# T.W. Adorno, Iris Murdoch, and the Importance of Art for Ethics

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## ABSTRACT

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Theodor Adorno, a member of the first generation of critical theory, and Iris Murdoch, a major contributor to the field of virtue ethics, are not ordinarily thought to have much in common, and, like the diverse philosophical traditions with which they are respectively associated, rarely treated together. Through a discussion of the role of art for ethics in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*, this thesis brings these two authors together, highlighting the similarities that in fact exist between them.

It argues that Adorno and Murdoch share similar conceptions of ethics which index the motivation human beings feel for ethical action to the recognition of particular moments within experience that call for ethical response. It argues moreover that Adorno and Murdoch each describe human beings as generally unable to accurately perceive the world that confronts them. Adorno points to the domination of instrumental rationality within modernity as the source of human beings' perceptual failings, and Murdoch, the natural tendency of human beings to focus upon themselves. For both Adorno and Murdoch, the inability of human beings to correctly perceive reality has negative consequences upon ethical life; it is, for Adorno and Murdoch alike, the immediate cause of the ethical failings of human beings. Finally, this thesis demonstrates that Adorno and Murdoch both attribute to art a capacity for enticing and enabling human beings to see beyond the scope of instrumental rationality, or the confines of the self, and therefore consider art to be of unique importance for ethics.

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**Introduction**

Theodor Adorno was a leading figure among the first generation of critical theorists at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. Critical of the "traditional theory" of philosophy and the social sciences modeled on the natural sciences, whose mandate is to explain a "wholly independent object-domain"[1] of social phenomena via the application of universal laws onto particular situations, critical theorists seek instead to see their objects from an external, i.e. functionalist, perspective, as well as from the inside, i.e. from the point of view of a participant in the social phenomena, and from this combined viewpoint not only explain their objects, but criticize pathologies where they identify them to exist and make recommendations for their eradication wherever possible.

Iris Murdoch was a British philosopher heavily influenced by Plato. Her works on morality, like much Greek philosophy, emphasize the importance of character and virtue while simultaneously deemphasizing the role of obligation to moral laws for achieving right action in particular situations that require moral response, as is characteristic of Kantian and utilitarian ethics. In so doing Murdoch's moral philosophy contributed significantly to the resurgence of "virtue" ethics in the twentieth century.

Belonging as they do to diverse philosophical traditions, Adorno and Murdoch are seldom thought to have much in common, and rarely considered together. However, a serious venture to juxtapose certain of their works reveals that in fact there exist significant points of contact between them. Both, for example, perceive an ethical deficiency about the world around them, both formulate ethical theories in which virtue

plays a significant role, and both identify art as a unique and important place for moral growth. Briefly, according to Adorno and Murdoch, the motivation necessary for ethical action ensues from human beings' recognition of particular instances within their experience that call out for ethical response. As Adorno describes it, however, the social conditions of modernity dictate a conforming to instrumental thinking which apprehends objects in terms of their utility only, precluding the perception of the unique ethically motivating material particularity in which objects consist. Art, as distinctly for-nothing, has a unique capacity for inviting human beings to see beyond the scope of such instrumental thinking. For Murdoch, the self impedes the ability of human beings to clearly perceive those realities that require ethical response, and in so doing precludes true ethical action. Art, according to Murdoch, has a unique capacity for "unselfing" human beings, who are otherwise, and owing to their very nature, overwhelmingly self-obsessed. It is the aim of this thesis to show through an elaborated discussion of the importance of art for ethics as presented in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* that they overlap considerably, and in what specific respects.

As an inquiry into Adorno and Murdoch on the importance of art for ethics, this thesis assumes a practical significance. Anything that contributes to the moral betterment of human beings is important for practice. That art can incite human beings to see past the parameters of instrumental rationality, as Adorno describes it, or, as for Murdoch, through fantasies of the self—as ethical life requires—indicates that the appreciation of art is a worthwhile human endeavour.

In terms of scholarship, this thesis contributes to a newly emerging groundwork for dialogue between virtue ethics and critical theory. One such avenue for further research concerns the supplementation of virtue ethics with critical theory.

As any endeavour to compare authors from diverse traditions of philosophical thought inevitably involves, reading Adorno and Murdoch alongside one another means seeing each in light of the other. And, in so doing, certain less obvious features of their respective philosophies illuminate.

For example, in the context of a comparison with Murdoch, the closeness of Adorno's conception of ethics to Murdoch's, or to virtue ethics generally, is accentuated. Again, Adorno, like Murdoch conceives of the relationship between the recognition of particular instances that call out for ethical response and the motivation necessary for ethical action to be such that recognition incites action.

Conversely, in reading Murdoch in the light of Adorno, it becomes apparent that in attributing to human beings a naturally selfish tendency Murdoch discourages potential investigation into ways in which changes at the social level might contribute to promotion of ethical action amongst human beings. Just as both recognize the potential of art for moral growth, both are moreover alike in their sober awareness of its limitations. For Adorno and Murdoch alike, the moral import of art is operative at the level of the individual. That is, the observation of art promotes the ethical development of the particular individual observing the work. According to Adorno, however, the potential contributions of art toward the ethical development of any individual reflecting upon an artwork are ultimately countered by the instrumental-rationality-reinforcing social conditions of modernity in which that individual is otherwise immersed. As Murdoch

describes it, on the other hand, although attending to art can contribute significantly to human beings' perceiving reality without the obstruction of selfish obsessions, there are nevertheless "insuperable psychological barriers"[2] to overcoming the self completely.

In attributing the ethical failings of human beings to human nature, Murdoch forestalls investigation into ways in which social conditions may contribute to the inability of human beings to perceive reality, and, more importantly, heads off investigation into potential ways in which certain changes to the social conditions could facilitate moral growth. Supplementing virtue ethics with critical theory would accommodate this lack.

Again, however, such a project is one for which further research is required. The aim of the present thesis is to explore the points at which Adorno and Murdoch meet on the question of the importance of art for ethics.

## Chapter Outline

The following thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter one, entitled "Adorno," is dedicated exclusively to exploring Adorno's position on the question of the importance of art for ethics.

With scientific rationality reigning within intellectual life, and society organized so as to make operations within it standardized, calculable and efficient, instrumental rationality has come to dominate the lives of human beings within modernity.

Thought that is predominately instrumental, however, is not sufficiently rational. It is a form of "identity thinking" that apprehends objects as particular instances of more general concepts, rather than as material individuals unique in their own right. As instrumental rationality conceives it, then, particularity is not truly particular, and universal therefore not truly universal.

According to Adorno, the diremption of universal and particular characteristic of instrumental rationality manifests itself in ethical life as a dichotomy between justification and motivation for ethical action. On Adorno's account, human beings have a historically inherited propensity to react—as the normative components of their normative-descriptive concepts dictate—to particular moments within the concrete material world that call for ethical response wherever they recognize such moments. Since, however, instrumental rationality prejudges objects—in which these ethically-motivating moments subsist—as mere exemplary instances of general concepts, human beings within modernity seldom experience these material details, leaving little opportunity for the recognition necessary to motivate human beings to action.

Art is important for ethics in virtue of its capacity to encourage thought more "complexly conceptual" than that with which human beings subject to modern social conditions ordinarily think. According to Adorno, artworks are in their form the "non-violent togetherness of the manifold of particularity." They take up and articulate—rather than obliterate, as instrumental rationality is prone to do—the material singularities of experience that are uniquely not identical with any concept. In so doing, they become temporarily resistant to subsumption within instrumental rationality. As distinctly for-nothing, such artworks invite a kind of "object-dependent" conceptuality, whereby

thought, in attempting to make sense of the artwork, must actively interrogate the work as a unique individual object of experience. Artworks invite just the kind of materialistic conceptuality Adorno recognizes as lacking under conditions of modernity and necessary for the restoration of ethics.

Artworks are, moreover, important for ethics in that they can afford human beings the insight that their thinking is predominantly instrumental, and that there is more to the objects of their experience than instrumental rationality can comprehend. And, finally, as each a particular image of the world in a state of reconciliation, i.e. a world wherein universal and particular rightly align, artworks can afford human beings insight into this "absolute," or "utopian" ideal to which they allude. For this, however, the utmost concentration upon the artwork is required, and even then can be conceptually apprehended only negatively; that is, in terms of what it is not.

Chapter two, "Murdoch," is dedicated to expounding Murdoch's account of the privileged role of art for the moral development of human beings.

According to Murdoch, the world is purposeless and human beings are unwilling to face such reality. Instead, compelled by their very nature, they retreat from "unpleasant realities" and take refuge in consoling narratives of the self. This human tendency to avert attention away from reality and look inward upon the self has consequences for ethics, for, according to Murdoch, human beings act according to what they perceive.

For Murdoch, value is a real object of human perception. True ethical action ensues only from the accurate perception of, e.g. other human individuals or states of affairs of which such value forms a part. Accurate perceptions, however, require accurate conceptions; in order for human beings to rightly perceive their objects they must

conceive accurately of the virtues. And, it is only via a disciplined and prolonged effort to see beyond the fantasies of the self, in return for which human beings gain insight into the Good—a metaphor for the indefinable "centre" toward which improving conceptions of the virtues progress—that the acquisition of accurate virtue-concepts, or normative-descriptive concepts generally, results.

Great art, according to Murdoch, has a distinct capacity for inviting the unselfish attention necessary to acquiring an accurate conception of the virtues. It can, moreover, teach about the purposeless character of the virtues, about the difficulty involved in seeing objects clearly, as well as about the impact of false perceptions upon ethical life. Finally, in virtue of its capacity for attracting unselfish attention, for which in return human beings receive insight into perfection, or the Good, artworks can enhance the ability of human beings to perceive the varying degrees to which objects within their experience embody that perfection.

In chapter three, "Points of Contact," Adorno and Murdoch are at last considered together. Here the similarities between them are finally enunciated.

Adorno and Murdoch both diagnose actions amongst human beings as ethically deficient. And, both desire for human beings to become ethically better. In their analyses of ethical life, neither petitions any universal moral principles—of the kind to which Kantian or utilitarian ethics appeals—for its grounding; instead each adheres to a moral realism. For Adorno and Murdoch alike, value is a real object of perception, which, upon its recognition, spontaneously incites human beings to ethical action where such action is required. Adorno and Murdoch are moreover alike in that both describe human beings as

failing to perceive this ethically-motivating material; and both ascribe the ethical failure they respectively observe to this.

For both Murdoch and Adorno, singularities of context are of utmost importance for ethics: for Murdoch, it is only by attending outward to individual objects of experience that human beings can achieve an accurate conception of the virtues necessary for right vision, according to Adorno, in order to restore ethics to modernity, human beings must learn to actively inquiry into objects as individual entities unique in their own right. Adorno and Murdoch are again similar in their mutual recognition of art as of unique importance for ethics in virtue of its capacity for attracting just such unselfish attention and "object-dependent" conceptuality. Both recognize art as moreover important for ethics in that it can teach about moral value, and to inform human beings of their perceptual inadequacy.

Finally, there are points of contact between the Good, which, for Murdoch, selfless attention of the kind great art attracts affords human beings insight, and the absolute, which Adorno describes successful artworks to refer. Any experience of the absolute or the Good as Adorno and Murdoch describe them, requires the utmost concentration or disciplined attention, and even then appear only faint or fleeting. Yet it is only in glimpsing these "something more's" that human beings are able to detect existing ethical imperfections.

# Chapter 1

## Adorno

According to Theodor Adorno,[3] the domination of instrumental rationality in both intellectual and practical life has led to the dissolution of ethics; human beings within modernity lack any true ethical agency.

Instrumental reason, for Adorno, is not fully rational; it is a practice for which there are no rational grounds. The ethical predicament of modernity, Adorno contends, is a result of the irrationality of reason. The restoration of ethics within modernity is dependent on the rationalization of reason, on making reason more fully rational.

Art is of the utmost importance for ethics within modernity. The experience of successful art involves the recognition of uniquely particular singularities of experience contained within artworks that are not subsumable under any concept. Art is evidence that human beings are indeed capable of a kind of particularistic conceptuality; and for Adorno, it is just this kind of conceptualizing particularity that ethical action requires.

In order for one to act truly ethically, one must actively recognize particular instances of suffering where they exist. Attention to particularity is not exercised within modernity, except in the experience of successful works of art. Cultivation in aesthetics thus may be a means by which to develop a greater sensitivity to particularity, and thereby enable true ethical action.

This chapter begins with a presentation of Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the self-undermining character of rationality within modernity. It then proceeds to explain how modern rationality generates a separation between justifying reasons and motivating

reasons for ethical action and dissolves the conditions necessary for any true ethical action, followed by a discussion of the rationalization of reason as necessary to the restoration of ethics to modernity. The chapter then turns to the subject of art, establishing the importance of successful artworks for ethics specifically in their capacity to communicate non-conceptual truth. It then discusses the indispensable role of philosophy in combination with art in order to save the material truth artworks contain for conceptual thought. Lastly, in a section entitled The Complex Concept, the chapter describes in what reason, expanded and made rational, consists, and discusses the possibility of such rationalized reason under the conditions of modernity.

**Modern Secular Reason Undermined**

According to Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advancement of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters."[4] That is, propelled by fear of nature, the primary objective of modern enlightenment thinking has always been to attain for human beings control of nature; to make mankind sovereign over nature.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, "enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them."[5] For Adorno and Horkheimer, since the dawn of enlightenment, human beings have sought to learn from nature how to use it for their own

ends. For modern enlightened rationality, that is, nature is distinct from human beings, and principally conceived as an instrument for human purposes. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, with enlightenment, "[nature's] 'in-itself' becomes 'for-him.'"[6]

In its quest to gain control of nature entire, enlightenment aims "to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge."[7] According to Adorno and Horkheimer, "humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown."[8] In order to be wholly knowable, however, nature must consist of no mythical entities for which human thought cannot account. Only that for which there is sufficient empirical evidence, i.e. only that which can be shown through repeated instances of scientific investigation, is thought to exist; any object which transcends the scope of scientific thought is to be considered merely an imagined "fiction of the subject."[9] "From now on," Adorno and Horkheimer say, "matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties. For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and reliability must be viewed with suspicion."[10]

Adorno and Horkheimer contend that instrumental rationality—rationality applied to determining the most efficient means to achieving a given end, which, for example, in modern capitalist societies, dominates independent goal-setting as a result of competition generating conditions in which more and more is produced and more and more profit sought independent of asking what the profit is for—presupposes the reality of a unitary system wherein all parts are derivable from other parts. "For the enlightenment," Adorno and Horkheimer say, "only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system from which everything and anything follows."[11] All things which fail to conform to this *a priori* unified order, that is, all

things which instrumental rationality cannot apprehend, are thought not to exist. Adorno and Horkheimer charge that such instrumental rationality *assumes* nature to be wholly knowable by human beings, and that nature is actually identical with how human beings, using instrumental reasoning, represent it to themselves. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, because the grounds for presuming that the world is just as instrumental rationality conceives it to be are not based in rationality, but rather on belief issuing from fear, modern secular reason is self-undermining.

**Ethics within Modernity**

According to Adorno, for a humanity that operates predominately with instrumental rationality—a humanity for whom intellectual life is dominated by scientific rationality, i.e. the belief that all things can be known through experimentation and causal analysis, and for whom practical life is subject to societal rationalization, i.e. the ordering of society's institutions in accordance with instrumental rationality so as to make their operations calculable, predictable, and efficient—the ethical consequences are dire.

In ordering both intellectual and practical life in accordance with the dictates of scientific rationality and truth, all other (non-rational) entities, including all traditional objects of ethical esteem, e.g. God, lose their value-appeal. And, for Adorno, the devaluation of these mythic, or religious, entities is not the only consequence of enlightenment's scepticism. Where scientific rationality and truth reign as humanity's highest values—all things everywhere subject to its test—eventually, even the rationale

for the pursuit of scientific rationality and truth is called into question.[12] That is, modern rationality cannot account for the pursuit of scientific rationality and truth. According to Adorno, modern secular reason's self-undermining character thus impresses upon practical life by making "suspect the ethical ideals… [human beings] employ to orient [themselves]."[13]

Moreover, says Adorno, as the rational incoherence of values grows, their practical capacity for "regulating… orienting and giving meaning to… everyday life" dwindles. That is, the very questioning of these "orienting ideals" causes them to "lose their force, their power, to (rationally) motivate and guide." Thus, "the same conditions that dissolve the ethical meaningfulness of human existence," for Adorno, "simultaneously, in doing so, undermine the conditions of rational agency, of goal-directed meaningful action as such."[14]

According to Adorno, without any motivational values to regulate ethical action, human beings must justify their actions otherwise. Thus it becomes a feature of modern ethical life that the reasons to which one appeals to justify one's ethical actions are incommensurable with the motivation one feels for that action's pursuit. Said otherwise, the disenchantment of the world brought about by the belief that all things can be known through scientific rationality, paired with the rationalization of society whereby social institutions become subject to the rules of instrumental rationality, have, according to Adorno, together promoted a dichotomy between justifying reasons and motivating reasons for ethical action.[15]

**The Restoration of Ethics at the Level of the Concept**

Because Adorno sees the dichotomy between justificatory and motivational reasons for ethical action as a result of the domination of instrumental rationality, it is at the level of rationality, of conceptual thought, that Adorno seeks a solution.

According to Adorno, instrumental rationality is a form of "identity thinking," in which general concepts are representative of particular objects, and these particulars are conceived of as mere exemplars of given types. That is, where instrumental rationality dominatingly prevails, nature is presumed to be a unitary system identical with the way in which human beings thinking with instrumental rationality represent it to themselves; the particular objects within nature are conceptually apprehended in terms of this unitary whole, that is, in terms of their location within this universal scheme.

Such identity thinking, say Adorno, is irrational. According to Adorno, within identity thinking, there is a "systematic separation between universal and particular [that] distorts both;"[16] the universal conceptual scheme of instrumental rationality, for example, under which all of nature is conceptually apprehended, does not acknowledge, i.e. does not think, those parts of nature that do not *a priori* conform to this conceptual scheme (what Adorno calls "non-identicals"), the scheme is thus not truly universal. And, insofar as identity thinking comprehends particulars solely in terms of their location within distortedly universal conceptual schemes, such that one does not cognize the particular as a unique individual object of experience, but rather thinks the concept alone, there is equally something deformed about particularity.

According to Adorno, the justification/motivation dichotomy in ethics is an articulation of the universal/particular separation and deformation characteristic of instrumental rationality. Human beings think in terms of universal concepts, thus justification for any action occurs always at the level of the universal, and, for Adorno, motivation ensues always from experience of the particular. According to Adorno, because what universal and particular have, with enlightenment, come to mean are deformed, so too are "justifying reasons and motivating reasons as now conceived deformed."[17]

In order to restore ethically meaningful action to humanity, the dichotomy between justificatory reasons and motivational reasons must be resolved. Because, for Adorno, the separation of justification and motivation is but an ethical articulation of the universal/particular dichotomy characteristic of instrumental rationality, dissolving this latter dichotomy will eliminate the former. Thus, having indicted modern rationality as itself irrational, Adorno seeks not to dispense with rationality in favour of, for example, sentiment or emotion, but aspires instead to make reason rational, i.e. to set right the relation of universal and particular.

**Adorno on Art**

According to Adorno, where instrumental rationality dominates, human beings' experience of the world is obstructed by a "complex of illusion" or "social web of delusion;" they experience the world not as it truly is, but as it naively appears to

instrumental reason alone. Moreover, instrumental rationality does not recognize that it is not seeing things as they actually are. According to Adorno, because instrumental rationality is unable to step outside itself, without, that is, entering in to the realm of the fantastical, it is not, therefore, capable of conceiving of itself as simply a way of interpreting the world amongst other ways; that is, human beings operating solely with instrumental rationality cannot reasonably question whether thought is not in fact entirely self-sufficient. According to Adorno, in order that reason may be released from its own blind irrationality, it must come together with art.

According to Adorno, although any artwork is by its very nature an aesthetic semblance, in order for it to be truly art, it must communicate truth. For Adorno, true, or successful artworks—amongst which, for example, he includes Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and *Erwartung*, Beckett's *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, and Picasso's *Guernica*—"are predicated on fissuredness," on the "concrete historical situation"[18] as opposed to the ideological reality of instrumental rationality. True artworks that is, take up the "wordless and mute contradictions"[19] that the world of meaning excludes, and without obscuring, i.e. distorting or falsely reconciling those contradictions.

In its form, says Adorno, true art is "the non-violent 'togetherness' of the diverse, with the particularity of each individual entity remaining unharmed."[20] True art is thus an image, or semblance, of the world wherein universal and particular align in such a way that each is what it promises to be. It is an image of the world in the state of reconciliation.

By articulating the "nonsensical other" to the world of meaning, the "cracks and fractures in the texture of reality,"[21] artworks make possible an experience of the world

that "no longer understands itself through the anticipation of a totality of meaning,"[22]—an experience of the world where not everything is explicable in terms of the unitary whole instrumental rationality guarantees—and thereby make knowable the "social web of delusion" or "complex of illusion," through which human beings experience the world.

**Art and Philosophy**

In order to glimpse these traces of the "nonillusory absolute" which is the world as it truly is for human beings within modernity, and not simply as it appears to instrumental reason alone, art must come together with philosophy.

According to Adorno, the "intuition of the world in the light of redemption"[23] that the artwork possesses is communicated to aesthetic experience which alone is unable to understand it. According to Adorno, philosophical reflection is necessary in order to inform aesthetic experience about what it experiences and render it communicable.

Philosophy, bound as it is to the medium of identifying concepts, is incapable of affirmatively capturing the nonsensical, or non-linguistic, truth to which aesthetic experience gives way: Artworks, says Adorno, "point—as with their finger—to their truth content without its thereby becoming discursive;"[24] the nonsensical particular, or "non-identical" that the artwork articulates is, by definition, not linguistically meaningful, or conceptually graspable. However, according to Adorno, the "historical, geological stratum"[25] to which artworks open themselves and mold according to their own immanent law of form, although directly inaccessible to conceptual thought, can be accessed

negatively. Philosophical reflection, that is, can negatively circumscribe the artwork's ineffable truth, saying all that it is not. Without philosophical reflection to negatively delimit the non-identical, one could not recognize it as concept-elusive, as exactly non-identical. According to Adorno, in this "aporetic" relationship between aesthetic experience and philosophical reflection the "nonillusory absolute can be glimpsed"[26] and reason expanded.

According to Adorno, the truth content of an artwork, illusory, and hence "non-existing," emerges in the work, as though into existence, and is tangible for only "a fraction of an instant" before it quickly "flickers out in aesthetic semblance." Yet, says Adorno, "what does not exist, by appearing, is promised."[27]

**The Complex Concept**

Reason made rational can be conceived of as reason operating with concepts more complex than those with which instrumental rationality works. In contradistinction to the concepts employed by instrumental thinking, which comprehends particulars as instances of distortedly abstracted universals, the complex conceptuality of rationalized reason would contain "ineliminable moments of dependency on particularity."[28]

Formally, the complex concepts with which Adorno's emancipated subject thinks, consist of two axes: a "logical axis" and a "material axis." Each axis is always internally dependent on the other, but independently corresponds to a different mode of understanding: the logical axis corresponding to a radically transitive cognition, the

material axis corresponding to an intransitive, "object-dependent," mode of understanding.[29]

The logical axis of this complex concept is equivalent to the familiar concept of formal logic which identifies particulars as "belonging to the 'same' concept."[30] Thinking along this axis is thus exemplary of identity thinking; a kind of thinking which, with the enlightenment especially, has proven extremely useful for the manipulation of, and navigation within, the material environment.

The material axis of the complex concept, for Adorno, according to J.M. Bernstein, consists of "mediating moments of object, image, language and tradition."[31] Thinking along the material axis is a kind of mental activity through which one questions those particular phenomena for which one does not already have corresponding concepts under which they may be subsumed. It is a process of conceptualization, wherein the "material conditions for meaning and meaning itself are fully joined," that allows one to "proceed from the awareness of [those phenomena]... to the formation, or acquisition, or application of a concept." It is just that process of object-dependent conceptualization, minus the conceptual result, necessary where "a concept is either not present or uncertain" that leads to concept formation.[32] Because meaning and the conditions of meaning, i.e. the material phenomena, are not detachable in cognition along the material axis, neither are they therefore detachable in thinking with the complex concept of which the material axis forms a part.[33]

Possessing a concept is "coordinate with the natural history of [that concept's]... acquisition,"[34] which includes all of those experiences one undergoes in acquiring the concept, and as well the way in which those experiences shape one's self-conception.

That is, for example,[35] the process of acquiring the concept of cruelty includes acts of youthful curiosity such as pulling the legs off spiders, watching scenes of torture in film, the explanations one receives that enable one to identify with another's suffering, one's identifying cruelty for oneself in experiencing certain states of affairs—all experiences that require the presence of the phenomena from which the concept is acquired, to the individual acquiring the concept—*as well as the formation of the self that undergoes those experiences.*

For Adorno, says Bernstein, there is a psychology inherent to human beings within modernity that includes, for example, human beings' "spontaneous propensity to cruelty,... [their] spontaneous reaction to intentional harm to [themselves]... and others,... [their] capacity for empathy, etc."[36] And, part of the process of the acquisition of any ethical concept, like, for example, cruelty, includes the acquisition of a determinate propensity, in this case a negative propensity, reflective of socially agreed upon norms. Since it is a part of the determinate psychology that human beings within modernity have come to own to react to cruelty in a particular, negative way, all that is required to motivate human beings to act to eradicate instances of cruelty is that they recognize it where it exists.

And, according to Adorno, after one has initially acquired a conception of cruelty, were one to continue thinking in the same complexly conceptual way that enabled one to form concepts in the first place, that is, *beyond one's initial acquisition of concepts* like cruelty—if one continued to concentrate on particularity and interrogate particular states of affairs, rather than, for example, having one's conceptual process and identity formation taken over by another system of order like instrumental rationality—one *would*

be able to recognize cruelty where it exists amongst the individual objects of one's experience.

For a humanity operating with the complex concept, then, by dint of having acquired a concept of cruelty at all, one would be, upon the very recognition of its instances, motivated to act in response. One's ethical acts would thus be dictated by the concepts one comes to possess through particular personal interactions with the phenomenal world; the concepts one possesses are at least in part constitutive of who one is.

Since the recognition of particular instances of, e.g. cruelty, made possible by Adorno's complex conceptuality, invokes what amounts to a natural human reaction to cruelty, i.e. motivates one to act in response, motivation and justification here coincide. For Adorno, a humanity freed from the confines of instrumental rationality, and operating with this more complex conceptuality would be fully rational and truly ethical.

It is important to highlight here that for individuals within Adorno's utopia, the morally justifiable act is the act one is motivated to take upon the recognition of individual instances of injustice. And, that this contrasts considerably with Kantian ethics, for example, according to which rational reflection is required to determine what actions are morally justifiable; and according to which, the acts one feels motivated to take are often not the same as those for which moral justification can be given. That is, Adorno conceives of a much closer relation between justification and motivation for ethical action, than, for example, does Kant. However, due to the damaging conditions of modernity, the diremption of universal and particular characteristic of a kind of thought which is overwhelmingly instrumental, any true recognition of particular instances of,

e.g. cruelty, to which the motivation for ethical response is indexed, is curtailed. What results, then, is a relation between the actions human beings are motivated to take and the actions human beings are justified in taking, as far removed from each other as Kantian ethics describes them to be.

**On the Possibility of the Complex Concept**

According to Adorno, true art shows human beings who otherwise blindly think in terms of instrumental rationality, that such thinking may not in fact be the only way to interpret the world. According to Adorno, art does this by articulating a particular that is concept-elusive. It is relatively straightforward to see why one faced with non-conceptual phenomena would begin to think that instrumental rationality is limited in terms of what lies within its conceptual grasp, that instrumental rationality is indeed merely *a way* of interpreting the world amongst other ways, and why therefore Adorno refers to instrumental rationality as a complex of illusion through which human beings within modernity view the world.

It can also be readily seen that Adorno's complex conceptuality is indeed something of which human beings are capable. After all, as he has it, human beings originally acquire ethical concepts from interaction with others and their own personal particular experiences with the sensory material world.

However, despite its being the case that human beings are initially capable of Adorno's complex conceptuality, it may not be so clear that human beings—who after

acquiring their ethical concepts and after having become wholly immersed in a world ruled by instrumental rationality, a world where the conceptual process of concept acquisition is no longer exercised—are capable of resisting instrumental rationality and operating with the complex concept. That is, it is not so clear that socialization in instrumental rationality is not irreversible when it comes to the complex concept. This sort of pessimistic thinking about human conceptuality may be, for some, where Adorno's description of the experience of art leads.

Art, for Adorno, is the only realm of life within modernity where the kind of object-dependent conceptuality requisite for concept formation that is necessary to the complex concept is operative: In order for one to experience the non-identical within the artwork at all, one must be present to the artwork scanning, for example, the canvas, noting intricate details, searching out patterns of colour and of line, so as to discover, *within the material itself*, its meaningful arrangement.[37] Experiencing the truth of any true artwork requires a kind of conceptuality that is completely object-dependent.

Although the process of concept acquisition is reflected in the experience of true artworks, the process of concept acquisition that leads to concept formation, culminating in the actual formation of a concept is not a feature of true art. As Adorno describes it, the non-identical that appears in the artwork, *escapes* the grasp of philosophical reflection; according to Adorno, try as it may, philosophical reflection is incapable of grasping, in any positive way, the socially critical element of artworks, whereby artworks "transcend the given"[38] without, that is, distorting it, making it into something other. Thus, one may say, even where the object-dependent conceptual process Adorno sees as lacking in instrumental rationality is present, it does not, even with the utmost concentration, lead to

concept formation; one may dismay that even in art, the complex concept is not operative.

However, the inability of human beings within modernity to form a concept to capture the non-identical within the artwork is *not* evidence that the complex concept is here inoperative. The concepts human beings possess articulate only and exactly those things that various particulars can be seen to have in common. The questioning of an artwork does not lead to concept formation because the non-identical any successful artwork articulates is exactly not identical with anything other. The non-identical is thus always, by definition, concept-elusive.

Adorno's desire is not for a humanity equipped with the conceptual capacity for forming a concept for every particular. Adorno is not making any assumption that human beings are capable of conceptually representing to themselves the entirety of the phenomena with which they are faced—it is for making this assumption exactly that he criticizes instrumental rationality! Rather, the utopian world Adorno desires is one in which human beings interrogate the material world so as to acquire a set of thick ethical concepts and, having acquired those concepts, further interrogate their experience in order to recognize instantiations of those concepts where indeed they exist, as well as to recognize the uniquely particular within experience as not identical with any concept and to respond appropriately to it.

In order for one to recognize any non-identical, particularity of experience as not identical with any concept, both axes of Adorno's complexly conceptual thought must be operative in interrelation That is, one can only recognize the non-identical within one's

experience as concept-elusive by interrogating the material particular non-identical and actively appealing to concepts, judging each of them unsuitable.

Since the performative conceptual process of interrogating particularity—which necessarily involves the appeal to concepts—is the complexly conceptual thought to which Adorno aspires for humanity in full operation, whether it results in the formation of a concept, the recognition of that material particular as demonstrative of a concept or, alternatively, as a *non*-concept-conforming singularity, and since the concentrated conceptual process of questioning material particulars, despite its not leading to any concept formation, is exactly what glimpsing the non-identical in art involves, the experience of the non-identical in art corroborates the possibility of the operation of the complex concept under conditions of modernity. That human beings are capable of conceptualizing the non-identical in art at all is evidence that the complex conceptuality to which Adorno aspires is at work; such conceptuality is thus something of which human beings, although otherwise immersed in instrumental rationality, are capable.

For Adorno, the material world of human experience, the manifold of individual "objects," whether human beings, animals, states of affairs, etc., are comprised of a multitude of particular identifiable attributes as well as an array of non-identical, hence non-concept conforming, particularities. The motivation for ethical action within an emancipated humanity ensues "naturally" from human beings' recognition of particular instantiations of their ethical concepts within these objects of experience, such that, for example, the recognition of a particular state of affairs as cruel motivates human beings to respond negatively. Concepts of course can change; the continued interrogation of the material world leads to the change and development of one's concepts, as well as the

acquisition of new concepts. The specific response that an object motivates one to enact depends upon the particular set of thick ethical concepts that the individual human being experiencing the object possesses, and upon the individual object itself, which is, in virtue of its non-identical characteristics, itself distinctly unique. In an emancipated humanity, one would be able to recognize within an object, the instantiation of probably several of one's concepts, and also the uniquely particular moments of a given object that are not identical with any concept. It is the concepts that one discovers in the object, as well as the particular configuration of concepts one invokes to describe the, albeit ultimately ineffable, particularity contained in the object, that together dictate the particular ethical actions that the object motivates human beings to take.

**Adorno and the Essentials**

Since Adorno discusses only the way in which phenomena are conceptualized by human beings, contending that human conceptual processes are capable of dealing with material phenomena in a way more complex than humans have done since the beginning of modernity, that is, in a way that enables them to truly discern instances of cruelty, kindness, love, and so on, he is not thereby making any claims about a world somehow "out there," independent of human beings' conceptualization of it.

That is, although there is clearly a disposition within the particular material phenomena with which human beings are faced, enabling that phenomena to be apprehended by human conceptuality as manifesting cruelty, love, kindness, etc., there is

nothing to prevent the phenomena from altering so significantly that, regardless of humanity's conceptual capacities, such ethical concepts are no longer discernable in it. Within modernity, however, it is not, according to Adorno, that there is no such thing as cruelty to be discerned from the phenomena that particular instances of cruelty go unnoticed; rather, cruelty exists within modernity, but human conceptuality, dominated as it is by instrumental rationality, is unable to truly recognize it. Because Adorno is talking only about conceptuality, and not the way the world is independent of human thinking, any criticism launched against Adorno for making claims about how the world is from some non-subjective, God's-eye-view for example, for making claims that cannot with legitimacy be made from one's always subjectively-bound viewpoint, are unwarranted.

There is nothing either to suggest that, for Adorno, human conceptuality itself cannot change. The conceptuality to which Adorno refers is a kind of conceptuality that human beings under modernity are capable of. Adorno's aspirations for an emancipated humanity are aspirations for a humanity that exercises these historically, socially defined capabilities to the fullest extent possible. There is here nothing to suggest that under any conditions other than those inherent in modernity human beings themselves would not be entirely different. That is, there is here no hint of human essence; there is no reason to think that the rational human agent due to be restored by the rationalization of reason is anything other than an agent wholly dependent on historical, social conditions.

Although human beings within modernity are capable of Adorno's complex conceptuality, the social conditions of modernity, the espousal of scientific rationality in intellectual life and the organization of society so as to make it an instrument for efficiency, have relegated the exercise of such conceptuality to the only realm which

perpetually resists this ideological reality: the realm of true art. But since one exercises such complex conceptuality when attempting to make sense of true art, there is reason to think that one's frequent involvement in these aesthetic experiences should strengthen one's conceptual capacity, making one fit to more regularly attend to particularity, and thus better able to recognize those particular instances that cry out for ethical response. By exercising their own historically prescribed conceptual capabilities to the fullest extent, human beings just may be able to improve society.

**Art and Social Change**

The domination of instrumental rationality within modernity implicates ethical life by repressing the kind of particularistic conceptuality that is necessary to the recognition of instances of suffering. The experience of successful works of art involves the kind of particularistic conceptuality that ethical knowing requires, and is thus assurance that such conceptuality is indeed possible within modernity.

It is theoretically possible that cultivation in aesthetics would develop this particularistic conceptuality. However, whether this is fertile soil for a program for changing a society so firmly in the grip of instrumental rationality is another question altogether. It is not clear how much cultivation in aesthetics would be necessary to exercise one's particularistic conceptuality sufficiently so that it is not simply overridden by instrumental rationality upon one's taking leave of the artwork. However, it is certain that any improvement in the direction of Adorno's complex conceptuality, that is, any

increase in frequency of attention human beings give to particularity—to actual instances of suffering—and the invocation of response to alleviate that suffering, is desirable.

# Chapter 2

## Murdoch

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch describes the world, the stage of real sin and suffering, to be without any ultimate purpose, and its grave realities generally too much for human beings to bear. In order to make sufferable what for human beings is in many ways an abhorrent reality, they routinely project consoling narratives onto their experience, thus obstructing and distorting their objects.

A true vision of reality, then, is one free from selfish fantasy. Such realism is, as Murdoch describes it, a moral achievement which human beings can make progress toward only via prolonged and persistent efforts to see individual realities within their experience for what they really are. Human beings can perceive reality only to the extent that their "endlessly perfectible" normative-descriptive concepts will allow. Attention to the world unobstructed by selfish obsessions affords human beings intuition of the real but indefinable Good toward which perfecting conceptions of the virtues progressively move, thereby enabling them to increasingly refine their concepts of the virtues, and normative-descriptive concepts more generally, hence improving their perceptions.

True perceptions ensure right action. According to Murdoch, human beings are naturally compassionate. The perception of moments that call out for ethical response—particular moments of, e.g. cruelty—naturally incite human beings to act to abolish them. Unselfing human beings, then, contributes to the alleviation of the suffering that surrounds them.

Art is of unique importance for ethics in its capacity for inviting the unselfish attention necessary to human beings perfecting their concepts. Art, moreover, teaches about the virtues; about the difficulty involved in being objective about one's objects; and, finally, about the ethical consequences that result ultimately from human beings' unwillingness to confront an often harsh reality, indulging themselves with fantasy instead.

In this chapter I will:

1. Describe the world, the self, and in what morality consists
2. Describe in what learning the virtues consists, and in so doing make explicit the indispensable role of attention
3. Explain how one's conceptions of the virtues influence one's actions
4. Clarify what is meant by the Good
5. Discuss the difficulty involved in learning the virtues
6. Present the unique position of art as the most important place for moral education

**Realism as a Moral Achievement**

Human life is, for Murdoch, purposeless. There is no ultimate end, no "external point" toward which human life properly progresses. Rather, the world is "chancy and incomplete," and human beings are but "transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance."[39] The Good, then, or goodness, or morality, has nothing to do with purpose.

Moral value is not valuable in relation to some greater end; but valuable for-itself. Thus, it is only "for-nothing" that human beings can be truly good. "'All is vanity,'" she says, "is the beginning and end of ethics."[40]

"Human beings," says Murdoch, "cannot bear much reality."[41] "The psyche," she says, taking lead from Freud, "is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself." Daydreaming is chief among its activities; it is unwilling to confront "unpleasant realities," and "seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature." Most human beings, says Murdoch, view the world through "a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain."[42] It is important to recognize here that Murdoch's account of human nature is an ahistoric one, and that in this she contrasts with Adorno, for whom everything is historically determined.

Realism, according to Murdoch, involves a "clear-eyed contemplation of the misery and evil of the world,"[43] and is a moral achievement. Borrowing the term from Simone Weil, Murdoch uses "attention" to mean "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." According to Murdoch, attention is the mark of any active moral agent. Human beings as moral beings must strive to "see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection." Love is the ability to direct attention outward away from the self toward individual objects of experience; and reality, that which is disclosed to "the patient eye of love."[44]

**Learning the Virtues**

Human beings, as Murdoch explains, ordinarily conceive of goodness in terms of the virtues. And, where learning the virtues is concerned, attention is of the utmost importance. Learning the meaning of any normative-descriptive term, including any such term which names a virtue, like, for example, "courage," occurs when such words are "used, either aloud or privately, in the context of particular acts of attention."

Words have both spatio-temporal and conceptual contexts. And, learning the virtues, or the meaning of any normative-descriptive term, is facilitated by attention to both.

According to Murdoch, words are used in reference to particular objects, at particular times, by particular individuals. It is the nature of normative words especially, that is, words that consist of a normative part, that they cannot be understood independent of some appreciation or understanding of larger "sets or patterns" which such words together comprise. That is, for example, the virtues, as Murdoch describes them, are interrelated. If asked to describe any particular virtue, again, for example, courage, one is inevitably led to mention the names of other virtues—e.g. "steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving…"—in one's description. "If we reflect upon the nature of the virtues," she says, we are constantly led to consider their relation to each other;" that is, to consider the order in which the virtues relate.

Thus, in order to understand what is being said about a particular object at a particular time, one must understand something about the particular conceptual scheme to which the word being uttered belongs. And, attention to objects can help in one's

understanding that conceptual scheme. "If the common object is lacking," according to Murdoch, "communication may break down and the same words may occasion different results in different hearers."[45]

**Perfecting Concepts**

According to Murdoch, quite unlike the words that name them, it is characteristic of one's conceptions of the virtues that they alter, or change; "we have a different image of courage at forty," says Murdoch, "from that which we had at twenty."[46] Through a multitude of various acts of attention to concepts and objects, says Murdoch, human beings' conceptions of the virtues deepen and complicate. The virtues, she says, are "infinitely to be learned;"[47] one's conceptions of them, "endlessly perfectible."

According to Murdoch, "[a] deep understanding of any field of human activity… involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect;"[48] and, she continues, so is the case in the realm of human conduct. Attention to the world unobstructed by selfish obsession, for Murdoch, affords human beings the intuition that "there is more than this."[49] The human idea of perfection, the intuition of something "still somewhere beyond"[50] even the very great, informs human beings' conceptions of the virtues, and is a "natural producer of order."[51] According to Murdoch, one has a conception of perfect courage for example, which operates as an "ideal limit" or "ideal end-point," against which to measure one's experience and evaluate the degree to which the particular

objects of one's attention are reflective of courage thus conceived. It is "in light of" one's intuition of perfection, that one is able "to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously... [one was] prepared to 'let by:"[52] to newly recognize as, for example, mere self-assertion what one had formerly thought to be courage.[53]

Different human beings have different intuitions of perfection and different conceptions of the virtues which their respective intuitions of perfection inform. And, for Murdoch, some human beings' conceptions of the virtues are in fact more perfect, i.e. more accurately representative of reality, than other human beings', and their intuitions of perfection comparatively less misleading.

In contrast to moral philosophies which picture the moral agent as moving about and bestowing value freely onto a world utterly "devoid of normative characteristics,"[54] moral philosophies which insist that value does not belong to the "world of truth-functions, the world of science and factual propositions... [so] must live somewhere else,"[55] Murdoch conceives no dichotomous relationship between facts and values. The world of human experience is not a plainly factual world to which value is arbitrarily attached, but comes to human beings value-laden from the start. And, human beings are able to accurately perceive that reality, and detect degrees of value amongst the objects to which they attend, with greater and lesser degrees of success.

The degree to which one is able to accurately, or selflessly, perceive the objects of one's attention is determined by the quality of one's conceptions. One's conceptions of the virtues then, for example, complete with information of perfection, improve gradually as particular acts of attention to reality are related and re-related to one's already formed

conceptions; the more accurate one's perceptions, i.e. the better able one is to perceive those objects of attention without the self intruding and falsifying the picture, the better able one is to conceive of the virtues. And, the more perfect one's conceptions of the virtues, the better able one is to see the unitary perfection that they are informed by and that they reflect, that is, the better one's intuition of perfection and of the direction in which it lies.

**Moral Action**

According to Murdoch, the quality of one's concepts of the virtues, or one's normative-descriptive concepts more generally, not only affects what one sees, that is, the degree to which one is able to see beyond the confines of oneself to the reality that confronts one, but affects one's actions as well. Human beings, says Murdoch, "desire in accordance with what they see;" and, says Murdoch, the preconditions for good habit and dutiful action in which virtue consists, is, "in human beings, a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness."[56] That is, according to Murdoch, there is a connection specifically in human beings between "clear realistic vision...[and] compassion;"[57] for human beings a true vision of the real, "occasions right conduct."[58]

Thus, the better one's conceptions of the virtues, or set of normative-descriptive concepts more generally, the more enhanced one's sensitivity to particularity and detail; and the more sophisticated one's ability for detecting and perceiving value, the better one is able to navigate reality and act virtuously. "An increasing awareness of 'goods,'" says

Murdoch, "and the attempt... to attend to them purely, without self, brings with it an increasing awareness of the unity and interdependence of the moral world;"[59] the good man is he who sees the ways in which the virtues relate to one another, and hence, e.g. "knows whether and when... politics is more important than family." [60]

The ultimate condition to which Murdoch aspires for human beings is one in which they are free to act fully in accordance with their natural impulse for compassion, which is a function of the progressive attempt to see particular objects always more clearly. Freedom is, for Murdoch, freedom from selfish fantasy which consists in the "realism of compassion."[61]

**On the Good**

The idea of perfection, towards which one's improving conceptions of the virtues are oriented, is that idea to which the "proper and serious use"[62] of the Good refers. On the status of the Good, Murdoch says that its existence should be conceived of as devoid of all "heavy material connotation[s]."[63] It does not exist independently of human beings, e.g. there is no Form of the Good. And, although it can be intuited, it cannot, and by its very nature, be defined; that is, it can have no actuality in human thought, it is not something of which human beings can have a clear conception.

Thus, of the intuition of the Good which human beings receive in return for selfless attention, Murdoch says, "if it is not to be corrupted by some sort of quasi-theological finality, must remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were,

a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form."[64] But, says Murdoch, the intuition is real, and it is an integral part of a capacity with which human beings are endowed to see the world they experience always more clearly, and to behave always more compassionately. "We are all capable of criticizing, modifying and extending the area of strict obligation which we have inherited," says Murdoch, and that this is a true aspect, "in which all men are brothers [*sic*]."[65]

According to Murdoch, where moral philosophy is concerned, the creation of metaphors and the invention of concepts are necessary to make certain components of moral life explicit; and, "[t]he image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre... [is] the least corruptible, most realistic image for us to use in our reflections upon moral life."[66]

**Moral Discipline**

(a) The Corruption of Concepts

Of course, for Murdoch, the complicating and deepening process one's conceptions undergo need not be in the direction of true perfection; one's conceptions of the virtues can also become increasingly degraded, and this she says "is more commonly to be observed."[67] According to Murdoch, "psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary."[68] Ordinary conversations with others, that contain, for

example, morally depraved descriptions of human things, can, if the effort is not made to keep such descriptions in check with reality, be the most morally corrupting of activities. That is, for Murdoch, the orientation of attention natural to human beings is inward toward the self rather than outward toward the real. False perceptions of the world—perceptions obstructed by selfish fantasy—give way to imperfect conceptions, which, without the effort to suppress self and redirect attention out toward the world and virtuous objects, can lead to deeper and more complicated, but corrupt conceptions of the virtues and of the Good. "[I]n so far as goodness is for use in politics and in the market place," she says "it must combine its increasing intuitions of unity with an increasing grasp of complexity and detail. False conceptions are often generalized, stereotyped and unconnected. True conceptions combine just modes of judgment and ability to connect with increased perception of detail."[69]

(b) Discipline

According to Murdoch, accurate vision, "a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one,"[70] requires a discipline similar to that required of a student learning a language, or any other intellectual discipline. Seeing the real is like learning Russian, so says Murdoch, in that it involves reflection upon something other than one's self—the moral world, in the first case, and the authoritative structure of the Russian language in the latter—and with, in both cases, "[t]he honesty and humility… not to pretend to know what one does not

know."[71] For both, the task is difficult, with a distant, probably never wholly achievable, goal; and progress is marked by the increasing revelation of something other than one's self. As an exercise in the act of unselfish attention, learning Russian is itself an exercise in morality.

(c) On the Impossibility of Sustained Attention

Even those few human beings who try lovingly to direct their attention outward, away from self, toward individual objects, face what are, says Murdoch, perhaps "insuperable psychological barriers."[72] It is an "empirical fact about human nature," she says, that the "attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is... cannot be entirely successful."[73] According to Murdoch, human beings are, at their best, "decent persons,"[74] virtuous people in certain of their life-roles, and naïvely selfish in others. According to Murdoch, "[i]t is very difficult to concentrate attention upon sin and suffering, in others or in oneself, without falsifying the picture in some way while making it bearable..." "Only the very greatest art can manage it, and that is the only public evidence that it can be done at all."[75]

## Murdoch on Art

### (a) The Practice of Art as an Exercise in Morality

"A great artist is, in respect of his work, a good man."[76] Excellence in morals, and in art, for Murdoch, requires unselfish attention; that one "cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need."[77] And, just as fantasy obstructs excellence in morality, so too does it impede excellence in art.

"The talent of the artist," says Murdoch, "can be readily, and is naturally, employed to produce a picture whose purpose is the consolation and aggrandizement of its author and the projection of his personal obsessions and wishes."[78] In art one finds the clearest examples of the human propensity for fantasy-consolation: "We see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world." To attend to the world as it really is, "[t]o silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline."[79] Most art is, for Murdoch, consoling fantasy; only few artists manage a vision of the real. But, as Murdoch acknowledges, few artists *do*; and they, in their work, provide human beings with the clearest examples they have of what it is like to overcome fantasy and see reality, as well as present them with a true image of reality, the contemplation of which proves the most morally edifying of activities in which human beings can engage. Art, says Murdoch, is a place where "virtue plainly shines,"[80] it depicts reality "with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centered rush of ordinary life."[81] It presents a "truthful

image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated, and indeed," she continues, "it is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all."[82]

(b) Art as Educator and Revealer

"Good art," says Murdoch, "reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world... together with a sense of unity and form."[83] The form of successful art is the "simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe;"[84] that is, good art is the formal embodiment of the purposelessness, uncertainty and incompleteness of the world. Good art and nature—of which good art is, in its form, an honest representation as it appears to a refined vision—share, says Murdoch, in the "perfection of form," or "beauty," which human beings love instinctively. The form common to both good works of art as well as all natural objects, spontaneously and uniquely, "invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness."[85] Of the beauty in nature Murdoch says, "we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees."[86]

According to Murdoch, because good art and nature, in virtue of their purposeless form, attract the particular kind of "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention"[87] requisite for right vision, they are important for virtue; human beings learn,

from good art and from nature, how "real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used."[88]

Although nature and art, in their shared capacity for "unselfing," are both important for virtue, the experience of good art is especially morally instructive. Art, as Murdoch describes it, is particularly important for virtue, first, because it is a "human product." All great artists—Shakespeare, Cezanne, Tolstoy, Velasquez—are, in respect of their work, "brave, truthful, patient, [and] humble,"[89] and the experience of their work can afford human beings intuition of this, the artist's disciplined restraint against fantasy-consolation.

However, according to Murdoch, it is from the representational arts that there is the most to be learned about virtue. Among great works of representational art, which Murdoch describes to most "evidently hold the mirror up to nature,"[90] there are those that are about human affairs directly, and thus depict virtue specifically. These works, says Murdoch, "show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition. They show us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance."[91] That is, because such representational works depict *virtue* in the context of purposelessness that is their form, they are instructive not simply about the purposelessness of things generally, but about the sheer pointlessness of virtue specifically; that *virtue* is indeed for-its-own sake.

Moreover, good works of representational art, whether about human affairs or otherwise, can reveal the diverse character of appearances. In contrast to the familiar patterns of fantasy which human beings routinely project into the world—and from which bad art is born—the form of good art seems often mysterious to the observer. In virtue of

its human conception, i.e. that the objects represented in the work are real objects as they appear to a human vision, and of its mysteriousness, good artwork can teach human beings about the difficulty involved in seeing the world that confronts them, the value-rich world of human experience; "[g]ood art," says Murdoch, "shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision"[92]

Finally, and, says Murdoch, most importantly, by displaying its objects in a light of justice and pity, good art such as this reveals the connection "in *human* beings between clear realistic vision and compassion."[93] That the artist is motivated to depict his objects in such a light may serve as a clue for the spectator of the work that a major factor contributing to the lack of ethical action amongst human beings is the failure to see things clearly.

It is in virtue of owning *all* of these capacities that art is of unique and supreme importance for morality.

# Chapter 3

## Points of Contact

### False Perceptions

Since the dawn of Enlightenment, propelled by fear, human beings have sought to know nature in order to control it. With the championing of scientific rationality in intellectual life, says Adorno, and the eventual extension of its inherent values into areas of practical life via social institutions, means-ends, instrumental rationality comes to dominate the lives of human beings within modernity. According to Adorno, thinking within modernity is disproportionately instrumental.

Thinking that is predominately instrumental is not sufficiently rational to apprehend all aspects of reality, says Adorno. Instrumental rationality is a form of identity thinking which conceives of objects solely in terms of their location within an abstract universal scheme of fixed fundamental terms. As such, instrumental rationality thinks only those parts of nature, the concrete material world, that conform to its structure, and fails to apprehend particular realities within nature that are uniquely not identical with any concept. Anything which fails to conform to the workings of instrumental rationality, anything which does not meet the grade of repeatability, calculability, predictability, does not, according to instrumental rationality, warrant the status of an existent.

Nature thus appears to instrumental rationality as a unity of interconnected parts fully amenable to conceptualization within it. Human beings within modernity perceive

nature and its objects, not as they exist in their own material particularity, but as predominately something to be manipulated to serve human ends.

Like Adorno, Murdoch too insists that human beings are not truly seeing or experiencing the world they confront; however, unlike Adorno, who impugns the social and historical conditions of modernity for humanity's superficial treatment of nature, Murdoch does not ascribe to such behavior a social explanation. Rather, Murdoch attributes to human beings a natural tendency for projecting consoling, fantastical narratives onto their experience in order to make sufferable an existence that is otherwise overwhelmingly chancy and incomplete. Said otherwise, human beings have a natural propensity for averting their attention from the external and purposeless world and focusing instead upon the self.

According to Murdoch, because human beings focus mainly upon themselves, objects within their experience appear not as they are independent of human obsessions but rather as they exist relative to human needs and desires. Like Adorno, then, Murdoch characterizes human beings as failing to experience such objects as they are in their own right, in all their "complexity and detail,"[94] seeing or experiencing them instead as intermediary stuff potentially useful in satisfying their own ends.[95]

Adorno and Murdoch are further alike in that the obstacles each identify as impeding human beings' experience of the world are not easily surmounted. For Murdoch, the self-obstructed, fantastical view of the world she describes as natural to human beings is not easily overcome; according to Adorno, human beings under the conditions of modernity experience their objects through a "complex of illusion" that is not easily displaced.

As Murdoch describes it, one cannot simply upon awareness of one's failure to perceive objects objectively, i.e. without one's self intruding and obstructing one's view, readily see beyond one's self. For Murdoch, the quality of one's concepts determines the quality of one's perceptions, i.e. the degree to which one is able to suppress one's self and see the world as it really is. Since human beings attend mainly to themselves, the concepts of the virtues which they abstract from their various experiences with the world are largely self-involved, and thus permit, at best, a predominately selfish experience of "objects," whether other human individuals, states of affairs, natural objects,[96] etc. In order, therefore, to improve the way in which they apprehend their objects human beings' very concepts, each a reflective synthesis of particular multifarious experiences with the world and other human beings, according to which they organize their experience, must undergo change.

According to Adorno, humanity's awareness that its instrumental thinking is limited in terms of what lies within its conceptual grasp, and of its failure therefore to truly apprehend the individual objects of experience, is not sufficient to dispel so illusory a way of seeing or experiencing the world within modernity either. That is, one's recognition of instrumental rationality as but a way of interpreting the world amongst other ways is not enough to permit one any alternative experience. According to Adorno, any attempt to see beyond the confines of instrumental rationality is discouraged by modern social conditions. That is, with the reign of scientific rationality in intellectual life and social institutions ordered to make calculability, predictability, repeatability, and so on, the standard in their operations, survival within modernity demands a conforming to instrumental thinking. According to Adorno, human beings' experience of the world

within modernity is obstructed by a "complex of illusion" that, due to the instrumental-rationality-reinforcing social conditions of modernity, is virtually immovable.

## Ethics

### (a) Moral Realism

Not only do Adorno and Murdoch alike insist that human beings are not clearly perceiving the world they confront, they both credit the inability of human beings to clearly perceive their objects for the lack of true ethical action amongst them.

Both Adorno, according to J.M Bernstein,[97] and Murdoch, by her own admission,[98] subscribe to a moral realism which takes value, as distinct from fact, to be a part of the world as human beings experience it, and which indexes motivation for ethical action to the recognition of instances of value.

Before going on to discuss Adorno's and Murdoch's moral realism in more detail it is important to note of the value that is to be perceived within the world as human beings experience it, although it can be conceptually distinguished from its value-neutral counterparts, it cannot exist independently of matters of fact. That is, neither Adorno nor Murdoch conceive of any external or ultimate universal principles for human beings to discover and upon which to ground ethics: Adorno is seeking an ethics for a modern secular world and Murdoch for a world without purpose and recognized to be so.

According to Adorno, human beings acquire their ethical concepts from interaction with the concrete material world and with others. Human beings have, for Adorno, a psychology—albeit one thoroughly historically determined—which includes a spontaneous propensity to react to, for example, the deliberate infliction of harm onto others. Part of the acquisition of any ethical concept, e.g. in this case cruelty, is the acquisition of a particular determinate propensity, here normally a negative propensity, that the experience of any material instantiation of that concept—any material instantiation of cruelty—will provoke.

For Adorno, human beings experience the world within modernity primarily as it appears to the distortedly abstract universal scheme of instrumental rationality, that is, in such a way that any experience of objects in their own uniquely individual historical materiality is overwhelmingly blocked. Where human beings do not so intimately *experience* their objects, there is little opportunity for *recognition* of the material particularity in which the objects about them consist for which they have ethical concepts, nor of the unique singularities of experience of which those objects are also comprised that elude all subsumption under concepts but which the assiduous application of inevitably discrepant concepts can make increasingly discernable. Without the recognition of the material particularity/singularity which make up the individual objects which human beings encounter within their experience, there is nothing to motivate human beings to ethical action.

It is precisely because Adorno adheres to a moral realism whereby the mere recognition of the material particularity/singularity in which objects consist suffices to motivate human beings to ethical action, that the complex conceptuality to which he

aspires could further ethics. Recall, this complex conceptuality, as Bernstein describes it, consists not only of a mode of thought akin to instrumental rationality which identifies various particulars as belonging to the same general concept, but also of a supplementary particularistic kind of conceptuality whereby thought penetrates any superficial appearance of objects, and interrogates them in their very materiality. The particularistic dimension of Adorno's utopian thought makes possible the experience of the material particularity/singularity in which objects consist, necessary for any recognition of that material as subsumable under, or circumscribable by, general concepts, and for the motivation that such recognition permits. Were the ideal of the complex concept therefore realized in practice ethical meaningfulness and rational human agency would be restored.

For Murdoch too, there is value to be perceived within the world of human experience. And, human beings are able to perceive that value with varying degrees of sophistication. As Murdoch describes them, human beings have each an intuition of perfection which informs their experiences of the world, enabling them to detect degrees of hierarchy, or order, in value amongst objects. That is, in a world that is not simply composed of facts, but is altogether rich with value, human beings are able not only to discern gradations of, e.g. colour and size amongst their objects,[99] but to detect degrees of merit also. And, for Murdoch, it is precisely their respective intuitions of perfection that enable them to do so. According to Murdoch, it is one's intuition of perfection that affords one the ability to perceive e.g. acts of courage as distinct from and more perfect than acts of self-assertion.

The accuracy with which human beings are able to perceive their objects is, for Murdoch, a function of the quality of their concepts of the virtues, or of their normative-descriptive concepts more generally, which they acquire through various acts of careful attention to particular objects about them in their experience as well as to the variety of descriptions as regards those objects supplied by other human beings. According to Murdoch, the more accurate one's concepts, i.e. the more truly one's concepts represent the world, the better one's intuition of perfection, hence the better one's ability to perceive value within one's experience.

The realism to which Murdoch aspires for human beings well fits description as a moral realism because there are moments of value to be perceived within the world of human experience, which although distinguishable from mere matters of fact, are in fact inseparable from them; that is, again, there is no Form of courage for example. The term "moral realism" is, moreover, appropriate to describe the reality Murdoch seeks for human beings because, for Murdoch, like Adorno, it is the recognition of these moments of value within experience that moves human beings to ethical action.

That is, for Murdoch, a constitutive part of any ethical concept is its particular evaluative component, without an appreciation or understanding of which, according to Murdoch, the concept itself cannot be understood: one can understand the ethical terms other human beings use to describe objects, she says, only if one can to some extent share, or identify with, their respective evaluative points of view. Since every ethical concept is in part its normative component, the perception of particular experiential instances of concepts, which the concepts themselves permit, is sufficient to motivate human beings to action.

However, not all acts human beings are motivated to take are, according to Murdoch, morally justifiable. Human beings, says Murdoch, perceive in accordance with their concepts, and desire in accordance with their perceptions. Most human beings have ethical concepts, which enable them to perceive objects not as they exist in their own right, that is, as independently existing individual objects, but in relation to themselves; the actions they are motivated to take are therefore primarily self-serving.

According to Murdoch, only true ethical concepts can enable accurate perceptions, which alone can motivate human beings to true ethical action. And, according to Murdoch, the accurate perception of objects naturally motivates a compassionate response. That is, unlike Adorno, for whom the particular determinate reaction that the true recognition of the material instances of ethical concepts provokes is a function of socially inculcated norms, Murdoch describes human beings to be naturally compassionate beings such that any accurate conception of, e.g. cruelty, which enables the accurate perception of cruelty where it exists, is one that identifies it as undesirable and thus naturally motivates human beings to act in order to eradicate it.

(b) Singularities of Context

Given that both Adorno and Murdoch attribute the lack of ethical action amongst human beings to the failure of human beings to accurately perceive their objects, it is not surprising that each should recognize the individual, or singularity of context, as the most important area of focus for human beings as ethical beings.

According to Adorno, true ethical action ensues from the recognition of particular material instances of one's ethical concepts in the objects of one's experience, as well as from the recognition of the concept-elusive material singularities within those objects that call for an ethical response, made visible *ex negativo* by the invocation of certain select concepts. With the domination of instrumental rationality within modernity, human beings are everywhere encouraged to apprehend objects not as unique individuals in which to discover ethically motivating material particulars, but rather as mere exemplary instances of the more general concepts with which instrumental rationality operates, that is, in terms of their sheer instrumentality only. In order that there may be any hope of restoring ethics to modern secular society, human beings must learn to actively interrogate objects in all their materiality, despite being at seemingly every turn encouraged to do otherwise.

Whereas Adorno emphasizes the importance of singularity of context, for Murdoch, the emphasis is always upon overcoming selfish obsessions and desires which cloud human beings' perceptions of the real, and thereby preclude right action. The individual, which Murdoch describes as the central concept of morality, is the most important area of focus, for it is only by concentrating one's attention upon individual objects—again human individuals, natural objects, any act or state of affairs which has a value component—that the self can be overcome. According to Murdoch, human beings perceive their objects as their concepts dictate, and desire in accordance with their perceptions. True ethical action she says follows only from a right conception of the virtues; i.e. a conception informed by an accurate idea of the Good. For Murdoch, selfless attention toward real objects human beings encounter within their experience is rewarded

by an intuition of the Good. Thus, the better one's ability to perceive one's objects without self, the better one's ability to intuit the Good, and therefore to form accurate concepts of the virtues. And, the better one's concepts of the virtues, the better one's ability to perceive one's objects, and hence to be motivated to act ethically where such action is called for. Most human beings, according to Murdoch, submitting to their natural impulse to do so, attend mainly to themselves, and form concepts which enable them to perceive their objects not as they are in their own right, but rather as ancillary to their own needs, desires and obsessions. In order to improve their concepts of the virtues, which would enable them to accurately perceive their objects and hence motivate them to true ethical action, human beings must direct their attention outward toward individual objects of experience contrary to their natural inclination to focus inward on the self.

(c) The Importance of Art for Ethics

Artworks as individual objects of human experience invite just the kind of conceptual interrogation and selfless attention that Adorno and Murdoch, respectively, describe as essential to ethics.

According to Adorno, successful artworks, amongst which he includes, for example, the compositions of Schönberg, Kafka's *The Trial*, and Beckett's *Endgame*, demand of human beings the object-dependent conceptuality that he identifies as lacking under conditions of modernity. The successful work of art, according to Adorno, takes up and articulates the material particular that is uniquely not identical with any concept.

Specifically by articulating the non-identical, the successful artwork, as individual material object, or singularity of context, resists any immediate subsumption under instrumental rationality, and, for a time, subsists without purpose. Because successful works are not readily amenable to assimilation within one's conceptual scheme of instrumental rationality, any understanding or comprehension of the work requires one's actively engaging in questioning with the artwork, trying out various concepts in search of those that best describe the non-identical contained in the work, and hence the work itself.

For Murdoch, the universe is self-contained and purposeless, and great art, in its form, is a "simulation" of that aimlessness. The natural world and great works of art both, in virtue of their purposelessness, naturally attract the objective, i.e. selfless attention that Murdoch deems prerequisite for attaining an accurate conception of the virtues necessary for right vision and true ethical action.

According to Murdoch and Adorno both, then, it is in virtue of their purposeless character that successful or great works of art can teach human beings how rightly to regard their objects. It is also owing to their form that Adorno and Murdoch see artworks as further able to teach about moral value.

Artworks, for Adorno, by articulating the non-identical, become temporarily resistant to treatment by instrumental rationality, and thereby claim to be not merely valuable for-society, but to be valuable in- and for-themselves. That is, by failing to qualify as "socially useful," and "merely existing" instead, artworks can be seen to defy the notion that all value is instrumental.

For Murdoch, attention to natural objects and to great works of art alike, can teach human beings about the purposelessness of the world about them, arguably from which they may infer the purposelessness of virtue.[100] However, great works of art in particular have more to teach about virtue specifically. According to Murdoch, all great works of art require discipline of the artists who create them; recall that "[t]he good artist, in relation to his art, is brave, truthful, patient, humble."[101] And, human beings who properly attend to such art can gain insight into these virtuous qualities.

Moreover, great works of literature and painting that deal with human affairs directly, in so doing depict "virtue in its true guise"[102] and thereby demonstrate the absolute pointlessness of virtue specifically. That is, unlike works that teach about the purposelessness of things generally from which one may infer the purposelessness of virtue, by depicting one or more of the virtues in a context of purposelessness, such representational works as these can teach that the virtues are for-nothing, that virtue is indeed, for-its-own-sake.

Murdoch describes the representational arts generally to teach about the difficulty involved in being objective. According to Murdoch, because representational works depict real objects of experience as they appear to an artist's refined vision, they appear to their spectators often strange and unfamiliar. Should one come to recognize such an artwork as an accurate representation of real objects of experience, one may see also that is it difficult to be objective, and thus that when it comes to the world one confronts, one may not be perceiving all that one might. On this point, Murdoch is similar to Adorno who describes successful artworks to, by articulating the non-identical, show human beings who think predominately with instrumental rationality that there exist realities

with which their thinking cannot cope. Both Adorno and Murdoch, perceive art as a clue that there is more to the objects of human experience than human beings' conceptual capacities habitually permit to be seen.

In fact, for Murdoch, such representational art can serve not only as a clue to human beings that they do not always perceive their objects clearly, but moreover, that a failing to see clearly may have ethical consequences. The artist's realism, says Murdoch, is "the realism of compassion."[103] That the artist, who attends so scrupulously to the world as to capture even its minutest and random detail, should portray his objects in a compassionate light may afford human beings the realization that the lack of ethical action amongst them may stem at least in part from a failure to clearly perceive.

It is important to note that Murdoch describes representational art to be especially morally relevant—"the representational arts," she says, "...seem to be concerned with morality in a way which is not simply an effect of our intuition of the artist's discipline"[104]—placing particular emphasis upon those that take human affairs as their subject matter, or as she is at times even more specific still, those that deal with death and chance in particular: "[i]t is the role of tragedy and also of comedy and of painting to show us suffering without a thrill and death without a consolation."[105] These works communicate the pointlessness of human life most directly. And, for Murdoch, a genuine sense of absolute mortality enables human beings to see virtue not merely as for-nothing, but as the only thing of any real import.[106] It is also important however to recognize that despite highlighting the moral significance of representational art, Murdoch does not restrict great art to representational art. In the context of comparing the moral import of great art with that of nature, she says, "One may also suggest, more cautiously, that non-

representational art does seem to express more positively something which is to do with virtue. The spiritual role of music has often been acknowledged, though theorists have been chary of analyzing it."[107] That Murdoch does not restrict great art to the representational arts which she describes to be especially important for morality, suggests that she is aware that so restricting the content of great art would be to attribute to art the explicit role of teaching about virtue; and that this would contradict the purposeless character of art.

Adorno, by contrast, in no way privileges the representational arts. For him, artworks that, for example, portray virtue specifically are not in so doing any more morally edifying than those that do not; and many of Adorno's discussions about successful art in fact invoke examples from music. That Adorno does not see representational art to be particularly morally relevant is not, however, to suggest that content is altogether unrelated to an artwork's success and hence moral significance. For Adorno, the success of any artwork turns upon its forming its contents in such a way as not to oppress any of the concrete historical material taken up in the work, *as well as* upon its remaining representationally true to reality. Indeed, according to Adorno, it is only by articulating the non-identical which instrumental rationality denies that artworks become representative of the immense suffering that everywhere pervades modernity. And, it is only by not lying about reality that artworks can be in their form the non-violent togetherness of the manifold to which they mold themselves. Thus, any work that, for example, depicts paradise, because it neglects suffering, must necessarily fail in its form. For Adorno, such works are kitsch, and, like Murdoch's fantasy art, mere consolation.[108]

## Art

The similarities that exist between Adorno and Murdoch on the subject of the importance of art for ethics can further be seen through a comparison of Adorno's absolute and Murdoch's Good.

### (a) The Absolute

In order for any successful artwork to afford human beings the realization that thought which is predominately instrumental is not all-encompassing of reality, it must go beyond the world as it appears to instrumental rationality and permit, however faint or fleeting, the experience of something more. Recall that for Adorno, any successful work of art, by virtue of its having taken up particular historical concrete materials—e.g. paint, canvas, particular historical objects as subject matter, etc.—and having formed them in such a way as to articulate rather than obliterate the non-identical, is—as the non-violent togetherness of the particularity taken up in the work—a particular image of the world in a state of reconciliation.[109]

These "weak traces of a nonillusory absolute" that any successful artwork contains as its truth content communicate to aesthetic experience which, however, does not understand what it experiences. It is in order to save this "non-discursive" truth for human thought, i.e. to inform aesthetic experience about its experience, that Adorno sees the conceptual instruments of philosophy to be so indispensable.

According to Adorno, one can at best "glimpse" these traces of the "non-existing" absolute contained within the artwork, and for this the utmost concentration of philosophical reflection in combination with aesthetic experience is necessary. It is in the *aporetic* relationship of art and philosophy that the absolute can be seen to arise in the artwork as though into existence, that is, "as if it did exist," before "[i]ts claim to existence flickers out in aesthetic semblance."[110]

Recall also, however, that since philosophy is limited to the use of concepts which articulate only those things that are seen to be common amongst objects, the non-identical, i.e. non-conceptual, truth the artwork possesses perpetually eludes philosophical thought. Philosophy can describe the absolute, or "affirmative ineffable," only negatively, that is by articulating what it is not. One's experience of the absolute thus ultimately enables one to recognize particular aspects of the world as it exists under conditions of modernity that contrast with, or fall short of, the "utopian" ideal.

(b) The Good

As discussed in the section the "Importance of Art for Ethics," according to Murdoch, great works of representational art, as honest depictions of real objects, because they appear mysterious to the observer, can teach about the difficulty in seeing things objectively. Just as successful works of art as Adorno describes them must give way to the experience of something "more" if they are to show thought that is predominately instrumental to be limited or biased in terms of what realities lie within its

conceptual grasp, so must great works of representational art, for Murdoch, if they are to teach about the imperfection of perceptions, permit human beings the insight that "there is more than this."

In order for one to recognize the particular objects that appear unfamiliar in any great work of representational art to be in fact more accurately represented there than in accordance with one's own conceptual scheme, that is to recognize the artwork as a more perfect representation of its objects than one ordinarily represents those objects to oneself, one must receive insight into something more, an intuition of perfection or of the Good, against which to measure both the objects portrayed within the work as well as one's own conceptual representations of them.

In fact, for Murdoch, "[a]n understanding of any art [representational or otherwise] involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority,"[111] that is, an awareness of, or attunement to, order and perfection. In order to appreciate the beauty of any great artwork, or the patience or humbleness the artist must have had to demonstrate in creating the work, one must have an intuition of perfection, and of the direction in which it lies, informing one's concepts of beauty, patience or humility respectively, enabling one to recognize the qualities reflected in the work to approximate that perfection. And, any artwork in virtue of its capacity for attracting unselfish attention, can afford human beings such insight.

The Good moreover parallels the absolute in that it is in its light that one is able to see various aspects of the world as precisely *less* than perfect. That is, similar to the way in which the experience of the absolute to which successful artworks for Adorno give way shows aspects of the world as it currently exists to be in contrast with the "utopian"

ideal, the intuition of the Good that Murdoch describes human beings to receive in return for selfless attention, informs their concepts and hence their perceptions, enabling them to recognize the varying degrees to which the objects they experience approximate—though never equal—that perfection so conceived.

Furthermore, just as Adorno describes the traces of the absolute to appear only very fleetingly in successful works of art, the intuition of the Good which Murdoch describes great works of art to afford human beings with discipline enough to suppress their selfish impulses and see the virtue therein contained, remains but "a very tiny spark of insight."[112]

Finally, similar to the absolute to which successful artworks allude for Adorno, the Good, as Murdoch describes it, has no definite existence. The "there is more than this" has "metaphysical position but no metaphysical form."[113] The Good for Murdoch is a metaphor for the human capacity to see objects within their experience always more clearly, and to act, in accordance with their increasingly more perfect perceptions, ever more compassionately.

The intuition of the Good, then, or of perfection, which human beings receive in return for selfless vision, enables them to see the virtue that any great representational work of art depicts, or that any great artwork, representational or not, reflects, to more closely approximate that perfection than one's own concepts. As more perfect representations/reflections of the virtues, great works of art can thereby alert human beings to their own perceptual shortcomings as well as improve their concepts of the virtues. And, with improved conceptions of the virtues, human beings have an enhanced

ability to perceive value where it exists, and hence an increased capacity for ethical response where ethical response is called for.

Similarly, the experience of the trace elements of the absolute that Adorno describes any successful work of art to articulate, can afford human beings the recognition that their thinking is not all-encompassing of reality; that one is not perceiving all that there is. And, although art, as Adorno describes it, does not have the capacity for improving human beings' concepts of the virtues, and hence their ability to perceive, as it does for Murdoch, cultivation in aesthetics can nevertheless influence human beings' dispositions toward their objects. By inviting the particularistic kind of conceptuality Bernstein describes as necessary for the restoration of ethics, and indicating to human beings that there is more to the objects of their experience than they ordinarily perceive, art has the capacity to enhance human beings' sensitivity to particularity and thereby expand consciousness and moral insight.

**Closing Remarks**

Although Adorno and Murdoch are rarely considered to have much in common, their respective positions concerning the importance of art for ethics in fact overlap significantly. To begin with, both Adorno and Murdoch recognize a current lack of ethical action amongst human beings, and both aspire to restore ethics to humanity. They are similar also in that neither is willing to appeal to any ultimate universal moral principles upon which to ground ethics. Instead, each holds to a moral realism: for both,

value is a real object of human perception, and the perception, i.e. conceptual recognition, of instantiations of value suffices to motivate human beings to ethical response. Adorno and Murdoch are further similar in that it is to a failure on behalf of human beings to clearly perceive their objects that they attribute the ethical deficiency which they observe; both share the belief that human beings do not truly see the world that confronts them, but experience illusion or fantasy instead.

In contrast to moral theories which call for the application of universal rules on to particular situations, for Adorno and Murdoch alike attention to singularities of context is of the utmost importance. They are moreover alike in that both recognize great or successful artworks, as individual objects, to be of unique importance for ethics, in virtue of their capacities to attract the kind of attention or "object-dependent conceptuality" Murdoch and Adorno respectively describe as necessary for ethics, to teach about moral value, and to alert human beings to their perceptual failings.

Finally, there are significant points of contact between the absolute to which Adorno describes successful artworks to give way, and the Good which, for Murdoch, selfless attention of the kind great artworks invite affords human beings insight. Any experience of the Good or of the absolute is difficult, demanding disciplined attention and the utmost concentration respectively, and even when such effort is expended, each appears only as a spark. Yet it is in this ephemeral light that imperfections of the world that call out for ethical response become visible.

# Notes

## Introduction

[1] J. M. Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 10.
[2] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 97.

## Chapter 1: Adorno

[3] I will rely quite heavily on J.M. Bernstein's *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) for my understanding of Adorno.
[4] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments,* ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1
[5] Ibid., 6
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 1
[8] Ibid., 11
[9] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 25.
[10] Horkheimer and Adorno, 3.
[11] Ibid., 4.
[12] The following characterization of the ethical dilemma of modernity is based upon Nietzsche's nihilism as Bernstein presents it in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 4f.
[13] Ibid., 5.
[14] Ibid., 5f.
[15] Ibid., 18.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot Kentor. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 231.
[19] Ibid., 232.
[20] Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 7.
[21] Albrecht Wellmer. *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity Essays and Lectures*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 156.
[22] Ibid., 164.
[23] Ibid., 156.
[24] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 245.
[25] Ibid., 258.
[26] Wellmer, *Endgames*, 157.
[27] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 233.
[28] Bernstein, *Adorno*, 31.
[29] Ibid., 34.
[30] Ibid., 33.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 308ff.
[33] According to Adorno, the habitual application of concepts can proceed almost automatically, without, that is, calling upon intransitive understanding. Transitive understanding can therefore operate on the assumption that all meaning is transitive meaning, and moreover, that it is instrumentally useful for it to be

so, and is hence desirable. There is thus a tendency implicit in transitive understanding to forget the experience of concept acquisition, suppressing the role of intransitive meaning in transitive understanding. This, of course, leads to identity thinking.

[34] Bernstein, *Adorno*, 318

[35] The following example is provided by Bernstein, *Adorno*, 318f.

[36] Ibid., 319.

[37] Ibid., 310f.

[38] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 239.

## Chapter 2: Murdoch

[39] Murdoch, 77.

[40] Ibid., 69.

[41] Ibid., 62.

[42] Ibid., 76f.

[43] Ibid., 59.

[44] Ibid., 39.

[45] Ibid., 32.

[46] Ibid., 28.

[47] Ibid., 29.

[48] Ibid., 60.

[49] Ibid., 71.

[50] Ibid., 91.

[51] Ibid., 60.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 56.

[54] Ibid., 40.

[55] Ibid., 57.

[56] Ibid., 89.

[57] Ibid., 85.

[58] Ibid., 64.

[59] Ibid., 69.

[60] Ibid., 92.

[61] Ibid., 65.

[62] Ibid., 90.

[63] Ibid., 62.

[64] Ibid., 71.

[65] Ibid., 72.

[66] Ibid., 73.

[67] Ibid., 32.

[68] Ibid., 36.

[69] Ibid., 93.

[70] Ibid., 37.

[71] Ibid., 87.

[72] Ibid., 97.

[73] Ibid., 91.

[74] Ibid., 97.

[75] Ibid., 71.

[76] Ibid., 63.

[77] Ibid., 58.

[78] Ibid., 63.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid., 97.
[81] Ibid., 64.
[82] Ibid., 84f.
[83] Ibid., 84.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 83.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., 64.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 84.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., 85.

## Chapter 3: Points of Contact

[94] Ibid., 93.
[95] Cf. "...[H]uman consciousness is prone to distort the world egotistically and, thereby, to see the world through prejudices, illusions and fantasies that accord with our own unrealistic evaluations of ourselves." Franklin I. Gamwell, "On the Loss of Theism," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 174f.
[96] "The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person." Murdoch, 68.
[97] Bernstein, *Adorno*, 35.
[98] "...[M]orality, goodness, is a form of realism." Murdoch, 57.
[99] For Murdoch, infinite perfectibility is a characteristic of normative-descriptive concepts specifically. However, she does make the suggestion that endless perfection might be a property of all concepts, though she does not argue the point: "Why not consider red as an ideal end point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual object of love? A painter might say that you don't know what "red" means.' This would be... to bring the idea of value, which has been driven by science and logic into a corner, back to cover the whole field of knowledge. But this would be part of a different argument and is not my concern here. Perhaps all concepts could be considered this way: all I am now arguing is that some concepts must be." Murdoch, 29.
[100] That human beings should make this inference, however, is not necessary, for, says Murdoch, "It is so patently a good thing to take delight in flowers and animals that people who bring home potted plants and watch kestrels might even be surprised at the notion that these things have anything to do with virtue." Murdoch, 83.
[101] Ibid., 84.
[102] Ibid., 86.
[103] Ibid., 65.
[104] Ibid., 84.
[105] Ibid., 85.
[106] Ibid., 96.
[107] Ibid., 84.
[108] "If we wished to separate analytically the elements which are dialectically connected in Adorno's thinking, then we might distinguish $truth_1$, as aesthetic rightness or validity (*Stimmigkeit*), from $truth_2$, as representational truth. The unity of these two moments would then mean that it is only by virtue of aesthetic synthesis ($truth_1$) that art can represent cognition of reality ($truth_2$), and conversely that aesthetic synthesis ($truth_1$) can only succeed if it helps to make reality ($truth_2$) manifest." Wellmer, *Persistence*, 8f.
[109] It is thus that aphorism 153 of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* should be understood: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world

by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light." Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1999), 247.

[110] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 233.

[111] Murdoch, 85, 86.

[112] Ibid., 71.

[113] Ibid.

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