

The Elusiveness of the Ethical: From Murdoch to Diamond

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Abstract

Cora Diamond is a powerful witness to the originality of Iris Murdoch's writings on ethics, showing how Murdoch is at variance with contemporary orthodoxy not just in respect of particular doctrines (no 'ought' from an 'is', etc.), but in her questioning of mainstream assumptions as to what constitutes the subject-matter of moral philosophy. Diamond celebrates Murdoch as an ally in her campaign against the 'departmental' conception of morality – the idea that moral thought is just one branch of thought among others – and highlights Murdoch's enduring belief in the 'ubiquity of the moral quality inherent in consciousness'. In keeping with this belief, both philosophers affirm the value of general humanistic reflection on experience, an enterprise in which traditions of imaginative literature as well as of self-conscious theory can invite us to participate. While welcoming this vindication of the claims of ordinary (existentially embedded) moral intelligence, I will explore some difficulties flowing from the associated idea that 'morality' (in the guise of value-saturated human consciousness) is all-pervasive, and from the 'perpetually-moralist' account of our incentive to engage with fictional worlds.

1. Introduction

This discussion will be concerned with a certain tradition of dissent in twentieth-century (and subsequent) moral philosophy: a tradition, though, which I will treat as comprising just two main representatives.

Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond, through their respective bodies of work – and I mean for present purposes only the philosophical work of Murdoch, not the fiction – command attention as highly original and distinctive personalities, each speaking in her own characteristic voice and generating a characteristic intellectual atmosphere. Their interests intersect to some extent; at the same time, each has a range of interests that remain largely outside the area of intersection. But a topic on which they are of one mind, and on which Diamond has laboured to bring out Murdoch's radicalism in relation to the academic mainstream, is the inadequacy of our customary ways of talking about 'morality', 'moral thinking', 'moral language' – and consequently 'moral philosophy', the branch of philosophy whose business it is to reflect on these things.

Among the most famous Murdochian themes is an insistence that morally significant events in human consciousness occur not only at the point where some choice is made or some principle adopted as a basis for action, but also in the outwardly uneventful passages between these points. The moral life, she says, ‘is something that goes on *continually*’; the in-between element is indeed what is most important, issuing as it does (in a ‘small, piecemeal’ way) in habits of perception and attention – or of course *inattention* – which more or less determine in advance how we will respond to a real-life practical challenge. And this is not intended as a denial of our freedom, but simply as a suggestion that ‘at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over’.¹

Many years later, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch still maintains ‘the importance and omnipresence of a reflective experiential background to moral decision and action, and with this the omnipresence of value (an opposition between good and bad) in human activity’;² she continues to hold that ‘value, valuing, is not a specialised activity of the will, but an apprehension of the world, an aspect of cognition, which is everywhere’.³ This is not to be understood as an expression of psychological optimism, but on the contrary as the announcement of an unending task. ‘Certainly morality must be seen as “everywhere” but in a fallen and incomplete sense’; in fact, the ‘(daily, hourly, minutely) attempted purification of consciousness [is] the central and fundamental “arena” of morality’.⁴ And while ‘arena’ has to be placed in inverted commas, since our efforts to correct what is bad in our habitual thought-patterns typically occur in private, we are not without resources to guide these efforts. Prominent, or perhaps foremost, among such resources is the realistic novel. In Murdoch’s view, ‘Novels ... exhibit the ubiquity of the moral quality inherent in consciousness’;⁵ they show us ‘personal morality in a non-abstract manner as the stuff of consciousness’,⁶ or conversely, they support the idea of consciousness as ‘the fundamental mode or form of moral being’.⁷

¹ *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970; hereafter ‘SG’): all quotations in this paragraph are from 37 (emphasis added on ‘continually’).

² *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993; hereafter ‘MGM’), 259.

³ Op. cit. note 2, 265.

⁴ Op. cit. note 2, 293.

⁵ Op. cit. note 2, 169.

⁶ Op. cit. note 2.

⁷ Op. cit. note 2, 171.

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Cora Diamond correctly identifies the (variable) ‘quality of consciousness’ as a constant element in Murdoch’s thought and a connecting link between its earlier and later phases.⁸ She appeals to Murdoch as an ally in her campaign against the ‘departmental’ conception of morality – the ‘idea that moral thought is a branch of thought, one branch among others’,⁹ and by extension that moral philosophy is one of a number of intellectually self-evident ‘departments into which philosophy can be divided’.¹⁰ This whole picture, she argues, is an artefact of educational or professional convenience; we would do well to be more critical of the practice of defining ‘moral discourse’ by the occurrence of a certain vocabulary, or by certain linguistic forms or patterns of rational order. Murdoch can help us address the philistinism of the ‘moral discourse’ approach through her conviction that ‘consciousness is *always* morally colored’,¹¹ and that ‘moral thought, evaluative thought’ is not just one among a family of cognitive activities but – precisely – something ubiquitous. To take this view seriously would mean suspending the assumption that it is just obvious (by reference to vocabulary or other surface phenomena) when something with ‘moral’ content is being expressed, and instead, attuning ourselves to the possible presence of such content in places where it is not explicitly signalled – an attunement that would rely on the exercise of some actual moral powers on our part, not merely on hazy memories of what we once heard in undergraduate lectures.

True, Murdoch holds fast to the view that ‘Morality is and ought to be connected with the whole of our being’; that ‘The moral life is not intermittent or specialised, it is not a peculiar separate area of our existence’.¹² In arriving at this view, however, and in affirming (or reaffirming¹³) that ‘There are qualities of consciousness’, she does

⁸ “‘We Are Perpetually Moralists’: Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value’, in Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (1996; hereafter ‘WPM’), 79–109, at 95.

⁹ ‘Murdoch the Explorer’, in *Philosophical Topics* 38 (2010) 51–85 (hereafter ‘MTE’), at 54.

¹⁰ Op. cit. note 9, 59. Compare also 53, where ‘field of study’ (borrowed from Murdoch) is mentioned as another term belonging to the objectionable idiom.

¹¹ Op. cit. note 8, WPM 106 (emphasis added).

¹² Op. cit. note 2, MGM 495.

¹³ ‘Reaffirming’, since she has previously argued in SG op. cit. note 1, 84 that ‘Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act’.

pause to concede that ‘There are [also] “moral judgments”, which may in some ways resemble judgments in law courts, or which take place at stated times and initiate clearly visible new courses of action or the embryos of new dispositions’.¹⁴ And she acknowledges that the celebration of ‘alert vivid experience’,¹⁵ the claim of the present moment on our attention, can appeal to aesthetic or hedonistic values as well as to those of a moral or spiritual kind: our conception of the attentive, undistracted consciousness can draw upon Walter Pater (in his famous lines from *The Renaissance* about burning with a ‘hard, gem-like flame’) as well as on Simone Weil. Murdoch simply notes that both ways of thinking are available and that we can ‘switch’ from one to the other – though her own interest is clearly in the Weilian direction of travel, the role of Pater being just to point to something precious in that momentary consciousness ‘which philosophers tend to be embarrassed by, to neglect, or to analyse away’.¹⁶

2. Murdoch and Value

The concession that *there are* some (dateable) ‘moral judgements’ – and hence, presumably, something in the nature of a ‘departmental’ morality to which these judgements are indebted – looks like a helpful sign of willingness to remain in touch with ordinary, non-philosophical language. Certainly it would be difficult to emancipate oneself entirely from the familiar way of referring to ‘moral’ considerations: the kind of consideration invoked, for example, when one politician accuses another of an ‘abdication of responsibility and morality’,¹⁷ or when a powerful corporation is described as a ‘morality-free zone’.¹⁸ Such remarks convey a criticism with a certain content, perhaps not fully determinate in the first instance, but nevertheless a criticism belonging to a determinate general area of concern.

Can it really be such a blunder to try to formulate some shared account, however rough, of what is meant by terms like ‘moral’ or ‘morality’ in so far as these are *less than* coextensive with the entire space of value? For example, if there is anything in particular that

¹⁴ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 238.

¹⁵ Op. cit. note 2, 218.

¹⁶ Op. cit. note 2, 219.

¹⁷ Jeremy Corbyn on Boris Johnson’s attitude to Syria, *Guardian* 16 April 2018.

¹⁸ Julian Knight MP, referring to Facebook: *Guardian* 27 April 2018.

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can be identified as ‘what moral life demands’,¹⁹ or if it is correct (or at least desirable) to think of artistic activity as subject to ‘moral discipline’,²⁰ shouldn’t we be prepared to face the question: what kind of discipline is that? If morality ‘pervades thought’,²¹ and yet also issues ‘demands’ (so that ‘every single second has a moral tag’,²² and thus contributes to some eventual reckoning), where should we turn for clarification of *what is demanded*?

Murdoch would perhaps regard this question as symptomatic of the fixation of mainstream moral philosophy on issues of conflict-resolution in the public realm, which do typically call for the establishment and skilful interpretation of practical principles, and hence for a local form of epistemology. In opposition to this approach, or at any rate with a view to side-stepping it, she hopes to gain a hearing for the view of Weil that rather than straining over moral ‘problems’ we should be trying to achieve a quiet appreciation of ‘the truths which are evident’²³ – to ‘see reality clearly and justly’,²⁴ where the obstacle to clear vision lies not in any great objective complication but in our own egoism and conceit.

Diamond agrees with Murdoch that to define the sphere of morality, or of moral philosophy, in terms of action and choice is a ‘limited and limiting’ specification.²⁵ She praises Murdoch’s appreciation of the part played in our assessment of people – which can quite legitimately be called *moral* assessment – by the ‘texture’ of their being, as expressed in gesture or demeanour; or by the ‘nature of their personal vision’, revealed in modes of speech, or in what someone notices or fails to notice.²⁶ We can also observe that what Diamond wants to restore to a place of greater honour in our general picture of moral consciousness seems to have to do with *receptivity* (in contrast to ‘rational agency’): her various reviews of the blind spots of analytical ethics touch on desiderata such as ‘perceptiveness in regard to the currents of life’; a ‘rejection of the spirit of knowingness’; a capacity for the ‘acknowledgement of mystery’ or for the experience of life

¹⁹ Op. cit. note 9, MTE 73.

²⁰ Op. cit. note 9, 64, quoting Murdoch, SG op. cit. note 1 64.

²¹ Op. cit. note 9, MTE 52.

²² Op. cit. note 2, MGM 495.

²³ *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (London: Penguin, 2005), 231.

²⁴ Diamond (expounding Murdoch), MTE, op. cit. note 9 71.

²⁵ ‘Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is’, in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (1991; hereafter ‘RS’), 376.

²⁶ Op. cit. note 25., 374.

as an 'extraordinary adventure'; or a response to individual life *qua* 'irreducibly particular'.²⁷ So we have at least this much of an indication of what might be regarded as belonging to the 'moral' side of life, over and above the usual hackneyed (and juridically orientated) examples. But Diamond holds nevertheless that 'no one knows what the subject [of moral philosophy] is';²⁸ that even a seemingly broad-brush account of that subject, such as the quasi-Aristotelian study of the good life proposed by Martha Nussbaum,²⁹ will struggle to qualify as consensual.

A conception of the 'moral life' that finds favour with all of Nussbaum, Murdoch and Diamond is that it is the life concerned with *values*. For each of these writers, the evaluative domain appears to be practically coextensive with the moral. Thus Nussbaum can say of Henry James that for him 'the artist's task is ... above all moral, "the expression, the literal squeezing out of value"':³⁰ here the words quoted from James are meant to support the preceding statement, with the implication that the business of squeezing out value is ('above all', anyway) a moral one. And in her view a novel like *The Golden Bowl* (of which more later) 'calls forth our "active sense of life", which is our moral faculty'³¹ – again, apparently, an identity claim.

Murdoch, as we've seen, holds that 'value' or 'valuing' – and hence (though 'in a fallen and incomplete sense') morality – is 'everywhere', and she sometimes treats the two terms as interchangeable: thus '*Value, morality*, is eliminated by the structuralist picture if taken seriously'.³² (This might admittedly be a compressed way of saying 'value, *and therefore* morality' – but compression is not in general a feature of Murdoch's late style.) Diamond, in the same vein, writes in approving exposition of Murdoch that 'thinking is always an

²⁷ Op. cit. note 8, WPM 93, 100; 'Martha Nussbaum and the Need for Novels', *Philosophical Investigations* 16:2 (1993) 128–53, at 139–40, 147, 152. The relevant notion of 'mystery' is illustrated by a passage from Wordsworth, *The Prelude*; 'extraordinary adventure' comes from G. K. Chesterton, who also contributes a view of the world as 'filled with the wonder of fairy tales'.

²⁸ Op. cit. note 25, RS 380.

²⁹ Notably in her *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford, 1990; hereafter 'LK').

³⁰ Op. cit. note 29, 163 (quoting James, *The Art of the Novel*).

³¹ Op. cit. note 29, 162. Nussbaum has argued in detail for the recognition of this novel as a 'major or irreplaceable work of moral philosophy' (LK op. cit. note 29 138).

³² Op. cit. note 2, MGM 190, emphasis added.

activity of ours as *moral* beings'; that 'Value, or moral value, is not the object of some *branch* of thought or discourse ... moral thought, evaluative thought, is not one member of the family [of cognitive practices] alongside the others'.³³

3. Pluralism and monism

This treatment of 'value' and 'moral value', or 'morality', as functionally equivalent demands closer attention. On the face of it there are numerous *values* (plural) other than the moral variety. Most obviously (and traditionally), there are the values called into play by prudential and by hedonistic reasoning. But we also talk about aesthetic and artistic value, and about value of an intellectual, educational, economic or social kind; no doubt the list can be extended. Reflection on the distinct sub-species of value and their mutual relations constitutes (what was once, around a century ago) the well-defined discipline of 'axiological ethics', developed especially in Germany by philosophers such as Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann.³⁴ Of course it will be pointed out that some of these forms of value are affiliated to various 'hypothetical imperatives' over which philosophy has no special reason to linger. (Compare, for instance, 'nutritional value'.) But this does not dispose of the thought that what we value non-instrumentally, or 'for its own sake', extends beyond the moral. Aesthetic, artistic, intellectual and (hopefully) educational value are powerful examples.³⁵ To view any of these as a subdivision of the 'moral' looks worryingly reductive. Nor is value-pluralism discredited by Murdoch's (in itself persuasive) observation that 'Aesthetic insight connects with moral insight, respect for things connects with respect for persons'.³⁶ It is true that the destruction of ancient buildings, trees, animal life, and so forth often displays a morally reprehensible – not to say wicked – cast of mind. But it does not follow that the value of the things destroyed by such activity is itself *moral value*: these things have value in their own distinctive ways.

³³ Op. cit. note 8, WPM 82, 106.

³⁴ See J. N. Findlay, *Axiological Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1970). Scheler, 1874–1928; Hartmann, 1882–1950.

³⁵ 'Hopefully', in that non-instrumental attitudes to education are not to be taken for granted. See Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

³⁶ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 495.

And as Diamond delicately but tellingly points out,³⁷ it is unclear that James's wish to produce an 'intelligent report' on social experience is really, as Nussbaum claims, such as to bring him 'into intimate connection with the Aristotelian enterprise'. The desire for an 'intelligent report', or indeed the aspiration to be someone 'on whom nothing is lost',³⁸ is naturally understood as an intellectual one: a wish or hope to become less stupid. And the stupidity for which a course of Henry James can serve as antidote may well be partly 'moral' in the familiar sense of issuing in bad behaviour towards others: from this point of view the treatment might consist in a remedy for our insensitivity or emotional blindness. But that can hardly be the whole story. To look no further afield than *The Golden Bowl*, the momentousness of the trap set for the Ververs (father and daughter) by devious old Europe is all about their failure – through no fault of their own, one may feel – to qualify as people 'on whom nothing is lost'. Some supremely important stuff is indeed lost on them at critical moments, with consequences for which they will spend the rest of their lives paying, though they will not be the only ones to pay. They suffer from not having a sufficiently developed sense, as Diamond puts it on James's behalf, of 'there being more to things than meets the eye';³⁹ and Diamond is probably also right about James's view of 'the characteristic danger of New England life, the danger of the Puritan spirit' – namely that 'one misses out on life through unconsciousness, unawareness, linked to moralism'.⁴⁰ Yes – 'moralism' in the sense of a lack of attunement to *values other than the moral*. And this without prejudice to the point on which Nussbaum lays particular stress, that Maggie Verver's response to her difficulties (once she fully understands them) is a *moral achievement*: one that bears witness to important qualities of character.

Returning to Murdoch, we might wonder if she would have any principled reason for objecting to this pluralist approach, which at first glance looks like a potentially helpful resource for her later philosophy. Certainly in *Metaphysics* the contrasting notion of 'monism' has negative – illiberal, anti-humanist – connotations; thus 'Structuralist (monist, idealist) thinking, by inflating coherence at

³⁷ 'Missing the Adventure: Reply to Martha Nussbaum', op. cit. note 25, RS 376.

³⁸ Op. cit. note 29, LK 148, quoting James's preface to *The Princess Casamassima*. Nussbaum refers to the attempt to become such a person as 'our highest and hardest task' – an 'ethical' task, as she explicitly describes it.

³⁹ Op. cit. note 25 315.

⁴⁰ Op. cit. note 25, 315.

the expense of correspondence, loses our ordinary everyday conception of truth',⁴¹ and so becomes a hostile rather than a congenial tendency. However, the object under attack at this stage – namely the kind of social or linguistic holism which issues a challenge to 'ordinary everyday' evaluative notions – belongs to a quite different problematic from the one inhabited by 1960s Murdoch, who can say of herself (albeit confidingly rather than argumentatively): 'My own temperament inclines to monism'.⁴² That (confiding) remark figures in an account of moral consciousness which can properly be called 'monistic' by virtue of its Platonist inspiration – that is, its orientation towards a single transcendent good. And though she deplores the totalizing ambitions of late twentieth-century critical theory (for example, the 'nightmarish schemata of deconstructionist thought',⁴³), the mature Murdoch does not disown her earlier view that 'moral advance carries with it *intuitions of unity* which are increasingly less misleading'.⁴⁴ She continues to regard the conscientious mind as following a trajectory of which the ideal end-point is characterized by (impersonally) truthful vision; plurality of points of view, here as in Plato,⁴⁵ is a distraction rather than an asset, serving at best to furnish dialectical material which can help the understanding on its way; moral and intellectual progress is enabled by the Weilian principle of detachment or 'unselfing'. So the *purification* of consciousness – the moral project identified by Murdoch in *Metaphysics* as 'central and fundamental' – remains potentially at variance with the impulse of the story-teller or dramatist to explore a multiplicity of evaluative positions, not all of them compatible with morality in the 'departmental' sense. This is the problem with which Murdoch wrestles in *The Fire and the Sun*,⁴⁶ where she seeks to mediate between the moralism of Plato and the value we attach to (at any rate 'good' or 'great') literary art. Her stake in the success of such a mediation is due to the important didactic role which, as

⁴¹ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 267; compare also 227, 'Hegel's authoritative monism'; 235, 'the authoritarian aspiration to a unique systematic truth'.

⁴² Op. cit. note 1, SG 50. To supply some context for the confession: Murdoch has just stated that it is a 'great merit' of philosophy in the Oxford and Cambridge tradition, 'and one which I would not wish to lose sight of, that it attacks every form of spurious unity ... Perhaps it is a matter of temperament whether or not one is convinced that all is one'.

⁴³ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 168.

⁴⁴ Op. cit. note 1, SG 93 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ See for example *Republic* Bk X, 604e–605a and context.

⁴⁶ *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

we saw earlier, she assigns to the novelist – that role being to provide a concrete, though necessarily imaginary, demonstration of ‘personal morality ... as the stuff of consciousness’,⁴⁷ and in doing so, to step forth for moral inspection by the reader.

4. A diversity of value

Without rushing to judgement on this claim, I want to see how it works in relation to some sample cases where an evaluative response to (fictional) experience is undeniably to the fore. My choice of texts has been guided by a sense of something puzzling in the denial of what might be regarded, a priori, as a truistic or commonsensical thought: the thought that *moral* considerations represent a *particular kind* of evaluative consideration, which may or may not speak to one at any given moment. My aim is to bring out a discontinuity between the ‘morality is everywhere’ view in (what we might call) its maximalist form, and on the other hand the more sharply focussed scepticism of Diamond about ‘departmental’ moral philosophy – her objection, for example, to the claim that ‘moral discourse *unquestionably* has the surface form of a descriptive, property-attributing language’.⁴⁸ I will accordingly seek to direct attention – with some supporting literary evidence in the general spirit (I hope) of Murdoch and Diamond – to the internal diversity, the not exclusively ‘moral’ constitution, of the domain of value.

A. Anthony Powell, *Casanova’s Chinese Restaurant* (1960) (Fontana 1980, 8–9)

From the vantage-point of a bombed-out street in Soho during the war, Powell’s first-person narrator recalls a conversation with his friend Moreland on almost the same spot, back in the 1930s. The memory is prompted by hearing once again the voice of a woman, apparently a beggar or busker or just a local eccentric, singing ‘Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar’ – an Edwardian drawing-room number, also known as the ‘Kashmiri Love Song’. On the earlier occasion, the two young men had been speculating on the whereabouts of the Shalimar:

“A nightclub, do you think?” Moreland had said. “A bordel, perhaps? Certainly an establishment catering for exotic tastes –

⁴⁷ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 169, 170. See also below, note 61 and context.

⁴⁸ Op. cit. note 9, MTE 55, quoting Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton, ‘Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends’, *Philosophical Review* 101:1 (1992), 115–89, at 119; emphasis added.

and I expect not very healthy ones either. How I wish there were somewhere like that where we could spend the afternoon. That woman's singing has unsettled me. What nostalgia. It was really splendid. "Whom do you lead on Rapture's roadway far?" What a pertinent question'.

The tone here is playful, a bit silly; the speaker seems to be riffing on the theme of dullness and possible remedies for dullness. We cannot infer that Moreland has ever seriously thought about visiting a brothel – his use of the quaint word 'bordel' rather suggests otherwise – but equally, there is nothing to show that he has not. That question is none of our business; it is as remote from the narrative mood as the social reality of the sex trade, or indeed of the British Empire, relevant as these things are to the understanding of Moreland's words. What we can take from those words is that he is having an aesthetic moment of a certain (highly specific, concretely presented) kind.

I will assume that the passage just quoted, like those I will go on to discuss, can be accepted as a convincing depiction of a possible (small-scale) human situation. Now, how does this relate to the thesis that 'the moral life ... is something that goes on continually', or that 'all consciousness has a moral character'?⁴⁹

The reply that suggests itself runs as follows: 'Certainly there are states of mind or consciousness – like those celebrated in the famous lines from Pater – in which the values that are salient for us, the ones that exert the most insistent claim, are not "moral" values in the departmental sense. However, this possibility is allowed for by the idea of morality as all-pervasive: the point is not that a "moral" attitude (in contrast, for example, to an aesthetic or a purely strategic one) is inescapable for us as socially situated individuals, but that however we see fit to conduct ourselves or to govern our mental life, the attitude we actually adopt will have *moral significance*: no morally neutral or "colourless" position is available; thus in the case of Moreland, we are being shown a *moral* snapshot of how things stood with him on a particular (fictional) afternoon, though of course we don't yet know how this snapshot bears upon his overall personality or life story'.

So far, then, we have before us an illustration of the idea that 'consciousness is always morally coloured', or that moral quality is 'ubiquitous' in it – not however in the 'departmental' way (since this would amount to the highly implausible claim that human beings are continually engaged in questioning their consciences, wondering

⁴⁹ Op. cit. note 9, MTE 52.

how they can become more virtuous, and so forth), but rather because the kind of value that is salient for someone at any given moment identifies them as a person with a certain ‘moral’ orientation, in the global sense that interests Murdoch and Diamond.

B. Colette, *Chéri* (1920) (trans. Roger Senhouse, Vintage, 2001), 95

‘Thus, for a long time, she mused over her future, veering between alarm and resignation. Her nerves were relaxed, and she slept for a little. As she sat with one cheek pressed against a cushion, her dreams projected her into her fast-approaching old age. She saw day follow day with clockwork monotony, and herself beside Charlotte Peloux – their spirited rivalry helping the time to pass. In this way she would be spared, for many years, the degrading listlessness of women past their prime, who abandon first their stays, then their hair-dye, and who finally no longer bother about the quality of their underclothes. She had a foretaste of the sinful pleasures of the old – little else than a concealed aggressiveness, day-dreams of murder, and the keen recurrent hope for catastrophes that will spare only one living creature and one corner of the globe. Then she woke up ...’

Léa, the heroine of this short novel, is a woman around the age of fifty coming to terms with the loss of ‘Chéri’, her lover of the past several years – a rich, spoilt, gloriously handsome creature half her own age, who is also the son of one of her oldest friends, though ‘friendship’ in this case is large enough to accommodate some pretty fierce feelings of hostility. Again a window is opened here upon a value-saturated state of consciousness, which can be all the more bracingly negative by virtue of its presentation as a dream (but a dream only just below the conscious level). Again, too, the passage shows us ‘value’ and (departmental) ‘morality’ parting company: Léa’s sense of what lies ahead as she checks out of her sexually active existence is expressed in the language of disgust, but it is full of an implied contrast with all that has been joyful and thrilling – not to mention lucrative – in the life she has lived. So if this is an instance of ‘personal morality as the stuff of consciousness’, or of morality as something that ‘per-vades thought’, the point must be that the contents of one’s consciousness are such as to *situate* one morally, for better or worse; a weakness for the so-called ‘sinful pleasures of old age’ would fix some co-ordinates (maybe rather unusual, but who knows?) that someone might occupy within the total space of ‘moral’ possibility, construed in the non-departmental fashion.

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Of course, once we recognize the inner life as a scene of moral activity, it will not be a matter of indifference to find oneself entertaining ‘day-dreams of murder’ or the ‘keen recurrent hope for catastrophes’. We know that for Murdoch morality ‘must be seen as “everywhere” but in a fallen and incomplete sense’, and that our central moral task is the ‘attempted *purification* of consciousness’.⁵⁰ Some work of ‘purification’, then, would seem to be indicated for Léa, if it is not too late; what such a person needs is a change of orientation within the total (non-departmental) moral space. Possibly that need could be met by reconnecting with the moral wisdom of Murdoch’s iconic (uncorrupted) ‘ordinary person’.⁵¹ Or we might think of Léa as a victim of her own ‘fat relentless ego’,⁵² someone whose vision has become clouded and who no longer has a just perception of her human surroundings. But really, when confronted by the unwavering coolness and dryness of Colette, this kind of commentary seems to bounce off without gaining much of a foothold. It is as if the question were being put: ‘Morality, yes, we have known about that from our early years – we are familiar with its demands, at least the more obvious ones, and you should not infer that we hold them in any disrespect — but what *else* goes on in the mind? Aren’t we allowed to acknowledge that as interestingly differentiated? In accepting that the *moral life* goes on continually, we are not yet consenting to pass over what is dubious or transgressive in that life. To say that the transgressive moments are not worthy objects of attention, or that we would be better off not “thinking on these things”,⁵³ is a further and more contentious claim’.

C. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (1904) (Penguin, 1987), 553

In addition to its importance for Nussbaum, this novel supplies the haunting image of the pagoda, deployed by Murdoch in *Metaphysics*⁵⁴ to demonstrate the resources of an account of the inner life untrammelled by doctrinaire behaviourism. The mysterious, impenetrable structure represents Maggie Verver’s sense that there is something about her husband’s life, his relationship with her old friend Charlotte Stant (now married to Maggie’s not very aged father), from which she, Maggie, is excluded – as indeed there

⁵⁰ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 293 (emphasis added).

⁵¹ SG, op. cit. note 1 97.

⁵² SG, op. cit. note 1 52.

⁵³ Compare Murdoch, MGM, op. cit. note 2 301 (quoting Paul, *Philippians* 4:8).

⁵⁴ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 170–1.

is, since the two are lovers, and had already been heading in that direction before the fateful marriages took place.

Later in the book – much later existentially, though it is just a few months by the fictional calendar – the tables have been turned and Maggie is no longer the ingénue but a deep practitioner of the ‘conquest of appearances’.⁵⁵ By confronting her husband with the truth she has discovered, but then by acting in such a way as to prevent any public avowal or any clearing of the air with the other couple, she has succeeded in driving a wedge between the adulterers and tacitly communicating to her father that he may, with her blessing, remove himself and Charlotte permanently to the wasteland that is ‘American City’ (‘the awful place over there’).⁵⁶

So complete is Maggie’s eventual triumph – in respect of proprietorship, if not of spontaneous personal magic — that she can even allow herself the luxury of pity for her victim, who will now be mourning the loss of a relationship that was ‘everything a relation could be, filled to the brim with the wine of consciousness’. Shouldn’t her husband, in fact, be actively encouraged to honour Charlotte with some worthy gesture of farewell? In a certain weird mood of conscientiousness or compunction, Maggie feels (‘at moments’)

‘the duty of speaking before separation should constitute its chasm, of pleading for some benefit that might be carried away into exile like the last saved object of price of the *émigré*, the jewel wrapped in a piece of old silk and negotiable some day in the market of misery’.⁵⁷

This daring description shows us an instance not merely of the ‘ubiquity’ of value in consciousness, but also of the complex, nested (or perhaps fractured) mode of its manifestation. There is a high-flown lyricism of happiness (the wine, the jewel), but projected on to someone else, one’s immediate rival for the relevant sexual object; projected, too, into the past, since what is being imagined is the other woman’s ecstatic *memory*, not how things are for anyone at the (fictional) present time. But behind or beneath all this, as we have also been shown, is the (slow-burning) joy of victory in a power-struggle: the ‘excitement’, ‘exaltation’, or ‘fascination of the

⁵⁵ Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987; hereafter ‘GB’), 486.

⁵⁶ Op. cit. note 55, GB 524: ‘awful’, that is, from Charlotte’s (presumed) point of view. (She too is American, but a thorough-going expatriate.)

⁵⁷ Op. cit. note 55, GB 553.

monstrous' experienced by a hitherto dutiful daughter who is now, all of a sudden, having 'the time of her life'.⁵⁸ And Maggie's struggle has certainly involved the use of some unconventional weapons - 'duplidity', 'deceit', and 'merciless manipulation', to name but a few.⁵⁹

'Value', in the sense of evaluative interest or significance, may well be all-pervasive in this scenario. But *moral* value? How might we set about accommodating the story of Maggie Verver's evolving consciousness to the 'theme of the cognitive as always moral'?⁶⁰ The idea would seem to be that Maggie's inner life reveals the 'ubiquity of the moral quality inherent in consciousness' not through any moral *correctness* disclosed to us as readers (except in so far as we may be gratified by the retaliation of an injured party), but rather in the guise of a strange, impressive and faintly sinister moral *phenomenon* – in effect, a rival pagoda constructed by Maggie herself as she emerges from her initial condition of ignorance.

5. Coda

My fictional source materials all present us, in their different ways, with characters who stand in a negligent, defiant, whimsical, or otherwise skewed relation to (departmental) 'morality'. However, according to the view we are considering, the characters in question experience states of mind which are none the less 'morally coloured' on that account — and none the less revealing, at least when suitably contextualized, of the moral qualities of their creator: as Murdoch puts it, 'The writer's own *morality*, displayed in the novel, is a major item'.⁶¹

An initial misgiving one might feel here is that while any literary utterance, fictional or otherwise, is apt to reveal something of the writer's general state of receptivity to value – their 'perceptiveness in regard to the currents of life' – it does not seem to be true of all fiction worth reading that a 'morality' in the sense of a *practical application* of that faculty is displayed in it, or that (if displayed) it constitutes a *major item*. Of course, a writer can present to us only the world that he or she can *see*, as Murdoch would put it. But not only may they decline to express themselves in a series of morally pointed vignettes, they may also be quite enigmatic about questions of ultimate

⁵⁸ Op. cit. note 55, GB 473, 483, 487, 469.

⁵⁹ Op. cit. note 55, GB 359, 543, 399.

⁶⁰ Diamond, op. cit. note 8, WPM 82.

⁶¹ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 205 (emphasis in original).

importance – about their view of ‘relations between the worthwhile and the practically demanded’,⁶² between (for example) the ‘wine of consciousness’ and that rather different medium through which one tracks the moral law. Just as our subjective ‘valuational focus’ can shift or wander⁶³ without necessarily calling for a decision on the objective lexical ordering of the relevant values (though it may *sometimes* do that), so the archive of fictional subjectivity offers us a world of opportunity to share in such wanderings imaginatively, with no obligation – Platonism aside – to commit ourselves to a final resting-place. In this respect a writer of fiction may be like Heraclitus’s Delphic oracle, which ‘neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign’,⁶⁴ the later Henry James would probably be a good example.

More seriously, however: don’t we lose rather than gain insight if we insist on finding, or purporting to find, ‘moral’ consciousness everywhere, rather than in some places in contrast to others? True, it makes a difference whether, or to what extent, the suggested equivalence of ‘value’ and ‘moral value’ is construed *moralistically* – whether we take the proposition that ‘consciousness is always morally coloured’ to be *no more than* a reminder of the ‘ubiquity of value’, or whether we hear in it something more teleological. That is: something approximating to the view that unfamiliar value-attitudes (perhaps startling, or perhaps just comical) are to be treated as illustrative of some position or other on a scale of progress in the work of ‘unselfing’ or in the ‘purification’ of consciousness, a scale which – as it happens – can be displayed to us artistically as well as didactically. But if the latter kind of treatment is what is called for, the question arises: is this really a plausible account of the cultural significance of such offerings, or of our incentive to pay attention to them?

In evaluating such an account, it is hard to suppress the feeling that there is a difference between looking to imaginative literature as an aid to becoming *morally better* people, and as an aid to becoming people ‘on whom nothing is lost’. The second of these approaches seems less instrumental, more disinterested: at any rate more willing to be content with an ‘intelligent report’ on human phenomena, more

⁶² Findlay, op. cit. note 34, 4.

⁶³ Wording suggested by Findlay, op. cit. note 34, 74–5 (discussion of Hartmann).

⁶⁴ See G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1963), fragment 247.

accessible to scepticism with regard to any final imposition of order on the domain of value.

Of course, if we agree that an *intelligent* report must be one that *does justice* to the complexity of the world we encounter, we can hardly disown the idea of a certain ‘moral’ input to whatever local epistemological demands may happen to engage us, since the underlying demand will always be for a (potentially difficult) outward orientation, a commitment to getting things objectively right.⁶⁵ Also, to become more like a person ‘on whom nothing is lost’ would presumably be to gain additional resources for deliberation, and hence to become more skilful at it – a skill that might equip us to behave better in our day-to-day life (cf. §3 above). So the two approaches I have just distinguished can certainly be said to share some common concerns or reference points. But without the support of the distinctive moral psychology whereby clear vision requires, or proceeds in tandem with, the reduction of the ego to an extensionless point,⁶⁶ there appears to be no guarantee that the resources of our intelligent reporter will be placed at the service of (departmental) morality – the thing in respect of which there do, regrettably but all too obviously, exist ‘morality-free zones’. Such a reporter might, as we’ve seen, interpret the realist imperative more as an injunction to avoid squeamishness than to think on ‘whatsoever things are lovely’.⁶⁷

And in fact there is a risk that by interpreting the ‘ubiquity of value’ thesis in a moralistic spirit, one may encourage some wrong ideas about what society at large stands to gain from the humanities. We can concede that there will be some connection between becoming, in a general way, less *humanly* stupid and becoming less *morally* stupid – but to overplay the directness of that connection is to court

⁶⁵ Thanks to David Garrard for helpful written commentary on this point.

⁶⁶ Compare Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 5.64: ‘Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are carried out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it’. The *Tractatus* is an important influence on the moral philosophy of Diamond, though hardly on that of Murdoch. However, there does appear to be some affinity between the ‘extensionless point’ idea and Murdoch’s ‘unselfing’ theme, an affinity which might repay study alongside the element of contingency – that is, the contingent or unstable aspect of the two philosophers’ intellectual alliance – touched on in §6 below.

⁶⁷ See note 53 and accompanying text above.

(moral) disappointment. Just as humanistic education amounts to more than a training for citizenship,⁶⁸ so it is far from being coextensive with the business of training in virtue.

6. Conclusion

Let me now take stock and offer some hermeneutic suggestions about the ‘morality is everywhere’ view. That view appears to comprise some or all of the following elements:

- (1) the idea of *valuing*, in the sense of value-discrimination, as all-pervasive;
- (2) the refusal to recognize *moral value* as one kind of value among others, so that (on the basis of that refusal) ‘value’ and ‘morality’ can be treated as interchangeable;
- (3) a conception of the moral – in some less than totalizing sense – as nevertheless *inescapable*, as when Murdoch refers to its ‘indelible inherence in the secret mind’.⁶⁹

Of these, (1) is probably the strongest in its own right, since it can draw upon powerful phenomenological considerations about the tendency to react *for or against* what is presented to consciousness at a given moment – sensations, emotional or cognitive stimuli, or possibilities for action, as the case may be. However, when (1) is conjoined with (2), we get a result that will be much more surprising to anyone inclined towards value-pluralism: that is, we now have to recognize value *in general* as implicitly ‘moral’ – so that the inventory of ‘moral concepts’ will include, for example, not only *truthfulness* (which is a traditional virtue of character), but also *truth* itself (an obvious bearer of value in that the distinction between truth and falsity is one to which, as thinkers and agents, we cannot be indifferent), and even *factual disagreement*, since this is an idea that – as Diamond puts it on Murdoch’s behalf – ‘plays a role in the moral vision of the nature and situation of human beings’.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard, 1997: 35 for the idea just mentioned) Martha Nussbaum presents an account of the value of literary culture very different from the one suggested by *Love’s Knowledge*, but similarly non-autonomous.

⁶⁹ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 259.

⁷⁰ Op. cit. note 9, MTE 75. Compare MGM op. cit. note 2 194; and for an earlier statement of Murdoch’s unorthodox line on the relation between

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What if we are minded to resist this imperialism of the ‘moral’? To repeat: Murdoch herself leaves room for such resistance; she is aware of the possibility of a stand-off, with respect to the inner life, between aesthetic and moral ideals. She envisages the protest ‘can we not rest sometimes!’ – to which the eventual answer is that ‘Every moment matters, there is no time off’; that ‘every single second has a moral tag’.⁷¹ The undertaking from which there is no time off is the purification of consciousness. And here we see the relevance of what I have identified as element (3) of the ‘morality is everywhere’ view: for Murdoch that undertaking is not just an elective project of the morally minded individual, but (again, as in Plato⁷²) something *indelible* in the mind, namely a disposition to pursue the (objective) good as we – however inadequately – see it. To purify our consciousness is to progress towards a more adequate (or a less inadequate) grasp of the good. And in this connection Murdoch might well recommend that we accept from Plato a criterion of progress in terms of the ‘intuition of unity’⁷³ – the growing conviction that what look like plural (and potentially conflicting) values are mere appearances, phenomena of the surface of things, not true guides to the underlying reality.

There is so much that is right in the insistence of Murdoch, and of Diamond, that our ‘moral life’ (in the sense of *morally significant* life) reaches beyond our deployment of some specified vocabulary or style of judgement, and into that qualitative or ‘textural’ domain addressed by humanistic fiction. Yet we might also wonder if the ‘morality is everywhere’ view owes something to a contingent encounter between two recognizably distinct intellectual influences: one received from Diamond in her capacity as a critic of ‘departmental’ moral philosophy (and also, at least in passing, of the restrictive ‘Puritan spirit’); the other from Murdoch by virtue of the confessional or penitential atmosphere of much of her mature writing. And this encounter seems to threaten a certain cognitive dissonance. For the ‘moralism’ that comes into clear focus for Diamond when she

‘moral’ and ‘factual’ thinking, see ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’ (1957) in her *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 59–75.

⁷¹ Op. cit. note 2, MGM 257, 484, 495.

⁷² *Republic* Bk VI, 505e.

⁷³ Op. cit. note 72., Bk VII, 537c7: the mark of the *dialektikos* (the naturally philosophical or ‘dialectical’ person) is to be *sunoptikos* (disposed to see things as a unified whole). For ‘intuitions of unity’ see SG 93, discussed in §3 above.

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enters into the thinking of Henry James (who sees this as a factor that may cause us to '[miss] out on life through unconsciousness') is also arguably present in Murdoch herself, not immediately through her idea of the 'omnipresence of *value* in human activity'⁷⁴ – since this (or so I have suggested) is compatible with a more pluralistic picture in which evaluative space is not exhausted by specifically moral forms of valuing – but instead, through her somewhat subjective preoccupation with the 'original sin' theme. ('We know very well what it is like to be obsessed by bad thoughts and feelings ... The ego is indeed "unbridled". Continuous control is required'.⁷⁵)

To be a person 'on whom nothing is lost'; to commit oneself to the 'daily, hourly, minutely attempted purification of consciousness': I persist in thinking that these are *different* ideals. Literary illumination is available to the adherents of each; they may draw upon a common body of material, and it may well be quite normal to feel the attractions of both. The ideals are not entirely discontinuous, nor are they starkly opposed. But they remain different for all that.⁷⁶

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⁷⁴ Op. cit. note 2, 259 (emphasis added).

⁷⁵ Op. cit. note 2., 260.

⁷⁶ Thanks are due to the Honorary Director of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Professor Anthony O'Hear, and to all who took part in discussion at the lecture at which this paper was given.