to be *possible* for almost anyone, and *actual*, at least to some degree, in many of us.

What is this, for instance, if not a description of experience? -

When, therefore, a man, by means of the right sort of desire for boys, rises up above these particulars and begins to behold that thing The Beautiful, then he will almost have completed his journey. For this is the right way to be introduced or initiated into the science of love (*ta erôtika*): to start with particular beautiful things, but be always rising above them for the sake of that one Beautiful, using them like the rungs of a ladder: to move from one particular beautiful body to two beautiful bodies, then from two to all beautiful bodies; then from beautiful bodies to beautiful characters (*epitêdeumata*); then from beauty of character to the beauty of forms of understanding; then, finally, from these various forms of understanding to the

4 J. BARNES, *Introduction*, in: ID. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995: xvi. In context, Barnes' point is to contrast Aristotle favourably with Plato as thus described. The contrast doesn't really hold up: Aristotle has plenty of exotic opinions and outré arguments too.

one kind of understanding that concerns itself with nothing but the Beautiful Itself, in order that he may in the end know the essence of beauty⁵.

In this narrative of ascent and elsewhere, Plato talks the way he does about the Forms because he takes them to be things that can be phenomenologically present to us: "Each of the just and unjust, good and bad, and of all the Forms... although it is one in itself, shows up all over the place, and appears to be many things, because of its communion (*koinôniai*) with deeds, and bodies, and the other Forms"⁶. As Plato admits in *Symposium* 211b-d, we experience The Beautiful, *to kalon*, only in flashes; still, there *are* such flashes. For Plato the Forms are things that we can be experientially acquainted with - and whether we realize it or not, quite often are.

This point about the importance of experiential knowledge for Plato comes out in at least three ways in the description I quote above from *Republic* 517b8-c6. First and most patently of all, Plato's comparison of the Form of the Good to the sun is expressly designed to convey to us that the Form of the Good is not just something that (under the right conditions, such as escape from the Cave) we *can* be aware of. It is something that (under those conditions) we can hardly help being aware of.

Secondly, Plato introduces the comparison with the sun with a double reference to appearances: *ta d'oun emoi phainomena houtô phainetai*, "but to me at least, the appearances appear like this"⁷. How could he do more to get it across to us that his claim is experiential first and metaphysical, if at all, only second?

Thirdly, note the words that I translate "Once that is seen, we can reason about it" (*ophtheisa de syllogistea*)⁸. *Once* that is seen - and not before. To repeat - experience comes first, metaphysics and logic second. The intellectual moves whereby we access the Forms are, Plato thinks, simple and easily made; in a sense, anyone who is minimally aware at all is already making them. The difficulty in getting to grasp the Forms is not a *technical* difficulty. It is more like a difficulty for one's character.⁹

It follows that a good critique of PVE should not content itself with metaphysical arguments alone. Here as in a number of other cases, the metaphysical arguments are not much more than book-keeping on the experience. It may happen that the metaphysical claims that a Platonist finds most natural as

5 PLATO, *Symposium* 211b6-d1.

6 PLATO, *Republic* 476a2-7.

7 *Ibi*, 517b8.

8 *Ibi*, 517c1.

9 "[There is a] contrast between understanding the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will rather than with the intellect." (WITTGENSTEIN, *Culture and Value* 17e).

expressions of the experience of the Forms turn out to be ontologically extravagant, perhaps even logically incoherent. But if that happens, the Platonist very probably won't withdraw the claim that she has had the experience in the first place; much more likely, she will simply look for other ways of expressing that experience. Criticizing PVE cannot be solely about asking what adds up logically or metaphysically; it must also be about asking whether the Platonist's experiential reports ring true.

"Ring true for whom?" is the obvious question here. The question brings us back to the importance of the affective and dispositional education that is so painstakingly detailed by Plato in Books 2-4 of the *Republic*. Plato fairly obviously does not think that the experiential reports that someone might bring back of what it is like to contemplate the Form of the Good have to 'ring true' for just anyone at all. What he does think is that any reasonably well-educated person ought to be able to make at least some sense of at least the more modest of his claims. It will be easiest, of course, for those who have undergone a proper Platonic education. But perhaps anyone who is not hopelessly ill-conditioned can get *somewhere* towards understanding what Plato is on about when he talks about the contemplation of the Form of the Good, if he just starts from experiences that, we may reasonably assume, are perfectly familiar to him.

So let's try to do just that. Let us suspend, at least for the moment, PVE's ambitious talk about contemplating the Form of the Good. Let us assume that we ourselves are not hopelessly ill-conditioned, and ask a less ambitious question. Suppose we adopt a position that I will call *modest* Platonistic virtue ethics, a summary statement of which can be this: -

MPVE: Good agency in the truest and fullest sense presupposes contemplation.

- And suppose we then turn to the two obvious questions about MPVE: (a) what is contemplation? And (b) contemplation of what? I consider these questions together in the next section.

II

Let us begin with a notion of contemplation that is perfectly familiar from our ordinary thinking and awareness. For this sort of contemplation, I suggest this simple definition:

Contemplation is sustained careful intellectually honest concentration on some object of attention, attended to for its own sake, in order to understand it.

The word "object" is crucial in this definition; contemplation is meant to be objectual knowledge, knowledge of objects not propositions, in action. However, the definition is only a starting-point. Contemplation in the present sense is

unlikely to be captured satisfactorily just by a definition. It has a phenomenology, indeed a whole phenomenological profile. There's not just 'something it is like' to contemplate, there are lots of things it is like.

One central thing it is like is simply what it is like to concentrate calmly and steadily on study. Contemplation in this sense is something with a history, something humans have been doing, in one form or another, pretty well as long as they've been human. (So academics should know what I am talking about here; but not *only* them.) Here is a description of such concentration by someone who has herself worked as an academic, A.S. Byatt:

The London Library was Roland's favorite place.¹⁰ It was shabby but civilized, alive with history but inhabited also by living poets and thinkers who could be found squatting on the slotted metal floors of the stack, or arguing pleasantly at the turning of the stair. Here Carlyle had come, here George Eliot had progressed through the bookshelves.... The clock ticked, motes of dust danced in sunlight, Roland meditated on the tiresome and bewitching endlessness of the quest for knowledge. Here he sat, recuperating a dead man's reading, timing his exploration by the library clock and the faint constriction of his belly. (Coffee is not to be had in the London Library.)

...When he left, with his green and tomato boxes heaped on his *Selected Ash*, they nodded affably behind the issue desk.... He left the building as usual, his battered and bulging briefcase under his arm. He climbed on a 14 bus in Piccadilly, and went upstairs, clutching his booty. Between Piccadilly and Putney, where he lived in the basement of a decaying Victorian house, he progressed through his usual states of somnolence, sick juddering wakefulness, and increasing worry about Val.¹¹

I take it is no accident that Byatt begins a novel called *Possession* with this description of one kind of possession: the possession of the scholar by his research project. As anyone who has engaged in it will know, study or contemplation of this sort can indeed, as Byatt's description brings out, be completely and hypnotically absorbing. It is, as Roland finds, both boring ("tiresome") - at least to those who aren't used to the long stretches of exclusive concentration on one object that it requires - and also (in a quiet way) exciting, "bewitching", full of the thrill of the chase (cp. Socrates' hunting cries at *Rep.* 432d).

10 On St James's Square between Pall Mall and Piccadilly; not the same place as the British Library, and not, unfortunately, a free-admission library.

11 A.S. BYATT, *Possession*, Vintage, London 1990, Chapter 1.

On the excitement and absorption of this sort of contemplation, compare the opening of Bernard Lonergan's *Insight*:

Deep within us all, emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain. Just what is wanted, has many names. In what precisely it consists, is a matter of dispute. But the fact of inquiry is beyond all doubt. It can absorb a man. It can keep him for hours, day after day, year after year, in the narrow prison of his study or his laboratory. It can send him on dangerous voyages of exploration. It can withdraw him from other interests, other pursuits, other pleasures, other achievements. It can fill his waking thoughts, hide from him the world of ordinary affairs, invade the very fabric of his dreams. It can demand endless sacrifices that are made without regret though there is only the hope, never a certain promise, of success. What better symbol could we find for this obscure, exigent, imperious drive than a man, naked, running excitedly, crying, 'I've got it'?¹²

And on the elusiveness of real attentiveness cp. Bertrand Russell (talking about philosophical logic, but perhaps we can apply what he says more widely):

The subject-matter that you are supposed to be thinking of is so exceedingly difficult and elusive that any person who has ever tried to think about it knows you do not think about it except perhaps once in six months for half a minute... The really good philosopher is the one who does once in six months manage to think about it. Bad philosophers never do.¹³

Such study always takes place against the background of the possibility of distraction, and can be extremely elusive when we are not in the right state of mind (and body). But done right, it involves and evokes a sense of calm and focus, what some call a feeling of being 'centered down'.¹⁴ It lifts us up out of ourselves, gives us

12 B. LONERGAN, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1957, p. 4.

13 B. RUSSELL, *Portraits From Memory And Other Essays*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1956, p. 185.

14 Or it can do. It can also, and indeed at the same time, be maddeningly frustrating: most of the time because you're not getting anywhere, the rest of the time either because you are getting somewhere but much too slowly, or because you are getting somewhere, but the wrong somewhere.

These reports are of course autobiographical, but it isn't just me. "In the course of our conversations Russell would often exclaim: 'Logic's hell!' - And this fully expresses what we experienced while thinking about the problems of logic; namely their immense difficulty. Their

a sense that we are, for once in our lives, really and properly *seeing* at least some bit of reality, and seeing it as it were 'from on high'. For this and perhaps other reasons, it makes us (or it can make us) very happy: the library is Roland's favorite place, the place where he is happiest. As Roland also finds, such study insulates us and redirects us, temporarily at least, away from our own unhappiness. (Does this make it *escapist*? I'll come back to that.)

So much (so far) on (a) what contemplation is, on the modest understanding that I am recommending. What about question (b): what is Roland contemplating?

The answer is that he is looking at the marginalia and the note-slips that a Victorian poet, Randolph Henry Ash, left inside his copy of Giambattista Vico's *La Scienza Nuova*, and which have remained in the book undisturbed since Ash's death until the day in 1986 when Roland opens it. Roland is about to discover something rather sensational inside the Vico, namely evidence that this major Victorian poet had a love-affair with another major poet of the time, Christabel LaMotte.¹⁵

"But surely only a scholar could be interested in *that!* Surely contemplation, if it is to be ethically significant, has to be of something more important than long-dead people's private lives?"

This objection is extremely tempting; I shall explore in the next section what truth there is in it. There *is* truth in it - *some* truth; but we can acknowledge that without missing an important possibility. This is the possibility that it might be good to contemplate *almost anything*, even something as cosmically by-the-way as what Roland is contemplating. There might be something to be said ethically for contemplating all sorts of minutiae, taking learning in all sorts of directions. At any rate (as they say), it keeps you off the streets; to rewrite Dr Johnson, man is never so innocently employed as when he is accumulating knowledge. Moreover, as T.H. White notes in a passage that I have loved since I was nine, all sorts of study share the capacity I noted in Roland's studies, the capacity to make us happy:

"The best thing for disturbances of the spirit," replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night

hardness - their hard & slippery texture. The primary ground of this experience, I think, was this fact: that each new phenomenon of language that we might retrospectively think of could show our earlier explanation to be unworkable. But that is the difficulty Socrates gets caught up in when he tries to give the definition of a concept. Again and again an application of the word emerges that seems not to be compatible with the concept to which other applications have led us. We say: but that isn't how it is! - it is like that though! - & all we can do is keep repeating these antitheses." (L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Culture and Value*, p. 30e).

¹⁵ Both poets are fictional, but judging by the poetic styles that Byatt forges for them, Ash is rather like a cross between Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, and LaMotte rather like a cross between Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson.

listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love and lose your moneys to a monster, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then - to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the poor mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn - pure science, the only purity there is. You can learn astronomy in a lifetime, natural history in three, literature in six. And then, after you have exhausted a milliard lifetimes in biology and medicine and theocriticism and geography and history and economics, why, you can start to make a cartwheel out of the appropriate wood, or spend fifty years learning to begin to learn to beat your adversary at fencing. After that you can start again on mathematics, until it is time to learn to plough..."¹⁶

And is the happiness brought by such variously idiosyncratic studies as Merlin describes here a self-indulgent, escapist happiness? Not in the book, where Merlin recommends learning something (anything) to his pupil, the juvenile Arthur, not as a form of escapism, but as a way to "pull himself together" and rise above a fit of self-pity. Learning *can* be escapist, of course; but it needn't be. On the contrary, even the contemplation of idiosyncratic or "unimportant" subject-matters, like fencing or wheel wrighting or (some would say) philosophical logic or the private lives of Victorian poets, might be a form of self-discipline rather than of self-indulgence.

Even if such studies do involve escape, the escape in question may well be an ethically crucial one - the escape from the self. Iris Murdoch argues this using the example of learning Russian:

If I am learning Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. The honesty and humility required of the student - not to pretend to know what one does not know - is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory... Studying is normally an exercise of virtue as

16 T.H. WHITE, *The Sword in the Stone*, Collins, London 1938 Ch.XXI, p. 265.

well as of talent, and shows us a fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world.¹⁷

The “fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world” that Murdoch has in mind here is what we may call the authority of reality over the self. Serious, contemplative study of Russian - or of Randolph Henry Ash, or of fencing, or logic, or whatever - is good for the student because, as I put it above, it “lifts us up out of ourselves”. (Or as people say sometimes to someone preoccupied by his own troubles: “Come and see a film, it’ll take you out of yourself.”) Contemplation forces us, or perhaps I should say frees us, to recognize something *objective*, something beyond ourselves, something we cannot control, something that imposes the discipline of external reality on “the “fat relentless ego”¹⁸. To put it bluntly, this kind of contemplation, no matter what its object, does us good because it gets us to *shut up and listen*; to listen to something real outside our own heads. In this sense the key word in the title of an illuminating article by Mark Johnston, “The authority of affect”¹⁹, is, of course, *authority*: as much as what we emotionally feel, what we intellectually attend to can have a kind of normative and reason-giving force for us, and in the cases that interest me here, it will have this kind of normative force. (“Anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue”²⁰) Against the background of this sort of consideration, there is a certain irony to the familiar charge that what I am calling contemplation is escapist, or involves a flight from reality. On the contrary, it can be a flight *to* reality, and an escape from unreality.

Nor, incidentally, need the “something real” that is contemplated be anything terribly intellectual; contemplation is not only for the clever. “It is so patently a good thing to take delight in flowers and animals that people who bring home potted plants and watch kestrels might be surprised at the notion that these things have anything to do with virtue”²¹. If we insist on the crude clear question “What’s the use of contemplation?”, and won’t accept the real answer, that it is valuable in its own right, still a crude clear instrumental answer is available. To put it one way, contemplation is good for us because it builds in us the ability to concentrate, a crucial prerequisite for all sorts of other ends. To put it another and slightly different way, contemplation is good because it focuses us, and focuses us on

17 I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London, Routledge 1970, p. 89.

18 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, p. 58.

19 M. JOHNSTON, *The Authority of Affect*, «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», Vol. 63, No. 1 (Jul., 2001), pp. 181-214.

20 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, p. 84.

21 *Ibi*, p. 85.

something outside ourselves. The benefit gained from the exercise does not depend on what that something is - as Evelyn Underhill notes:

Gather yourself up, as the exercises of recollection have taught you to do. Then - with attention no longer frittered among the petty accidents and interests of your personal life, but poised, tensed, ready for the work you shall demand of it - stretch out by a distinct act of loving will towards one of the myriad manifestations of life that surround you: and which, in an ordinary way, you hardly notice... Pour yourself towards it, do not draw its image towards you. Deliberate - more, impassioned - attentiveness: this is the condition of success. As to the object of contemplation, it matters little. From Alp to insect, anything will do, provided that your attitude be right: for all things in this world towards which you are stretching out are linked together, and one truly apprehended will be the gateway to the rest.²²

“So contemplation in this sense can be of *absolutely anything*. So, can I ‘submit myself to the authority of reality’ by making an in-depth and detailed study of - hard-core pornography, or Nazi memorabilia, or excrement, or celebrity magazines?”

Well actually, yes you can, provided that is really what you are doing: submitting yourself to the authority of reality, not pursuing some disreputable private obsession or getting lost in pointless, anxious, fantasy-warped trivia. I have not suggested for a moment that contemplation cannot be corrupted. Of course it can. The “frightful devious egoism of the human soul”²³ is everywhere a threat to our efforts to make genuine contact with realities outside our selves. At every turn it directs us away from the shock of the real, back towards the comforts of illusion, fantasy, and private obsession that we nurture within ourselves. We feel uneasy with the investigator of Nazi memorabilia, or porn, or excrement, because we worry that we are in the presence, not of the liberating quest for truth, but of a self-serving and degrading fetish. (It is because the necrophiliac Leontius son of Aglaion knows perfectly well that he is a fetishist that he despises himself²⁴)

Yet even investigations into the lowest and “dirtiest” things - and surely “dirtiness” is a concept we *obviously* need to outgrow²⁵ - even investigations like

22 E. UNDERHILL, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Developments of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th ed., New York, Meridian, 1955, pp. 93-4.

23 I. MURDOCH, *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Chatto & Windus 1997, p. 401.

24 PLATO, *Republic* 439e.

25 Mt 15.11: “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man.” Simone Weil: “La pureté est le pouvoir de contempler la souillure.” S. WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, Paris, Plon 1947, p. 200.

these *can* be conducted in a pure spirit of inquiry.²⁶ It is an important point about science in general that it too involves this kind of contemplative attention to things as they are in themselves. Most people seem to think that the question about “science and humane values” is the question how humane values can possibly be justified, against the starkly inhumane perspective that science affords. Perhaps part of the answer to this familiar difficulty is just to come to a better appreciation of the ways in which the practice of science itself is an expression of and response to one of the deepest humane values of all - the value of contemplation that I have been discussing.

I will say a little more about science at the end. For now, let me just add this. One of the hallmarks of modern philosophy, by which I mean roughly philosophy since Bacon and Hobbes, is that it takes the world to be made of what the contemporary libertarian (and very Hobbesian) consequentialist Jan Narveson likes to call “just stuff”:²⁷ value-neutral matter in space. If there is value, it is routinely assumed, it must lie somewhere else than just *in the stuff*; indeed, given the priority of ‘stuff’ in our world-view, there is bound to be a problem about fitting value into a world of neutral stuff. Even if we are deep-green environmental philosophers - the usual story is - we cannot coherently assume that *everything* is valuable; there is easy if cheap sport to be had - perhaps in the first lecture of a first-year undergraduate course - in mocking anyone who starts from that rapidly-discarded assumption. (“So you think that stones have rights?”, etc.; as if, for anything to have value, it must have it in the way that humans have value.)

Yet the most striking thing about this now-universally-mocked assumption is that for hundreds and hundreds of years it is what pretty well everybody thought. At the very least from Augustine (*de Libero Arbitrio* Book 1) to Aquinas (*omne est bonum quoad ens*, ST 1a.49.3), it was a close to universal consensus among Latin philosophers that existence as such was good, and therefore that anything that existed was good - at least to the extent that it existed, though possibly not much further. (The doctrine that existence in general as such is good does not entail that it cannot ever be better on balance that some particular thing *not* exist.) I want to suggest that it is this metaphysical outlook that gives its grounding to the idea that anything at all, however humble, can be a proper object of contemplation. The reason why everything that exists is worth (at least some) contemplative attention is because there is a sense in which everything that exists is good.

Undoubtedly, today, most philosophers, and probably most people - most of the time - have lost their grip on such ideas. One way to breathe new philosophical

26 There can even be a kind of philistinism in denying this possibility, as Robertson Davies reminds us: see Davies' *The Rebel Angels* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 106-8.

27 I don't know whether Narveson uses this phrase in his writings; he certainly used it - a lot - in a talk he gave at a Ratio day conference in Reading in about 1993.

life into the Thomist thesis *omne ens est bonum quoad ens* might be to borrow a move from Thomas Nagel. Nagel famously argues (1979) that since it is impossible to explain how mind might have emerged from matter, and since it is clear that mind does now exist, the only coherent way to explain mind's existence now is to adopt the panpsychist view that mind has been present in matter all along. Maybe we should make out a parallel argument about value.

Outside philosophy, there are places in our culture where the idea of goodness in everything still seems alive, at least at a subliminal level. I think poetry may be one such place; at least poetry as practiced by those poets who find epiphany in even the smallest things, such as Louis Macneice, Norman MacCaig, Seamus Heaney, sometimes Philip Larkin. Perhaps Simone Weil agrees:

Le poète produit le beau par l' attention fixée sur du réel. De même l' acte de l' amour. Savoir que cet homme, qui a faim et soif, existe vraiment autant que moi - cela suffit, le reste suit de lui-même.²⁸

We might, if we are theists, go even further, and suggest that everything that exists is not only good, but good because it is charged with the presence of God. That suggestion will certainly be made by Augustine and Aquinas - and by Evelyn Underhill and Simone Weil. Also by Thomas Traherne:

Your enjoyment of the World is never right, till you so esteem it, that everything in it, is more your treasure than a King's exchequer full of Gold and Silver. And that exchequer yours also in its place and service. Can you take too much joy in your Father's works? He is Himself in everything. Some things are little on the outside, and rough and common, but I remember the time when the dust of the streets were as pleasing as Gold to my infant eyes, and now they are more precious to the eye of reason... You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a sand exhibited the wisdom and power of God: And prize in everything the service which they do you, by manifesting His glory and goodness to your Soul.²⁹

28 WEIL, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 196: "The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on the real. Just so does the act of love. To know that this man, who is hungry and thirsty, really exists, just as much as I do - that is enough. The rest follows of its own accord."

29 T. TRAHERNE, *Centuries of Meditations*, New York, Cosimo Classics 1909, 1.25, 27. Cp. the opening of William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*:

"To see a world in a grain of sand /
And a heaven in a wild flower, /
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, /
And eternity in an hour".

If these theists are right, then underneath all our other attitudes to the world around us should lie awe and wonder. For such theists, the most foundational reason why reverence is indeed a virtue - and why glory is a value³⁰ - is because the Real Presence is everywhere, and there is nowhere in the world to which Jacob's marvelous words in *Genesis* 28.17 do *not* apply: "God is here, and I wist it not. How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven"³¹.

III

And so we come to Murdoch. *The Sovereignty of Good* is one of the few modern expositions of a Platonistic view of ethics; it is Iris Murdoch's clearest and most concentrated attempt to offer such a view, and to offer it with at least a degree of metaphysical modesty. So it will be worth fairly close attention in what follows.

In line with her (relative) metaphysical modesty, Murdoch offers a 'demythologised' reading of Plato's cave: as a story about liberation from the illusions of the self. That liberation happens as we come into clearer and more comprehending contact with realities outside ourselves, things which have a life and a being of their own that we cannot manipulate to our own egotistical purposes, but have to respect as existing in their own right, quite independently of us.

The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself,³² to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. This is the non-metaphysical meaning of the idea of transcendence to which philosophers have so constantly resorted in their explanations of goodness. "Good is a transcendent reality" means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the

The parallel is all the more remarkable given that neither author can have known the other's work: Traherne's writings were completely forgotten until 1909, and indeed *Auguries of Innocence* was only published posthumously, in 1863. (Nor then can Dostoevsky's Father Zosima, as quoted above, be alluding to either passage.) Perhaps Psalm 139.17-18 stands behind all three passages: "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand."

30 See T. CHAPPELL, *Glory as an ethical idea*, «Philosophical Investigations», Special Issue: Ethics and Religion, Volume 34, Issue 2, pages 105–134, April 2011.

31 TRAHERNE, *Centuries of Meditations*, 1.31.

32 One wonders if this nonce-word has an argument packed into it: maybe Murdoch is suggesting that "being unselfconscious" is or can be not merely lack of consciousness of self, but positive consciousness of the reality that is not the self.

world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful.³³

Like arguing for the Forms in the *Phaedo* (73c-d), “joining the world as it really is” is a task that can take any part of reality as its point of departure. It is not, so far forth, important whether it is the study of fencing or Russian or indeed of anything else that happens to engage our interest. Provided we attempt to submit to the “authority of reality” in whatever area of study we *do* choose, we can still learn the same sort of lessons about self-disciplined attentiveness and looking beyond our own private obsessions and fantasies - lessons, that is, about the value of truth and objectivity, which as Murdoch rightly stresses are morally crucial lessons.

But I say ‘so far forth’ because, obviously, this can’t be the whole of the story. If you like, this is only the centrifugal half of it, and there is a centripetal half as well. Suppose someone was only interested in his contemplation of Randolph Henry Ash, or Russian, or Homer (either one), or logic - and in nothing else. No matter how pure and unselfish his submission to the “authority of reality” in his area of study, such a person is plainly criticisable. However much his work has taught him about the value and importance of the humble pursuit of truth in that area, it seems not to have taught him that there are some subjects for contemplation that everybody should take an interest in.

“Joining the world as it really is” necessarily involves recognizing that, even if everything is interesting, still it is part of the way the world “really is” that some things are more important, and so more worthy of contemplation, than others. Under this heading Murdoch notes three things, or kinds of thing, in particular. The first is other people; the second is beauty; the third is what she calls “the Good”.

My project here is to try and make sense of Platonistic virtue ethics in the most metaphysically modest way possible. So - at least first time round - I will consider the third of these possible objects of contemplation, “the Good”, only briefly. Murdoch says this about it:

I think there is a place both inside and outside religion for a sort of contemplation of the Good, not just by dedicated experts but by ordinary people; an attention which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of *new* and quite undreamt-of virtue. This attempt, which is a turning of attention away from the particular, may be the thing that helps most when difficulties seem insoluble, and especially when feelings of guilt keep attracting the gaze back

33 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, p. 93.

towards the self. This is the true mysticism which is morality, a kind of undogmatic prayer which is real and important, though perhaps also difficult and easily corrupted.³⁴

What, we might ask, can Murdoch have in mind here? What is 'the Good' that she wants us to contemplate? Does she mean the quality of goodness, in things or people? Or particular paradigm cases of goodness? Or neither - but if neither, then what else? Murdoch herself is frank about the difficulty of speaking clearly about "the Good": even goodness, never mind "the Good", is "rare and hard to picture"³⁵. She notes, too, the indefinability of "the Good"³⁶: "a genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good". So in his different way does Plato (the Form of the Good is "over beyond Being", *epekeina tês ousias*³⁷).

Since what she calls "the Good" is both "a distant transcendent perfection", and also "a source of uncontaminated energy", "the Good" sounds really very like *God* - a resemblance that Murdoch does not always try very hard to deny. "That God, attended to, is a powerful source of (often good) energy is a psychological fact"³⁸. Murdoch wants to say that contemplating the Good can have the same power *whether or not* we are, as they say, "realists about religion":

Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love... God [is] a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*... moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all those characteristics.³⁹

On the other hand, Murdoch also thinks that there is a possible move from the experienced reality of a necessary convergence-point of all claims about the good to claims about God's actual existence. This is what she means by "the ontological argument". (She says more about these ideas in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* than in *Sovereignty*.)

In truth it might be easier to understand what Murdoch says here if we knew that she *was* talking about God. It is certainly less difficult to see how the God of traditional Judaeo-Christian theology, given that he is personal, could be this sort of originating force, this creative power of goodness, this ideal limit of longing, than could anything different from God that we might call 'the Good'. It is also, perhaps,

34 *Ibi*, pp. 101-2.

35 *Ibi*, p. 53.

36 *Ibi*, p. 99.

37 PLATO, *Republic*, 509b.

38 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, p. 56.

39 *Ibi*, p. 71.

clearer how God might be an object of contemplation than ‘the Good’. We might add that, at least in traditional theology, contemplating God *is* contemplating the Good, though the converse is not so obviously true.

So what Murdoch has to say about this third object of contemplation, ‘the Good’, is decidedly obscure. Perhaps some light will be shed on it too in the end, if we turn first to Murdoch’s two other types of object of contemplation, beauty and other people.

IV

“The appreciation of beauty,” Murdoch says, “is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it *is* the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real”⁴⁰. Murdoch’s most famous example of what she means about how beauty acts on us is the hawk:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel.⁴¹

The touchstone of such an experience is, as before, its *contact with reality*: in it we see, we experience, what is really there, outside and beyond ourselves. But that can happen - as we saw in the last section - in the contemplation of anything at all. So what makes the experience of *beauty* special?

I suspect Murdoch’s idea - here as elsewhere following Simone Weil - is that there is no clear boundary separating off the experience of the beautiful from the experience of any other reality. (If we accept the all-inclusive axiology of the last section, the absence of any such boundary is exactly what we will expect.) It is just that in the case of beauty our experience is abnormally sharp, and accompanied by a particularly strong and clear response of delight and wonder. In such an experience as Murdoch describes, you don’t just see the kestrel. You *really* see it; you see it properly, so properly that what drops out of awareness is not the kestrel but yourself.

As suggested at the end of the last section, there can be a convergence between loving *beauty* and loving *the world*; the omega-point of that convergence is the

⁴⁰ *Ibi*, pp. 64-5.

⁴¹ *Ibi*, p.84. It is hard to believe that Murdoch’s hawk has nothing to do with Hopkins’ in “The Windhover”, though the latter is, of course, a falcon not a kestrel.

affirmation that the world as a whole is beautiful.⁴² Something like the same convergence seems to be in Dostoevsky's mind when he has Father Zosima tell us to

love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things.⁴³

Perhaps something similar is going on in two other familiar forms of engagement with nature: bird-watching and mountaineering, at least when the birds, or mountains, are approached for their own sake and not out of mere competitiveness or list-ticking. Unfortunately it is more usual for us to fail to see or hear properly what is right in front of us, because of the white noise of our own little obsessions, the constant nagging and fidgeting of the ego: "Suppression of self is required before accurate vision can be obtained"⁴⁴.

In our society, contemplative devotion to nature is in fact a remarkably widespread phenomenon; indeed it is much more widespread than is any sense of how such devotion might be justified. Nothing is more usual than to hear devotion for nature dismissed as mere sentimentality, as opposed to the hard-nosed concern for financial gain that is displayed by, for example, those who like to call themselves "developers", and who, a Martian might be forgiven for concluding, are currently being encouraged by the British government to destroy as much of the British countryside as soon as they can.

If I am right, there is nothing necessarily sentimental about the contemplative exploration of nature that so many people in our culture unselfconsciously engage in. If it comes to accusing others of irrational attachments, perhaps the attachments to money and to busy acquisitiveness that are also so characteristic of our society should be a little more steadily scrutinized and criticized.

The third type of object of contemplation that I noted was other people. (Or perhaps we should just say 'people', since I am after all a person myself, and a

42 As a - perhaps unexpected - witness to this, see now Jerry Cohen (2012: 207): "What one might call true religion celebrates life, and the world, and looks for the good in everything. Since there is no God for the relation of celebrating (and sacrificing and so on) to be in relation *to*, but it is a sentiment fraught with relationality, it can find its completion only in relation to the world and to other human beings. Camille Pissarro said that "everything is beautiful if you look at it in the right way", and the analytical-philosophical response to that is to reach for the counterexample machine. But I think Pissarro's statement is defensible. Hegel said that in old age we see the good in everything. Old analytical philosophers should understand when not to use the counterexample machine."

43 F. DOSTOEVSKY, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Great Books, Chicago 1952, p. 167.

44 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, p. 66.

person of whom I particularly need a just and loving view. However the first-personal case introduces special complications, so for the moment I will stick with ‘other people’.) Here Murdoch says this:

The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing...⁴⁵

(Compare, once more, Traherne, *Centuries* 1.39: “Your enjoyment is never right, till you esteem every soul so great a treasure as our Saviour doth: and that the laws of God are sweeter than the honey and honeycomb because they command you to love them all in such perfect manner. For... are they not the riches of his love?”)

Both with our awareness of beauty and with our awareness of other people, the crucial thing that they teach us is a certain kind of purification of vision and imagination: we learn how to see them, and we learn how to think about them. Part of what it might mean to say, with MPVE, that “good agency in the truest and fullest sense presupposes contemplation”, is that the question of virtuous action does not even arise until this purification of vision has happened.

Or rather, begun to happen, because the process of purifying one’s vision is endlessly perfectible, and always incomplete. The activity of seriously and non-self-indulgently contemplating beauty or other people is hard, because it forces us to simplify ourselves, so long as we continue to contemplate, into nothing but still and undivided contemplaters: to concentrate our minds upon something single and different from ourselves. (Kierkegaard: “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”) And this is a hard thing for human beings to do, both because “human kind,” in Eliot’s famous words, “cannot bear very much reality” (the difficulty of concentrating again), and also because this sort of externally-directed attentiveness involves a kind of self-sacrifice. As Murdoch notes, somewhat ruefully, with an autobiographical eye on the difficulties of the novelist (difficulties which I fear her own novels as often succumb to as solve):

“The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” [T.S.Eliot, “Tradition and the individual talent”]. This is perfectly true. Art is not an expression of personality, it is a question rather of the continual expelling of oneself from the matter in hand. Anyone who has attempted to write a novel will have discovered this difficulty in the special form which it takes when one is dealing with fictitious characters. Is one going to be able to present any character other than oneself who is more than a

⁴⁵ *Ibi*, p. 66.

conventional puppet? How soon one discovers that, however much one is in the ordinary sense 'interested in other people', this interest has left one far short of possessing the knowledge required to create a real character who is not oneself. It is impossible, it seems to me, not to see one's failure here as a sort of spiritual failure... Virtue is not essentially or immediately concerned with choosing between actions or rules or reasons, nor with stripping the personality for a leap. It is concerned with really apprehending that other people exist.⁴⁶

The point of MPVE's focus upon attentiveness is not to deny that good agency matters at all, or to say that the only thing that matters is having our moral vision and imagination purified in this way. But it is to say that good agency is necessarily dependent upon good moral vision: "Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness"⁴⁷. It is also to say that moral vision is itself a morally central activity.

Is there not also a good constructive imagination which plays an important part in our life? Imagining is *doing*, it is a sort of personal exploring... This activity is, moreover, usually and often inevitably, an activity of evaluation. We evaluate not only by intentions, decisions, choices... but also, and largely, by the constant quiet work of attention and imagination. The image here is not so much that of a body moving... but rather of a sort of seeping of color, or the setting up of a magnetic field... We are obscure to ourselves because the world we see already contains our values and we may not be aware of the slow delicate processes of imagination and will which have put those values there.⁴⁸

Perhaps it will help to consider some examples of this activity of imagining, and of "the constant quiet work of attention", as it applies to other people. Murdoch's own example, which she develops in detail and at length, is the famous case of D and M (*Sovereignty* pp.16-23), in which the mother (M), by sympathetic engagement with and attention to the reality of a daughter-in-law (D) whom she finds unattractive in some important ways, learns to see her more truly and more generously. But that case is, perhaps, over-familiar by now; there are many other cases that deserve equally detailed consideration. Here are two.

First, sticking with parent-child relations, think of a parent who is trying to work out how to advise her uncertain daughter which courses to take at university.

46 I. MURDOCH, *Existentialists and Mystics*, (ed. Peter Conradi), London, Allen Lane 1998, pp. 283-4.

47 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, p. 91.

48 MURDOCH, *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 199-200.

To do this well she needs to bring to bear all she has learned over eighteen years or so about her daughter's abilities, what she will probably enjoy, what she probably really wants - if there is a fact of the matter about that. All the parent's deliberations about what to say to her undecided daughter are, and are quite properly, subject to the uncertainty of the future, and to the need to allow the daughter enough autonomy to, as they say, "make her own mistakes"; balanced no doubt by the very parental worry that mistaken life-choices, especially at eighteen, can be hauntingly costly and adhesive. (Here perhaps the parent remembers some of her own mistakes.) Above all, the parent's deliberations are constrained by the fact that the choice cannot be simply made by inference from premises about the daughter's character. At eighteen, barely out of school, her character is not yet fully formed. Its full formation is precisely what is in question, and one of the things to which the parent most needs to give her careful attention. (I think it comes out here that Heidegger has a term in his lexicon that corresponds quite closely to Murdoch's "loving truthful attention"; it is *Sorge*.)⁴⁹

For a second example, consider an episode from Heinrich Böll's *Irish Journal*. As it is not all that well-known, I need to quote it at some length:

I found on the pews what I found in lots of Irish churches, little enamel plaques that exhorted to prayer: *Pray for the soul of Michael O'Neill, who died, aged 60, on 17 January 1933; Pray for the soul of Mary Keegan, who died, aged 18, on 9 May 1945*. The deft, pious blackmail: the dead became alive, their death-date entwined itself, for whoever read the little tablets, with his own experience that day, that month, that year. Hitler with his twitching face waited for power, while here Michael O'Neill died, aged 60. As Germany capitulated, Mary Keegan died, aged 18. *Pray* (I read) *for Kevin Cassidy, who died, aged 13, on December 20 1930* - and this hit me like an electric shock, because in December 1930 I was 13 too. In a big, dark flat in the south of the city of Cologne - what in 1908 had been called "an exclusive apartment" - I squatted with my Christmas-communion certificate in my hand; the holidays had begun, and through a worn patch in the cinnamon-colored curtain, I could see the wintry street below...

On this day, then, Kevin Cassidy died in Dublin, 13 years old, as old as I was at the time: here his tomb was made ready, the *Dies Irae* sung below the organ loft, Kevin's dazed schoolfellows filled the pews; incense, the heat of candles, silver tassels on a black shroud; while I folded up my communion certificate and got the toboggan out of the closet to go for a sledge. I got a B in Latin, and Kevin's coffin sank into the grave.

49 See the entry "care, concern, solicitude" in M. INWOOD (ed.), *A Heidegger Dictionary*, Blackwell, Oxford 1999.

Later, when I had left the church and was walking through the streets, Kevin Cassidy still walked alongside me; I saw him alive and as old as myself, for seconds I saw myself as Kevin Cassidy at 37: he was a father of three and lived in the slums around St Patrick's; the whiskey was bitter and cool and expensive, the ice in it was shot from Swift's grave; his dark-haired wife's face was pale-green, he had debts and a little house like countless ones in London and thousands in Dublin, humble, two-storey, poor; *petit-bourgeois*, stuffy, hopeless is what the incorrigible aesthete would call it (but careful, aesthete: James Joyce was born in one of these houses, and Sean O'Casey in another). So near was Kevin's shade that I ordered two whiskeys when I went back into the drinking dive. But the ghost would not lift the glass to his lips, so I drank myself for Kevin Cassidy who died, aged 13, on 20 December 1930 - I drank for him, and with him.⁵⁰

Böll, pricked into reaction and empathy by the coincidence of his own age with the unknown Kevin Cassidy's, shows us with precision and eloquence what it is like to think your way into someone else's life when that someone has died. We can of course do more than think about others as dead (even if they are). We can wonder as Böll does how it would feel to occupy that person's position in the world; what you would see and smell and hear and otherwise sense from there. (Never mind "What is it like to be a bat?"; the prior, perhaps even harder, exercise for us is "What is it like to be someone else?"⁵¹)

By this creative, but also truth-seeking, activity of mind and feeling, one learns to see what others see, to understand what it was like for others to choose, and hence how and why those others did choose as they in fact chose. Amongst other things one gets, by this sort of application of the moral imagination, the beginnings of a sense of how they *might have* chosen: what potential there was in their situations for creativity and imaginativeness, what really *good* choices in those situations might have been like, and also - with pity and compassion - what choices were *impossible* for them. Such understanding is, as Peter Goldie has well argued, essentially narrative in its structure, yet essentially not understanding *of something* that is essentially narrative in its structure.⁵²

Despite her obvious and avowed love of detail and multiplicity, Murdoch says that attention to others of this sort is a *unifying* form of understanding.

50 H. BÖLL, *Ein Irisches Tagebuch*, München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1961, pp. 25-7, my own translation. (It apparently exists in English as well, but I've only seen the original.)

51 Not to mention "What is it like to be me?" But as before, the first-personal case raises special difficulties that I won't try to resolve here.

52 See P. GOLDIE, *The Mess Inside*, Oxford, Oxford UP 2012, Chapter 4, Section 2, "Imagination, emotion, and branching possibilities", and Chapters 6-7.

(“Reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world”⁵³) “A unifying form of understanding” is an ambiguous phrase, but maybe both sides of the ambiguity hold good: when I engage in such attention it tends to psychologically unify me, the attender, and it also tends to conceptually unify what I am attending to. Learning to respond appropriately to any particular phenomenon or experience means learning a kind of responsiveness that will be applicable to all sorts of phenomena and experiences; to understand what kinds of goodness are possible in different situations, you need to understand as much as you can about both goodness and possibility in general. Learning this kind of responsiveness and understanding is, to use Murdoch’s own phrase, a “limitless task”, because the possibilities that the world presents us with are unendingly various.

V

Imaginative exercises like the ones I have just described are part of what is involved in coming to an ethically adequate understanding of that part of the reality outside us that is other people. Something analogous is involved in the imaginative explorations that natural beauty might evoke in us.

Such imaginative explorations of natural beauty, or of what it is like to be other people, are interesting for many reasons. One obvious reason is because they also happen in our responses to art too. To look - to really look - at a great painting or piece of music is (or can be) to contemplate it with just the sort of stillness and inner undividedness that I describe above; to engage with a play or a novel is (or can be) just the kind of imaginative activity I have described, of thinking one’s way through what it is like to be the character in the fiction, and what that character might do, by exploring the possibilities for goodness for that character.

Imagination is a kind of freedom, a renewed ability to perceive and express truth... The artist must tell the truth about something which he has understood... In the case of fiction the subject-matter is, usually... individual people... Other people are, after all, the most interesting features of our world and in some ways the most poignantly and mysteriously alien. Literature tells us things and teaches us things. In portraying characters the author displays most clearly his discernment, his truthfulness, his justice, or his lack of these qualities, and one of our enjoyments lies in considering and judging his judgments. The highest pleasures of literature and, one might say, of art generally, are in this sense moral pleasures⁵⁴.

Plato contrasted the true objective vision of the philosopher, which enables us really to see the Form of the Good, aside from all distractions, with the deceptive pseudo-objectivity of art, which at best *tricks* us into thinking we see goodness.

53 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, p. 57.

54 MURDOCH, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 257.

Murdoch of course agrees with Plato that art *can* present us with falsehoods and unrealities. But she thinks that that happens not when art is functioning as it should, but when it *malfunctions* - when the artist is dragged away from trying to capture how things really are, and sidelined into mere fantasizing. For her Plato's contrast between philosophy and art transmutes into a distinction between a kind of true objective vision and a kind of deceptive pseudo-objectivity, both of which are available in both art and philosophy. Artists and philosophers alike can submit to the discipline of trying to make sense of what is actually there, in all its chaos and complication - and all its strange beauty; or they can insist on imposing the pattern that they find comforting and convenient (or as is also possible, stylish and impressive). The latter way is objectionable because it is dishonest: whether through affectation,⁵⁵ falseness of vision, laziness or sloppiness, or some other cause, it does not work hard enough at the "endless task" of engaging with reality. But when art does succeed in encountering and capturing what is really there, then contemplating art teaches us just as much about reality as purely philosophical contemplation can; for most people, indeed, probably more.

Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form. This form often seems to us mysterious because it resists the easy patterns of the fantasy, whereas there is nothing mysterious about the forms of bad art since they are the recognizable and familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream. Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision. We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated; and indeed this is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all.⁵⁶

VI

At the end of Section III above, I noted that Murdoch sees three kinds of thing as particularly important objects of contemplation: beauty (or the world, if the

55 A nice example of aversion to affectation in imagining: "In his memoir *Experience*, Martin Amis recalls his father, Kingsley, saying that he found Virginia Woolf's fictional world 'wholly contrived: when reading her he found that he kept interpolating hostile negatives, murmuring "Oh no she didn't" or "Oh no he hadn't" or "Oh no it wasn't" after each and every authorial proposition"' (quoted in N. HORNBY, *The Complete Polysyllabic Spree*, Penguin, London 2007, p. 95).

56 MURDOCH, *Sovereignty*, pp. 86-87.

whole world is beautiful), other people, and “the Good”. And I suggested that, since the third of these objects is decidedly mysterious, at least at first sight, we should look first at the other two objects of contemplation, and see if doing so shed any light on what it might be to engage in what Murdoch clearly thinks is the most important form of “just and loving attention” of all: to contemplate ‘the Good’. So, has any light been shed?

Perhaps it has. Looking in particular at the two passages from Murdoch that I have just quoted in the last section, the obvious suggestion as to what contemplating “the Good” is takes us to a second-order activity. In contemplating beauty, or other people, in the ways described in Sections IV-V - or for that matter, in contemplating the other multiplicity of possible objects of contemplation that we considered in Section II - we always contemplate them *in the light of standards*: most obviously, the standards of truth, justice, and love. Now we might also come to contemplate those standards themselves; we might even come to think of them as all being emanations or aspects of one single all-embracing standard, and make *that* the object of our contemplation. Wouldn't this be a description of what it might be to contemplate “the Good”? (Compare the way in which Plato's philosopher, once released from the Cave, looks around the upper world by the light of the sun, and only once he can do that, learns to look at the sun itself: *Republic* 515e-516c.) I think this is pretty clearly what Murdoch must mean by her talk about contemplating the Good: she means a steady reflective gaze directed not merely upon the things that we judge by the standards of love, truthfulness, and justice, but upon those standards themselves.

I think this interpretation makes Murdoch's version of Platonistic virtue ethics both metaphysically modest, and also intelligible. However, even in this “cleaned-up” version, there are doubtless criticisms of the view that we should take seriously. Here is one: for my own part, I find that I can do less with the idea of contemplating the Good itself in this sense, as it were “all on its own”, than I can with the idea of applying the Good to particular cases. To use an example that I introduced above, I can see what it would be like to consider how to advise my daughter on a choice of university course in the light of the standards of love, truthfulness, and justice. (As quite often with Murdoch's rather fulsome formulations, this may sound a bit high-faluting, but it is really just a matter of asking questions like: Would course X really ‘be *her*’? Have I the right to push her towards course Y instead, when she says that's not what she wants to do but my knowledge of her suggests she is mistaken about what she wants? How far should I let her make her own mistakes? - And so on; all of them vitally necessary questions, none of them definitively answerable.) Or to use one of Murdoch's examples from fiction, I can see what it would be to consider, say, Petya Rostov in the light of those standards. (It would be to ask questions like: Does Tolstoy picture him with full realism? Is he a character we can believe in? Is he someone we find attractive

and interesting? Does Tolstoy succeed in making his fictional existence *matter*? - To all of which questions, my own answer is a resounding Yes.)

It seems to me that we only get a clear grip on what talk about 'the Good' might mean when we are considering how "the Good" might be applied to contemplating specific cases like these. I am far from sure what I would be doing if I tried to consider 'the Good 'in itself', and *apart* from such specifics. In a meditative response to (say) *War and Peace*, there is a back-and-forth movement between thoughts of the form "The depiction of Petya is thus and so, therefore meets (or fails to meet) the standard of the Good" and thoughts of the form "Yes, he is shown like that, but that's not what it *is* to meet the standard of the Good; rather, what the Good demands is this..." - an interchange, that is, between thoughts about how to apply the concept of the Good, and thoughts about how to characterize that concept. To me at any rate, both sides of this interchange seem essential to understanding what the Good is, and indeed to contemplating it. One moves 'up the ladder', from the particular to the general; but one also moves 'down the ladder', from the general to particular. For me at any rate, there is no understanding without both movements.

Perhaps a Platonist of Murdoch's sort will not disagree. But if not, then surely we have given up the last vestige of what seems to be Plato's idea, in the *Republic*, that the contemplation of the Good itself, all on its own, is somehow the acme and the goal of contemplation. What we have instead is the idea that the Good is interesting because it is *both* necessarily separate from the world, *and also* necessarily involved with it. There again, when we remember the famous line about the philosopher's redescent from *Republic* 520c2 - *καταβατέον* - perhaps we will conclude that this conjunction of necessary separation and necessary involvement is what Plato himself really had in mind anyway.

VII

In this last section I consider an objection to MPVE. The objection is this. Murdoch talks about love, and about contemplation of the Good, as being all about "the discovery of reality"⁵⁷. But what if the 'reality' that is actually there to discover is not what she thinks it is, but the cold emptiness of 'atoms and the void' that other philosophers, Democritus and some modern physicalists for instance, have taken reality to be? Or what, alternatively, if the 'reality' that is actually there to discover is such that the appropriate response to it is not wonder, fascination, delighted curiosity, as Murdoch and I think, but boredom and contempt - as Sartre and Camus perhaps think?

57 MURDOCH, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 215

The second of these what-ifs is more swiftly dealt with, for the simple reason that almost no one seriously thinks this. (Not even teenagers. Perhaps not even gloomy French existentialists - not really.) Of course *some* things in the world are, at some level and from some vantage-point, boring or contemptible or both: *Mein Kampf*, for instance, or the minutes of 30 years' worth of Ku Klux Klan meetings. But the idea that the world overall is boring and/or contemptible, while it is hard to see what an *argument* against it would look like, does seem to fail the test of experience. It just seems empirically mistaken - mistaken in a way that experience of the world overall can very quickly falsify - and moreover expressive of bad character. Whether or not one accepts the kind of mystical vision of the world as being good insofar as it is real that I mentioned at the end of section II, the idea that we live in a world full of extraordinarily interesting and worthwhile objects of possible inquiry is something that everyone knows at the age of five.

I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect may... be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it; the rather as I generally observe such men retain a certain freshness and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood.⁵⁸

And even if people tend to forget this truth (as I take it to be) when they are older than five, it is still not something that anyone except a skeptical philosopher needs to have *proved*. If someone's response to the world, overall, is "How boring and pathetic", we don't think that the speaker is making a no less valid point than the person whose response is excitement, curiosity, wonder, love. Instead, we think there's something wrong with him, and probably feel sorry for him because of all the wonderful things he's missing. (Something like this is one part of my own reaction to a paper whose "classic" status for most contemporary philosophers I must say I have always found rather puzzling, namely "The Makropoulos Case"⁵⁹. To conclude, as Williams does, that in the end boredom is a reasonable and appropriate response to reality itself seems to me not only obviously wrong but also, well, just terribly sad, really.)

So much for the "reality might be boring and contemptible" version of the objection. I turn to the "reality might be atoms and the void" version.

58 C. DICKENS, *David Copperfield*, London, Chapman and Hall 1850, Ch.2.

59 B. WILLIAMS, *A critique of utilitarianism*, in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, with J.J.C. Smart, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1973, pp. 83-100.

Understood this way, the objection asks for metaphysical arguments for the existence of the Good, or the Form of the Good, and that request sounds fair enough. Plato does offer such arguments, e.g. in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*; so, in her own way, does Murdoch, e.g. in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. However, the request has its own pitfalls. As the request is often made today, it comes against a rich background of particular presupposition. (As above, we should always disbelieve any philosopher when he says or implies that he makes no presuppositions at all; even Plato.) Very often the modern request for a metaphysics of the good, fully spelled out, means something like: "Justify these moral-realist claims, all the way from the bottom up, against the background of a comprehensive desert-landscape physicalism" (perhaps even a Democritean atoms-and-the-void physicalism). Perhaps that can be done, but it has not, to general philosophical satisfaction, been done yet.⁶⁰ Even if it could be done, a better response to this request would be to ask what reason there is, beyond Quinean tastes of course, for accepting the physicalist's desert landscape in the first place. Answering this convincingly is a philosophical feat that has not yet been pulled off either. I very much doubt it ever could be.

I suspect that the more we think about the background physicalism that is now so pervasively assumed as (at any rate) the default position in philosophical metaethics, the more we will come to see the essential weirdness of that view. The view that nothing exists except particles, space, and forces gains no support whatever from anywhere outside philosophy. In particular, it gains no support at all from physics. Physicalism is no more part of a physicist's background assumptions than it is part of a plumber's background assumptions that plumbing is all there is; or part of the theory of chess's background assumptions that nothing exists except chess moves.

How could physics show that reality contains only the kinds of things that physics recognizes? It sounds embarrassingly like physics acting as judge and jury in its own case. That physics does not show that there is such a thing as a debt crisis does not mean that physics shows that there is no such thing as a debt crisis: physics simply does not address the question. That is no criticism of physics; it has other work to do. For it to turn out that reality contains only the kinds of things that hard science recognizes, where they exclude things like debt crises, it would have to turn out that a radically reductionist metaphysical theory is true. That in turn would require industrial-scale

⁶⁰ My own (doubtless incomplete) attempt to show that a thorough goingly moral-realist view can be vindicated even against the background of a for-the-sake-of-the-argument physicalism is T. CHAPPELL, *Moral perception*, «Philosophy» 83 (4), pp. 421-437 (2008).

argument at a characteristically philosophical level of reasoning. But I doubt that [a hard-line physicalist] counts philosophy as hard science.⁶¹

Even weirder than the view itself is the use to which physicalists typically want to put it in the study of human life. They want to tell us that what we *really know*, what we know about *best and first*, is the truth (as they take it to be) of physicalism; and that since we know that best and first, every other knowledge-claim is to be subjected to the test of comparison and connection with that knowledge. Hence our ordinary experience - and for present purposes, I am of course thinking primarily of our ordinary *moral* experience - must be subjected to the test of whether it accords with physicalism. The only thing more extraordinary than the bizarre Martianism of this view is the breadth of assent, conscious or unconscious, that it now commands in our society. A surer recipe for intellectual confusion and alienation would be hard to imagine. And lo and behold, intellectual confusion and alienation is exactly what our society has got.

It is certainly possible, given our plight it may even be necessary, to argue in the other direction: to argue not that we cannot talk about experience until we have justified such talk at the level of metaphysics, but rather that a metaphysics which denies our experience, or which insists on a dislocated Martianism about our experience like the physicalist's, can be seen without further discussion to have something seriously wrong with it. And this thought too, or something very like it, is already there in Murdoch. For as I have already stressed, she like Plato roots her arguments not in *a priori* logical or metaphysical considerations, but in experience.

Let us start by saying that Shakespeare is the greatest of all artists,⁶² and let our aesthetic grow to be the philosophical justification of this judgment. We may note that a similar method can, and in my view should, be used in moral philosophy. That is, if a moral philosophy does not give a satisfactory or sufficiently rich account of what we unphilosophically know to be goodness, then away with it.⁶³

The point that the most plausible arguments we have found for MPVE are in this way rooted in the context of some particular experience perhaps serves also, in closing, to remind us of something else I have stressed: the importance of

61 Timothy Williamson in the *New York Times*:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/on-ducking-challenges-to-naturalism/>.

62 I am not sure how seriously to take this claim. Perhaps Murdoch only means it *exempli gratia*. I hope so, since surely Shakespeare, great as he is, has -at the very least- serious competition; from Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Dante, and Tolstoy, for a start.

63 MURDOCH, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 215.

understanding the kinds of experience and contemplation that I am talking about within the right context and against the right background of affect and dispositional preparation. For I can think of plenty of people, and maybe many contemporary analytic philosophers would be among them, who might have said to Iris Murdoch, as she stared out of her window, "What? *What?* - It's only a hawk". If someone did say that - what would he fail to know, what would he be missing? In one sense, nothing at all. In another, everything.

Or as we might also say, the difference here is no more than the difference between saying, and not saying, "thank you" for things:

There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and that we ourselves are incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real. It is the fundamental fact of being, as against not being; it is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthinking it, though we may sometimes be unthinking about it; unthinking and especially unthanking. For he who has realized this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for negation, and that under all our grumblings there is a subconscious substance of gratitude.⁶⁴

64 G.K. CHESTERTON, *Chaucer*, Faber, London 1932, pp. 36-7.