Iris Murdoch on God, Good, and the Limits of Science

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Iris Murdoch's 'On 'God' and 'Good'' ends with the hope that art and ethics will generate concepts worthy and able to guide and check the increasing power of science. The main part of her essay sets out a provocative parallel between God and Good. How is this parallel supposed to check the increasing power of science? In this paper, I suggest that Murdoch takes her conclusions about the limitations of science to be established not by the nature of the good but by the nature of a soul which is capable of being moved by attention to reality.

1. Introduction

Iris Murdoch's 'On "God" and "Good"' was first presented to the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity at its meeting at Bowdoin College, Maine in August 1966. The study group was organised by Marjorie Grene, Michael Polanyi, and Edward Pols with funding from the Ford Foundation and it held two week-long meetings in 1965 and 1966. Its intent is nicely captured by the statement of purpose which opens the edited volume in which selected papers from the two meetings were published. 'Since the seventeenth

century', it begins, 'the kind of knowledge afforded by mathematical physics has come more and more to furnish mankind with an ideal for all knowledge. This idea also carries with it a new conception of the nature of things: all things whatsoever are held to be intelligible ultimately in terms of the laws of inanimate nature… [This] ideal is fundamentally mistaken' (Grene 1969, p.ix).

The Study Group opposed this ideal as a false unity: it claims 'to unify science and comprehend in it all subjects of study' (p.ix) but it isolates science from humanistic thinking and displaces philosophy from its task of capturing the whole domain of human thought. They sought instead a true cultural unity and their meetings brought together physicists, philosophers, biologists, sociologists, and others who shared this opposition:

> Convinced that there is an unsuspected convergence of ideas separately developed in various fields, we propose a meeting of a number of persons who actively oppose in their work the scientism, and the related methodological and ontological oversimplification, which in one or another form are ascendant in every field of scholarly and creative endeavor. (Grene 1969, p.x)

The papers presented at Bowdoin College were intended to form part of the resistance.

'On "God" and "Good"' bears the traces of this genesis. Murdoch emphasises throughout the paper both the philosophical allure of unity and its requisite risks: 'It is the traditional inspiration of the philosopher, but also his traditional vice, to believe that all is one' (p.69).[1] And she sets herself against scientific explanations of human behaviour which threaten to 'swallow up ethics completely' and are 'not equipped to deal with the real problems' of moral philosophy (p.69, p.70). Her final paragraph returns to both themes. 'The search for unity is deeply natural', Murdoch writes, 'but like so many things which are deeply natural may be capable of producing nothing but a variety of illusions'. Still, moral philosophy must be defended and it is from

[1] All unattributed page references are to OGG.

art and ethics 'that we must hope to generate concepts worthy, and also able, to guide and check the increasing power of science' (p.74).

These two themes—the danger of false unities and the limitations of science—run throughout Murdoch's work.[2] Their emphasis in the conclusion of 'On "God" and "Good"' is no sop to the subject of the Bowdoin meeting—it is an expression of deeply held philosophical beliefs. But how do they relate to the argument of 'On "God" and "Good"'? The main part of Murdoch's essay—and the part which has had the most attention—is an original and provocative parallel between God and Good. The final paragraph of Murdoch's essay suggests that the parallel between God and Good is supposed to generate resources worthy and able to establish limitations on the increasing power of science. How so? What is the connection between Murdoch's discussion of God and Good and the scientistic thinking decried by the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity? That is the topic of this essay.

2. Freud's Insight

Murdoch's starting point in 'On "God" and "Good"' is Freud's claim that the mind is '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' (p.50). Modern moral philosophy, she claims, has failed to reckon with this insight. Murdoch's aim is to show that it can be accommodated. To accommodate it is to show how goodness is possible given these claims about the mind. Thus the questions which drive the essay: 'What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better? These are questions the philosopher should try to answer.' (p.51). The latter two give Murdoch's essay a semi-therapeutic character—her aim is as much to help us become better people as it is to show that moral philosophy need not retreat from a concern with goodness if it is to take seriously Freud's insights about the mind.

[2] E.g. IP, p.5, p.27, p.37; SGC, p.83, MGM, p.1, p,83f.

How should we understand this starting point? Murdoch presents the Freudian picture as a secular version of original sin and though she calls it a 'discovery' by Freud, she notes its progenitors in philosophers as far back as Plato.[3] Much the same picture is presented with no reference to Freud in 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' where it is stated as one of her assumptions, evidenced by experience of human beings (SGC, pp.76–77). Murdoch doesn't expand on the picture in 'On "God" and "Good"' but two points are worth noting.

First, that the mind is a system of energy. This is part of Freud's explanation of psychological phenomena and, in broad terms, it involves the characterisation of mental activity in terms of a psychological force subject to varying degrees of intensity. The movement and displacement of this force is used by Freud to explain patterns of mental activity, such as the fixation on certain images in dreams or the release of inhibition in humour.[4] Murdoch adopts this mode of explanation throughout the essay without the restrictive assumption that the self is the sole source of psychic energy.

Second, that the mind is a *quasi-mechanical* system of energy. This draws on Simone Weil's characterisation of the 'mechanical necessity' which governs matter and perhaps also Plato's hydraulic imagery in the *Republic* (e.g. VI: 485d.). For Weil, mechanical necessity governs the natural world—'everything obeys mechanical laws as blind and as precise as the laws of falling bodies' (2024, p.360; cf. KV, p.158). For Murdoch, the important point about such laws is that they are indifferent, perhaps even antithetical, to the good. This is why we need something outside the system to effect a change towards the good.[5]

Murdoch takes this starting point to pose a prima facie obstacle to the possibility of goodness. This is not because the mechanical system of

[3] For example, in the discussion of the different parts of the soul: *Republic* IV: 436af. Murdoch relates Freud to Plato in *The Fire and the Sun* (pp.36–38).
[4] See, e.g., (Freud 1900). Cf. (Lear 2015, ch.3)
[5] Freud makes use of hydraulic imagery when discussing libidinal impulses: 'they are related to one another like a network of intercommunicating channels filled with fluid' (1916–17, p.345). Murdoch later writes of the 'Imagery of the mechanical, in Simone Weil, in Wittgenstein, in Freud, in Canetti's *Crowds and Power*' (MGM, p.503).

psychology operates according to deterministic laws, as Freud and Weil claimed. Murdoch sees that this is an accretion: 'determinism as a total philosophical theory is not the enemy' (p.51). Rather, the problem is 'to accommodate inside moral philosophy, and suggest methods of dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind' (p.51)—a problem compounded by the way in which the egocentric system actively distorts our perception of the world, turning us away from reality by constructing a 'tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one' (p.57). The challenge to moral philosophy rests on the fact that so much of what we do can be explained by the mechanical movement of psychological forces operating independently of the will, without any regard for what is good, and in ways which obstruct our perception of reality.

Murdoch's aim in her essay is to show how goodness is possible given this claim about the mind. She wants to show how the quasi-mechanical system of energy can be disrupted in ways which allow us to be moved by consideration of the good. How does she set out to achieve this? The architecture of her essay is more legible in the original publication where the text is separated into four parts.[6] (These divisions are not included in the reprintings in *The Sovereignty of Good* and *Existentialists and Mystics*.) In the first part Murdoch sets out the background to her discussion. In the second and most substantial part, she outlines a parallel between the traditional Christian understanding of our thought of and relation to God and our thought of and relation to the Good. In the third part, she outlines 'the picture of the human personality' (p.65) which has emerged from the preceding discussion. Finally, she concludes with a discussion of some objections to her claims and the status of her argument.[7]

[6] The first sentences of each part, with the corresponding page numbers from the Routledge Classics edition, begin as follows: I. 'To do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament…' (p.45); II. 'If this is so, one of the main problems of philosophy might be formulated thus…' (p.53); III. 'One might at this point pause and consider the picture of the human personality…' (p.65); IV. 'I have suggested that moral philosophy needs…' (p.70).

[7] Justin Broackes (2012, p.59f) organises his discussion of the essay around this division. For an alternative account of the structure, see (Hopwood 2025).

The first part of the essay traces the problems of modern ethics back to its unrealistic picture of the mind. The opening sentence of the second part summarises the problem: 'If this is so' – that is, if what Freud says about the mind is so – 'one of the main problems of moral philosophy might be formulated thus: are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly?' (p.53). The rest of the essay aims to establish that there are such techniques by means of a parallel between God and Good. As Justin Broackes puts it, Murdoch's aim is to show that just as prayer to God is answered by grace and redeems us from sin, so too does loving attention to the Good provide us with energy for good action and reorient us from the selfish egotism identified by Freud (Broackes 2012, p.56).

This gives a broad account of the essay. Its starting point is the Freudian claim that human beings are egocentric systems of selfish energy. Its problem is to explain the possibility of goodness in light of this claim. And its solution is the claim that loving attention to the Good can reorient us away from ourselves and provide us with energy for good action.

3. God and Good

At the heart of 'On "God" and "Good"' is an extended parallel between God and Good. Murdoch identifies a set of attributes traditionally ascribed to God and argues that they apply to the Good. God, as traditionally conceived, is an object of attention, unitary, transcendent, perfect, and necessarily real. Murdoch discusses each of these features in turn, and argues that they apply, in some sense, to the Good: it is an object of attention (pp.54–55); it is unitary (pp.55–56); it is transcendent (pp.57–59); it is perfect (pp.60–61); and it necessarily exists (pp.60–62). There is a tendency among commentators to strip out this element of Murdoch's discussion and read it either as a self-standing argument or in the context of her later discussion of the parallels between God and Good in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.[8] Our concern

[8] See, e.g., (Jordan 2022) and (Mason and Dougherty 2023). Maria Antonaccio (2000, p.115f) reads Murdoch's account of the Good in OGG in light of the later discussion in MGM but this is a self-conscious methodological decision (see pp.20–24).

here is how it contributes to Murdoch's aim of showing that our egocentric system of selfish energy can be disrupted.

Start with the parallel. This is reasonably straightforward at first. But when Murdoch turns to the question of whether goodness is necessarily real, she begins with what looks like a straightforward non sequitur: the *realism* involved in seeing things as they are (pp.57–58, p.62f). This is curious. Murdoch could have faced the question of whether the Good is real head on—perhaps by setting out criteria for reality and showing that goodness meets them, or, hewing more closely to her methodology, by showing the limitations of criteria for reality which would exclude it. Instead she asks what is involved in seeing things realistically. And she does so with no indication that she is changing topic.[9]

The connection comes in two sentences of, as Justin Broackes puts it, 'extraordinary—perhaps maddening—difficulty' (Broackes 2012, p.67, cf. Taylor 2022, p.202):

> I would suggest that the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self. *The necessity of the good is then an aspect of the kind of necessity involved in any technique for exhibiting fact.* (p.64)

Murdoch's suggestion is that the realism involved in perceiving what is true commits us to the necessity (and presumably thus reality) of the good. The thought seems to be that in recognising a dimension of accuracy in our vision of the real, we are thereby committed to an ideal of goodness which governs that assessment.

Discussion of this argument has often focussed on the nature of this ideal. We will come to that in a moment. For now, the question is how it is supposed to show the possibility of disrupting the egocentric tendencies of the Freudian

[9] See (Broackes 2012, p.67) on the transition and cf. (Setiya 2013, p.17). Cathy Mason (2023, p.666) suggests that the appearance of a shift disappears once we recognise Murdoch's distinctive form of realism. But it is the unmarked shift from an attribute of the Good to an attribute of vision which is at issue rather than the commitments of realism.

system. Murdoch claims that just as prayer to God is answered, in traditional Christian theology, by a grace which redeems us from sin, so too does loving attention to the Good provide us with energy for good action and reorient us from the selfish egotism identified by Freud (see Broackes 2012, p.56 for this formulation, cf. Broackes 2024, p.44).

The exact way this argument is supposed to work depends on larger questions about Murdoch's methodology which are not our topic here but, in broad terms, it seems to involve an appeal to ordinary experience characteristic of the three essays in *The Sovereignty of Good*.[10] Murdoch notes that the kind of attention to reality she aims to establish is 'difficult to describe' and perhaps difficult to understand for those who are not versed in religious tradition (p.67). But she thinks that we do have experiences in which we seem to receive good energy from something outside us and she gives as example the apprehension of beauty in art or nature (p.67). Someone unsympathetic to religion or art might consider instead the way that commitment to an ideal can motivate in times of hardship or the action prompted by awareness of a loved one's needs. These ordinary experiences are supposed to show the possibility of receiving good energy from something outside us.[11]

Such cases will not carry much weight for the imperialistic Freudian—what seems to be a confrontation with a reality outside one may be nothing more than a displacement of psychic energy manifesting psychodynamic tension.[12] But there is no reason to take Murdoch to be offering an argument which starts from premises the sceptic is bound to accept. Her appeal to ordinary experience is closer to Kant's appeal to his fact of reason in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (5:31): just as Kant takes the reality of freedom to be secured by ordinary consciousness of the moral law, so too does Murdoch take the reality of disruptive attention to be secured by ordinary experience of beauty

[10] See (Hopwood 2025) on the importance of ordinary moral experience for Murdoch. Cf. her appeal to what we are inclined to say at IP, p.19 and OGG, p.59.
[11] Murdoch gives one such experience a pivotal role in her 1958 novel *The Bell*. Dora is struck by a Gainsborough painting in the National Gallery*:* 'Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making part of her fantasy make it worthless…the pictures were something real outside herself…something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood' (Murdoch 1958, p.196).
[12] See (Freud 1927) on religious experience.

and art. Someone sceptical about the objectivity of morality will deny that the fact of reason is a genuine fact of *reason* rather than an expression of the superego or a manifestation of the Nietzschean will to power. Kant is not concerned to refute such scepticism on its own terms. Nor is Murdoch.

Still, why should attention to reality in light of the good disrupt the egocentric system? Murdoch occasionally talks as if goodness itself were an object of attention (e.g. pp.54–55) but her considered view seems to be not that we see goodness—'[t]he Good itself is not visible' (p.68)—but that we see other things in its light. This is possible because vision involves a conceptual scheme, a 'total vision of life' as she puts it in 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (VCM, p.39). To see things in light of the Good is to make use of a scheme of concepts governed by an ideal of goodness when attending to reality. This requires us to regulate the application of our concepts under the constraints imposed by a normative ideal of perfection—an essentially progressive and infinitely perfectible process through which our concepts change and deepen (IP, p.23).

How does this process operate? Murdoch's second claim is that this ideal of perfect goodness cannot be 'taped' or measured (p.61). It cannot be taped because we cannot set out in advance how it operates—it is an *idea* of perfection in Kant's sense, one which functions as a regulative ideal without being determinately given (see, e.g. A644/B672). Such a standard 'cannot be reduced to psychological or any other set of empirical terms' (p.59). This picks up on a leading theme in 'The Idea of Perfection', where Murdoch argues that the concepts we use when attending to objects are infinitely perfectible in ways which preclude codification in public rules and structure (IP, p.23, p.29—see Gomes forthcoming). The thought in both papers is that attention to reality is governed by a scheme of concepts whose content and application cannot be derived from a fixed set of public rules and principles.

Justin Broackes (2012, p.51) and Kieran Setiya (2013, p.12) connect this thought to Donald Davidson's views on the constitutive ideal of rationality (Davidson 1970, 1974). For Davidson, the possession of propositional attitudes is governed by 'conditions of coherence, rationality, and consistency' which 'have no echo in physical theory' (1974, p.231); rationality is 'a normative notion which by its nature resists regimentation in accord with a

single public standard' (1985, p.245). Similarly, for Murdoch, attention to reality in light of the good is governed by an ideal of goodness whose infinite perfectibility resists regimentation in accord with a single public standard. The good person, like the true artist, is 'obedient to a conception of perfection to which his work is constantly related and re-related' (p.61)—and that ongoing process of refinement is governed by an ideal which has no echo in any fixed set of public rules and principles.

I will return to this connection in §6 below. For now, the broad thought is that attention to reality in light of the good operates in ways which cannot be codified in advance. This is a claim about the scheme of concepts we use when attending to reality. But Murdoch takes it to have implications for the *objects* of attention: 'Moral concepts do not move about within a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up, for different purposes, a different world' (IP, p.27). Someone who attends to reality in light of the good sees aspects of the world which are visible only from the point of view of someone whose attention is governed by an ideal of perfect goodness. These aspects are genuinely part of reality—when we see things in light of the good, we see things as they are (pp. 57–58)—but they are comprehensible only from within that point of view. Looking at others in light of the good brings into focus aspects of the world which are visible from and only from a particular point of view.[13]

It is these aspects of the world which Murdoch takes to have disruptive potential (see especially the paragraph on pp.61–62). The idea seems to be that once we recognise the way in which attention to reality is governed by an ideal of goodness, we allow that there is more to be seen than can be captured in public rules and structure. We see that 'another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own' (p.64)—and this can move us to action. Many have thought this impossible because they assume that the same world can be cognized by subjects with radically different conative states—we see the same things and what we do depends on what we want. Murdoch's views on vision and the good reject this assumption: someone who looks on the world in light of the good may find something there which is inaccessible to someone who

[13] See (Gomes forthcoming) for this reading of 'The Idea of Perfection'. (Setiya 2013) presents a consonant reading in terms of a Platonic theory of concepts.

does not. And that opens a way of thinking about attention which allows it motivational power.[14]

We have, then, a picture of vision on which attention in light of the good brings into view aspects of the world which are perceptible only from the point of view of someone guided by an ideal of perfection. Our concepts are infinitely perfectible, and this opens up features of the world invisible to others. This combines with a story about what we find when we attend to reality in light of the good and the barriers which prevent us from doing so. Loving attention is directed primarily at individuals—among them, other people with their own set of needs and concerns—and seeing them as they really are requires the dissolution of fantasies constructed by the egocentric system. The final essay in *The Sovereignty of Good* will make that its focus. The result is not a direct argument for the claim that we can be moved by attention to reality contrary to Freud's claims about the mind but the removal of one obstacle to taking ordinary experience at face value.

4. Goodness and Limits

Murdoch's argument, then, is that attention to reality in light of the good can disrupt the mechanical system of egocentric energy because it presents us with aspects of the world which serve as an alternative source of energy. In her final paragraphs, Murdoch suggests that this has implications for the limits of science. How so? A natural thought is that this is where goodness enters—it is the nature of goodness which shows the limitations of scientistic thinking. This way of reading Murdoch's essay places a lot of weight on the parallel Murdoch draws between God and Good and, in particular, on the attributes of singularity or unity, transcendence, and necessary reality as they apply to the Good. Many have thought that it follows from the parallel, for Murdoch, that goodness is a real unity which eludes scientific explanation. It is because Good, like God, is unitary, transcendent, and necessarily real that there is a genuine unity in the moral domain which sets a limit to scientific explanation.

[14] See (Antonaccio 2000, pp145f.) for helpful discussion; (Setiya 2013) and (Taylor 2022) emphasise this aspect of Murdoch's views.

There are passages in Murdoch's essay which seem to make this direct connection (see especially p.56, p.59). But Murdoch is more ambivalent about the status of her parallel than this reading allows. In her discussion of whether Good is unitary, for example, she says only that reflection 'rightly *tends* to unify the moral world,' that it reveals '*increasing* unity' (p.56, my emphases). These are claims about the direction of moral reflection rather than its achievement. But '[w]hether there is a single supreme principle in the united world of the virtues, and whether the name of that principle is love, is something which I shall discuss below' (p.56)—which she does only later in the essay. Indeed, she notes explicitly that her discussion might be thought to show only that we must think or act *as if* the Good is a real unity. And rather than dismissing this, she responds that what she has formulated so far '*seems* unlike an 'as if' or a 'it works" (p.62, my emphasis), and that 'a purely subjective conviction of certainty'—that is, one which falls short of establishing an objective reality—'seems less than enough' (p.62).

These lines about the status of her claims come before Murdoch's discussion of whether the Good is necessarily real. So one might think that the limitations of science are secured only with the argument condensed into Broackes's two sentences of extraordinary, perhaps maddening, difficulty. But, as I noted above, this argument doesn't straightforwardly attempt to show that goodness is necessarily real. Instead, it claims that in recognising a dimension of accuracy in our vision of the real, we are thereby committed to an ideal of goodness which governs that assessment. Does this show that the nature of goodness places a limit on scientific explanation?

It would do so if Murdoch's conclusions were suitably immodest—if, as per Maria Antonaccio's pioneering study (2000, p.115f.), the argument establishes that goodness is a transcendental condition on the very possibility of moral consciousness. For, modulo certain Kantian assumptions about the structure of transcendental conditions, the status of goodness as a transcendental condition would insulate it from empirical investigation.[15] But Murdoch does not explicitly commit to these Kantian assumptions here. And

[15] See, e.g., Kant's comments on the pure concepts of the understanding (A94–95; B126–127) and rational psychology (B421–422).

nothing in her argument requires them.[16] If we instead read the conclusion more modestly—as requiring only a *belief* in the existence of the good or an *ideal standard* of perfection—then it is not clear why it should elude capture in scientific terms.[17] Quite the opposite.[18]

For these reasons, I am sceptical that it is the necessary reality of the good which is supposed to play a load-bearing role in support of Murdoch's claims about the limitations of science. This topic has exercised commentators but it is somewhat orthogonal to Murdoch's stated aim of showing how goodness is possible given Freud's insight. In order to defend that conclusion, Murdoch argues that attention to reality in light of the good has the capacity to move us. The way in which this sets a limit on scientific explanation is more complicated than this proposal suggests.

There is one final structural point to bear in mind. I noted above that Murdoch's essay is divided in its original publication into four parts. If it is the nature of goodness alone which is supposed to establish that there are limits on scientific investigation, then we should expect her conclusion to be reached at the end of part two—after all, that is where she draws the parallel between God and Good. But this is not how the argument proceeds. Murdoch ends the second section asking which faculty relates us to the real and the good, answering that the idea of compassion or love is naturally suggested (p.65). The conclusions about the limits of scientific explanation come later, only after we have considered the capacity of human beings to love.

5. Soul and Limits

How, then, does Murdoch support her conclusions about the limits of scientific explanation if not by reference to the nature of goodness? To answer this question, we need to turn to the third section of Murdoch's essay where she asks us to 'pause and consider the picture of the human personality, or the

[16] See (Hämäläinen 2013).
[17] See (Jordan 2022) and (Mason and Dougherty 2023) respectively; neither is explicit whether they intend their interpretation of 'the ontological argument' to apply to the argument of OGG but both draw equally on OGG and MGM in presenting their reading.
[18] Compare (Dennett 2006) and Hume's introduction to *The Natural History of Religion*.

soul, which has been emerging' (p.65). It is the human personality, or the soul, which underwrites Murdoch's conclusions about scientific understanding. Her thought is that our capacity to attend to reality shows the limits of scientific explanation.

I noted that the second section of Murdoch's essay uses a parallel between God and Good to argue that moral experience commits us to a standard of goodness in light of which other things are evaluated or perceived as good. What happens next? Murdoch argues that it is the capacity to love which frees us from fantasy and enables us to see clearly (p.65); that sincerity and self-knowledge are much less important in this process (pp.65–66); that seeing things in light of the Good requires techniques which alter and purify our attention (pp.67–69); and that all of this requires '*some more positive conception of the soul* as a substantial and continually developing mechanism of attachments, the purification and reorientation of which must be the task of morals' (p.69, my emphasis).

This section is organised around Murdoch's explication of the capacity to attend in terms of the capacity to love. There is a danger to this characterisation, insofar as we are primed to understand it in terms of a prior notion of love perhaps unsuited to the role Murdoch accords it. Murdoch recognises this, in effect insisting that her use of the term 'love' captures something only imperfectly realised in the normal case (p.73, cf. the diminution of love in the final paragraphs of 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts', especially the remarks at p.100). But there is an advantage too: it connects historically with Platonic discussion of love as the route to virtue (as in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) and it emphasises the structural way that attention to reality has motivational force: the capacity to attend is a capacity to love inasmuch as both are cognitive capacities to apprehend the world which thereby move us to action. Murdoch makes this equation in the first paragraph of this section and then draws various implications from it. It is here we find a link to the themes of the Study Group on Cultural Unity.

Start with her positive conception of the soul. Murdoch takes her argument to show that there is a fundamental unity to its faculties: attention to reality inextricably involves both cognition and appetite. This contrasts with Humean views on which will and reason are 'entirely separate faculties in the

moral agent' (IP, p.39). And it contrasts with Kantian views on which we are separated into 'a pure rational agent and an impersonal mechanism, neither of which represented what we normally think of as personality' (p.52). For Murdoch, the unity of the capacity to attend shows that there are no grounds to split the soul into merely cognitive and merely appetitive faculties: our capacity to take in the world is at once a capacity to be moved by it (see especially the first two paragraphs of the third section, pp.65–66).

This sets the context for Murdoch's rejection of existentialism. It is introduced at the start of her essay as pervading the philosophical scene, even going so far as to '[get] into the minds of those (e.g. Oxford philosophers) who have not sought it and may even be unconscious of its presence' (p.46). And it returns in the final section, where it is described as 'optimistic romancing or else something positively Luciferian' (p.70). (It's hard not to enjoy the effrontery of both descriptions which one suspects were designed to irritate as much as reveal.) Murdoch's fundamental objection to existentialism is that it has a mistaken conception of the self: '[m]oral philosophy of an existentialist type', she tells us, 'is still Cartesian and egocentric' (p.46). It isolates a region of the self which is supposed to operate independently of the mechanical system of egocentric energy—but this requires the identification of the moral agent with an 'isolated principle of will' and the divestment of the remainder 'to other disciplines, such as psychology or sociology' (p.47). Existentialism thus inherits the bifurcation of the Humean and Kantian pictures—and their failures too.[19]

What are the implications for scientific explanation? Murdoch claims that attending to reality in light of the good can disrupt the mechanical system of egocentric energy. I've suggested that her argument turns on the idea that goodness cannot be taped—that when we look at things in light of the good, what we see only shows up from the point of view of someone operating with a scheme of concepts governed by a normative ideal of perfection. This allows us to be moved by reality contrary to the egocentric forces of the Freudian

[19] See Sartre *Being and Nothingness* (Part I, ch.1, §v, p.78f) for material suggestive of bifurcation; but cf. (Moran 2012) for opposition to Murdoch's interpretation of existentialism.

system. It is also supposed to safeguard the possibility of freedom against psychological determinism.

Consider the mechanical system of egocentric energy. Murdoch is prepared to allow that if it were the whole truth about psychological explanation, then we would be able to provide a complete explanation of human behaviour in the terms of an ideal psychoanalysis—this is the kind of explanation amenable to scientifically minded empiricism (see especially IP, pp.25–26; cf. p.73). But if our capacity to attend is governed in ways which preclude codification, then there is no saying in advance how the psychological system will develop. The patterns of psychic energy identified in the psychoanalytic setting may give us a rough and ready prediction of how a person's psychology will progress. But they cannot be the whole story: what a person sees, when they attend in light of the good, cannot be determined in advance. Our capacity for attention is governed by an ideal of goodness and this ensures that its operations cannot be captured within the terms of psychoanalytic theory. The perfectibility of the good blocks a complete system of psychoanalytic laws.[20]

Murdoch's suggestion, then, is that our capacity to attend sets a limit to scientific explanation. Since it is governed by the good, it brings into view aspects of the world which are accessible only from the point of view of someone who operates with that scheme of concepts. This explains how it can disrupt the mechanical energy of the egocentric system: the idea of perfection, she says, moves and changes us (p.60). It also shows the limits of Freudian analysis: our capacity to attend operates in ways which cannot be captured by psychoanalytic theory. It is the fact that our 'natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range', Murdoch says, which shows the limits of a 'scientifically minded empiricism' (p.69). Her conclusions about the limitations of science come from her reflections on the capacities of the soul.

There is one final small point to note. As part of the administration of its grant, the Ford Foundation required a narrative report on the meetings of the Study Group on Cultural Unity. The report on the 1966 meeting describes

[20] This contrasts with Stuart Hampshire's more conciliatory approach (p.48; cf. IP, p.27). See the discussion in DPR and (Pears 1963).

its topic as 'Levels of Understanding'. But it notes a second leading theme of 'the ontological status of the person'. And this is where it situates Murdoch's paper. It is described as enlarging 'our conception of the being out of which doing comes' and refocusing the discussion on 'the 'ontic power' of the Person [which] displays itself in normative action'. It was this ontic power which was supposed to have implications for the scientistic ideal. Murdoch's first audience in Bowdoin thus understood her paper not as an investigation into the nature of goodness but as part of a general discussion of the nature of persons. It is the status of persons which was supposed to show the limitations of the scientific ideal.[21]

6. Mind and Reality

'On "God" and "Good"' was part of a series of reflections on the importance of unity and the limitations of the scientific ideal. I've suggested that this context is relevant for understanding Murdoch's essay. It is also helpful for emphasising the continuities in Murdoch's thinking. She begins 'The Idea of Perfection' by tracing the 'inarticulate moments in modern ethics' back to contemporary thinking in the 'philosophy of mind' (IP, p.3) And she sets out to offer in its stead a 'rival soul-picture' (IP, p.2) which better connects, illuminates, explains, and makes available 'new and fruitful places for reflection' (IP, p.44). 'On "God" and "Good"' makes good on this intent: Murdoch presents us with a picture of the soul with the capacity to attend to reality in light of the good. It is this picture of the soul which shows the possibility of goodness in spite of Freud's insight. And it is this picture of the soul, I have suggested, which shows the limitations of a mode of explanation which confines itself to the terms of an ideal psychoanalysis.

But does this suffice to undermine the scientific ideal at issue for the Study Group on Cultural Unity? That ideal, according to the Group's statement of purpose, is one on which 'all things whatsoever are held to be intelligible ultimately in terms of the laws of inanimate nature' (Grene 1969, p.ix). The argument identified above suggests a principled reason for denying that psychological explanation can be modelled solely in psychoanalytic terms: our

[21] The quotes from the 1966 Narrative Report come from (Breytspraak and Mullins 2017) which contains helpful background on the Study Group.

attention to reality is governed by an ideal of goodness which cannot be taped in advance. I noted above the connection to Davidson's views on the constitutive ideal of rationality. But one of the supposed lessons of Davidson's discussion is that anomalism about the mental is compatible with monism about reality. That is, even if we cannot provide an explanation of psychological systems in purely psychoanalytic terms, there could still be a level of description which picks them out in terms of the laws of inanimate nature. And if this possibility is realised, the scientific ideal is left standing.

Well, perhaps. But Davidson's conciliation of anomalism and monism turns on the assumption that there is a common ontology for psychological and physical explanation—only so can items which appear in the first be identified with items which appear in the second. In Davidson's case, this is an ontology of events, variously describable in nomological or psychological vocabulary depending on whether our interest is causal law or rational explanation. But the point generalises to other ontological categories—anomalism and monism cohere because psychological and physical explanation share a domain. This is true also of the scientific ideal at issue for the Study Group on Cultural Unity: *all things whatsoever*, it claims, are intelligible ultimately in terms of laws of inanimate nature. And this includes, presumably, those things which Murdoch claims are intelligible only in terms of their capacity to be moved by the good—which is to say, people.

But one might think that the very considerations which Murdoch raises to motivate the possibility of goodness also tell against the idea that there is a common ontology specified in a purely descriptive vocabulary which includes either people or things with which they can be identified. For if people are essentially moral agents capable of looking at the world with love and justice and if this activity is governed by an ideal which cannot be codified in public rules and structure, then people themselves cannot simply be identified with or recovered from aspects of the world which are not describable in these terms. Or so one might argue. And if Murdoch's argument can be extended in this way, then the scientific ideal would be shown false: some things are

intelligible not in terms of the laws of inanimate nature but only in terms of their capacity to be moved by the good.[22]

Now, one might think that Murdoch would go further and deny the very possibility of 'a standardized, unique description of every physical event couched in a vocabulary amenable to law' (Davidson 1970, p.224). After all, if scientific enquiry is also governed by an ideal of perfect goodness, then it too will involve concepts whose infinite perfectibility resist codification—the true scientist no less than the true artist will need to be 'obedient to a conception of perfection to which his work is constantly related and re-related' (p.61). This would put pressure on the idea that there is a purely descriptive vocabulary suitable for formulating an ideal physics.[23] But it is important that the case against the scientific ideal need not rely on this stronger claim. Murdoch can resist Davidson's monism so long as she has grounds for denying that items in the domain of psychological explanation can be identified with anything which falls under the laws of inanimate nature—for denying, that is, that the domain of the scientific ideal includes *people*.

The idea that there are aspects of the human being which pose a threat to scientific explanation is now most readily, and often solely, associated with debates about the nature of conscious experience. And much of that discussion focuses solely on the events and states which constitute the mental lives of conscious beings and their relation to the physical. This is attributable, Jennifer Hornsby once suggested, 'to a line of thinking which allows questions about consciousness to arise detached from questions about the beings that are actually conscious' (Hornsby 1997, p.17). The problem is that 'a person's leading of a mental life is treated as if it were a separable side of her biography' (Hornsby 1997, p.44).

Not for Murdoch. What makes difficulties for the existentialist-behaviourist model, she tells us, is 'the conception of *persons* or *individuals*, a conception

[22] Jennifer Hornsby has repeatedly pressed this line of thought, against Davidson (1997, ch.1; 1999) and more broadly (2008). See also (Child 1993).
[23] For material in this vein, see IP, p.29; SGC, p.68, p.95 and especially MGM, p.418, p.484f. But cf. her reference to the neutral language of natural law or science at OGG, p.51 and DPR, p.201.

inseparable from morality' (IP, p.24, my emphasis). And this, I have suggested, is where she thinks we find resources able and worthy to guide and check the increasing power of science. It is the fact that we have the capacity to be moved by attention to reality which is supposed to show that the soul's activities cannot be captured in reductive Freudian terms. If there is a challenge to the broader scientific ideal here, it rests not on some special qualitative properties of experience but on something more fundamental: the existence of people, looking at others in ways which cannot be captured in impersonal terms.[24]

References

Iris Murdoch

DPR	The Darkness of Practical Reason
IP	The Idea of Perfection
KV	Knowing the Void
MGM	*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*
OGG	On 'God' and 'Good'
SGC	The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts
VCM	Vision and Choice in Morality

Page references for the three essays (IP, OGG, and SGC) which make up *The Sovereignty of Good*, are given to the Routledge Classics edition (London: Routledge, 2001). Page references for *The Fire and the Sun* are to the Oxford University Press edition, 1977. Page references to MGM are to the Chatto & Windus edition, 1992. All other references are to the papers collected in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997). Page references to *The Bell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958) are to the Vintage edition, reprinted in 2004.

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