"Why be good?", a critique of Murdoch's metaethical underpinning for virtue ethics (slightly revised)

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In our contemporary society, where some claim that the idea of God is redundant as an explanation for morality, ethicists have attempted to fill the void by asserting that value is somehow attached to the human will. The upshot of these theories is that the right act is the one which is ultimately self-serving[i]. Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) refutes egoism as a first order system or method of ethics[ii]. She argues that we should be good 'for nothing' or for the love of Good. In this paper I will assess whether her theory of motivation succeeds or if the idea of good is an elaborate fantasy. I identify a flaw in her theory and suggest a tweak.

Let us then look at Murdoch's central argument:

1) Good is a necessarily real object of attention (*The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 54, 62, 64, 100)

2) We are magnetically attracted to Good (ibid, pp. 97, 100; *Metaphysics as a Guide to the Morals,* p. 507)

   Therefore:

3) Freedom of the will is an illusion[iii] (SOG, pp. 36, 97; MGM, p. 507)

With regard to the first premise, there are hints in Murdoch's text which suggest that she might be fabricating the concept of Good to rescue ethics from egoism. For example, she says Good is 'a source of *new* and quite undreamt of virtue' (SOG, p. 99). The fact that Murdoch highlights the word 'new' in italics and uses it in conjunction with the phrase 'undreamt of' might suggest that she is aware that she is inventing the concept. Indeed, she says: 'In my own case I am aware of the danger of inventing my own Plato and extracting a particular pattern from his many-patterned text to reassure myself that, as I see it, good is really good and real is really real' (MGM, p.511).

Furthermore, she says it is from art and ethics 'that we must hope to generate concepts worthy, and also able, to guide and check the increasing power of science' (SOG, p.74); and 'art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all' (ibid, p.74). This might suggest that she is attempting to justify her own life choices. Murdoch is, after all, better known as a highly successful novelist than as a philosopher.

Moreover, it might be said that novelists are creators of fiction and not seekers of truth. However, I do not think that the latter claim is strictly true. Murdoch's novels are populated with characters who are extraordinary and yet somehow simultaneously familiar. I think they are familiar because they represent persons like us even if we do not think that we would behave as they do. We might think that some of their actions are immoral or amoral. Of course we *know* that fictional characters are not real persons, and yet we might suspect (or even know) that there are individuals in the non-fictional world who behave as Murdoch's characters do. It is a fact that there are stalkers, adulterers, rapists, child molesters, murderers and terrorists. It is also a fact that there are others of whose actions we disapprove. So, whilst it is true that fictional characters are not real persons nonetheless they might be modelled on potential real life scenarios. What Murdoch attempts to do is to show us how people really are. The picture we are given is of human frailty, vulnerability and fallibility. Her characters lack self-awareness and are sometimes (if not always) inaccurate in their assessment of others. Is this not a true picture of humans? On the basis of my own life experiences, I think it is. Furthermore, I

think we can learn from Murdoch's characters because they are frail, vulnerable, fallible persons like us facing the harsh unpredictability of life. Novels, like real life, are not momentary static snapshots of individuals; rather they are unfolding sagas where circumstance, chance and accident usually (if not always) somehow modify the *dramatis personae*. Literature can show us that what we think is critically important is actually not so; and that the outcome of particular actions might not be as expected. Thus we might learn the difference between appearance and reality.

It is this understanding of the difference which Murdoch brings to her philosophy. She says: 'the idea of "objective reality" … undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to "the world as described by science" but in relation to the progressing life of a person' (SOG, p. 25). It is, I think, true that our ideas and mental concepts change as we age. Murdoch illustrates this by saying: 'Repentance may mean something different to a person at different times in their life' (ibid, p.25); and, 'we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty' (ibid, p.28). If this is true, as I think it is, then it means that the meaning we attach to some (if not all) words is arbitrary; thus, we err if we think that words have essential meaning.

What then do the words 'Good' or 'God' mean? If they have no essential meaning then the terms are like empty vessels waiting to be filled[iv]. Murdoch suggests that there is a relation between these two terms and virtue (SOG, p.54). The word 'God' seems (or might be accepted) to represent or symbolise the highest value; God is (by Anselm's definition) that 'than which nothing greater [or more perfect] can be conceived' (MGM, p. 393). Murdoch claims that the problem with this definition is that the term is unhelpfully associated with a person or the idea of an existing being (ibid, 394-429; SOG, pp. 61-62). Nonetheless, she thinks the term has value because for the theist God represents an object which can be contemplated and is a source of energy: 'That God, attended to, is a powerful source of (often good) energy is a psychological fact. It is also a psychological fact, and one of great importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art… the idea of goodness itself' (SOG, pp.54-55).

That there is a powerful source of energy in the world is difficult, if not impossible to deny. Energy is necessary for action[v]. Do we not know from our own personal experience that despair, depression and grief associate with low energy and lack of drive; whereas our experience of joy and desire associate with high energy? And do we not know from personal experience that focussing on the things we value gives us an energy boost? And is it not true that if we focus *only* on our own self we might find that our motivation to do anything else drains away[vi]? If so, then focusing on God/Good might be a powerful motivator.

Yet Murdoch rejects the notion that Good serves a function: 'The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. 'All is vanity' is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only genuine way to be good is to be good for nothing…' (SOG, p.69).

The idea that the only genuine way to be good is to be good for 'nothing' might seem to suggest that how we choose to act is of no importance and, thus, we may as well do as we please regardless of the consequences. Murdoch strongly refutes this suggestion for she says: 'action is the starting point of reflection'; and, 'Action also tends to confirm, for better or worse, the background of attachments from which it issues' (SOG, p. 69). I think her implication is that it is *only* by reflecting on actions that we are able to gain an understanding of virtue and its psychological impact. If a particular course of action is pursued in the anticipation of some reward then the end might be disappointment. Furthermore, action for reward is not virtuous because it is self-seeking rather than other-

involving. Moreover, if an act is a means to gain reward and no reward is received, then the act is self-defeating. Right action is the action which is done entirely for the love of the act; that is to say that the love of the action is itself a prize, and not the means to attain some further reward. Thus how we act is of utmost importance. If the consequences of our actions are not what we intended then the result might be psychological damage, guilt, depression, shame, anxiety and despair which rob us of our ability to do good in the world. I think we do know from our own personal experience when our action is good because we gain a psychological energy kick which motivates us to want more. If this is so then there appears to be a problem in Murdoch's argument. On one side she claims that we should be good without expectation of reward: on the other side she claims that contemplating Good is rewarding. Clearly if contemplating Good is rewarding and we should be good without expecting compensation, then contemplating Good cannot be good.

This dilemma is resolved in the concluding step of Murdoch's argument. She says: 'Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves' (SOG, p. 100). Her implication is that knowledge of the reality of death is knowledge of the pointlessness of our own virtue (ibid, p. 101); thus, if there is any point or meaning in life it must be external to our self-centred desires. She argues that this knowledge is derived not from the impersonal logic of scientific understanding but from the continuing assessment and redefining of our own concepts and experiences (SOG, p.25). Knowledge requires the stripping away of personal prejudices which can be achieved only by exploring our own temperament whilst at the same time attempting to discover the truth (SOG, pp. 25, 27-29, 32-33, 45, 49). This is an endless task because there is always the possibility of some new evidence (whether scientific or non-scientific) or alternative view-point not previously considered (ibid, pp. 13, 17, 21-23, 27). Thus truth is understood not by a flash of inspiration in which a concept is suddenly grasped; rather it is by a progressive disciplined and controlled checking process[vii]. The methodology might suggest an infinite circular activity. However, the circle can be, and is, broken by each and every new insight which results in a deeper and clearer understanding[viii]. The idea that knowledge acquisition is a checking process suggests that there must be some ideal pattern against which to evaluate (SOG, p.60). What then might this 'ideal pattern' be? According to Murdoch, the self[ix] is a fantasy-making machine and a place of illusions and, thus, it cannot be a source of perfection or truth (ibid, p. 27, 51, 63, 65-66, 77, 81, 82, 91, 97, 98). We might imagine that our self is the most important thing in the world; but science and life experience shows us the falsity of this claim (ibid, pp. 76-77, 91). We might fabricate fantasies of living on after death in order to avoid facing the harsh reality of our own nothingness; but there is no reason other than our own selfish desire to believe that human life is not 'self-enclosed' (SOG, p.77). Thus, to ground an ethic on egoism is entirely wrong-footed.

Murdoch worries that if analytic philosophy is left unchecked then it leaves ethics in an odd position for it is an ethic devoid of love (SOG, p.45; Letter to Raymond Queneau dated 22nd July 1946). She concedes that it is difficult to analyse Love and suggests that it should not be identified (SOG, p. 100). I think her prescription arises from her concern of science declaring love is illusionary. If so, then her anxiety is not unfounded. I think it is true that unchecked scientism is promoting a reductionism of humanity to neural activity. The truth is that we do not know *what* we are or *how* we come to think of ourselves as organisms[x]. The truth is that there is much that we do not know and we err if we assume that we are nothing more than material beings. What we can justifiably say is true by

personal experience is that we know that we are here (SOG, p.77) even if we do not know how we know we are here or why we are here. We do know our own feelings even if we do not know why we feel as we do. We know that we want to love life for if we do not then there is little point in living. But we do not know what life is. The last claim, however, is not strictly true for we do know from our personal experience a certain amount about life. Life is not a material object or something to be scientifically studied; rather it is a flow of happenings. In other words, life is a personal process which like all processes can be interrupted. Life is a mystery only if we think about it[xi]. We might be forced to think if and when our flow of life is impeded, for example, by the interference of others; or we might think simply for the joy of thinking and because we can think. Murdoch says: 'That we can and do love Good and are drawn towards it is something we must learn from our experience, as we move all the time in the continuum between good and bad' (MGM, p.507). I suggest that we do actually know what Good is because we have experienced it but sometimes because of our selfish desires we ignore it or pretend that it does not exist. The experience of Good is like no other and, thus, is difficult to describe in words. I suggest that it might be described as a feeling of total freedom. We might experience this liberation when our thoughts are fully absorbed in something that is not our self, in those moments when the difference between 'I' and 'others' is dissolved and merged into one: when there is no 'I' and no 'you' (SOG, p. 82). When one has had such an experience one wants to seek it out because it feels good, but if we do not know how to generate this feeling then we might feel at a loss. We might then try to fill this void in our knowledge with speculation and come up with all sorts of nonsense. Murdoch suggests that the idea of Good is analogous to a magnetic force which attracts us if nothing stands between it and us. Metaphorically Good is a reality check, a source of knowledge and value (SOG, pp. 75-76, 88, 89-92, 95). In itself Good is pure energy[xii] (SOG, p. 99; MGM. p.507). If this is so, then we know when we are doing right because we experience the energy of being in the flow of life[xiii]. Murdoch says: 'The sovereign Good is not an empty receptacle into which the arbitrary will places objects of its choice. It is something which we all experience as a creative force' (MGM, p. 507). That we have these experiences is proof that the idea of Good is not a product of Murdoch's imagination.

Murdoch suggests that the right action is 'to silence and expel the self'[xiv] and she suggests ways of achieving this such as the appreciation of beauty in art or nature (p.63). Her proposal has the advantage of alleviating psychological suffering which arises from our concern for our self. However, whilst I agree with her that the self is a place of illusions, I do not think that expelling the self could constitute virtue, nor do I think that the self is the enemy of morality. The self might be a product or property of our material being but it is also 'other' in relation to our body. The self is, I think, essential for our adequate functioning as a person. If I am right then we have a moral duty to care for our self in order to prevent disease, such as Alzheimer's which Murdoch suffered from. I suggest that the right action is to care for[xv] our self by pursuing our own passions but only if in doing so we do not impede others from pursuing theirs[xvi]. This might seem to be an ethic based on egoism, however, if we are doing what we love[xvii] and thereby generating good[xviii] energy then our activity benefits everybody because it increases the overall happiness in the world[xix]. The proof is in the doing; however, I am not suggesting that the doing is an easy task.

Implications

The practical implications (both for individuals and politically) of my theory are far-reaching and I will present just a few for the purpose of demonstrating the advantages of the theory. It might be argued that the disadvantage of the theory is that it does not clarify which (if any) particular acts are good. This failure, however, might be viewed as a

distinct advantage for it allows for the diversity of human psychology in terms of preferences, dispositions and attitudes[xx].

One of the inadequacies of Kantian deontology is the difficulty in reconciling the apparent conflicting desires of sadists and masochists. The sadomasochist would will as a universal law that everybody ought to inflict pain on others. This of course would probably not be acceptable by non-sadomasochists! According to my theory, it is wrong to inflict pain on those who do not want to be hurt but permits torturing masochists; thus, sadists, masochists, sadomasochists and the rest of the population are all satisfied.

The theory states that everybody has a right to life and a right to death because the priority is quality, and not quantity, of life. If an individual does not want to live then that person has the right to terminate their own life and to ask for assistance to achieve this end. There is no obligation on others to assist.

That there is no obligation to assist others might be taken to imply that the theory promotes selfishness. However, this is not true because although it might be true that some individuals are purely interested in their own self-interests to the exclusion of all other interests; most individuals are interested in the welfare of others[xxi]. Caring for others is, for some individuals at least, a source of great joy which may or may not be altruistic[xxii]. Thus, I think, there are individuals who will willingly assist others to end their life. Whether they do so as an act of kindness or for the love of killing is irrelevant because what is important is the achievement of the end[xxiii]. Of course, some might object to the idea that it is right to kill for the love of killing. I am not suggesting that killing or torturing is to be encouraged; rather I advance the theory that there are some individuals whose essential psychological nature predisposes towards a love of killing and maiming. My theory proposes that individuals should (and ought to) use their nascent talents[xxiv] for the benefit of all.

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i See for example John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. The central idea is that there are no objective values and that morality cannot be discovered.

ii 'In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego' (SOG, p. 51)

iii Murdoch says that freedom is a mixed concept (SOG, p. 36). She is not suggesting that we are not free to make choices such as whether to write this paper or go for a walk; rather she argues that we are not free to choose the nature of good (see MGM, p. 507).

iv If this is so then the concepts might be a function of the will. This idea might appear to be attractive because it removes the need to posit queer metaphysical entities and allows moral statements to be understood as persuasions or commands or rules (SOG, p.4)

v The relation is symmetrical.

vi Indeed, introspection can be confusing and disorientating so that all sense of direction is lost (SOG, p.66)

vii The process is dialectic between psychology grounded on the cogito and the pure empirical observer whose paradigm of knowledge is a symbolic logic (Letter to Raymond Queneau dated 22/7/1946). As such it is a fusion of analytic and continental philosophies.

viii Murdoch's thoughts about the method of knowledge acquisition may have been influenced by her time spent with an enclosed community of Benedict nuns in Kent of which she writes: 'This was a remarkable experience. Discipline and control of that kind – i.e. when visited with a spontaneous love and tenderness (such certainty – I have forgotten what it means to be certain when I use that word 'love') can be very healing and strengthening.' (Letter to Raymond Queneau, 15th October 1946, p.4). As such her philosophy is based on analysing her personal experiences against generally accepted wisdom; indeed she asserts that this methodology is the only way to do philosophy (SOG, p.45)

ix There appears to be an inconsistency in Murdoch's text. On the one hand she rejects the behaviourist's argument that the self is an illusion generated by observable neural activity; on the other hand she agrees that the self is difficult to identify. This inconsistency is however dissolved by her argument that the failure to identify something does not prove that it does not exist (SOG, p.10). This argument grounds her claim that 'the self is a place of illusions' (SOG, p.91) and leaves open the question of whether or not the self actually exists.

x We have many theories and some of these seem to be better supported by evidence than others. However, there is, as yet, no conclusive evidence. We might speculate about what new discoveries might be made in the future; but speculations are not knowledge.

xi We can exist without thinking about existence although we must exist in order to think.

xii My thanks to Frank Brierley for suggesting that 'vitality' or 'life-force' might be better names than 'energy'.

xiii Plato separates spiritual energy from spiritual goal. The goal, the end, the absolute, is transcendent, impersonal and pure' (MGM, p. 343). Our own psychic energy informs us of whether or not we are on the right path. It is a psychological fact that we experience low energy levels if and when we believe that we are unable to reach our aim or when and if we have nothing that we are aiming for.
xiv As such Murdoch seems to adopt the Buddhist philosophy of Nirvana (extinguishing the self).
xv I distinguish between 'caring for' and 'thinking about'. Thinking about our self is counter-productive because it is passive and therefore does not produce energy. Caring for some thing (including our self) involves action and, thus, energy.
xvi My use of the word 'right' is to indicate a Kantian-style categorical imperative; in other words, a rule which all rational beings would agree to adopt as law.
xvii My use of the word 'love' is to indicate that the reason for adopting my suggested law is grounded both on reason and emotions. As such my thinking is Humean: 'Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions'.
xviii I use the word 'good' here to mean that the generated energy is available for others. As such, I contrast it with the activity of introspection which uses up energy without a corresponding release of energy.
xix Thus my proposal is consistent with utilitarianism. However, note that increment in utility is a by-product of the action and not the reason for the action.
xx Other ethical theories are generally based on the idea that all humans are somehow essentially similar and essentially self-interested; thus the function of ethics is to invent theories which promote co-operation amongst essentially competitive individuals. I thank Greville Jones for his interesting discussions about the idea that humans are co-operative competitors. I reject his thesis on the grounds of the empirical evidence for altruism which I do not think is adequately explained in terms of evolutionary history.
xxi I assert this as an empirical fact.
xxii I suggest that altruism is an innate (by which I mean 'not acquired') personality trait.
xxiii This might appear to be a weak contradiction, however, note that both individuals are primarily acting for the love of the act and the actual end (the death of one individual) is merely a by-product of the actions of both individuals.
xxiv Note – I assume such nascent talents exist and that our moral task is to discover and fully utilise our personal assets whatever these might be.

References:

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