

# Iris Murdoch's 'Good': A Critical Analysis of its Nature and Relevance

Heather Widdows

From the late 1950s to the early 1990s, Iris Murdoch produced her own unique brand of moral philosophy which offers commentary and insight into the current debate concerning the nature of moral values. Over the years, Murdoch criticised existentialism, behaviourism, linguistic analysis and utilitarianism on the grounds that they present distorted, and at best partial, depictions of the moral life. At the root of her criticisms is the conviction that these views are out of step with experience and are too narrow to account for the reality of moral value as it manifests itself in ordinary life. Today, as the debate regarding the nature of moral values—between the realists and non-cognitivists—becomes more polarised around what have come to be defining issues, such as whether there are moral facts (moral facts being assumed to be analogous to scientific facts), her criticisms and her opposing schema continue to have validity, and offer an alternative approach to moral values and the moral life. Moreover, her philosophy contains elements which could enliven the current debate in both theology and philosophy regarding the nature of moral value.

Murdoch offers a realist framework in which moral values are real and influential in human life, differentiated from other realists by her inclusion of the religious and the aesthetic. Like other realists, the main support for her claim is that her position is upheld by experience, in light of which she holds that “the non-cognitivist tradition in moral philosophy is just widely untrue to what everybody knows perfectly well” [Kerr, 1997, p.84]. In her view, moral values are simply part of the fabric of reality and human beings are essentially moral beings:

The human scene is one of moral failure combined with the remarkable continued return to an idea of goodness as unique and absolute. What can be compared to this? If space visitors tell us that there is no value on their planet, this is not like saying there are no material objects. We would ceaselessly *look* for value in their society, wondering if they were lying, had different values, had misunderstood. [Murdoch, 1992, p.427]

There are many elements of Murdoch's philosophy which contribute to her picture of the moral life. These elements are drawn from all aspects of life, and notably religion and art are crucial, to the point of being indistinguishable from morality. Consequently, it is difficult to focus upon one aspect of her thought without distorting her philosophy. Nonetheless, this paper will focus upon her central concept, the good, around which her philosophical framework is constructed. It should be borne in mind that, if one is to adequately grasp her schema, one should take into account other elements; in particular, her conviction that the moral life is religious in nature. This paper, then, will attempt to explore Iris Murdoch's central concept of the good. This will be done in four sections: first, the characteristics of the good will be analysed; second, the arguments for the good will be addressed; third, the ontological status of the good will be assessed; and fourth, some comments will be made on the good's relevance for the current debate.

### **Murdoch's Good**

Murdoch's notion of the good as the central element of her moral philosophy first appeared in her book *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), in which the good is revealed as the guiding principle of the moral life and the ultimate reality. Murdoch returned to the good 20 years later in her largest and most detailed philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, which presents the good as the supreme object of attention, the focus of her 'godless religion' and the end-point of the moral quest.

The good, like all moral values, is discovered in everyday moral life, and its recognition is part and parcel of life. Recognising and comprehending the good is neither difficult nor mysterious, and as Murdoch is swift to point out, "there is no complicated secret doctrine" [Murdoch, 1970, p.74]. For Murdoch, values are real and knowable; "the good is there, whether or not we perceive or pursue it. It is not impossible to get from what 'is' to what 'ought' to be" [Kerr, 1997, p.78]. However, though the good is primary for Murdoch, adjudging its status and nature is no easy task, because the "unsystematic presentation of her ideas and the difficulty of the issues being considered make it hard to be sure what she means by the Good" [Burns, 1997, p.303].<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, difficulty in defining the good is somewhat to be expected, as Murdoch regards perceiving it as the end-point of the moral quest, an endeavour which is a lifetime's work.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, although defining the exact nature of the good is difficult, even impossible, some aspects of the good can be known, because "we ordinarily conceive and apprehend goodness in terms of virtues which

belong to a continuous fabric of being” [Murdoch, 1970, p.30]. Therefore, although imperfectly, one always has some sense of goodness:

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 . . . *The necessity of the good is then an aspect of the kind of necessity involved in any technique of exhibiting fact.* [Murdoch, 1970, p.66]

Thus, one’s experience of the good, though limited, makes a partial description possible; if this were not the case, the good could not play such an overwhelming role in ordinary experience.

### **Transcendence and Immanence**

The key feature of the good is that it is both transcendent and immanent. Though this may appear controversial, Murdoch maintains that there is no contradiction in recognising the good as both immanent and transcendent, because plainly the “idea of good, perceived in our confused reality, also transcends it” [Murdoch, 1992, p.405]. Thus, the good “lives as it were on both sides of the barrier and we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement within our limitations” [Murdoch, 1970, p.93].

Murdoch uses the term ‘transcendent’ in the Aristotelian sense, viz, that of transcending the categories.<sup>3</sup> Good is transcendent in that it is never contained in a single object or action which one would describe as good, but always exceeds the confines of a particular situation. For Murdoch, the good is part of the “fundamental texture of human nature” [Murdoch, 1992, p.474], and although part of the human experience, this “inexhaustible reality” [Murdoch, 1970, p.42] surpasses it. It is the “ideal end-point” [Murdoch, 1970, p.42]. ‘Transcendent’, used in this context, does not have supernatural connotations, in that the good is not otherworldly, or dependent upon any ‘thing’ or ‘being’ outside the human world. Rather, it is a reality in the world and transcendence describes part of its nature.

Simultaneously, Murdoch insists that the good has an immanent aspect. It is through this immanent aspect that the good itself is known, and she postulates that the “idea of good (goodness, virtue) crystallises out of our moral activity” [Murdoch, 1992, p.426]. In other words, a partial recognition of the good itself is contained within the experience of goodness in ordinary life. For Murdoch, then, knowledge of the good and inklings of its transcendent nature are not unusual concepts but simply arise from moral experience, for though the good “can be neither seen nor possessed it is perceptible in instances of moral behaviour” [O’Conner, 58

1996, p.120}. Thus, the “all-important knowledge of good and evil is learnt in every kind of human activity” [Murdoch, 1992, p.418].

These two characteristics are the most significant aspects of Murdoch’s good, and her definition of these terms differentiates her realism from that of other contemporary philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Murdoch denies that transcendence and immanence are opposites, maintaining that any such dichotomy is false. She holds that transcendence and immanence are not mutually exclusive but connected, since the terms are used to highlight different aspects. For her transcendence begins in immanence, otherwise it would not be perceptible to finite humans, as it is transcendence which gives particulars authority and meaning. Thus, the good is “an idea, an ideal, yet it is also evidently and actively incarnate all around us” [Murdoch, 1992, p.478]. Hence, the two aspects of the good flow into each other; the transcendent is recognised in its immanent aspects, for “what is fundamental here is ideal or transcendent, never fully realised or analysed, but continually rediscovered in the course of the daily struggle with the world” [Murdoch, 1992, p.427]. To illustrate her concept of the good as both immanent and transcendent, Murdoch refers to Plato’s picture of the cave.<sup>5</sup> In Plato’s imagery the good is “unique, it is ‘above being’” and yet “it fosters our sense of reality, as the sun fosters life on earth” [Murdoch, 1992, p.399]. Hence, the good, like the sun, is ‘beyond’ and transcendent, but it can be seen and known in part on an immanent level, just as the sun has influence and can be known in part from its effects. Thus, in effect Murdoch uses the terms transcendent and immanent in order to signify the way in which an absolute concept like the good can have relevance for finite beings like ourselves.

Murdoch’s outright rejection of dualism, manifested in her contention that transcendence and immanence are not opposites but correlates, perhaps more than any other has made her work difficult for many theologians and philosophers to accept. Although dualism has been rejected by most contributors in the debate, underlying dualist assumptions are still present in much philosophical and theological thinking.<sup>6</sup> The legacy of the dualism remains embedded in much of contemporary thought and (despite post-modern assertions to the contrary) it still underpins many basic assumptions, such as the dualism of objective and subjective which remains in philosophy and other academic disciplines. In order for Murdoch to succeed, she must convince her readers of the fallacy of such an opposition, which one would think would be fairly straightforward since scholars of moral philosophy<sup>7</sup> have explicitly rejected dualist theories. Nonetheless, such assumptions continue, and often philosophers remain trapped in

dualistic mind-sets.

Instead of rejecting the dichotomy which a dualist world-view created, many theorists have tended to simply reject one side of the equation: the 'objective' side. Consequently, they have denied the objective and insisted that all is subjective, a move which leads to relativism and non-cognitivism. Other schools of thought have gone in the opposite direction and rejected the subjective side of the equation, particularly in theology: for example, those who endorse divine command theories and hold to fundamentalist views of God and morality. Such positions deny any subjective element in moral understanding and assert certain objective truths. As a result, both sides, while claiming to reject dualism, have not actually done so. Though they do not appear to propose dualist theories, their tendency to adopt one side of the dualism they claim to reject, rather than attempting a reintegration, ensures that the dichotomy remains in place.

Both approaches ultimately lead to misguided viewpoints. Adopting an objective stance leads to the old difficulties of unchanging dogma which is imposed upon human beings and which limits the possibility of truly moral action.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, the claim that all is subjective, while releasing humanity from the control of 'outside' factors, opens the path to relativism, which for Murdoch results in a loss of the meaning and significance of moral value, and, for moral realists (such as Dancy and McDowell) ignores the phenomenology of moral experience.

By attempting to remove the division between transcendence and immanence, and represent them as correlates, Murdoch hopes to integrate both sides of dualism, a project which she deems necessary if one is to account for the full complexity of human experience. However, her attempt, though laudable is not without difficulty, since the dichotomy between subjective and objective still predominates, either in its traditional form, or because of a one-sided emphasis. This underlying continuation of dualism, which informs and upholds many philosophical and theological assumptions, makes Murdoch's thesis problematic. However, if one recognises this and truly rejects dualism in its various forms, then it is possible to conceive of the good as both transcendent and immanent.<sup>9</sup>

## **Establishing the Good**

If one accepts that transcendence and immanence are correlates, then the different aspects of the good are accounted for. However, Murdoch must still convince the reader of the reality of the good, which she attempts to do using two main arguments: an argument from perfection and her own version of the ontological argument. These arguments go some way to

setting out a philosophical defence for her position. However, ultimately she believes that the fundamental support of her thesis is found in examining one's own experience. Therefore, her use of the argument from perfection and the ontological argument are in some sense 'after the fact'; they are ways of philosophically articulating what she holds to be already known.

### **Argument from Perfection**

Murdoch's argument from perfection revolves around the meaning of the term 'perfection', which clearly presents the relation between the immanent and transcendent elements of the good. Murdoch asserts that 'perfect' is a comparable term and can only be used in contrast with that which is imperfect.<sup>10</sup> That which is truly perfect is never attainable by finite beings such as ourselves, and hence perfection is always an ideal. However, though unattainable, the concept of perfection enables one "to see that A . . . is really better than B" [Murdoch, 1970, p.62]. The comparative nature of the term means that one can judge between actions and objects, for "we learn of perfection and imperfection through our ability to understand what we see as an image or shadow of something better which we cannot yet see" [Murdoch, 1992, p.405]. This ability to contrast and compare means that it is possible to intuit what is not already visible, in that "we *know* of perfection as we look upon what is imperfect" [Murdoch, 1992, p.427]. By extension, the good is known when one looks upon that which is not good.

Murdoch's claim, then, is that though human beings cannot know perfection, they do know in which 'direction' it lies; something which is deduced from imperfect objects. This knowledge is immediate in that "we are not usually in doubt about the direction in which good lies" [Murdoch, 1970, p.97]. It is the concept of 'direction' towards that which is perfect which suggests that the good is real, because it is from recognising imperfect instances of goodness that the reality of the perfect good is revealed. This transcending order of perfection is "*characteristic of morality*" [Murdoch, 1992, p.427], for it is only in the light of perfection—which for Murdoch means what is perfectly good—that 'better' alternatives can be judged. Because perfection is not attainable, but always lies beyond and transcends a particular instance, it provides an ideal, a standard against which particulars can be assessed. Thus, knowing of perfection, which cannot be seen, provides inspiration and knowledge, for "the idea of perfection moves and changes us... because it inspires love" [Murdoch, 1970, p.62]. Therefore, although perfection is "beyond... it exercises its authority" [Murdoch, 1970, p.62].

## The Ontological Argument

The second argument Murdoch employs in support of her realist conception of goodness is the ontological argument, which like the argument for perfection is about progressions of goodness.

The ontological argument was first put forward as a proof of the existence of God by St Anselm (1033–1109), and Murdoch reproduces this argument in great detail.

Anselm's thesis is formulated around his definition of God, namely that God is a "being than which nothing greater can be conceived" [Anselm, 1968a, p.4]. His argument starts with the assertion that even the fool<sup>11</sup> who does not believe in God can understand this definition. If the definition can be understood then God must exist, otherwise any existing being would be greater, contradicting the initial definition. Thus, Anselm's assertion is that "there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality" [Anselm, 1968a, p.4].

This first form of the argument ran into difficulty immediately and was criticised by Anselm's contemporary, Gaunilo, who argued that merely because one can conceive of 'the greatest being'—a possibility which he questions<sup>12</sup>—this does not mean that it exists in reality. To illustrate his point Gaunilo cites the now famous example that imagining a perfect island would not bring it into existence. For Gaunilo to be convinced, he demands some other proof.<sup>13</sup>

In response to this criticism, Anselm restates his argument, explaining that his conception could only apply to the Supreme Being, because only the Supreme Being 'necessarily exists', arguing that "if such a being can be conceived to exist, then necessarily it does exist" [Anselm, 1968b, p.14]. This assertion of necessary existence is connected to the manner in which Anselm argues that the Supreme Being can be conceived of, despite Gaunilo's doubts. Anselm contends that experience of the Supreme Being is revealed all around, and is especially derived from experience of goodness, for "by ascending from the lesser good to the greater, we can form a considerable notion of a being than which a greater is inconceivable" [Anselm, 1968b, p.24]. Hence, if one starts with an experience of goodness, one can then reason that good would be greater if it had no beginning or end, and it is this eternal concept of goodness which is the Supreme Being.

Anselm's introduction of 'necessary existence' has not satisfied critics, and has been disregarded to the extent that Schopenhauer called it "a charming joke" [Murdoch, 1992, p.392]. Momentously, Kant practically destroyed the validity of the proof with the observation that 'existence' is not a predicate, which returns the proof to being

susceptible to Gaunilo's first criticism. However, Murdoch along with other scholars<sup>14</sup> have returned to the proof with a renewed interest.

Murdoch remains unconvinced by Kant's criticism, maintaining that "only the first version is vulnerable to Kant's contention that existence is not a predicate" [Murdoch, 1992, p.404]. Murdoch concedes that Anselm's first formulation "may indeed seem frail, only to be given substance by a belief or faith deriving from another source" [Murdoch, 1992, p.404], and appears as "a specious way of expressing a personal certainty which is already tacitly concealed in its premises" [Murdoch, 1992, p.404]. However, she views the second formulation differently and maintains that the replacement of existence with necessary existence creates a very different argument. She maintains that 'necessary existence' is not an empty concept, and to corroborate this she introduces the work of Norman Malcolm<sup>15</sup>, who claims, as Anselm did, that 'God' is different from any other concept. Murdoch suggests, in line with Malcolm's work, that, if God exists then he must have always existed. Hence, if the concept 'God' "is meaningful, if it is not self-contradictory, God exists" [Murdoch, 1992, p.410]. For Murdoch the notion of necessary existence is concerned with what constitutes our notion of 'God', and therefore the "problem, in no trivial way . . . (is) . . . one of meaning" [Murdoch, 1992, p.410]. Her contention is that necessary existence is about those elements of human life which are ever-present aspects of experience.

Murdoch contends that God does not fulfil these criteria, and therefore 'necessary existence' cannot be correctly applied to the Christian God. If the term were to be used of God, then God could not be "a particular, a contingent thing, one thing among others; a contingent god might be a great demonic or angelic spirit, but not the being in question" [Murdoch, 1992, p.395]. Consequently, if necessary existence is to be used legitimately of God, then "God is not to be worshipped as an idol or identified with any empirical thing; as is indeed enjoined by the Second Commandment" [Murdoch, 1992, p.395]. Thus, Murdoch reckons that Anselm's second version of the ontological proof fails not because necessary existence is not a predicate, but because it is wrongly applied to God, for "no empirical contingent being could be the required God and what is 'necessary' cannot be God either" [Murdoch, 1992, p.425].

To reinforce her pronouncement that the ontological proof cannot apply to the Christian God (at any rate not about the object it has become), she turns to the work of Findlay<sup>16</sup>, who dismisses "forms of religion... (that)... attach a uniquely sacred meaning to existent things" [Findlay, 1968, p.120]. Findlay observes that "there are other frames of



mind, to which we should not deny the name 'religious', which acquiesce quite readily in the non-existence of their objects" [Findlay, 1968, p.120].<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he notes that part of what is attributed to God is the "possession of certain excellencies we cannot possibly conceive away" [Findlay, 1968, p.120]. It is these 'excellencies' which Murdoch contends the proof is really about, and she praises Findlay for bringing to light what she believes is the 'deep meaning' of the ontological argument, namely that "morality and demythologised religion are concerned with what is absolute, with unconditioned structure, with what cannot be 'thought away' out of human life" [Murdoch, 1992, p.120].

Murdoch's hypothesis is that necessary existence cannot be applied to God, or to "one empirical phenomenon among others" [Murdoch, 1992, p.412], but that it can be used in relation to the good. Just as Murdoch maintains that religious images are foils for the reality of moral value<sup>18</sup>, so too she suggests that in Anselm's proof, "what is in question . . . is something unique, of which the traditional idea of God was an image or metaphor and to which it has certainly been an effective pointer" [Murdoch, 1992, p.412]. Consequently, her hypothesis is that the proof claims "some uniquely necessary status for moral value as something (uniquely) impossible to be thought away from human experience, and as in a special sense, if conceived of, known as real" [Murdoch, 1992, p.396]. The correct interpretation of Anselm's proof is that it establishes the "necessity and sovereignty of the Good" [Murdoch, 1992, p.425], which is revealed in Anselm's description of how one conceives of God: the 'degrees of goodness' argument. Anselm's assertion that "we recognise and identify goodness and *degrees* of good, and are thus able to have the idea of a greatest conceivable good" [Murdoch, 1992, p.395] is similar to Murdoch's own argument from perfection. Thus, although the "*goodness* of God is. . . lost to view in logical discussions of the Proof" [Murdoch, 1992, p.414], it is this which she holds is at the core of his work. Hence, Murdoch concludes that the proof is really not about God but concerns the existence of goodness, which "must be in at the start and cannot be added later" [Murdoch, 1992, p.395].

Hence, Murdoch regards the ontological argument as being about the necessity of the good, and by extension of moral value, which is derived from our "most general perceptions and *experience* of the fundamental and omnipresent (uniquely necessary) nature of moral value, thought of in a Christian context as God" [Murdoch, 1992, p.396]. The proof claims necessary existence for the good, and her use of the ontological argument she believes effectively addresses "one of

the great problems of metaphysics..., to explain the idea of goodness in terms which combine its peculiar purity and separateness (its transcendence) with details of its omnipresent effectiveness in human life” [Murdoch, 1992, p.407]. Thus, she contends that the proof is a logical attempt to articulate “the unique nature of morality” [Murdoch, 1992, p.428], which for her is characterised by immanence and transcendence. It elucidates her contention that:

what is perfect must exist, that is, what we think of as goodness and perfection, the object of our best thoughts, must be something real, indeed especially and most real, not as contingent accidental reality but as something fundamental, essential and necessary. [Murdoch, 1992, p.430]

In addition to presenting the ontological argument as a logical proof, she also highlights the fact that Anselm too argues from experience in his “appeal to our sense of God (Good) as discovered everywhere in the world” [Murdoch, 1992, pp.404–405]. She contends that this argument “emerges... under the pressure of the logical argument” [Murdoch, 1992, p.405], and “experience shows us the uniquely *unavoidable* nature of God (Good or the Categorical Imperative)” [Murdoch, 1992, p.405]. Thus, she asserts that the argument “appeals to our moral understanding” [Murdoch, 1992, p.396] and supports the logical claims for the necessity of moral value. The logical formulation of the proof is an attempt to systematise and philosophically account for what is known in experience, namely that “we can ‘think away’ material objects from human existence, but not concepts of good, true, and real” [Murdoch, 1992, p.425].

Thus, Murdoch, like other realists, returns to the argument from experience, claiming that:

Reflection upon our ordinary perceptions of what is valuable, what it is like to seek what is true or just in intellectual or personal situations, or to scrutinise and direct our affections, can thus also lend support to the argument about existence and essence which appeared at first as a kind of logical argument. [Murdoch, 1992, p.398]

The ultimate ground for the conviction of the reality of goodness is one’s own moral experience, and it is from reflection upon this experience that logical proofs emerge. It is experience which tells us of the reality of the good, of “its omnipresence, its purity and separateness from our fallen world, in which its magnetic force is nevertheless everywhere perceptible” [Murdoch, 1992, p.405]. The ontological argument provides a logical articulation of our awareness of the good,

an awareness which is not “something unusual, specialised or remote” [Murdoch, 1992, p.239], but part of everyday life. In essence, her use of the ontological argument is an attempt to systematise and reveal in philosophical form the reality of the good.

Despite Murdoch’s concentration upon one of the traditional proofs for the existence of God, she is at pains to stress that she is not wishing to replace God with good. Like God, the good provides “a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessary real object of attention*” [Murdoch, 1970, p.55]. Indeed, Murdoch is adamant that “moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics” [Murdoch, 1970, p.55]. However, because the good is not an empirical object or a personal being, it is “above the level of gods or God” [Murdoch, 1992, p.475]. Consequently, Murdoch’s good, unlike God, is non-personal, and though it inspires and informs the moral life, the good is indifferent to human striving. Accordingly, the good does not “play a real consoling and encouraging role” [Murdoch, 1970, p.72]; “God sees us and seeks us, the good does not” [Murdoch, 1992, p.83]. Furthermore, Murdoch contends that because of the impersonal nature of the good it is a better focus for attention, for one must “love the good for nothing” [Murdoch, 1992, p.344]. Unlike a personal God, there can be no ulterior motives for being moral; there can be no hope of reward or fear of punishment and the moral life is pure and uncorrupted. Thus, her contention is that “good is not the old God in disguise, but rather what the old God symbolised” [Murdoch, 1992, p.428]. God provided a personality for moral value. Stripping away the personality of God we are left with reality of the good, in the sense that the “good represents the reality of which God is the dream” [Murdoch, 1992, p.496]. For Murdoch, the good offers a central focus which does not have the disastrous consequences for moral living and communication which some ideas of God may.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Ontological Status of the Good**

Having critically observed and accepted the manner in which Murdoch argues for the reality of the good, it is now possible to examine the main obstacle to her (and her mentor Plato’s<sup>20</sup>) realism: that of satisfactorily establishing the reality of the good without presenting it as an object.

Her introduction of the ontological argument is intended to establish the reality of the good as something more than simply an idea, or concept in the mind.<sup>21</sup> If the good was simply a concept or metaphor, then Murdoch would not have introduced the ontological argument to support her cause, especially given the controversy which surrounds it, and the fact that necessary existence is generally dismissed out of hand.

Murdoch's intention is precisely to claim ontological status for the good. In order to do justice to Murdoch's good, it is imperative to accept that for her the good does exist in some absolute sense. The alternative is to accuse her of using an ontological argument which she does not intend to be about ontological status.

This said, her use of the ontological argument is confusing, in that she uses it to explicitly preclude the possibility that the good is an object—the fact that the good is not an object forms part of her reason for claiming that the proof works for good but not for God—while at other points she refers to the good as an *object* of attention; the best object of attention no less.<sup>22</sup> This apparent contradiction is never addressed by Murdoch; however there are solutions to this dilemma which may be suggested. One explanation may be that Murdoch does not consider that the term 'object of attention', with regard to the good, refers to an 'object' in a material sense at all, a suggestion supported by statements like "in an important sense goodness must be an idea" [Murdoch, 1992, p.478]. Perhaps Murdoch regards the good as an object only in the sense that it is the end-point of the search for perfection and goodness, and is in the value systems and frameworks by which people live and conceive of the world.

In order to clarify this issue, it may be possible to draw insight from religion, a course which seems to be justified given Murdoch's own interest in the subject. In Christianity there is a strong tradition, particularly arising from the mystical strains, that God must not be an object, and negative theology adopts much the same stance towards God as Murdoch does towards the good. For such believers, God is not an object but most certainly does exist. Clearly Murdoch respects mystics and even suggests that some have succeeded in achieving the end of the quest. However, if Murdoch accepts the validity of such a view of God as a non-object then this threatens the distinction which she has made between God and good. Part of the problem with Murdoch's analysis is that she regards God as an object, and although certain believers may act as if this is the case, viewing God in such a way is explicitly precluded by Christian theology and tradition.<sup>23</sup> Not only does Christianity deny that God is an object, but "Christian theologians who are orthodox enough to believe in God as Trinity would have caveats about referring to God as 'a person'" [Kerr, 1997. p.75]. Thus, the established position of Christian theology, and one which arose in part from the same source as Murdoch's own philosophy, Platonism, is that God, no less than Murdoch's good, should not be thought of as 'object'. Such reasoning provides an example of how it is possible to hold that 'something', or some 'entity'—it is difficult to find the correct word as 'thing' suggests

object but 'concept' implies a lack of reality—is both real and not an object. However, the difficulty of using this example is obvious, in that the example of God is precisely that from which Murdoch is attempting to distinguish the good. In fact, many critics take this position and declare that Murdoch has not succeeded in separating the two, but that she has simply replaced God with the good. Moreover, if the ontological argument can work for good, then it can also work for God.<sup>24</sup>

Critics are correct to point out that Murdoch adopts a very narrow interpretation of Christianity. Furthermore, given the place she allots to religion and to religious thinking, theologians are underrepresented in her work.<sup>25</sup> Although this does not undermine her whole thesis, her lack of familiarity with theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, and with different schools of thought, such as Christian Platonism, does lead her into error. As a result, she has misconstrued the ways in which God is conceived, and hence has simplified Christian views of God<sup>26</sup> almost to the point of caricature. Consequently, Murdoch wrongly describes God as an object, and attributes to believers elements of belief and practice which many would find unacceptable, especially believers at the mystical end of the spectrum. However, although her conception of the Christian God may be naive, there are elements of her criticism which do not disappear when these mistakes are rectified.

Although Murdoch has not fully taken account of theological conceptions of God and wrongly conceives of God as an object, her assertion that God is personal is not so easily dismissed. God, though not a person, is certainly 'personal', in that God has a character which is interested and intervenes in human affairs. Both good and God are personal in that they have supreme personal relevance for human individuals, though the good is disinterested. The impersonal nature of the good allows it to escape from the criticisms of the ontological argument and rescues moral value from the humanist critique of religious morality.

However, distinguishing between good and God merely because the good is impersonal (rather than the stronger, but flawed assertion that the good is not an object as God is), weakens her argument. It brings into question the focus and reason for adopting her moral religion, and certain scholars have argued that, like Plato before her, Murdoch presents a philosophy in which the individual can find no fulfilment. Since the good is impersonal, achieving the end of the quest and seeing the good can have no practical relevance because all that is accomplished is knowing the impersonal good. Yet this reading makes assumptions which Murdoch would not endorse. She would argue that the good is highly relevant to practical decision-making, indeed the most

relevant component. Furthermore, although the good is impersonal, in that it is not an entity with personality, it is not impersonal in that it is irrelevant to the concerns of human beings. Underlying her whole thesis seems to be the hope that living a moral life is not pointless. While she has discounted the possibility of an external *telos*, she clearly hopes that if one lives a moral life one will have a more fulfilled life. Her hope, though never explicitly articulated, is that the Universe, at least the human part of it, is not indifferent to human striving, and that moral effort does bring reward in that it improves the quality of one's own life and of those around.

The impersonal nature of the good is crucial for Murdoch because it precludes any possibility of coercion in the moral life. Unlike God, the good has no character and therefore does not 'wish' certain behaviour; one must be 'good for nothing'. By this means, Murdoch presents a moral source which is objective but which does not bind the individual in any sense other than it is part of the human condition.

In arguing for the good, Murdoch has employed a number of means—her redefinition of the relation between transcendence and immanence, the argument from perfection and the ontological argument—and underlying all of these is the belief that the good is revealed to us in experience as an ever-present reality which draws one towards it. It is this conviction which leads her to the ontological argument. The ontological argument, while helping the reader to clarify the nature of the good does not help her case for establishing the good. In introducing 'necessary existence', her intention is simply to assert that goodness is a constant certainty of the human condition and the enduring factor of the human quest. However, using the ontological argument—and especially necessary existence—to establish this takes the reader directly into the old debate about predicates and attributes which has surrounded the argument from its conception. Such associations do not aid her endeavours, for the terminology involved—such as possession of attributes—suggests the existence of an object or being to which attributes belong. Thus, her invocation of the ontological argument to prove the good's status leads the reader back to thinking about the good as an object. Given these factors, one is left wondering if she might have achieved her aim more easily by avoiding Anselm's argument altogether, especially given the contempt in which many philosophers and theologians hold it—regarding it as little more than a word game. Her fundamental point is that the good is an essential part of experience. In an attempt to prove this conception it may be best to disregard her ontological argument in favour of her other arguments—from perfection, and the Platonic degrees of goodness argument—which

are more helpful in establishing her realism and certainly less likely to give the impression that the good is an empirical object.

### **The Relevance of Murdoch's Good**

Despite the difficulties surrounding her use of the ontological argument, Murdoch's good cannot be unreflectively dismissed. Her descriptions of the place of the good in the moral life as revealed in experience are compelling, and though some reject them as being out of step with their own experience<sup>27</sup>, they still have something to offer to the debate. In particular, Murdoch's conception of the good, and by extension other moral values, is one in which experience is primary and a determining feature. Recourse to experience (the ability to account for moral phenomenology) remains the trump card in the realist hand; however, in the current debate moral realists have tended to accept the non-cognitive premises, leading to argument and counter-argument in ever-decreasing circles. Accepting these premises has served to weaken their case, in that if they succeed in their attempt to equate moral facts with scientific facts they will have argued away the factors which make moral values unique and significant.<sup>28</sup>

Murdoch would regard this as a reductionist position which denies the nature of moral value as it is revealed in experience, and so undermines the realist case. She attempts to remain true to experience which necessitates that one is not limited by the criteria of the current debate.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in Murdoch's philosophy the good remains unique and the most significant feature of life. However, her refusal to be bound by the current debate has made it harder for others in the field to utilise her ideas, and her work has largely been ignored. In part this is simply because she moves in unusual territory for contemporary philosophy, and her concept of the good incorporates both aesthetic and religious components. Her contemporaries are uneasy with such conclusions, and with the unverifiable, non-scientific concepts she introduces to support her realism. Murdoch would reject such pseudo-scientific tendencies as reductionist and regard them as making philosophers incapable of discussing and representing ordinary life.

Therefore, in order for her concept of the good to be useful in the contemporary debate, one must be prepared to step outside the present boundaries. Unless this is done and it becomes possible to recognise and comment upon the non-factual aspects of life, then not only will Murdoch have little to say to her contemporaries, but more importantly Murdoch believes that 'something' fundamental will be lost. This 'something' is the ability to articulate and communicate not only moral values, but other aspects of life such as emotion—in fact, all the 'deep'

areas which provide the substance and quality of life. If one does step outside the confines of the contemporary debate then Murdoch's holistic thesis has something to offer, not least in highlighting the narrowness of the present debate about the nature of moral values. Her conviction that the good is real and known in ordinary experience has led her to a holistic conception which does not fit neatly into the boundaries of philosophy, theology, or aesthetics but, because of the nature of the good, contains elements of all. As such she is able to present a fuller and hence more accurate depiction of the moral life.

Thus, even though one may not wish to accept Murdoch's reading of the good as it stands, there are elements which are relevant to the current debate in both theology and philosophy regarding the nature of moral value; not least her challenging conviction of the reality of the transcendent and immanent good. She has made a strong case for the fundamental reality of the good in the lives of individuals and in moral-decision making, and, even her questionable use of the ontological argument gives both philosophers and theologians much to ponder.

- 1 We now know, from the writings of her husband, John Bayley, and the extensive public interest in her progress through Alzheimer's, that it was during the writing of this book that her disease began to show itself, which may account for the lack of systemisation and clarity of this concept. However, though there is difficulty in analysing the good, the essential ideas which form and enliven her conception are present.
- 2 Murdoch conceives the moral life as a ongoing struggle to see the real (part of which reality is constructed of values). The moral task is not easy, as it is beset by self-delusion and illusion, which must be countered by 'attention' to the real. The moral life is characterised not by moments of moral choice but by continual attention, which gradually builds good habits and character.
- 3 A description of 'transcendence' as it applies to beauty can be found in the work of Maritain. Beauty is 'transcendent' in that it is present in all other categories for 'just as everything is in its own way, and is good in its own way, so everything is beautiful in its own way' [Maritain, 1953, p. 124].
- 4 Most contemporary philosophers would not use the terms at all. Instead, they would use the comparative though not identical distinction of objective and subjective.
- 5 See *The Republic*, Book Seven.
- 6 Dualism has been a strong characteristic of Western theology and philosophy, which many would argue had devastating consequences for the Western world, in particular for the treatment of women and the environment, consequences which make contemporary thinkers extremely wary of endorsing a dualism of any kind.
- 7 Examples are found in philosophy from Hume to Mackie, all of whom reject the possibility of objectivity, arguing in favour of subjective (in the



broadest sense of the word) conceptions. In theology, one finds it in the overt subjectivism of Dun Cupitt.

- 8 As pointed out so forcibly by the humanist critique of religion, which argues that the believer does not act morally for moral reasons (such as wishing to help another person or do good), but from selfish reasons (hoping for reward, or in order to escape everlasting punishment). See Hume, Nowell-Smith, Nielsen, Hepburn.
- 9 A solution which offers some answer to Plato's problem of participation (at least with regard to moral forms).
- 10 It may be suggested that the word perfect is used in ordinary language simply as a description, without any consciousness that the object/person is not perfect in the fullest sense (absolutely entirely flawless and complete). However, this argument is peripheral to Murdoch's case, for on reflection when the term is used correctly it is comparative, and Murdoch's argument has validity.
- 11 The fool being taken from Psalm 14, where the fool says in his heart there is no God.
- 12 He argues that one has no means by which to picture a greatest being, because one has no experience of such a being. Thus, though one can imagine the 'greatest man', for example, because one has a general idea of 'man', one cannot picture the greatest being as one has no experience to draw upon.
- 13 See Gaunilo, 1968, p.10.
- 14 For example, Malcolm, Hartshorne, Findlay etc.
- 15 Malcolm criticises Kant's premise that "if God exists (and it is possible that He does not) then He necessarily exists" [Malcolm, 1968, p.155]. The adoption of this premise, Malcolm argues, negates the true meaning of 'necessity' and presents "a self contradictory position" [Malcolm, 1968, p.155].
- 16 Incidentally, although Murdoch uses Findlay to support her rejection of any empirical being or object as the focus of the ontological proof, it is worth noting that Findlay takes a very different approach to the ontological argument as a whole. He asserts that "necessity in propositions merely reflects our use of words, the arbitrary conventions of our language... (and)..., the Divine Existence could only be a necessary matter if we had made up our minds to speak theistically *whatever the empirical circumstances might turn out to be*" [Findlay, 1968, p.119]. Findlay, like most post-Kantian scholars, rejects necessary existence, seeing it as a trick of words, whereas for Murdoch it is not only real, but essential for establishing the good.
- 17 Murdoch suggests that the good can function as the focus of a 'godless religion'. See *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.
- 18 Murdoch argues that religious symbols are simply that; symbols for the reality of moral value. Therefore, she suggests that traditional religion presents these values using stories and images, which make them easier for incarnate personal beings to recognise and she states that it is possible to "look through Christ into the mystery of the good" [Murdoch. 1992, p.429].

- For Christianity to be a 'true' religion, this must be recognised as Christ must lose his historical significance and become only the metaphorical son of a metaphorical God; "the Christ who saves us is the mystical Christ whom we make our own, whose figure is a mixture of essence and accident, partly a creation of art as well as being a compact of everything we know about goodness" [Murdoch 1992, p.429].
- 19 Again, Murdoch endorses the humanist critique that religion corrupts true morality and prevents action from purely moral motives, which, in the most extreme cases, leads to immoral action for the sake of religion.
  - 20 Plato was accused of presenting moral values as objects, and his critics, from Aristotle onwards, often envisaged the Platonic forms as objects, though not objects of the sensible world. By interpreting Plato's philosophy as a two-world theory, the forms were regarded as analogous to material objects, and hence thought of in a not dissimilar manner. Such a reading of Plato is rejected by Murdoch, and she is at great pains to avoid a similar interpretation of her own work. Consequently, she emphasises that there is no other-worldly supernatural element to her thought and nothing which suggests that moral values exist as objects in some other realm.
  - 21 Some commentators disagree, claiming that the good is never intended to be more than an idea in the mind. See Kaalikoski, 1997.
  - 22 Attention for Murdoch is a mechanism to purify the thoughts and turn one's focus away from the self and illusion and towards something else. It is "looking carefully at something and *holding* it before the mind" [Murdoch, 1992, p.3]. Attention to anything outside the self will aid the moral task to see the real, however, it is intended that one should gradually progress toward the good. This progression is paralleled to the progression in the *Phaedrus*, in which one moves from the beauty of the flesh to absolute beauty.
  - 23 As noted by Kerr, who comments that "her knowledge of medieval theology evidently does not include the standard thesis that God is not to be regarded as an object in any kind" [Kerr, 1997, p.75].
  - 24 By way of example, see Kaalikoski, 1997.
  - 25 Murdoch neglects many of the most influential theologians, devoting "more space to Don Cupitt than to Thomas Aquinas" [Jones, 1992, p.689].
  - 26 Something which she most certainly does not do in her novels. For example, in *Nuns and Soldiers* Anne is certainly not a naive believer, and has a non-objective God, but a personal Christ; this may even be Murdoch's mystical Christ.
  - 27 Some claim that Murdoch's argument is not supported by experience, but in fact that she misrepresents moral experience. For example, Cupitt dismisses Murdoch's description of moral values as false and states that Murdoch, like Plato, separates morality from nature, resulting in morality being "reactive, inhibitive, anti-life and supernatural" [Cupitt, 1987, p.44]. In a similar vein, Blackburn describes her moral vision as 'repellent', and states that in her work "the age-old device, freely indulged, is to exalt the mystery of the unconditional by debasing the everyday. The more depraved the unredeemed spirit seems the greater the importance of redemption. Since

everyday life is so abject, we need a transfiguration to become anything good or truthful" [Blackburn, 1992, p.3]. However, though experiences may differ, Murdoch's picture remains more true to experience than that of those who postulate that values are determined by choice. To consider moral evaluations as merely matters of preference, rather than as highly significant, is not representative of human experience and could be described as excessively reductionist.

- 28 The primary argument for moral realism is from experience, in particular the experience of moral authority. By attempting to make moral values 'mundane reasons', to use Dancy's phrase, one removes the uniqueness of moral facts and undermines this factor of moral experience.
- 29 Consequently, realists such as Dancy would dismiss her realism as weak, and so, in his terms, no realism at all, in that the good, while real in the decision-making process of individuals, is not necessarily real in the way which scientific facts are. However, as she rejects the fact/value dichotomy, this criticism cannot be regarded as decisive.

## Bibliography

**St. Anselm.** "St. Anselm's Ontological Argument" in *The Ontological Argument*, Ed. Alvin Plantinga, London: Macmillan Press, 1968, pp. 3–6.

**St. Anselm.** "St. Anselm's Reply to Gaunilo" in *The Ontological Argument*, Ed. Alvin Plantinga, London: Macmillan Press, 1968, pp. 6–13.

**Blackburn, Simon.** Review of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* by Iris Murdoch. *Times Literary Supplement*, 1992, pp. 3–4.

**Burns, Elizabeth.** "Iris Murdoch and the Nature of Good" *Religious Studies*, 1997, Vol. 33, pp. 301–313.

**Cupitt, Don.** *The Long Legged Fly*, London: SCM Press, 1987.

**Dancy, Jonathan.** "Two Conceptions of Moral Realism" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (Supplementary Volume)*, 1986, Vol. 63, pp. 167–188.

**Dancy, Jonathan.** *Moral Reasons*, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

**Findlay, J. N.** "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" in *The Ontological Argument*, Ed. Alvin Plantinga, London: Macmillan Press, 1968, pp. 111–123.

**Gaunilo.** "In Behalf of the Fool" in *The Ontological Argument*, Ed. Alvin Plantinga, London: Macmillan Press, 1968, pp. 13–27.

**Hartshorne, Charles.** "The Necessarily Existent" in *The Ontological Argument*. Ed. Alvin Plantinga, London: Macmillan Press, 1968, pp. 123–135.

**Hepburn, R. W.** *Christianity and Paradox: Critical Studies in Twentieth Century Theology*, New York: Pegasus, 1958.

**Hepburn, R. W.** "Vision and Choice in Morality" in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, Ed. I. Ramsey, London: S.C.M., 1966, pp. 181–194.

**Jones, Gregory.** Review of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* by Iris Murdoch *The Thomist*, 1993, Vol. 57, pp. 687–689.

**Kaalikoski, Katri.** "Replacing God: Reflections on Iris Murdoch's Metaphysics" *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 1997, Vol. 11, pp. 143–160.

**Kerr, Fergus.** *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*, London: SPCK, 1997.

- Mackie, J. L.** *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London: Penguin Books, 1977.
- Mackie, J. L.** "The Subjectivity of Values" in *Contemporary Ethics: Selected Readings*, Ed. James P. Sterba, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1989.
- Malcolm, Norman.** "Malcolm's Statement of Anselm's Ontological Arguments" in *The Ontological Argument*, Ed. Alvin Plantinga, London: Macmillan Press, 1968, pp.136–159.
- Maritain, Jacques.** *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, New York: Meridian Books, 1974.
- McDowell, John.** "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1978, Vol. 52, pp. 13–42.
- McDowell, John.** "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity and the Fabric of the World" in *Pleasure Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics*, Ed. Eva Schaper, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 1–16.
- McDowell, John.** "Values and Secondary Qualities" in *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J L Mackie*, Ed. Ted Honderich, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, pp. 110–129.
- Murdoch, Iris.** *The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.
- Murdoch, Iris.** *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Murdoch, Iris.** *Nuns and Soldiers*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1980.
- Murdoch, Iris.** *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987,
- Murdoch, Iris.** *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1992.
- Murdoch, Iris.** "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" in *Existentialists and Mystics Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1997, pp. 261–286.
- Nielsen, Kai.** "Some Remarks on the Independence of Morality from Religion" in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, Ed. I. Ramsey, London: S.C.M., 1966, pp. 140–151.
- Nielsen, Kai.** "God and the Basis of Morality" *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1982, Vol. 10, pp. 335–350.
- Nowell-Smith, P.** "Morality: Religious and Secular" in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, Ed I. Ramsey, London: S.C.M., 1966, pp. 95–112.
- O'Conner, Patricia J.** *To Love the Good The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*, New York:, Peter Lang Publishers: Part of American University Studies, 1996.
- Plato.** "Phaedrus" in *The Dialogues of Plato: Vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, Translated into English with Analysis and Introductions by B. Jowett, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892, pp. 432–489.
- Plato.** "The Republic" in *The Dialogues of Plato: Vol. 3, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, Translated into English with Analysis and Introductions by B. Jowett, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892, pp. 1–338.