

SIMONE WEIL
A Study in Moral Psychology
and Observations on Religious Life

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ABSTRACT

Simone Weil: A Study in Moral Psychology and Observations on Religious Life

John Kerkhoven

At the heart of this thesis is the work of Simone Weil; at its centre is a critique of Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*. Murdoch was greatly inspired by Simone Weil and also wrote in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon philosophy; a thorough critique of her book therefore provides an opportunity to discuss critical concepts in Weil's work in a context meaningful to philosophers in the analytic tradition. I demonstrate the *prima facie* implausibility of Murdoch's portrayal of a moral agent as a psychologically isolated rather than socially situated human being; I then critique her views by appealing both to psychological evidence and to insights owing to linguistic philosophy. I show, in contrast, that on Weil's conception humans are socially and politically situated thinking beings endowed with a faculty of attention and capable of consent. I further show how Weil's view of human relationships acknowledges the harm and isolation that people can experience, and only experience, as social beings, and which are constitutive of the phenomenon that she calls "affliction". As an experience of the lack of a referring context, affliction cannot be either acknowledged or named. The insight of linguistic philosophy that meaning is tied to context proves helpful to understanding this. Finally, I extend the notion of context beyond the social and argue for a four-stage schematism in the thought of Simone Weil; this schematism begins with the individual, passes on to the social world, then to the natural world viewed as necessity, and then to God.

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KEY TO BOOKS BY SIMONE WEIL

FLN	<i>First and Last Notebooks</i>
FW	<i>Formative Writings 1929-1941</i>
GG	<i>Gravity and Grace</i>
LP	<i>Letter to a Priest</i>
NR	<i>The Need for Roots</i>
OL	<i>Oppression and Liberty</i>
SL	<i>Seventy Letters</i>
SNLG	<i>On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God</i>
SWA	<i>Simone Weil: and Anthology</i>
WG	<i>Waiting for God</i>

INTRODUCTION

Simone Weil is perhaps best known for her religious writing, as collected in *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*. As soon, however, as one steps beyond these books and encounters her political essays, social studies, reflections on history and science, her daily journal from the time she worked in factories, her correspondence, her notebooks, and *The Need for Roots* – the book-length document that she prepared for the Free French Government in Exile in London during World War Two as an outline for the social reconstruction of France after the war – one is struck by Weil’s erudition and her breadth and depth of concern. One is also liable to be struck by the combination, especially in some of her later essays, of moral, philosophical, political, social, and religious themes. For Weil, these are all aspects of the same central subject: the human being in his social and natural setting, bound to die, and born to participate in the love of God. It is part of the burden of this thesis to shed light on this vision. I begin with the following outline of her thought.

From the time she began writing, Weil was concerned with both the plight of the oppressed as well as the conditions of their oppression. She took her cue from Marx whose genius, in her estimation, consisted in studying and analyzing society as a natural phenomenon in which forces are at play, much as a natural scientist would study matter and the workings of material forces.¹ Weil adds to this, among other things, an analysis of

¹ Writing in 1942 or 1943, she says that “Marx was the first and, unless I am mistaken, the only one – for his researches were not followed up – to have the twin idea of taking society as the fundamental human fact and of studying therein, as the physicist does in matter, the relationships of force.

Here we have an idea of genius, in the full sense of the word. It is not a doctrine; it is an instrument of study, research, exploration and possibly construction for every doctrine that is not to risk crumbling to dust on contact with a truth.” (OL, 162)

liberty in terms of the relationship of thought to action.² From an initial concern with each person's ability to be the author of her own actions, Weil came to hold that the power of thought and of reflection was, furthermore, the seat of each person's dignity, and of justice in the sense of preserving others from harm.³ As she expresses it, our concern for our fellow humans is at its best a concern that each have the capacity to consent to the circumstances which befall her, and of which she forms a part. Where this is impossible because a person is so thoroughly constrained by her circumstances, as, for instance, the person forced to work long hours for subsistence pay, that she cannot begin to determine the course of her own activities, and in the furthest extreme, which Weil calls "affliction," a state of utter wretchedness and social degradation in which, in the eyes of those around her, a person does not even count, another may yet consent to her conditions on her behalf. "Whatever a man may want," Weil says,

... the essence of his desire always consists in this, that he wants above all things to be able to exercise his will freely. To wish for the existence of this free consent in another, deprived of it by affliction, is to transport oneself into him; it is to consent to affliction oneself, that is to say to the destruction of oneself. It is to deny oneself. (WG, 147-48)

It is at this point that Weil's work is inescapably religious. Continuing her thought, she says:

² "True liberty," she writes, "is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action...." (OL, 81) In the same context, she writes that "every judgment bears upon an objective set of circumstances, and consequently upon a warp and woof of necessities. Living man can on no account cease to be hemmed in on all sides by an absolutely inflexible necessity; but since he is a thinking creature, he can choose between either blindly submitting to the spur with which necessity pricks him on from outside, or else adapting himself to the mere representation of it that he forms in his own mind; and it is in this that the contrast between servitude and liberty lies." (*ibid.*) Similarly, she says: "It is true that we can never act with absolute certainty; but that does not matter so much as one might suppose. We can easily accept the fact that the results of our actions are dependent on accidents outside our control; what we must at all costs preserve from chance are our actions themselves, and that in such a way as to place them under the control of the mind." (OL, 83)

³ "The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence." (SWA, 173)

In denying oneself, one becomes capable under God of establishing someone else by a creative affirmation. One gives oneself in ransom for the other. It is a redemptive act. (*ibid.*)

Through what she described as her own contact with affliction, Weil discovered conditions not merely suitable to, but, by her own account, requisite of, religious expression. Moreover, her religious thought, far from supplanting her previous concerns and her critical thought, recast these in a new light.

With this outline, the essential elements of Simone Weil's thought are in play where this thesis is concerned. I will elaborate on this sketch in the pages that follow, and in the final part of this work, situate the progression in Weil's thought that I have just outlined in terms of a four-stage schematism which I propose as a new contribution to the reading of Weil. In addition, I intend by this thesis to extend Weil's thought, to carry on with the work she began, and to do so in ways that make connections with more contemporary thought and, more specifically, with recent Anglo-Saxon philosophy. In this thesis, then, I also offer a treatment of psychological and religious themes in a way that is intended to be relevant to philosophy and, I think it is not pleonastic to say, to philosophers.

At the heart of this thesis is the thought of Simone Weil; at the centre of it, however, is a study of Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*. The rationale for this is as follows. First, Murdoch was greatly influenced by, and openly acknowledged her debt to Weil; and second, Murdoch wrote the three essays in *The Sovereignty of Good* to challenge the dominant views of analytic moral philosophy of the mid-century. A study of this book, then, provides a point of reference for understanding Weil's thought, and it allows us to see how one author critiques, from a perspective inspired by Weil, moral philosophy from the analytic tradition.

In part one of this thesis, I present and juxtapose the views of both authors. The dominant themes in Murdoch's moral philosophy are that vision is central to morality,

that it is clouded by selfishness, that several techniques exist for overcoming selfishness (or defeating the ego, as she puts it), and that, where morals are concerned, art is foremost among these techniques, because art, especially literature, often represents moral life itself. Furthermore, if we attend well to the world around us, Murdoch believes, then our actions will, in measure, be right actions. Her outlook is pessimistic, though, because vision, she believes, forever falls short of apprehending reality, and, as she further believes, though we strive for good in its perfection, this is not either attainable. This pessimistic view is only underlined by her adoption of a loosely Freudian image of the self as that entity whose selfishness needs to be overcome. The view that emerges is that the moral agent is someone whose clear vision of the world, to say nothing of whose contact with the world, is continually, if not continuously, frustrated.

In the course of the discussion, I introduce notions that Murdoch borrows from Weil, particularly the concepts of attention and obedience, and show how differently these function in the thoughts of each writer. Murdoch does not show an appreciation for the versatility these concepts have for Weil, or for the careful and consistent way in which Weil uses them. There is a similar point of contact and difference between the authors in their appreciation of the ability of some artists to represent human misery truthfully. In Murdoch's exposition, this is presented as an impressive fact, but never developed. Weil, on the other hand, is able to tell us important things about such representation. I conclude part one by showing that, whereas Murdoch is preoccupied with the moral agent's vision and the impediments to vision, Weil writes about and within a world of social and political realities. More generally, Weil holds up an image of the human being taking his place in the social, political, and material world as a person who thinks, quite possibly one who engages in physical work, and as someone who certainly suffers, and who may

respond to the suffering of others, and at all events, may acknowledge their capacity for consent and their own proper ability to attend to the world that surrounds them.

In part two, Weil remains, for the most part, in the background while I critique Murdoch on her own terms. I take a more careful look at the view of morality that Murdoch presents us with, highlighting its positive contribution that moral deliberation is as much a matter of the attention a person brings to her ongoing situations as it is a matter of explicit choice. This is as far as Murdoch gets, however, for what one does is still a matter of concern to moral philosophy and she is unable to broach this. The sum of my arguments in this part of my thesis is that Murdoch has no account of human relationships, and no account of social life; consequently, she has at best only a partial account of morality. I make these points in a number of ways, including reference to Murdoch's own examples of moral situations. To begin with, her examples are curiously at odds with her exposition. When Murdoch offers examples of moral conflict, the ongoing attention to the detail of daily life that she would have us believe is so important to morality is not developed; and oddly enough, the moral agents in her examples are solitary agents facing down a consequential choice – rather like the moral agents described by her contemporaries, with whom she takes so much issue. The only elaborated example in Murdoch's book – the fairly well-known case of M, a mother-in-law, and D, her daughter-in-law – is deliberately designed to challenge the views of morality of her contemporaries who portray the moral agent as a solitary and rational person whose moral life is largely characterized by his public acts and his moments of choice. In this view of her philosophical adversaries, Murdoch sees the elimination of the realm of the private from moral concern, and sees *that* as derivative of linguistic philosophy's elimination of the private as anything verifiable. She argues that moral concepts are importantly different from other concepts because they are learnt in the context of an individual's personal history. Moral concepts,

and more generally, mental state terms, are importantly different from other concepts, but not in the way that Murdoch thinks. They are different because the context that gives them their meaning is social context itself. As it happens, Murdoch's example contains within itself precisely the reference to the social world that makes the situation she describes intelligible; only she does not give these features of her thought experiment any particular theoretical status. Unable to situate the meaning of mental concepts in specifically social situations, Murdoch retreats to the suggestion of a substantial (again Freudian) self, thereby impugning, at one and the same time, the results of linguistic philosophy and her own moral vision. Finally, I address some of Murdoch's thoughts on religion. Murdoch tries to identify religion, and more specifically, mysticism, with morality, but the identification is far too strong and instead of buoying up her other thoughts, it tends only to weigh them down.

In part three, I return to Weil and the moral problem that Murdoch has left unaddressed, i.e. the problem of right action, related to which are the matters of responsibility and blame. I aim to show that Weil has the resources to address these issues, and, moreover, that her understanding of relationships, rooted in the capacity each person has for consent, and in the fact that each person has a faculty of attention, not only of itself provides an account of human dignity, but further accounts for the isolation and harm that people sometimes suffer owing specifically to the social situation of which they are a part. Thus I focus on a constitutive aspect of the phenomenon that Weil calls "affliction". Affliction is an experience that, insofar as it exists, can neither be named nor acknowledged because it is the experience of the lack of a referring context. Just as words require a context to have meaning, so too do our experiences require a context in order to have meaning. When circumstances are such that the social context of which they are a part is unable to provide the resources to acknowledge some aspect

or another of a person's experience, that person either has to live with a silence that is in proportion to the unacknowledged dimension of her experience, or she must find an external context in order to shed light on what her experience is and has been. I exemplify situations of this kind with reference to E. M. Forster's *Maurice*.

It is here that the notion of "moral psychology" plays its part in my thesis. As I argue early in this part of my thesis, to be a moral agent is to be blameworthy, not only on a given occasion, but generally. If we accept that, then being moral is part of what it is to be a social being, and a part of what it is to have dignity. Following Weil, though we may rely on our own intuitions here, human dignity concerns as well, and among other things, the ability a person has to think and feel and be able to express herself. It becomes clear that a person has dignity or falls away from it on all fronts at once. Insofar as the structural features of a situation may strip a person of dignity, it will do so in ways that are tied to her status as a moral agent, and it thus becomes important that social context be a part of the meaning of "moral psychology". Put another way, my claim is that it is only in the context of a world of shared and mutually recognized human purposes that we can exist as moral agents. Thus, it is crucial that we be able to register the structural features of our social lives if we are to talk of morality. It is furthermore the case that we must refer to the structural features of our social lives if we are to talk of moral psychology. I intend, therefore, to displace Murdoch's use of the term "moral psychology", on which morality is understood in relation to a loosely Freudian conception of psychological mechanisms, with my own use of the term, on which morality and psychology are both understood in relation to social contexts.⁴

⁴ With my emphasis on the social, I cannot imagine any other use of the term "moral psychology". If someone were to discuss the neurological conditions that are correlated with moral deliberation, for instance, "moral psychology" would be a bad term to use. Something like "the neurological correlates to moral behaviour," would, I think, be better. (One might propose "the biological basis of morality", but this has a reductionistic cast to it that I think is best avoided.)

I approach by degrees Weil's account of affliction which is a severely adverse physical, psychological, and social condition which a person may not have the resources to help herself out of. As I emphasize the structural features of social situations, so too does Weil emphasize the structures that give rise to oppression. She goes so far as to say that

The notion of oppression is ... a stupidity: one only has to read the *Iliad*. And the notion of an oppressive class is even more stupid. We can only speak of an oppressive structure of society. (GG, 156)

In some respects, the worst tyrant or dictator knows the evil that he commits. Oppressors are not altogether blind, nor is oppression altogether accidental. The following, from her essay on the *Iliad*, helps to make clear what Weil means.

We see Achilles cut the throats of twelve Trojan boys on the funeral pyre of Patroclus as naturally as we cut flowers for a grave. These men, wielding power, have no suspicion of the fact that the consequences of their deeds will at length come home to them – they too will bow the neck in their turn. (SWA, 174)

When Simone Weil says that “we can only speak of an oppressive structure of society”, she is deliberately avoiding the all-too simple deception that there is some person or group of persons who could put an end to oppression, and that for two reasons which are closely bound up with each other. One is that no one understands sufficiently the nature of oppression (to say nothing of the nature of peace⁵), the other is that society being what it is, there is nothing stopping those who are oppressed from becoming oppressors in turn. Furthermore, the words “oppressed” and “oppressor” do not divide the social world into two neat and tidy categories. In a late essay, “Is There a Marxist Doctrine?”, Weil observes that

The selfsame men are oppressed in certain respects, oppressors in certain other respects; or again may desire to become so, and this desire can override the desire

⁵ Weil writes near the end of her essay “The Power of Words”: “Once all the real data of a problem have been revealed the problem is well on the way to solution. The problem of peace, both international and social, has never yet been completely stated.” (SWA, 237)

for liberty; and the oppressors, for their part, think far less often about keeping those under them obedient than of getting the better of their equals. Thus there is not the counterpart of a battle with two sides opposing each other, but rather an extraordinarily complicated tangle of guerilla forces. (OL, 179)

She concludes this thought with a typically empirical consideration: “This tangle is nevertheless governed by laws. But they remain to be discovered.” (*ibid.*) I see in the attention I bring to the structural features of personal relationships a continuation of Weil’s work in this direction.

Part of the overwhelming difficulty that exists for people who suffer for social reasons of any sort is to recognize the structures of the oppressive relationships that are operative in their lives – be they relationships to other individuals, to groups, to institutions, or to yet other social structures. “Conscience,” Weil says, “is deceived by the social. Our supplementary energy” – by which she means the “energy which a man directs as he pleases towards what he thinks good for himself”⁶ (FLN, 221) –

... is to a great extent taken up with the social. It has to be detached from it. That is the most difficult of detachments.

Meditation on the social mechanism is in this respect a purification of the first importance.

To contemplate the social is as good a way of detachment as to retire from the world. ... (GG, 166)

She speaks here of a purification that can enable a person to bear the suffering that might come her way, though it is a mistake to read prudence into this as it has everything to do, for Weil, with the discipline of one whose attention is directed to God. The hard truth that lies in this thought is that those who do not suffer from their social circumstances, or who suffer little, will have, in measure, little understanding of the conditions of those who do suffer, and who may suffer greatly; they will also be ill-disposed to detach themselves from the social precisely because they are at home in the social circumstances that they

⁶ Weil contrasts ‘supplementary energy’ with ‘vegetative energy’ which is the energy “by which the chemicobiological mechanisms necessary for life are maintained”. (FLN, 220)

know, like a chick in its nest, altogether unaware that one day it must learn to fly. One may take or leave the metaphor – Weil uses the metaphor of a chick in its egg, which must one day crack the shell – but the fact is that those who have the greatest strength and the most resources to help the afflicted are often as not those who are most removed from their condition and most unlikely to come to know it. For their part, the afflicted are so rarely able to begin the process of understanding that would free them from their condition. The metaphors I just introduced of the chick in its nest, or Weil’s of the chick in its egg, seem less quaint when applied to the afflicted for whom liberation is to see and to love their situation as it is, which is, in Weil’s terms, to love the order of the world.

What follows from all of these considerations is that it remains possible, sometimes, for a person both to suffer and to contemplate affliction, to see the social nature of one’s suffering and how it deprives one of participation in the social. One finds oneself then to be a bit of matter in the universe with the exception that one is conscious. Consent, which is so important for Weil in a social context, now may be expressed towards the universe itself. At which point, if Weil has any say in the matter, one is very near to God.⁷

I conclude my thesis with the proposal of a schematism for understanding Weil’s thought. To my knowledge, no one has proposed this schematism, and nothing anyone has said contradicts it. It is a four stage sequence of awareness. Which level of awareness one is at determines if and how the other levels are viewed. The passage from one level to the next may be understood as the emergence from one context or frame of reference to another one that encompasses the previous ones, and from which the previous ones are re-evaluated and the next level of awareness (obviously ascending no further than the

⁷ “If the soul is set in the direction of love, the more we contemplate necessity, the more closely we press its metallic cold and hardness directly to our very flesh, the nearer we approach to the beauty of the world. That is what Job experienced. It was because he was so honest in his suffering, because he would not entertain any thought that might impair its truth, that God came down to reveal the beauty of the world to him.” (WG, 177)

fourth level) is seen. The four points on this path are: the individual, society, the universe viewed as necessity, and God.

I intend for this thesis to show, on the one hand, my own view of things through the lens of the thought of Simone Weil, and on the other hand, for it to show the thought of Simone Weil through the lens of my own reading and thinking. I am sufficiently postmodern to believe that there is no single true reading of an author. At the same time, I hope that an image of Weil emerges that those who know her work will recognize, and that she herself would not be ashamed of, or embarrassed by.

There is a considerable literature surrounding Weil's work, much of it recent, and notably diverse, which only emphasizes that there is more than one way to read Weil. Peter Winch (*Simone Weil: A Just Balance*), for instance, reads Weil from a secular, Wittgensteinian perspective. He is able to draw out resonances of Weil's work with Wittgenstein's, and able, as well, to give a confident portrait of Weil's thought with careful attention to the development and interrelationship of key concepts in her thinking. Miklos Vetö (*The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*) writes out of the Rationalist-Enlightenment tradition, and is Winch's equal in his erudition and skill; where Winch deliberately tries to downplay Weil's metaphysics as far as can be done, Vetö engages it fully – certainly far more fully than anyone else has. Graham H. Bell (*Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion*) is interested in a Weilian vision of a society inspired by compassion. As such, he is interested in Weil's mature, arguably communitarian thought, places more emphasis on *The Need for Roots* than other writers do, and devotes little time to her early work. Lawrence A. Blum and Victor Seidler (*A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*) devote themselves to Weil's political thought. Finally, though the list could go on, Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springstead (*Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil*), true to the title of their

book, examine specific issues in Weil's thought.⁸ Though a separate thesis on Weil's thought could be written based on a study of these books, it has fallen outside of the scope of this project to do more than refer to them from time to time where it has been helpful to do so.

Late in 1934, having taken a year's leave of absence from teaching, and having just completed "Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," the essay that capped off her juvenilia,⁹ the 25-year old Weil began several months of work in industrial factories in the Paris region. Her goal, as she put it in a letter, was to "make a little contact with the famous 'real life'." (SL, 10) Weil's factory experience was a turning point in her thought and her life. Only after she experienced first hand the exhaustion and degradation of one who must submit endlessly to the orders of other people did she develop a clear understanding of the bases for self-respect that are typically external to a person and what it is to be systematically deprived of these. It is at least in part because of this experience that she began to speak of affliction rather than of oppression, the difference being that "affliction" puts the emphasis on the individual who suffers, whereas "oppression" puts the emphasis on the external conditions which occasion the person's suffering. From her own loss of self-respect and her regaining it,¹⁰ Weil began to understand compassion, not

⁸ The literature on Weil far exceeds what I have indicated, and Bell's "Selected Bibliography" is a good point of departure for recent Weil scholarship. (Bell, pp. 243-249) There exists a bibliography of Weil's work and secondary literature up to 1979 compiled by J. P. Little: *Simone Weil: A Bibliography*, Grant and Cutler, Research Bibliographies and Checklists, no. 5, 1973, London; and *Supplement No. 1* to the same, 1979.

⁹ Miklos Vetö argues more precisely – and to my mind, convincingly – for a tripartite division in Weil's work, placing "Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression" and her factory experience at the end of the first half of the second phase of her development. See Vetö, 5-7.

¹⁰ "What working in a factory meant for me personally," Weil wrote to a friend, "was as follows. It meant that all the external reasons (which I had previously thought internal) upon which my sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, was based were radically destroyed within two or three weeks by the daily experience of brutal constraint. And don't imagine that this provoked in me any rebellious reaction. No, on the contrary; it produced the last thing I expected from myself – docility. The resigned docility of a beast of burden. It seemed to me that I was born to wait for, and receive, and carry out orders – that I had never done and never would do anything else. I am not proud of that confession. It is the kind of suffering no worker talks about; it is too painful even to think of it. When I was kept away from work by illness I became fully aware of the degradation into which I was falling, and I swore to myself that I would go on enduring the life until

so much as a response to a perceived need, but in terms of attention to another person who suffers a loss or a lack of self-respect. All of these developments are further related to her later religious awakening and the writings for which she is best known.

To live and think and work as Weil did is, as she recognized, vocational; a person must be called to such a life. She understood perfectly well the expression “C’est le métier qui rentre”: it is the trade entering the body. “When an apprentice gets hurt, or complains of fatigue,” she writes, “workmen and peasants have this fine expression: ‘It’s the trade getting into his body.’” (SNLG, 180) Tiredness and pain are the result of having exceeded one’s limits. Apprenticeships involve the exploration and discovery of one’s limits in relation to a craft, a skill, a trade. Simone Weil extends this idea to our relationship with the social and natural world – with, in a word, the universe.

Whenever we have some pain to endure, we can say to ourselves that it is the universe, the order and beauty of the world, and the obedience of creation to God which are entering our body. After that how can we fail to bless with the tenderest gratitude the Love which sends us this gift? (*ibid.*)

It is not for us to seek out pain, any more than it is for the apprentice workman to do so; but it is possible for us to learn, Weil believes, how to read pain when it occurs. Affliction she describes as a category of pain unto itself, in which a person’s existence as a social being is obliterated.

In affliction, if it is complete, a man is deprived of all human relationship. For him there are only two possible kinds of relation with men: the first, in which he figures only as a thing, is as mechanical as the relation between two contiguous drops of water, and the second is purely supernatural love. All relationships between these two extremes are forbidden him. (SNLG, 191)

the day when I was able to pull myself together in spite of it. And I kept my word. Slowly and painfully, in and through slavery, I reconquered the sense of my human dignity – a sense which relied, this time, upon nothing outside myself and was accompanied always by the knowledge that I possessed no right to anything, and that any moment free from humiliation and suffering should be accepted as a favour, as merely a lucky chance.” (SL, 21-22)

In affliction, one is not merely subject to “the universe, the order, and beauty of the world and the obedience of creation to God” entering one’s body – one is reduced to an irrelevant entity subject to the blind play of forces. Love alone remains possible for the extremely afflicted; and the love they experience, if they can experience it, is, Weil as much as assures us, the love of God.

I have written this thesis in such a way as to present Weil’s thought above all in its social and religious dimensions. I have also tried to be as faithful as possible to her thought that we may find the wellsprings of our own thinking and feeling therein. Simone Weil is someone whose thought is a reflection of her engagement with the world, not a prelude to engagement. She encourages us to think and to feel, and ultimately to love, as fully as it is given to us to do.

Part One – Weil and Murdoch

Iris Murdoch, who lectured in philosophy at St. Anne's College in Cambridge for many years, wrote with an ear for, if not in the style of, British-North American philosophy of the mid-century, and her corpus of philosophical writing is a substantial complement to her accomplishments as a novelist.¹ Simone Weil, who received an excellent philosophical training, and taught philosophy for four and a half years in lycées for young women, wrote principally social and political essays and articles, though much of her later work includes religious themes, and most of the later work, regardless of its themes, expresses a religious viewpoint and conviction.² I draw upon several of Weil's writings in this thesis, but to begin the discussion, I refer to her late essay, "Human Personality".³ My reading of Murdoch focuses on *The Sovereignty of Good*,⁴ in which she openly acknowledges her debt to Simone Weil.

The difference between Weil and Murdoch, in its shortest form, is that Weil has a social critique and analysis and Murdoch does not. The character of this difference and its importance will become increasingly clear as this thesis progresses. For not only – I say in

¹ Murdoch's books in philosophy (in addition to her 26 novels) are: *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (1953), *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (1977), *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (1986), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), and the book of essays collected near the end of her life, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (1997).

² Weil's central works, with (to the best of my knowledge) original English publication dates, include: *Waiting for God* (1951), *Gravity and Grace* (1952), *The Need for Roots* (1952), *Letter to a Priest* (1954), *Notebooks* (1956), *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (1957), *Seventy Letters* (1962), *First and Last Notebooks* (1970), *Oppression and Liberty* (1973), and *Lectures on Philosophy* (1978). Several important essays can be found in: *Selected Essays: 1934-1943* (1962), *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (1968), *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (1986), and *Formative Writings* (1987).

³ In *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (1986), Siân Miles, ed., pp. 49-78.

⁴ Hereafter referred to as "SG". I refer throughout to the 2001 Routledge Classics edition, which corresponds closely, but not exactly to the 1970 Routledge edition. Citations appear a little bit later, in terms of pagination, in the earlier edition.

anticipation – does Weil’s understanding of the social in relation to the individual provide the context for her moral vision, it also forms a part of a larger hierarchy of understanding which provides clarity for her religious thoughts. Coming to terms with her notion of affliction is a good way to see this, and will form a large part of the discussion in part three. One of the points I hope to convey is that Weil’s religious thought cannot be properly understood in the absence of her analysis and understanding of social life (though that is not sufficient for understanding her religious thought). As for Murdoch, the absence of a similar analysis paralyzes her moral vision; and her attempt to link morality with religion only results in confusion. I begin by outlining some of the main ideas of each author.

Murdoch wrote the three essays of *The Sovereignty of Good* largely in response to the dominant views of British moral philosophy of her day. Those views emphasized a rational agent who exercises his morality in moments of overt moral choice (however rightly or well he chooses). This, believed Murdoch, did not give any, let alone enough, moral credit to the experiences of the agent between such moments. The alternative picture of moral agency that Murdoch presents us with, consists, on my reading of her book, of five principal and interrelated themes, echoed across the three essays. First, we are selfish beings in a finite universe and there is no *telos* to our lives; our selfishness detracts us from moral achievements; and “the real”, as she puts it, occasioned through attention to nature, art, and intellectual disciplines (*technai*), provides a focus to free us from the hankerings of our egos. Second, vision is a better metaphor for moral life than is movement (action and the effects of action); in particular, vision for the sake of morality is best seen as loving attention. Art and morality, Murdoch claims, both rely upon this ability to attend, art being, in fact, a case of morals. Third, morality and the attention that goes with being moral are ongoing activities; to speak in terms of virtues is a better way of

talking about morality than to speak in terms of freedom, the will, and reason; virtue words connect up with the specificity of individual lives and individual experience, and so our knowledge of their meaning alters and develops over time; for this reason, Murdoch argues, where morality is concerned, personal experience is the arbiter of the meaning of words. Fourth, morality is connected with change and progress; the very notion of standards in human activities and human conduct leads on, via the notion of excellence, to the idea of perfection, which, in turn, leads on to the idea of the good. Fifth, the good provides unity among our concepts, particularly our virtue concepts, and is a transcendent reality, non-representable and indefinable, in the light of which we see the reality of this world; love, in its refinement, allies us with goodness; to love attentively is the way to relate morally to others and to reality in general. This summary does not exhaust Murdoch's concerns in the book, but it is a good indication of her priorities, and of the kind of language – psychological, emotional, artistic, philosophical, and classical – that she uses.

Weil's moral vision likewise consists of a constellation of themes and is succinctly presented in her essay "Human Personality". At the centre of this vision is a conception of justice that Weil traces to Greek and evangelical sources, and which is a counterpart to Christian love, and distinct, as Weil emphasizes, from the notion of rights.⁵ In reference to Antigone's love, for instance, Weil writes, "It was Justice, companion of the gods in the other world, who dictated this surfeit of love, and not any right at all. Rights have no direct connection with love." She continues: "Just as the notion of rights is alien to the

⁵ In addition to her discussion in "Human Personality" see also Weil's discussion of "The Love of Our Neighbour" – the first part of "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" in *Waiting for God*, especially pages 139-140. In "The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force", Weil juxtaposes the conception of justice as love with the conception of force (another important concept for her): "Justice and love, which have hardly any place in this study of extremes and of unjust acts of violence, nevertheless bathe the work in their light without ever becoming noticeable themselves, except as a kind of accent." (SWA, 188) (Though she says "Justice and love" it is inconsistent with Weil's meaning that she should here mean justice in the sense of ensuring people's rights.) See, further, the opening pages of *The Need for Roots* where Weil makes the distinction between rights and obligations, arguing that the notion of rights "is subordinate and relative to" the notion of obligations. (NR, 3) There is thus a connection, for Weil, between the conceptions of justice and of obligations.

Greek mind, so also it is alien to the Christian inspiration whenever it is pure.... One cannot imagine St. Francis of Assisi talking about rights.” (SWA, 63) Weil is not asking us to abandon our sense of justice that is based on a notion of rights, but to situate it relative to a sense of justice based on impersonal love.

Justice centred on rights is characterized by a concern for the equal distribution of goods and opportunities; justice centred on love is explicitly about ensuring that people are not harmed. It is only in a spirit of loving justice that the harm suffered by others, or potentially suffered by others, can be registered, or, as Weil puts it, that the cry “Why am I being hurt” can be heard.

If you say to someone who has ears to hear: ‘What you are doing to me is not just’, you may touch and awaken at its source the spirit of attention and love. But it is not the same with words like ‘I have the right ...’ or ‘you have no right to ...’. They evoke a latent war and awaken the spirit of contention. To place the notion of rights at the centre of social conflicts is to inhibit any possible impulse of charity on both sides. (*ibid.*, 63)

Making the point in a slightly different way, she says that the sense of justice associated with rights can have limited efficacy in acknowledging the cries of the wounded since rights are ultimately backed by, or subject to, the workings of force. “The notion of rights,” she says,

is linked with the notion of sharing out, of exchange, of measured quantity. It has a commercial flavour, essentially evocative of legal claims and arguments. Rights are always asserted in a tone of contention; and when this tone is adopted, it must rely upon force in the background, or else it will be laughed at. (*ibid.*, 61)

Only a spirit of justice in the form of love can act to countervail the workings of force, because justice in this sense is shown as a consensual suffering of force.⁶

⁶ Weil does not develop the notion of justice as a consent to force in “Human Personality”, but does so in “The Love of Our Neighbour”, the first part of “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” in *Waiting for God*. On the part of the stronger in a relationship, a spirit of justice will allow him to prevail from exercising force; on the part of the weaker, it will allow him to accept the force he is subject to without either submitting or revolting. (WG, 143-144)

Justice in the form of love is possible, continuing with Weil's view, only for the person who has touched and consequently preserved within herself some understanding of what is impersonal. An indication of the impersonal is given by the greatest artists and thinkers who are, Weil observes, essentially anonymous. The *Iliad* stands as a great work of art regardless of what we know of Homer. The personality of such artists, she says, has vanished; their works are impersonal.⁷ The "level of the impersonal", to use her terminology, is reached through "the practice of a form of attention" which requires mental solitude. The capacity for attention required to reach the impersonal may be cultivated through attention to nature, art, or science,⁸ and also through physical labour.⁹ Implicit in Weil's vision is that this capacity may also be cultivated through attention to society. This state of attention is required to form judgments and to perceive truths; it is required to perceive beauty; it is also required to discern the cries of those who have been harmed, which is to say that it is required to perceive justice. In a system based

⁷ Does this mean that Homer and Shakespeare were, in their respective days, ignored and unknown? Certainly not. In fact, their ability to achieve what they did may in part be due to an ability to live close to others, among others. Moreover, they were able to communicate their visions, which alone demonstrates an uncanny sensitivity to what matters to others. And this is precisely the point: that they could register how others think and behave and at the same time remain detached from them. There is an important tension here, which causes confusion for interpreters of Weil (for example, Rush Rhees and Peter Winch). The tension is that love of the neighbour, to use Weil's Christian terminology, requires detachment, but detachment seems to be at odds with compassionate identification, which could include acknowledgment of another's attachment to one. Weil's observation, however, is just the opposite: that compassionate identification is not possible *without* detachment. My discussion in part three should shed some light on this question, but I do not pursue the matter in this thesis.

⁸ It is fair to say that by attention to art and science Weil means either or both the study and practice of these, but she is not explicit on this point. I have taken the liberty to include the reference to nature here, which Weil does not make in "Human Personality". I do so to emphasize the parallels between her thought and Murdoch's, though caution is required since next to Weil's religious language, Murdoch's is downright secular. Consider for instance the following from a fragment called "Some Thoughts on the Love of God": "Nothing is pure in this world except sacred objects and sacred texts, and the beauty of nature when looked at for itself and not as a background for day dreams, and also, to a lesser degree, those human beings in whom God dwells and those works of art which are of divine inspiration." (SNLG, 149-50). Even though Murdoch would concur wholeheartedly with Weil's thoughts about day dreams, she never speaks with this kind of religious conviction, and I am not sure that she would rank things in terms of their purity, or that she would agree with Weil's ranking. (Weil's reason for ranking human beings in whom God dwells beneath the beauty of nature is because, among humans, none is more pure than Christ, and not even he, according to Weil, is perfectly pure. (See WG, 189) Nature, which has no will, is always perfectly pure.)

⁹ It may sound strange to say that attention is required to cultivate a capacity for attention, but this is no more strange than to say that running is required for a runner to develop his ability to run, or that writing is required for a writer to develop his ability to write.

solely on rights, the cry of someone in a state of affliction – a particularly extreme state of unrecognized harm – is perverted into a condition of envy (one does not have what others have), or at best reduces it to bargaining; it is, however, a cry which asks “Why am I being harmed?” and demands, first of all, to be heard. As Weil explains,

When affliction is seen vaguely from a distance, either physical or mental, so that it can be confused with simple suffering, it inspires in generous souls a tender feeling of pity. But if by chance it is suddenly revealed to them in all its nakedness as a corrosive force, a mutilation or leprosy of the soul, then people shiver and recoil. The afflicted themselves feel the same shock of horror at their own condition.

To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking. To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction, or in near danger of it, is to annihilate oneself. It is more difficult than suicide would be for a happy child. Therefore the afflicted are not listened to. (*ibid.*, 71)

The cries of the afflicted are impersonal cries. Society, Weil impresses upon us, needs people who can hear these cries. Politically, the capacity to think in silence and solitude should therefore be supported; morally, this capacity should be preserved and respected in all human exchanges; socially, we are called to attend to the afflicted who themselves have lost this capacity, or may never have developed it.

How well a person can attend to the afflicted will depend on that person’s capacity for attention as well as on her relationship to social groups specifically, and to society in general. For, as Weil observes, only an individual can form judgments. Collectivities, though made up of individuals, cannot form judgments; they require allegiance, and they reward allegiance with favours, prestige, and privilege (or the illusion of these); at the same time, collectivities discourage the autonomous functioning of the operations of the mind since by their very nature they rely upon consensus opinion. Collectivities, in other words, have a subordinating influence on people, and the benefits of allegiance need to be seen in this light. Recognizing the condition of the afflicted and being able to respond to it is in competition with the claims that our social affiliations make upon us. Because her affliction is not recognized by anyone, it is not part, paradoxically, of the afflicted’s identity,

of her *personality*, to use the term of the title of Weil's essay. The afflicted do not exist in the eyes of others, except as objects from which to recoil; to resist that recoil and attend truthfully to the afflicted is equivalent, as Weil says in the above quote, to an acceptance of death (it is "to annihilate oneself"), by which she means not a physical, but a social death.

The more a person's allegiances are given primarily to groups, generally speaking, the less will that person be able to discern justice and injustice (in the sense emphasized by Weil), the less likely will he be to hear the cries of the wounded. Because it is by the operation of the mind in solitude that the impersonal is reached, relating humans to the impersonal is the only way to secure against the subordinating influence of collectivities,¹⁰ and it is the only way to respond justly to affliction. These things can be achieved in part, Weil tells us, by the careful and legitimate use of such words as "God", "good", "truth", "beauty", and "justice".¹¹

¹⁰ Weil does not think that all forms of subordination are bad, (see footnote 28, page 37) but that the subordination that sets a collectivity above an individual is. Dyads and triads are different from larger groups of people, because it remains possible for each individual to attend to the others such that the capacity for consent in all may be preserved (see next footnote). "Everybody knows," Weil says, "that really intimate conversation is only possible between two or three. As soon as there are six or seven, collective language begins to dominate. That is why it is a complete misinterpretation to apply to the Church the words 'Whosoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' Christ did not say two hundred, or fifty, or ten. He said two or three. He said precisely that he always forms the third in the intimacy of the tête-à-tête." (WG, 79-80) Though I think, to be true to Weil, that it is important to retain the religious content of this quote (which is partly a criticism of the collective nature of the Church), her observation about the difference between intimate and collective discourse does not depend upon it. Nor does it matter that intimacy is not always a function of two or three people talking – thus Christ's qualification about being gathered in his name. What is important is that the possibility of such intimacy is restricted to two or three and is increasingly frustrated as the size of the group itself increases. (Specifically, the number of individual tête-à-tête relationships in any group of size n is given by the sum from one to $n-1$. With three people there are three such relationships; with four, there are six; with five, there are ten; and by the time there are six, there are fifteen such simultaneous relationships. With perhaps rare exceptions, even in a group of four or five people, sustaining all instances of "the intimacy of the tête-à-tête" becomes impossible, and the group must dissolve into smaller parts if everyone is to be part of a tête-à-tête.)

¹¹ There are several other concepts central to Weil's thought, three of which I mention here. One is the concept of necessity which runs throughout Weil's thought. It represents the totality of the physical universe and is one half of the duality that Weil takes to be fundamental to our condition, the other half being love and the desire for goodness. Another concept which is the notion of consent, which Weil uses in a mostly conventional sense, though she attaches extreme importance to it. Socially, the faculty of consent is what we seek to preserve in others when we treat them in the spirit of loving justice. Friends, Weil says, take care "to preserve the faculty of free consent on both sides". (WG, 205) Consent may also be given to necessity and to the love of God. Affliction, as will be discussed in part three, is a confrontation with necessity, and an opportunity for the desire for goodness to reveal itself unambiguously. (On necessity, see also footnote 22, page 32.) Finally, there is the notion of obligation to which, as Weil argues in the opening pages of *The*

On Murdoch's view, morality is centrally about vision; it is crucial, she thinks, that for people to be good moral agents that they be able to discern their moral situations with acuity. The primary moral task, then, for Murdoch, is the achievement of clear vision, especially in our relations with others. In this connection, she borrows directly from Weil the notion of attention "to express the idea," she says, "of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality". (SG, 33) This is not, however, altogether true to Weil's conception of attention. Seeing how Murdoch's use of the term differs from Weil's will help to set the stage for the ensuing discussion, as well as to see, in a general way, the differences in outlook between the two thinkers.

Weil makes it clear that attention is a faculty which can be cultivated and developed, and which is subject to fatigue. She also calls it a *negative* effort because the great difficulty is in *not* turning away from the object of our attention. It is one thing to identify a rose as a rose, but still another to see the unique rose that is before one, in its particular setting and in its particular light. Summing up these points, Weil says that

Attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts perhaps but it is a negative effort. Of itself, it does not involve tiredness. When we become tired, attention is scarcely possible any more, unless we have already had a good deal of practice. It is better to stop working altogether, to seek some relaxation, and then a little later to return to the task; we have to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out. (WG, 111)

She says, further, explaining in what attention consists, that "Above all, our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it." (*ibid.*, 112) This is not so much a commitment to essentialism as it is an attitude of passive approach to something in order to respect it for what it is, such as it is.

Need for Roots, the notion of rights is relative. (See also footnote 5, page17.) Weil discusses the notions of consent and of obligation in connection with each other in "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations", SWA, 201-210.

As I indicated above, on Weil's view, the "level of the impersonal" is reached through the practice of attention, which is of the sort just described. Murdoch's interest in attention is similarly that by means of it a person becomes aware of something other than himself. And both Weil and Murdoch, as shown above in the outlines of their views, recognize nature, art, and intellectual disciplines (Weil refers to science) as occasions for the practice of attention. For Weil, attention to nature, art, and science allows a person to reach the level of the impersonal, and experience of the impersonal is essential to recognize and respond to affliction since the cries of the afflicted are impersonal cries.¹² (Weil, it will be remembered, also recognizes physical work and, implicitly, contemplation of society as means to reach the impersonal.) Murdoch does not speak in terms of the impersonal, but instead sees attention to nature, art, and intellectual disciplines as "occasions for 'unselfing'" (SG, 82) (about which I will say more below, though its meaning should be fairly clear). Similar to Weil, she recognizes a relationship in these activities to moral life, but she does not talk about affliction, and she makes a claim that Weil does not: she claims that these activities of 'unselfing' are themselves moral activities because they enable a person to understand and appreciate the kind of detachment that is necessary, she believes, for moral life. It is thus that Murdoch makes the connection between these activities and morals, not just in terms of attention, but in terms of realism, since attention allows us to overcome "the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real".¹³ (*ibid.*, 88) Morality, for her, concerns, generally speaking,

¹² "When the infliction of evil provokes a cry of sorrowful surprise from the depth of the soul, it is not a personal thing. Injury to the personality and its desires is not sufficient to evoke it, but only and always the sense of contact with injustice through pain. It is always, in the last of men as in Christ himself, an impersonal protest." (SWA, 54)

¹³ Strangely, in this context, though she speaks clearly of the value of art, nature, and intellectual disciplines as ways of "forgetting self", she refers to imagination and not attention as the responsible faculty of mind. The full quote reads: "We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real." If she wishes to be true to Weil, this is an error; in any event, it deserves clarification. Imagination, as far as Weil is concerned, is a way of escaping reality, not of apprehending it. "We must try to love without imagining,"

“attention to individuals, human individuals or individual realities of other kinds”, (*ibid.*, 36-37) and it is an apprehension of the real that leads on to good moral conduct. In fact, Murdoch tends to put the matter more strongly. She says, for instance, that “In treating realism, whether of artist or of agent, as a moral achievement, there is of course a further assumption to be made in the fields of morals: that true vision occasions right conduct.” (*ibid.*, 64) She says that this is an assumption, but if only in the case of a psychopath, it seems possible for one to have true vision and act immorally. If Murdoch were to respond saying that if the psychopath had true vision of his psychopathy he would behave morally, then she would be asserting as a tautology that there is no true vision where conduct is bad. This raises, among other things, the matters of agency, blame, and responsibility. I will discuss these related matters in part three where they also bear on my discussion of affliction in that section of the thesis. For the sake of the proceeding discussion, I will take it that, in the lives of good moral agents, clear vision is typically a part of acting well. With this much weaker formulation in mind, it may be easier to see the strength of Murdoch’s claim that clear vision is relevant to morality.

When Murdoch introduces the notion of attention, she describes it, as I said above, as “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality”. Though she says this in the context of a discussion concerning human relationships, it is not a careful characterization of attention which is a notion that extends beyond cases of human relationships, and hence to cases where a notion of justice might *not* be said to apply. Justice, according to Weil, is the face that love wears when the concern that others are kept free from harm is pre-eminent in our relationships. Leaving aside altogether our contemporary political sense of justice, the point here is that for Weil, justice just is love of the neighbour in the

she says. “To love the appearance in its nakedness without interpretation.” (GG, 54) True to her mysticism, she adds that this is the same as loving God: “What we love then is truly God.” (*ibid.*) Underlining this attitude to imagination, a short section of *Gravity and Grace* bears the title “Imagination Which Fills the Void” in contrast to another section entitled “To Accept the Void”.

spirit of the gospels, and that is an impersonal love. Impersonal love, however, need not have anything to do with justice. Indeed, love of nature is an example. It is also odd to speak, as Murdoch does, of directing a just and loving gaze since, following Weil, one's gaze – or one's attention more accurately – will be loving – and here I leave out the word “just” for reasons just given – in measure as one is able to apprehend the reality before one. Love does not issue forth from a person, but is rather, characteristic of a relationship that is altogether unpossessive: “To love the appearance in its nakedness without interpretation.” (GG, 54)

What emerges from these considerations is that Murdoch models moral life on contemplative activities. The faculty of attention may be essential for morality, as clear vision most certainly is, but this does not mean that everything that involves attention is thereby moral. By making this identification, she runs a double risk. On the one hand, she runs the risk of introducing a notion of justice where it does not belong; on the other, she runs the risk of turning morality into a matter of individual concern and accomplishment over and above a matter of the quality of human relationships. She does not get caught in the first of these traps, but she is wholly ensnared in the second.¹⁴

One more observation is in order where the notion of attention is concerned. For Weil, attention, which alone reveals the impersonal, is a mediator to the sacred. “What is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him,” she says. “Everything which is impersonal in man is sacred, and nothing else.” (SWA, 54) This way of putting things may not be to everyone's taste, but it is transparently positive, and, I think, comprehensible. For Murdoch, on the other hand, what is real is apprehended by attention, but the real is

¹⁴ In a kind of overlap of these problems, she does, in her discussion of the *technai*, use the word “justice” in the sense of “just discernment,” or “doing justice to a subject of study”, without in any way distinguishing it from the sense of justice as compassion or love. (See SG, 86-88) Getting an abstract problem right, or learning how to conjugate verbs in another language is one thing, but only people suffer contempt, humiliation, or ridicule, and concern for another engages one's own susceptibility to these things. Seeing another person well may require just discernment, but seeing a problem well does not require compassion since the problem is not a creature capable itself of just discernment.

itself never perfectly attained because we are limited in our ability to love and to know. When she talks about loving another person and says that it is an “endless task”, she suggests that it is possible, as an ideal, to come to know or love another person perfectly, but that, in fact, we are incapable of doing so. “As we move and as we look,” she says, “our concepts themselves are changing.”

To speak here of an inevitable imperfection, or of an ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes, may be taken as a reference to our ‘fallen’ human condition.... Since we are neither angels nor animals but human individuals, our dealings with each other have this aspect.... (SG, 27)

Reality itself, she describes as “infinitely elusive”, “magnetic” and “inexhaustible”. Here she brings the concept “good” into her discussion. “If apprehension of good is apprehension of the individual and the real, then good partakes of the infinite elusive character of reality.” (*ibid.*, 41) Not only is Murdoch less than lucid here, but her handling of the concepts “perfection” and “good” leads to a decidedly pessimistic view of our human condition. Since we cannot attain to a perfect vision of reality, it is written into our character, our very souls, in fact, to fail. In fact, Murdoch considers her pessimism to be of a virtuous kind. For instance, she criticizes the allure of existentialism for encouraging “contempt for the human condition, together with a conviction of personal salvation” at the expense of a “real pessimism”. “Such attitudes,” she continues, “contrast with the vanishing images of Christian theology which represented goodness as almost impossibly difficult, and sin as almost insuperable and certainly as a universal condition.” (*ibid.*, 49)¹⁵

¹⁵ For the record, I don’t think that Weil’s view of things is preferable to Murdoch’s because it is positive; I think it is preferable because it is comprehensive and it gets a great many things right. In point of fact, Weil’s social and political outlook is often described as pessimistic for the good reason that she assessed the conditions of her day in a hard light; also given the time in which she wrote – roughly 1929 to 1943 – it is hardly surprising that she had a pessimistic view of things. Her positive attitude, in contrast, is borne out of a deep regard for dignity, and an understanding of the conditions for dignity in both a sense of external conditions that abet well-being, and in a sense of how a person preserves her dignity under abjectly adverse conditions.

As Murdoch sees things, our inability to perceive perfectly is accounted for on the one hand by the fact that the meaning of mental concepts grows and deepens with experience (more will be said about this in part two), and on the other by what she takes as the empirical fact that we are creatures beset with poorly understood and interfering psychological mechanisms. In keeping with the pessimism I have just ascribed to her, Murdoch adopts, for the purposes of morality, what she calls Freud's "realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man".

What seems to me [for the purposes of morality] true and important in Freudian theory is as follows. ... [Freud] sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings. (*ibid.*, 50)

She says clearly enough that she is not interested in the details of Freud's theories *per se*. Her interest is in the psychological mechanisms, generally speaking, that influence, or interfere with, human behaviour. She is often quoted for her claim that "In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego." She adds to this that "Moral philosophy is properly ... the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat. In this respect moral philosophy has shared some aims with religion."¹⁶ (*ibid.*, 51)

The very fact that Weil sees attention as a negative effort, because, as I noted above, the effort is in *not* turning one's attention away from the object of attention, indicates that she, too, acknowledges that there are impediments to our ability to attend; but Weil sees contending with these impediments as part of being emotionally and spiritually

¹⁶ Though Murdoch distances herself from the particulars of Freud's theories, to be true to Freud, it is the id, and not the ego, that is the inner *enfant terrible*. According to Freud, the ego is, in well-adjusted people, the ultimate victor in the battle for supremacy between the ego, the id, and the superego.

mature. What is required is coming to know and understand them,¹⁷ and our concern with them is relative to our relationship with the social world and the natural world – to which Weil would add the supernatural world. In principle, though with reservations about the supernatural world, Murdoch has the same commitments, only in the expression of her views, we find a self that is strongly identified with psychological mechanisms beyond its control and which frustrate its attempts to better itself and be good – it is, in fact, a self that could never possibly be good, because then it would no longer be that self so psychologically constituted. Murdoch’s view has an uncanny affinity with a doctrine of original sin,¹⁸ and such concrete realities, valued for their own sake, as a relationship to the world through work, and relationships to others as citizens, friends, or colleagues, are not obviously part of the world of moral agents as Murdoch portrays it. They are, in contrast, a part of the world that Weil writes about.

I will return later, in part two, to Murdoch’s interest in our psychological mechanisms. “The techniques for the defeat of the ego” (to paraphrase her from above) are such as I’ve already indicated – attention to nature, to art, and to intellectual disciplines. Of the three, she speaks most eloquently and forcefully about art which she accords a distinctively high status in human affairs, going so far as to say that “For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all.” (*ibid.*, 74) Her comment about religion, though – that it has shared aims with moral philosophy in respect of the defeat, or taming, of the ego – is more than incidental. Murdoch is sympathetic to religious contemplation,

¹⁷ See for instance *First and Last Notebooks*, pp 230 ff. A discussion of these topics in Weil’s writing cannot be quickly summed up as they involve a host of notions particular to her and also relate directly to mystical discipline which is, I think, less esoteric than it sounds, but would require considerable space for an adequate treatment.

¹⁸ I have already shown, on page 26, Murdoch’s partiality to a traditional Christian theology. She further laments the loss of an “adequate conception of original sin”. “Briefly put,” she says, “our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated, and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves, and we have no adequate conception of original sin.” (SG, 46)

particularly prayer, as a practice to purify consciousness (*ibid.*, 53-54, 81), and the significance for her of religion in relation to morals should not be understated. This is another theme that I will return to later (at the end of part two). For now, though, it is enough to indicate briefly the priority that she gives to art over religion in her thoughts on morals.

When Murdoch introduces the notion of prayer in her second essay, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”, she says,

I have already suggested that a pessimistic view which claims that goodness is the almost impossible countering of a powerful egocentric mechanism already exists in traditional philosophy and in theology. The technique which Plato thought appropriate to this situation I shall discuss later. Much closer and more familiar to us are the techniques of religion, of which the most widely practised is prayer. (*ibid.*, 53)

Her allusion to Plato I turn to in a moment. “Prayer,” Murdoch says, continuing her thought, “is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love. With it goes the idea of grace, of a supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality.”¹⁹ (*ibid.*, 53-54) She proceeds to offer an account in contemporary terms of what such attention comes to, and slowly her discussion drifts in the direction of art. Later, fulfilling her promise of the above quotation, she returns to Plato.

Plato says (*Republic*, VII, 532) that the *technai* have the power to lead the best part of the soul to the view of what is most excellent in reality. This well describes the role of great art as an educator and revealer. (*ibid.*, 63)

¹⁹ This is a careful definition of grace, but unfortunately Murdoch does not develop it anywhere, which leaves some things unanswered, because she tells us clearly enough that “there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense.” (SG, 77) Nevertheless, she defines the operations of grace in terms of “empirical limitations of personality”. The question, then, is what are these limitations, and what is it about them that should require the notion of grace for someone who believes in God? And where does that leave the notion of grace for Murdoch?

By this point in her discussion she is already in full swing on the topic of art and its relationship to morals. In the third essay of her book, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts”, she makes exactly the same move, considering first the salutary psychological effects of religious practices, and then launching into a much more elaborated discussion of the role of art in helping us to establish direct connection with reality and becoming better moral agents. (*ibid.*, 81 ff.) Though the case could be made more carefully, in sum, Murdoch is inclined to speak in terms of religion, but only finds her voice when discussing art.

According to Murdoch, the value of art – “especially literature and painting,” she says – is that it provides an occasion for contact with reality, a focus for attention whereby we may free ourselves of selfish concerns, to be unsentimental and detached. “Great art teaches us,” Murdoch says, “how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.” (*ibid.*, 63-64) She also makes a connection between art and virtues saying that “the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue”. (*ibid.*, 84) The reason is that art serves no practical purpose and reveals – at least some art does – the purposelessness of life itself through a representation of the detail of the world²⁰ in a form fit for contemplation and for nothing else. Murdoch goes a step further and says that art “exhibits to us the connection, in human beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion. The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice.” (*ibid.*, 85)

Here is a point of contact between Weil and Murdoch, except that Murdoch’s use of the word “pity” in that last sentence shows either that she was careless in her choice of words, or else that she has not understood what affliction is. For one of the prime values

²⁰ Murdoch says “the minute and absolutely random detail of the world”. I appreciate a resistance to impose order on nature, and I accept that the world is shot through with contingency, but I am not persuaded that the detail of the world is random, let alone absolutely random.

of art, according to Weil, is that it occasionally proves capable of “reporting the truth” of affliction, which may in no other way be known except by experiencing it oneself, which is undesirable – literally not capable of being desired – and rarely understood even by those whom it touches or claims.

In proportion to the hideousness of affliction is the supreme beauty of its true representation. Even in recent times one can point to *Phèdre*, *L'École des femmes*, *Lear*, and the poems of Villon; but far better examples are the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and far better still, the *Iliad*, the book of Job and certain folk poems; and far beyond these again are the accounts of the Passion in the Gospels. The radiance of beauty illumines affliction with the light of the spirit of justice and love, which is the only light by which human thought can confront affliction and report the truth of it. (SWA, 72)

For Weil, affliction is as real as a landscape and may be lived or witnessed, but “the truth of it” may be communicated only through art, and when this is achieved, “the spirit of love and justice” are present, because it is impossible to see affliction in any other way. If love and justice are absent, what one sees is not affliction, but no more than an unfortunate individual (or individuals), worthy of pity and alms at best.

This is no small point. Weil is consistent and clear that pity and compassion are two different things, even radically different things. Recall the quote from page 20, above:

When affliction is seen vaguely from a distance, either physical or mental, so that it can be confused with simple suffering, it inspires in generous souls a tender feeling of pity. But if by chance it is suddenly revealed to them in all its nakedness as a corrosive force, a mutilation or leprosy of the soul, then people shiver and recoil.... (*ibid.*, 71)

Recognizing affliction requires compassion, not pity. “Those whom Christ recognized as his benefactors,” Weil writes in “The Love of God and Affliction”, are those whose compassion rested upon the knowledge of affliction.”

The others give capriciously, irregularly, or else too regularly, or from habit imposed by training, or in conformity with social convention, or from vanity or emotional pity, or for the sake of a good conscience – in a word, from self-

regarding motives. They are arrogant or patronizing or tactlessly sympathetic, or they let the afflicted man feel that they regard him simply as a specimen of a certain type of affliction. In any case, their gift is an injury.” (SNLG, 189)

Murdoch does not register this difference between pity and compassion, which is the difference between, on the one hand, observing another’s misery from the safety and security of one’s more privileged station in life, and, on the other, stepping outside that privilege and allowing oneself to be touched by another’s misery, to appear to the person in misery as an anonymous person, with nothing to give but attention. When Murdoch speaks of suffering, misery, or evil, she does so essentially in terms of the status of the moral agent. “All just vision,” she says,

even in the strictest problems of the intellect, and *a fortiori* when suffering or wickedness have to be perceived, is a moral matter. 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. (SG, 68)

Similarly, and echoing Weil’s observation that only art can faithfully represent affliction,²¹ she writes:

It is very difficult to concentrate attention upon suffering and sin, 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. (*ibid.*, 71)

And again:

How is one to connect the realism which must involve a clear-eyed contemplation of the misery and evil of the world with a sense of an uncorrupted good without the latter idea becoming the merest consolatory dream? (*ibid.*, 59)²²

²¹ Some holocaust accounts must certainly be counted as records of affliction. Do they count as art? What is critical in such reports is the distance between the telling and the events that are recounted. It is certain that it requires a steady pen and an even steadier soul to record such things. Eli Wiesel’s *Night* and Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* are two good examples of such records.

²² The contrast here between the real and “an uncorrupted good” may well derive from Weil for whom a desire for goodness is in contradiction with what she calls “necessity”, and for whom this contradiction lies

Though her emphasis in each of these quotes is different, Murdoch is in each case asserting or arguing for the importance of the moral agent being non-evasive about human situations, only – and I will make this clear soon enough in contrast with passages from Weil – she gives us little idea of what non-evasiveness comes to, or what it entails. She argues, moreover – and this is one of the major chords in her book –, that morality is not something that occurs only at overt moments of choice, but something that is ongoing, and that our ability to act well will follow upon our ability to attend well. (Recall my comments about this on page 24, above.) “The moral life,” she says,

is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial. (*ibid.*, 36)

As a kind of corollary to this – a rather crucial corollary – she says that “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at”. (*ibid.*, 38) The will is construed on this view as “obedience to reality” in Murdoch’s words, and she also quotes Weil here to the effect that “will is obedience not resolution”. (*ibid.*, 39) As Murdoch presents the idea, the moral agent can come to situate himself in his circumstances better or worse in accordance with the quality of his attention to the world. The moral agent, as she sees him, is “a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he

at the heart of our human condition. Murdoch mentions the concept of necessity a number of times, and may likewise have acquired this concept from Weil, though it could also have come from Plato. For Weil, who uses it often, it represents the indomitable progression of cause and effect in a thoroughly material universe. (Allen and Springstead, in chapter three of their book (see references), argue that this is too narrow and simplistic a view of Weil’s concept of necessity, but it will suffice for the present discussion.) Similarly, though it may be taken as an intellectual commonplace, Murdoch’s bald assertions that “Human life has no external point or *telos*”, and that “We are simply here”, are certainly reinforced, if not directly influenced, by Weil who spoke with equal clarity, e.g. “Every human being has probably had some lucid moments in his life when he has definitely acknowledged to himself that there is no final good here below.” (WG, 210) Also: “There are no other restraints upon our will than material necessity and the existence of other human beings around us.” (SWA, 52) Weil, does, of course recognize a *telos* in the love of God, but in that alone. “The soul does not love like a creature, with created love. The love within it is divine, uncreated, for it is the love of God for God which is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage in our soul for this love. That is the meaning of denying oneself. We are created solely in order to give this consent.” (SNLG, 181; also, in a different translation, WG, 133-34, which ends with the more poetic “We are created for this consent, and for this alone.”)

sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision”. (*ibid.*) Weil’s articulation of obedience, in contrast, is cosmological: one is not to resist or oppose one’s circumstances, but to bear them.

Weil uses the analogy of workmen learning their trade. When they hurt themselves, it is said, “C’est le métier qui rentre” – it is the work entering the body. In the same way, she says that we “must learn to feel in all things, first and almost solely, the obedience of the universe to God”, which is to consider all of one’s life like a trade, and indeed she says this learning is an apprenticeship. The result of this apprenticeship is that “differences between things or events” no longer matter. One concentrates one’s attention on being a creature that is subject to circumstances, but the variety of things experienced, be they pleasures or pains, are, to use her analogy, like different colours for the same text. For the person who knows how to read, the colours don’t matter, whereas for the person who does not know how to read, the colours are all that he sees. So too, completing one’s apprenticeship does not mean that one will not suffer, only that one will attach little significance to one’s suffering itself. “Pain,” Weil says, “is the colour of certain events.”²³

One of the striking differences between Weil and Murdoch is in the way each writer registers and conveys what it is to be situated in the world. Weil acknowledges again and again that we feel the impact of our circumstances in a variety of ways, and in differing degrees, and she in no way wishes to deny this impact. Neither, however, does she

²³ The full quote is as follows: “As one has to learn to read, or to practise a trade, so one must learn to feel in all things, first and almost solely, the obedience of the universe to God. It is truly an apprenticeship; and like every apprenticeship it calls for time and effort. For the man who has finished his training the differences between things or between events are no more important than those perceived by someone who knows how to read when he has before him the same sentence repeated several times, in red ink and blue, and printed in this, that, and the other kind of type. The man who cannot read sees only the differences. For the man who can read it all comes to the same thing, because the sentence is the same. Whoever has finished his apprenticeship recognizes things and events, everywhere and always, as vibrations of the same divine and infinitely sweet word. Which is not to say that he will not suffer. Pain is the colour of certain events. When a man who can and a man who cannot read look at a sentence written in red ink they both see something red; but the red colour is not so important for the one as for the other.” (SNLG, 180; for a very close variant, see WG, 131)

romanticize it. “We should seek neither to escape suffering nor to suffer less,” she says, “but to remain untainted by suffering.” (GG, 81) And: “We should make every effort we can to avoid affliction, so that the affliction which we meet with may be perfectly pure and perfectly bitter.” (*ibid.*) Again, in the same vein: “I should not love my suffering because it is useful. I should love it because it *is*.” (*ibid.*, 80)²⁴ These are reflections of a person for whom life may be said to have a discernable *grain* and who recognizes, moreover, that life will have a different grain for different people.²⁵ What I hear in Murdoch is a meditation upon the world, but little that registers a genuine confrontation and engagement with it. The view of morals she presents us with, I am saying, is arrested at the point of vision. Murdoch asserts the difficulty of seeing another person clearly, or of countenancing misery and evil in non-consolatory ways. But she is unable to acknowledge, with the unflattering impartiality with which Weil writes, what confrontation with affliction is like, either as sufferer or witness, what attitudes and responses – typically recoil – it evokes, and the claim it potentially has on each one of us. “The love of our neighbour,” Weil says,

in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled “unfortunate,” but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction.

²⁴ These remarks about suffering and affliction deserve, perhaps, some comment. When Weil says that “we should seek neither to escape suffering nor to suffer less,” she means that, given that a person is suffering, he should come to know and accept his suffering for what it is. If a person is burdened with a fifty kilogram weight, he should feel that weight for what it is. If the weight can be put down, he should put it down, but note that the better he is able to bear and accept the weight, the better will he be able to put it down without harm to himself and without harm or bother to others. Affliction is the most hideous of conditions and a category of suffering unto itself, but, for Weil, “a marvel of divine technique” if one can accept it and persist in loving (see SNLG, 182); it should therefore be avoided at all costs so that, on the one hand, one does not “fall into despair” (*ibid.*, 183) upon contact with it, but can withstand it, and, on the other hand, one makes no mistake about the love of God should one experience it. The third quote is similar to the first in respect of accepting suffering for what it is. One does not love it, however, because it is suffering, but simply because it is, i.e. one loves it as a fact of the universe to which one is witness.

²⁵ For example, she writes: “The degree and type of suffering which constitutes affliction in the strict sense of the word varies greatly with different people. It depends chiefly upon the amount of vitality they start with and upon their attitude towards suffering.” (SWA, 70)

For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. (WG, 115)

Knowing how to look at another – being able, in other words, to see another clearly – means, Weil explains, being attentive.²⁶ Murdoch does not demonstrate in anything like the way Weil does, a subtle understanding of the relationship of the faculties of the mind to a concern for the conditions of others. For Murdoch, other people, or misery and evil, remain at a remove from her; even worse, they are not just to be apprehended, but, *forever* to be apprehended (see again my discussion, on page 26, of Murdoch’s pessimism).

One of the main reasons for the differences between Weil and Murdoch is that Murdoch’s thoughts seem almost confined to the room in which she writes, whereas Weil’s reflections take place in the context of a world of politics, culture, work, conflict, economic disparities, and social oppression. Seeing another person, or seeing misery, are not matters of looking at isolated phenomena. Suffering and happiness – beyond immediate wounds and pleasures –, and misery, and joy, all relate to larger social contexts. Weil, in fact, emphasizes the social aspect of affliction. As she explains,

There is not real affliction unless the event which has gripped and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical. The social factor is essential. There is not real affliction where there is not social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another. (SNLG, 171)

Those few artists who manage to represent affliction truthfully do so because they are able to represent the social context of affliction truthfully. “Nothing is so rare,” Weil says in “*The Iliad*, or the Poem of Force,”

as to see misfortune fairly portrayed; the tendency is either to treat the unfortunate person as though catastrophe were his natural vocation, or to ignore the effects of misfortune on the soul, to assume, that is, that the soul can suffer and remain unmarked by it, can fail, in fact, to be recast in misfortune’s image. (SWA, 193)

²⁶ See again pp. 22 ff.

The *Iliad*, she argues, does portray misfortune fairly; it does this, in part and significantly, because it shows us oppression and violence from both sides. Those who wield force, Weil observes in reference to the poem, wield it only temporarily, though they do not see this as they trample those beneath them.

Since other people do not impose on their movements that halt, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity, they conclude that destiny has given complete licence to them, and none at all to their inferiors. (*ibid.*, 174)

“That interval of hesitation” echoes the thought from “Human Personality” mentioned at the start of this chapter, that the operations of the mind in solitude are essential to escape the subordinating influence of collectivities,²⁷ only here it is not assimilation to a group that is at issue, but domination by a group, or an individual.²⁸ At last, those with power exceed their limits and fall prey to circumstance, to chance.

Weil observes that “this retribution, which has a geometrical rigour ... operates automatically to penalize the abuse of force.” She sees it as “the soul of the epic,” and “the jumping off point of speculation upon the nature of man and the universe” for the Pythagoreans and for Socrates and Plato. (*ibid.*, 175) She also observes that, in the West, we have lost all sense of this “geometrical rigour” in the operations of force.

²⁷ “The human being,” Weil says, “can only escape from the collective by raising himself above the personal and entering into the impersonal.” (SWA, 57) But in this regard, too, the social is important. Later in the same essay – “Human Personality” – Weil says that “there is no guarantee for democracy, or for the protection of the person against the collectivity, without a disposition of public life relating it to the higher good which is impersonal and unrelated to any political form”. (*ibid.*, 77) I think this is an extremely important claim since it situates a moral concern in the public realm at the same time as it categorically resists institutionalization of that moral concern.

²⁸ In regards to the possibility that an oppressor can be on his or her own, consider the following, from Weil’s essay, “The Romanesque Renaissance”. Borrowing Plato’s notion of the social beast from *Republic, Book VI*, she says: “The social beast alone possesses force. It exerts it as a crowd, or deposits it in certain men or in one man. But law, in itself, possesses no force; it is only a written text and yet it is the sole bastion of liberty. The civic spirit that conforms to this Greek ideal, to which Socrates was a martyr, is perfectly pure. A man also, whoever he may be, considered simply as a man, is totally lacking in force. If he is obeyed in this capacity the obedience is perfectly pure. Such is the meaning of personal fealty in relationships of subordination; it in no way violates self-respect. But to obey, with or without love, the orders of a man, simply as the repository of a collective power, is to degrade oneself.” (SE, 51)

Conceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics. We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all, geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue. (*ibid.*)

Virtue, for Weil, is tied to the concepts of mediation and proportion, and these apply in all of human affairs, whether a farmer is sowing seeds, or fishermen are working together to bring in a catch, or armies are meeting in battle. What matters is respect for the balances in all of these activities. For the farmer sowing seeds, the balances concern the relationship of his thoughts about what he is doing to the rhythm of his work and the particular actions he makes; for the fishermen, it concerns as well, coordination between themselves and respect for each other's contribution to the job at hand; for armies in battle, it includes, to speak just of the level of command, a recognition of the movements and coordination of large numbers of people, as well as, ideally, a recognition of the operations of force (in the sense of Weil's essay on the *Iliad*, and which could help keep the conflict to a minimum).

In Weil's eyes, the world she was in was terribly out of balance.

We are living in a world in which nothing is made to man's measure; there exists a monstrous discrepancy between man's body, man's mind and the things which at the present time constitute the elements of human existence; everything is in disequilibrium. (OL, 102)

She continues:

This disequilibrium is essentially a matter of quantity. Quantity is changed into quality, as Hegel said, and in particular a mere difference in quantity is sufficient to change what is human into what is inhuman. From the abstract point of view quantities are immaterial, since you can arbitrarily change the unit of measurement; but from the concrete point of view certain units of measurement are given and have hitherto remained invariable, such as the human body, human life, the year, the day, the average quickness of human thought. Present-day life is not organized on the scale of all these things.... (*ibid.*)²⁹

²⁹ I include the reference to Hegel as a counterpoint to Weil's attention to the concrete. Peter Winch sums up well Weil's attention to the concrete when he says that "one of the most striking and, to my mind, most

It was not enough, either, for Weil to observe these things; she wanted to see them reflected in public discourse. She says in “The Power of Words”:

In every sphere, we seem to have lost the very elements of intelligence: the ideas of limit, measure, degree, proportion, relation, comparison, contingency, interdependence, interrelation of means and ends. To keep to the social level, our political universe is peopled exclusively by myths and monsters; all it contains is absolutes and abstract entities. This is illustrated by all the words of our political and social vocabulary: nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, property, democracy. We never use them in phrases such as: There is democracy *to the extent that* ... or: There is capitalism *in so far as* ... The use of expressions like ‘to the extent that’ is beyond our intellectual capacity. (SWA, 222, italics and ellipses in the original)

If the notions of proportion and equilibrium are to be operative in social life, language, Weil recognizes, needs to reflect these. She also recognizes here that language, if it does not refer to a context, is meaningless. There is a distinctive Wittgensteinian ring to this, and for good reasons. But Weil’s particular observation in “The Power of Words” is that language empty of content can have violent consequences.

As shown by her final comments in the last quote, Weil has no problem with the contextualized use of words such as “democracy”, “communism”, or “authority”. But when these words acquire, as she says, a capital letter, context is forgotten, and their meaning is drained of all content. They become banners, she says, and derive their meaning from the body count that rises in their name. In the *Iliad*, Weil recalls, Helen was at the heart of the dispute, but quickly forgotten – she had become meaningless. “For our contemporaries,” she says, “the role of Helen is played by words with capital letters. If we grasp one of these words, all swollen with blood and tears, and squeeze it, we find it is empty. Words with content and meaning are not murderous.” (*ibid.*, 221)

valuable features of Simone Weil’s philosophical procedure is to root the concepts which are most important to her in actual, very concrete, features of human life. Although she is no enemy of abstract theoretical considerations, she does not start with these, but with the circumstances of life which give rise to them.” (Winch, 190)

One of her examples of an empty word is the word “nation”. “In the end,” she says, “a study of modern history leads to the conclusion that the national interest of every State consists in its capacity to make war”. (*ibid.*, 224) There is no such thing as a national interest, she argues, besides the capacity to make war, since there is no common interest among “the great industrial, commercial, and financial companies of a country”, whose activities transcend borders and sometimes are mutually supportive and sometimes not, and that, irrespective of the country they are located in. “Nor can [the national interest] be defined as the life, liberty, and well-being of the citizens, because they are continually being adjured to sacrifice their well-being, their liberty, and their lives to the national interest”. (*ibid.*) She observes, in one of her more frequently quoted remarks, that, “What a country calls its vital economic interests are not the things which enable its citizens to live, but the things which enable it to make war; petrol is much more likely than wheat to be a cause of international conflict”. (*ibid.*) Finally, she asks,

when economic and political interests have no meaning apart from war, how can they be peacefully reconciled? It is the very concept of the nation that needs to be suppressed – or rather, the manner in which the word is used. For the word national and the expressions of which it forms a part are empty of all meaning; their only content is millions of corpses, and orphans, and disabled men, and tears and despair. (*ibid.*, 225)

Harm, misfortune, or affliction occur in social contexts which has nothing to do with any particular period in the history of humankind, but everything to do with how humans relate themselves to each other or fail to do so, in action, with words, and with attention itself. Where there is no “consideration for our brothers in humanity”, which is to say when thought and judgment are disregarded, or language becomes empty of meaning and fails to connect up with human purposes and human needs, people are subject to the crush of social forces with misery for result.

Murdoch nowhere shows such a rich sensitivity to thought, action, language, society, and politics, and her overall moral vision suffers in proportion. To see more clearly how this is so, and to see more clearly the notions and intuitions that were important to Murdoch, I devote the next section to a review and criticism of her ideas on their own terms. This, in turn, will help to see more clearly Weil's thoughts and ideas to which I return in the final section.

Part Two – Seeing Murdoch Clearly

Though Murdoch does not have an account of social life, she does, nevertheless, recognize the significance of contexts for the meanings of words. “As Plato observes at the end of the *Phaedrus*,” she says,

words themselves do not contain wisdom. Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom. Words, moreover, have both spatio-temporal and conceptual contexts. We learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (SG, 31)

Making a connection with morals, Murdoch links discerning a context with attention to the virtues. She is arguing for unity in our moral experience, but a unity that is approached through a discernment of shades and nuances.

...increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity. What is it like to be just? We come to understand this as we come to understand the relationship between justice and the other virtues. Such a reflection requires and generates a rich and diversified vocabulary for naming aspects of goodness. (*ibid.*, 56)

There is a relationship here to the importance that literature has for her since, as she says, “the study of literature ... is an education in how to picture and understand human situations”. (*ibid.*, 33) And drawing together her Weilian-inspired emphasis on attention with the thought quoted earlier that “the moral life ... goes on continually,” she says that

if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. (*ibid.*, 36)

This is certainly so, at least some of the time, for a virtuous, or morally astute person, someone who is generally self-aware; it is less obviously so for someone whose vision is coarse or undifferentiated. The “work of attention” as Weil makes clear, has to be developed and encouraged.¹ What Murdoch should have said is that the quality of our decisions will reflect the quality of attention we bring to all of our affairs; when she says that “the moral life ... is something that goes on continually”, she is less prejudiced in favour of the morally astute.² These criticisms are important, but should not detract from the point Murdoch is making that decisions do not take place in a void, that they take place against a background of values and beliefs, attachments and affiliations.

I have already mentioned Murdoch’s interest in nature, art, and intellectual disciplines as ways of helping us to see clearly, and have discussed briefly the importance that art has for her (see page 30, above). I review these methods here since they are important to her overall vision. As she explains in the third and final essay of her book, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts”, each of these activities provides the opportunity for a person to be free, for a moment or a while, from the demands and trappings of the self. In fact, she calls this experience “unselfing”. Starting with attention to nature, she asks us to consider what is doubtless a familiar example to most people, being distracted and taken out of oneself, as it were, by some natural phenomenon. She imagines herself in an “anxious and resentful state of mind ... brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige” and then distracted by a flying kestrel. “In a moment

¹ See pp. 22 ff, above, and what is generally regarded as Weil’s most articulate account of attention, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God”, in *Waiting for God*.

² Closer to what I think she should say, but still prejudiced in favour of right action, she also says “We act rightly ‘when the time comes’ not out of strength of will but out of the quality of our usual attachments and with the kind of energy and discernment which we have available.” (SG, 89) If she removed the word “rightly” from her sentence, she would be covering both the cases when right, or right-seeming actions occur, and the cases when action falls short of being right. (This way of putting things presumes that we can generally speak meaningfully of right actions. I believe that we often can, but suspect that in many cases we are better off to speak of acting well or not, which tends to direct or redirect our attention back to the context of the action.)

everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.” (*ibid.*, 82) We may also, she says rightly, *deliberately* turn our attention to nature in order “to clear our minds of selfish care”. (*ibid.*)

As we can turn our attention to nature, we can also turn our attention to art. Art – by which she means good art, as opposed to mediocre art which lulls us with appeals to fantasy and promises of consolation – exhibits to us purposelessness in a way that is fit for contemplation. It “transcends,” Murdoch says, “selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer”. (*ibid.*, 85) As well, to the extent that it offers a fair portrayal of life, it shows us compassion and justice.³ Seeing clearly and responding justly are inseparable from virtue, Murdoch claims, and “art is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*.” (*ibid.*, 85)

Finally, she offers us a third method of “unselfing” which is by means of “the sciences, crafts, and intellectual disciplines excluding the arts”, (*ibid.*, 86) which she also refers to as *technai*, using Plato’s term. She argues that the *technai* function in much the same way as the arts, as far as moral education goes, insofar as they “can stretch the imagination, enlarge the vision and strengthen the judgment”. (*ibid.*, 87-88) They do this by presenting to the person “a reality of a new kind, very unlike ordinary appearances”.

³ Recall my discussion on pages 30-32 concerning the distinction between pity and compassion, and Murdoch’s confusion of this distinction. I emphasize this because, as I argued above, it reflects a failure to understand affliction.

For Murdoch’s account of art, I refer the reader to *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 83 ff. “Virtues as well as talents,” she says, “are required of the artist. The good artist, in relation to his art, is brave, truthful, patient, humble...” (*ibid.*, 84) Also that “the representational arts, which more evidently [than non-representational arts] hold the mirror up to nature, seem to be concerned with morality”. (*ibid.*) And, as quoted earlier, that “the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue”. (*ibid.*) I do not wish to dispute these claims, only to say that her view of art is by no means definitive. A writer like Nabakov, for example, who claimed of *Lolita* that it is a book with “no moral in tow” but who still believed that art concerns itself with beauty, makes it hard to see what is representational and what is not, forcing us to see, that is, that when a mirror is held up to nature, that a mirror is being held up to nature.

(*ibid.*, 88) She also believes that they offer a distinctive training in the virtues since to study well, research, or develop a craft requires honesty and humility,⁴ and the relationship of these virtues to others such as “justice or courage, or even love” may further be revealed through these activities. (*ibid.*, 87)

I accept these observations with one important reservation. Art can enliven a sense of justice and love in its representation of, or reference to, the human condition, but the *technai*, even a study of history, by themselves have nothing to do with justice.⁵ As I observed in a previous footnote (note 14, page 25), Murdoch does not distinguish a sense of justice where the well-being or welfare of others is at issue from a sense of “doing justice to a subject of study” where what matters is getting things right in a purely academic sense. Relatedly, she fails to emphasize that an intellectual problem or subject matter is wholly unlike another person or human situation, since other people, unlike intellectual problems, are themselves capable of discerning justice, and are beings susceptible to injury in the context of their relationships with each other. As Weil would say, people are thinking beings who have a capacity for consent, and this makes all the difference in our dealings with others as compared with facing a problem in mathematics or the design of a bridge.

When Murdoch says, in summary fashion, that “In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly,” (*ibid.*, 88) she again overextends the notion of justice, but we can see the significance, generally, that these activities have for her.

⁴ Weil, in her essay “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” observes that attention to one’s errors in study have the benefit of cultivating the virtue of humility. (WG, 109)

⁵ Consider, in this connection, Marx’s remark from the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” Marx was not impugning studies; my point is that study in and of itself is not obviously a matter of concern with human social and moral circumstances.

The methods of unselfing and the training in virtues which they provide lead on to what Murdoch calls “the central area of morality” – our lives with others. It is here that she turns to a discussion of ‘good’. Murdoch gives the following example:

Should I leave my family in order to do political work? Should I neglect them in order to practise my art? (*ibid.*, 89)

The good man knows whether and when art or politics is more important than family. (*ibid.*, 92)

When she says that “the good man knows whether and when art or politics is more important than family”, she means that achievement in art or politics by itself does not a good man make.⁶ Being good, she argues, requires being able to contextualize one’s activities in the whole of one’s life; this broadening of context, she argues further, is a move towards unity in thought and understanding, is occasioned by an increasing appreciation for hierarchy and unity among the virtues, and is also coincident with an increasing attention to the detail of the world. (*ibid.*, 92 ff.) These developments in character and awareness may also be occasioned by an honest recognition of one’s own mortality with the conclusion that only virtue remains as being of any worth. Presumably, this means that we come to see and accept the world as it is, governing ourselves with the utmost respect for the things of the world, our situations, our commitments, and other people. “The area of morals,” Murdoch says, “and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen ... as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world.” (*ibid.*, 95)

⁶ She says also that “a serious scholar who is also a good man knows not only his subject but the proper place of his subject in the whole of his life. The understanding which leads the scientist to the right decision about giving up a certain study, or leads the artist to the right decision about his family, is superior to the understanding of art and science as such.” (SG, 94) Note that *here* she recognizes that intellectual activities have wider contexts in which the lives of others are of concern. This does not, however, correct her use of the word “justice” when talking of the *technai* by themselves. Note also that the widening of context she describes in all of her examples concern the individuals’ lives beyond the scope of their professional activities. She does not talk, for instance, about how the scientist or artist situates his life or work in the context of a larger community of researchers or artists, or of the institutions that support research, or of consumers or patrons of the arts, and so on. This strikes me as no accident since, as I have already suggested, and as I will show, Murdoch’s morality fails adequately to countenance relationships.

Thus stated, Murdoch's view of the moral life is compelling. She makes a place for the contemplation of nature and art, and the practice of intellectual disciplines, and she treats the acquisition of virtue in a way that relates it to the whole of one's ongoing experience. Moral choices, furthermore, are seen on this view to arise out of the quality of attention one brings to one's ongoing experience, so that the better one is able to attend to the world around one and to one's situations, the better one will be able to discern the right action when faced with explicit moral choices. These are persuasive observations, but when we look more closely at Murdoch's account of moral life, we find that she describes morality in distinctively solitary terms. She says that the area of morals concerns "the quality of our relations with the world," but she gives us no developed account of relations with others.

It is worth noting, first of all, that Murdoch's discussion of the concept good emerges exactly at the point that she leaves behind her discussion of the methods of unselfing and proceeds to countenance our relations with other people. I have said little about her account of 'good' because I cannot get a good grip on it, nor on the role that Murdoch seems to think it plays. "The central explanatory image," she says, "which joins together the different aspects of the picture which I have been trying to exhibit is the concept of Good" (*ibid.*, 89) which "stretches through the whole of [the disparate and complex reality of human life] and gives it the only kind of shadowy unachieved unity which it can possess." (*ibid.*, 94-95) Perhaps the word 'good' does function as a superordinate virtue term which we cannot do without and which does not, as G. E. Moore argued, and as Murdoch agrees, admit of definition. Weil uses the word in the nominative case unapologetically, but not uncritically,⁷ and, as mentioned in part one, considers it to be

⁷ "The good," Weil says, "certainly does not possess a reality to which the attribute 'good' is added." (FLN, 316) Weil, it is worth remarking, is further attentive to her *use* of the word. "And what is this good?" she asks. "I have no idea – but what does it matter? It is that whose name alone, if I attach my thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods. If I know nothing more than that name I have no need to know any more, provided only that I know how to use it in this way." (*ibid.*, 315-16) For a commentary on these passages, see Winch, 200.

an ally of the words “justice,” “truth,” and “beauty”. All of these words, for Weil, however, get their meaning in relation to one’s experience both within and without the context of human relations and human affairs. Murdoch’s discussion of ‘good,’ although very much concerned with a person’s experience, makes no more than a superficial connection to human relations and affairs to the point that the concept seems to stand in as a substitute for these.

If we look at Murdoch’s examples of moral conflict – which are few –, we find that they all (and I do mean all) concern a single individual sufficiently empowered to make a significant decision, and that, moreover, the situations are so described that the agent faces his or her decision in isolation. Here are several:

Should a retarded child be kept at home or sent to an institution? Should an elderly relation who is a trouble-maker be cared for or asked to go away? Should an unhappy marriage be continued for the sake of the children? (*ibid.*, 89)

The case of the mother who has to consider each one of her family carefully as she decides whether or not to throw auntie out. (*ibid.*, 93)

There is [a] similarity between the honesty required to tear up one’s theory and the honesty required to perceive the real state of one’s marriage. (*ibid.*, 94)

In each of these examples a decision is to be made by one person about another person (a retarded child, an elderly relation), about a situation (a marriage), or about some thing (a theory). We do sometimes have to make important decisions on our own, but Murdoch gives no sense that there are other people who might contribute to the decision-making, either as confidantes, or as implicated others. Consider the example of the mother who is contemplating “throwing out auntie”. Who is auntie? Is she the mother’s sister, or the mother’s aunt, or does she bear some other relation to the people in the household? Is there a father on the scene? If so, what is his role in all of this? Why is auntie living with the family? How long has auntie lived with the family, and on what terms? What needs does auntie have? Is she capable of functioning on her own? Is she able to recognize the

burden that she represents to the family? Or is the burden felt only by the mother? These questions could be added to at length, but Murdoch presents her example as though it were a matter of one person's evaluation and decision – the mother's –, without giving any sense of the criteria relevant to the case. Moreover, saying that the mother needs to take everyone carefully into account is to assign her responsibility for the moral struggles of the others. Not only does this does not begin to address the structural features of auntie's life among the family, features by which we can begin to assess the case, it is also morally offensive in making the family members dependent on the mother for their well-being where the residency of auntie is concerned.⁸ In fact, they may be dependent on the mother in just this way, but if so, that would be a particular feature of the situation, and a troubling one at that. Murdoch's other examples are also subject to scrutiny. Even the case of a scientist faced with facts which falsify her theory is bound to be nuanced in numerous ways. Scientific research is a complex and collaborative enterprise, and the significant cases of someone unwilling or unable to abandon a bad theory must be few. Perhaps one of the best examples of this sort of recalcitrance is B. F. Skinner who remained a behaviourist all his life; but his work helped to shape and define psychological practice and research, and had applications, e.g. in the study and modification of animal behaviour.⁹

There are a couple of other things noticeably odd about Murdoch's examples. The first is that, as a novelist, Murdoch should be expert in understanding the details of relationships and interactions, but she makes no allusions to literature here, in

⁸It also has the strange consequence that, since, on Murdoch's view, morality is tied to individuals overcoming their selfishness, this makes the mother responsible for the family members' struggles with their own egos. I admit that Murdoch could not possibly mean such a thing, but then what does she mean? What room has she given for the others to be involved when they are clearly implicated?

⁹ I expect that there have been some lasting applications for humans as well, most probably in the treatment of abnormal or deviant behaviour.

connection with her examples, where such allusions would doubtlessly be of use.¹⁰ The second is that her target, philosophically speaking, is a view of human agency centred around rationalism and solitary choice. Her examples, however, retain a distinctive flavour of this view of the person by focusing on a single person faced with a consequential decision to make. At the least, she should have developed her examples and contrasted them with how the opposing view would have characterized each case. This might have been done for the auntie example by sketching a picture of the family with whom auntie lives; by indicating in this sketch something of the nature of the relationships in the household; by showing further, how the question of auntie's departure arises in the first place; then by indicating how the mother, if she is attentive, might be able quite easily to see what needs to be done, even though it may not be a decision that can be carried out easily or quickly, and even though it may involve emotional pain for some of the people involved, including herself. But Murdoch does not do this; instead, in opposition to her claim that "at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over", she presents us with examples in which the way forward is not at all clear.

It may not be possible to say why Murdoch developed a view of morals so unbalanced in favour of the individual moral agent, but it is possible to show some of the theoretical underpinning of her thoughts. In doing so, there are two threads to Murdoch's thought that I wish to tie off. One is her attraction to the idea of the mechanisms of the egocentric self; another is her disapproval and disavowal of the reigning views of the self of her day. To complete this section, I will then briefly discuss some of Murdoch's views on religion and its relationship to morals.

¹⁰ She does make a few passing references to literature or literary characters, but that is all. (See SG, 63 and 85.) She does not develop in any way the kind of structural detail that literature reveals and that allows us to see characters in their circumstances and in their relationships with others.

What concerned Murdoch was that the conception of the human being that was dominating philosophical discussion did not cohere with her own intuitions. In “The Idea of Perfection”, the opening essay of her book, she argues against the image of “‘the man’ of modern moral philosophy”: the lone, independent, rational and free agent. She calls this a behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian image of the person.

It is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts. (*ibid.*, 8-9)

“It is also incidentally,” she adds, “what may be called a democratic view, in that it suggests that morality is not an esoteric achievement but a natural function of any normal man.” (*ibid.*, 9) I believe that we are still operating with this vision, though the existentialist thread has been unwound and supplanted by such things as an emphasis on a community of language users which carries with it a conception of fraternity as opposed to seeing persons as isolated agents. Related to this is the notion of public practices as the source of our moral and conceptual *appui*. We may add to these shifts in perspective Murdoch’s own observations that moral life is an ongoing affair, and not limited to overt moments of choice. These more contemporary construals are not above examination and critique, but I will set those aside.¹¹ This leaves me with the behaviourist and utilitarian aspects of the above description to contend with – in short, to consider what Murdoch perceived as a perversion of moral understanding, i.e. that private individual experience is irrelevant to morality.

¹¹ For example, a Weilian critique of our more contemporary view is that it presumes a stable backdrop of persons engaged in mutually supportive activities, and this fails to take into account affliction and the conditions of affliction. Feminist critiques of Rawlsian political liberalism almost certainly apply here, e.g. critiques that try to countenance the reality of the chronically dependent, though I do not mean to identify dependency with affliction.

At the back of Murdoch's discussion is Wittgenstein's analysis of the public nature of language, striking a death-blow to any talk of introspectibilia, sense-data, or the Cartesian *cogitatio*. With these goes any partiality to the notion of privacy other than the ordinary one of keeping a secret. (See *ibid.*, 10) Murdoch describes the argument against the *cogitatio* as taking two forms: "(a) it's no use, (b) it isn't there". And since, if something is of no use, it hardly matters whether it's there or not, (b) does not even merit any great attention. (Behind this is Wittgenstein's well-known observation that a wheel that turns but does no work cannot be said to be part of the machinery.) With respect to (a), when Murdoch says that what is inner is no use, she means that there is nothing inner, or private, that contributes in any way to our understanding or our knowledge. Wittgenstein's private language argument does the bulk of the work here.

If there is a glass on the table, I can say to my friend standing nearby, "hand me that glass" and he may well pick up the glass and hand it to me. If there are two glasses on the table, he might ask, "Which one?" The glass is something that either of us can identify. "The tall one," I might say, or "the one closer to the window". But if I say, "I intend to throw that glass away," and a minute later I say again that I intend to throw the glass away, neither me nor my friend can point to any *thing* by which to identify my intention in the first instance as the same as or different from my intention in the second instance. Is it the same intention? This is an odd question, as though an intention could be something disembodied. It is less odd to ask, "Is *my* intention the same?" Answering affirmatively, however, is not to identify some state of mind, but to indicate possibilities for my behaviour against certain specified or specifiable background conditions.

Murdoch captures the force of Wittgenstein's argument well and succinctly when she says that

a mental concept verb used in the first person is not a report about something private, since in the absence of any checking procedure it makes no sense to speak

of oneself being either right or mistaken. ... no sense can be attached to the idea of an 'inner object'. There are no 'private ostensive definitions'. (*ibid.*, 12)

The private language argument gets pressed into service where moral philosophy is concerned in the following way, according to Murdoch. The criteria of applicability of concepts are public; moral and mental concepts are no exception; therefore “the inner must be thought of as parasitic upon the outer”. (*ibid.*, 10) She calls this the “genetic argument” since it identifies the locus of the meanings of concepts, mental and moral concepts included – it identifies from where, in other words, concepts get their meanings. By extension, it expresses that the way in which concepts are learned is both public and based upon use. A decision, Murdoch explains, might seem to be a private affair, but according to the genetic argument it is not. “I said some words to myself. But did I really decide? To answer that question I examine the context of my announcement rather than its private core.” (*ibid.*, 13)¹²

Murdoch acknowledges that Wittgenstein himself never drew conclusions about moral philosophy from his linguistic analyses, but that it was other philosophers who leaned on his work to create a philosophy of action free of a substantial self, and centred around an isolated will. (She names, in this connection, Stuart Hampshire, A. J. Ayer, Richard Hare, and, if only in respect of eliminating the substantial self, Gilbert Ryle.)¹³ She does not like the conclusions of these other philosophers, and so she has generated a *reductio ad absurdum*; her problem is that she accepts Wittgenstein’s private language

¹² Expressing her concern in terms of linguistic philosophy’s conception of reasons and rules, Murdoch says: “Reasons are public reasons, rules are public rules. Reason and rule represent a sort of impersonal tyranny in relation to which however the personal will represents perfect freedom. The machinery is relentless, but until the moment of choice the agent is outside the machinery. Morality resides at the point of action. What I am ‘objectively’ is not under my control; logic and observers decide that. ...” (SG, 15)

¹³ “...while Wittgenstein remains sphinx-like in the background, others have hastened to draw further and more dubious moral and psychological conclusions. Wittgenstein has created a void into which neo-Kantianism, existentialism, utilitarianism have made haste to enter.” (SG, 15) Note the tension that Murdoch expresses in this quote between accusing Wittgenstein for creating the problem, and absolving him at the same time as one who never actually drew the conclusions that she finds offensive.

argument, but cannot find anything else to criticize for the conclusions that clash with her intuitions. I think if she had been more attentive to Weil, if she had understood Wittgenstein better, and if she had thought through her intuitions more clearly, then she would not have found herself in this theoretical bind. These suggestions will gain in force from here to the end of this part of the thesis. Murdoch's solution, though, is to adopt an *ad hoc* solution, looking to have things both ways – to have, that is, the private language argument on the one hand, and to resist the conclusions of Hare and Hampshire on the other.

As my example of asking for a glass was meant to show, identifying something requires a world that is, for all intents and purposes, stable, and in which things can be compared with each other and located. As Murdoch aptly puts it, “knowledge requires the rigidity supplied by a public test.” (*ibid.*, 11) A stable world in which things can be identified is a public world, it is a world of observers, and it is a world in which rules govern the use of words – which is exactly, and all, that is meant by the notion of applying a word. Murdoch calls this way of construing identification, the “idea of identity”. “Wittgenstein,” she says again,

does not apply this idea to moral concepts, nor discuss its relation to mental concepts in so far as these form part of the sphere of morality. (That mental concepts enter the sphere of morality is, for my argument, precisely the central point.) But no limit is placed upon the idea either; and I should like to place a limit. (*ibid.*, 23-24)

Concepts like “jealousy,” “courage,” “love,” “compassion,” are highly contextual, and are learned in connection with the ongoing history of each person. For the purposes of morality, then, Murdoch urges that we can speak of a private, inner realm. The private language argument works well for concepts like ‘red,’ and ‘table,’ and ‘distance,’ but, she is telling us, when it comes to mental concepts in their relationship to morality, we ought to resist the argument. On the surface she has granted Wittgenstein his point about the

public nature of language, and she has sealed herself off from Hare and Hampshire. To what end, though? She must still offer us a conception of morals that will stand on its own and compete with the conceptions of which she disapproves.

In her second essay, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”, Murdoch asserts that:

Without some more positive conception of the soul as a substantial and continually developing mechanism of attachments, the purification and reorientation of which must be the task of morals, ‘freedom’ is readily corrupted into self-assertion and ‘right action’ into some sort of *ad hoc* utilitarianism. (*ibid.*, 69)

We can see her opponents behind this characterization of the denigration of the notion of freedom. And in her outline of her own view, we see here how the “powerful egocentric mechanism” and her target of “‘the man’ of modern moral philosophy” come together – the two threads I have promised to tie off. For the “more positive conception of the soul” that she believes will rescue us from the inner vacuum she believes to have been created by linguistic philosophy (or by certain philosophers running with the linguistic flag) is nothing less than the mechanisms, construed along Freudian lines, that govern (interfere with) the mind’s capacity for loving attention, whatever these mechanisms happen to be. She says, quite explicitly:

We have learned from Freud to picture ‘the mechanism’ as something highly individual and personal, which is at the same time very powerful and not easily understood by its owner. The self of psychoanalysis is certainly substantial enough. (*ibid.*, 53)

And, completing that same paragraph, she says:

neither the inspiring ideas of freedom, sincerity and fiats of will, nor the plain wholesome concept of a rational discernment of duty, seem complex enough to do justice to what we really are. What we really are seems much more like an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between the moments of choice. (*ibid.*)

Murdoch has created a paradox for herself in that the mechanisms of the selfish ego need to be overcome in order for the agent to see clearly (and not just at moments of overt choice, but, in the limit, all the time), but if they are overcome, then there seems to be no self left that can claim clear vision, and of whom the achievement of morality can be spoken.

Murdoch thus argues within a tightly closed circle of reason and evidence. If we retrace the steps of the last several pages, we see that Murdoch does think that the self and its mechanisms can be unproblematically overcome since she gave us three methods by which to achieve this, i.e. contemplation of nature, contemplation of art, and the practice of intellectual disciplines. These serve as preparations for moral life – so much so that she considers them *cases* of morality.¹⁴ However, when she comes to talk about moral life – our engagements, commitments, and, generally speaking, our relationships with other people – she seems not to know where to turn. Though she says that it is hard to see misery or simply another person clearly, she gives no indication why this is difficult, or in what the difficulty consists, let alone in what clear vision consists, other than to refer to overcoming selfishness. That sends her back to the methods of unselfing by way of analogy, and from there we move again to morality at its most important – our lives with other people –, at which point the self obtrudes, and she must revert again to methods of unselfing to indicate what is required for human relations. In short, Murdoch has no account of human relations.

Note the very way in which she states the problem of morality. She says, in the first passage quoted on page 55, that we need a “more positive conception of the soul as a substantial and continually developing mechanism of attachments, *the purification and reorientation of which must be the task of morals...*”. It makes sense to me that we should

¹⁴ See, for instance, SG, 40 and 58, where she describes art as a case of morals.

develop skills and abilities to deal with whatever gets in the way of our engagement with others, but to treat *that* as the end of morals is somewhat like recommending that a country limit its foreign policy to dealing with subversives from within its own borders. It may seem an appropriate high calling to set one's house in order, but if one excludes all other concerns, the peace that one achieves thereby will be a peace that cannot be shared because it makes no reference to others or to any purposes shared with others. Again, we might think – and I do – that it is well and good to develop emotional and psychological defences as part of living with and among others – otherwise the demands of others could become overwhelming. But to think that this might also be what morals comes to would be to construe life with others as a test of endurance.¹⁵

“Human beings,” Murdoch says,

are far more complicated and enigmatic and ambiguous than languages or mathematical concepts [*technai*], and selfishness operates in a much more devious and frenzied manner in our relations with them. (*ibid.*, 88-89)

There is a strange asymmetry to this way of putting things. The three methods of unselfing that she gives us all pertain to solitary activities, so when she says, without qualification, that selfishness is more devious in our relations with others, because Murdoch does not build into her account the reciprocity inherent in human exchanges, we have to think to recognize that the others are also beings subject – on Murdoch's account – to the devious operations of selfishness.

To put the case more strongly, her understanding of what people are does not so much as *allow* for reciprocity in human exchanges. In one place, she does seem to place

¹⁵ By defenses, I mean, in a Weilian vein, strength of attention to bear the demands that others can make on one, the goal being to recognize and accept the demands of others while leaving oneself free to meet those demands or not. Put another way, and in Weilian terms, where another does not recognize and respect one's own capacity for consent, one must preserve that capacity for oneself, but to do so in a way that preserves the capacity for consent in the other – in a way, that is, that forgives the other the injustice. Doing this requires a strenuous character, but it is not a test of endurance since the goal is to have and maintain relationships that are characterized by consent and that can flourish in all the ways that consensual relations allow.

people alongside each other by way of situating virtuous behaviour in a context. The comment concerns the famous thought experiment she presents us with in “The Idea of Perfection” and about which I will speak in a moment. Her observation is that if we are to use virtue words – “courageous”, “common”, “high-minded”, “mean” – we will not understand their use in a context without knowing something both of the person using the word and of the person to whom it is being applied. (see *ibid.*, 31-32) This might seem to be problematic because, for instance, person A might say that person B is being irresponsible, but we might believe that person A is vengeful and jealous and that even if B is slacking off a bit, in the case in question it is hardly worth mentioning. Murdoch would surely assert, however, that this only underlines her point that vision must allow of possibilities and that not only are we agents in the sense of being shakers and movers (whatever the degree of ramifications our actions may have for others), but that we are moral agents, and this requires that we have a moral vocabulary and can countenance a vivid contemplation of moral life. Once again, however, Murdoch says we must know something of each person but says not a word about the relationship the two people have in terms of the reasons for which they have anything to do with each other and which could range from mutual interest, to their having been thrown together professionally, to their being biologically related – in the same nest, as it were –, or that they had or have an asymmetric relationship of dependency (which itself could take numerous forms), and so forth. Indeed, when Murdoch suggests that in a moral situation concerning two people that a person outside of the situation but familiar with both people might be useful to one of them, she expresses the value of this not in terms of evaluating an interpersonal situation, or a relationship, but in terms of discussing the other in the moral situation on the analogy of two people discussing a work of art. (See *ibid.*, 31) This is because Murdoch already sees the moral situation uniquely, or almost uniquely, in terms of

appraisal of something external to oneself, not of something that involves oneself, or in which one is implicated and whose actions may have consequences for another person or other people. Though Murdoch is a renowned novelist capable of portraying people in relationships, as a theorist she emphasizes, on the one hand, the self as an ego-laden agent, and fails, on the other, to countenance the social structures that ground and guide and constrain human beings in their relationships with each other and in the fulfilment of their purposes in life. To show more clearly this disparity, I turn to her thought experiment alluded to above.

Murdoch asks us to imagine a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law, M and D respectively. Simply put, at the outset, M has a low opinion of D, finds her “pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile.” (*ibid.*, 16-17) She asks us to think of M as “an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her,” (*ibid.*, italics in the original) explaining that “When M is just and loving she sees D as she really is.” (*ibid.*, 36) Over time, M comes to see D in a more positive light, sees her as “refreshingly simple, ... spontaneous, ... gay, ... delightfully youthful, and so on”. (*ibid.*, 17) D, Murdoch allows, may be dead. Consequently, the change that takes place in M takes place in her mind, and has nothing to do with D’s behaviour. Furthermore, M’s behaviour does not change, so there is nothing publicly observable to account for the change in her view of D. But, as Murdoch asserts, acknowledging the private language argument, the fact that M may not be able to report on anything private taking place does not mean that she has been inactive. (*ibid.*, 23)

In sum, M comes to see D differently than she did before, Murdoch believes that her readers can identify with this kind of change, and she insists that this change is reflective of a moral activity. Therefore, according to Murdoch, seeing is – or can be – a moral

activity, it can be completely private, and the behaviourist and utilitarian insistence on public criteria for morality has been undermined.

Murdoch's example by itself is clear enough, but it does not reveal what she wants it to. To begin with, Murdoch complicates the issue philosophically with the focus she brings to bear on the notions of the individual, and of perfection. She says emphatically that "Love is knowledge of the individual. M confronted with D has an endless task." (*ibid.*, 27) To say that the task is endless is ambiguous between a temporal sense and an a-temporal sense of the task. In the temporal sense, it is merely ongoing and judgments are revisable for all sorts of reasons; in the a-temporal sense, love is a notion whose meaning we never fully grasp. (See *ibid.*, 28) As I discussed above (see page 26), Murdoch thinks that it is a contingent fact of our condition that there is "an ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes". Murdoch also says, as I quoted above, that "When M is just and loving she sees D as she really is," which suggests that loving D is an endless task because M can never get to the full truth of D. Whether the limitation lies with M's ever-increasing and never-completing understanding of the meaning of what it is to love, or with D's essential nature, or both, when Murdoch links, as she does, "the idea of the individual and the idea of perfection," (*ibid.*, 27) it becomes clear that it is the a-temporal sense of the task of loving that she has in mind. On the side of essentialism, this view suffers for lack of criteria for knowing when or in what measure the essential other has been seen (which is to say that the very essentiality of the other is in question); on the side of language, this view suffers because the notion of an ideal limit of loving has no clear meaning – to which issue I now turn.

The reason Murdoch turns to the idea of perfection is to safeguard the meanings of mental concepts in their relationship to morality from the results of linguistic

philosophy. “The entry into a mental concept of the notion of an ideal limit destroys the genetic analysis of its meaning,” she says. (*ibid.*, 28)

Murdoch argues that the criteria for the application of mental state terms are not the criteria that apply to a word such as “red”. “It is all very well to say that ‘to copy a right action is to act rightly’,” Murdoch says, quoting Stuart Hampshire, “but what is the form which I am supposed to copy?” (*ibid.*, 29) Moral life, she urges, is a life of progress – or at least should be; and progress is achieved in part by the use of virtue words, or normative-descriptive words (what she also calls “secondary value words”, “good” being the primary word *par excellence*).

Uses of such words are both instruments and symptoms of learning. Learning takes place when such words are used, either aloud or privately, in the context of particular acts of attention. ... words are not timeless, ... word-utterances are historical occasions. (*ibid.*, 31)

Because human life is so deeply idiosyncratic, she takes it that the application of moral concepts must be, in the limit, private, and that we cannot depend for their correct use upon impersonal criteria.

...if morality is essentially concerned with change and progress, we cannot be as democratic about it as some philosophers would like to think. We do not simply, through being rational and knowing ordinary language, ‘know’ the meaning of all necessary moral words. We may have to learn the meaning; and since we are human historical individuals the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit, and not back towards a genesis in the rulings of an impersonal public language. (*ibid.*, 28)

She asks us to consider “the case of a man trying privately to determine whether something which he ‘feels’ is repentance or not.” (*ibid.*, 25) “Here,” she tells us, “an individual is making “a specialized personal *use* of a concept. Of course he derives the concept initially from his surroundings; but he takes it away into his privacy.” (*ibid.*)

There is, however, nothing in what Murdoch says to make us believe that the private and historical trumps the public when it comes to the criteria for the right use of mental state terms. The notion of repentance is a public notion and exists because of attitudes that arise in situations of perceived wrongdoing between people.¹⁶ Granted, there may be a time when a man has no understanding of the term “repentance” and a time when he uses the term competently. There reaches a point, too, when some situations more readily call out for the word than do others, and a man may learn that repentance may be accompanied, though not necessarily, by other states such as anger or joy – that experiences, in short, can be multiply variegated. There is a certain fit between our experiences and the words of our language and beyond a certain point it becomes necessary to use extended and multiple descriptions to capture what we mean to convey, or to introduce expository devices of one sort or another. There is an infinite number of things that language can express, and there may be, as Weil argues in the case of affliction, a limit to what language can be used to convey. But that there are limits to language in this sense is a wholly different claim from the claim that there is an ideal limit to the meanings of mental concepts.

A man takes a term into his privacy, as Murdoch describes the matter, and this is supposed to show that the private goes on, though not amenable to any sort of report, are criterial for the meaning of the term. Taking a term into one’s privacy is, however, readily accounted for as a part of all mature language use. Lev Vygotsky made a compelling case to defend the idea that speech is internalized by children, roughly around the age

¹⁶ “Repentance” also has a particular use and meaning in the Christian tradition – which only underscores the fact that meaning is related to context. If there is an ideal limit to the meaning of the term then either Christians perverted its meaning by tying it to the notion of the (a) final judgment, or we, in contemporary society, have perverted its meaning by dissociating it from the notion of the final judgment. No one – I think – would seriously argue the former case, and anyone arguing for the latter – a staunch fundamentalist Catholic, perhaps – would find herself defending a theory of language that would have to distinguish between the parts of language that get their meaning in connection with the redemption offered humankind by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and those that do not, unless all of language issues from God, but that explains nothing. In short, what she would be explaining would be her Catholic beliefs and her use of words in connection with those beliefs. Note how the notion of an “ideal limit of meaning” has vanished here.

of seven. He wanted to understand the disappearance of egocentric speech in children. Egocentric speech, as the name suggests, is speech for oneself.

In egocentric speech, the child talks only about himself, takes no interest in his interlocutor, does not try to communicate, expects no answers, and often does not even care whether anyone listens to him. (Vygotsky, 15)

The concept of egocentric speech is owing to Piaget who distinguished it from socialized speech in which, as Vygotsky explains, “the child does attempt an exchange with others – he begs, commands, threatens, conveys information, asks questions.” (*ibid.*) One of the interesting things about egocentric speech is that it eventually goes away. Piaget’s explanation for this is that a child begins life as a solitary being who needs to be socialized, and that the disappearance of egocentric speech is the result of the child’s gradual socialization. Vygotsky turns this analysis around. In a series of experiments designed to frustrate the social dimension of the child’s environment, Vygotsky showed that egocentric speech dropped dramatically.¹⁷ If Piaget had been right that egocentric speech dies out as the child is socialized, i.e. that it is an a-social or nonsocial phenomenon, then egocentric speech should remain the same, or increase, when the child is socially isolated. Since it did not, Vygotsky argues,

It is logical, then, to assume that egocentric speech is a form developing out of social speech and not yet separated from it in its manifestation, though already distinct in function and structure.¹⁸ (*ibid.*, 138)

The child, Vygotsky concludes, begins life as a social being who acquires language in a social setting and who comes to use it, out loud, when on his own, or engaged in

¹⁷ In the first experiment, the child was placed with either deaf-mute children or foreign children; in the second experiment, he was with strangers or on his own; in the third experiment, there was too much noise to talk with others (an orchestra played loudly outside – this was some 70 years ago, long before boom boxes). The first experiment frustrated comprehension, the second frustrated “collective monologue,” the third frustrated “the vocal quality of egocentric speech.” See Vygotsky, 134-138.

¹⁸ See Vygotsky, 138, for a further elaboration of the relationship of egocentric speech to inner speech on the one hand, and to social speech on the other.

individual tasks; as his mind develops, language eventually becomes internalized as inner speech. That is, the child internalizes the social practices of language, so that the inner truly is parasitic upon the outer. (See *ibid.*, 132 ff.)

All of this said, Murdoch's observation is true that mental state terms are not like terms like 'red', or the terms, to offer another example, for household furniture. It does not follow, though, that the meaning of mental concepts relies upon something irreducibly private. The criteria for mental concepts are to be found, *contra* Murdoch, in the public world, not the private. Specifically, the criteria for mental concepts are to be found in the *social* world. Whereas colour terms or furniture terms may be readily learned in the presence of exemplars for these terms, the acquisition of mental concepts requires an understanding of social context.¹⁹

Ironically, Murdoch's thought experiment implicitly acknowledges this. M is loving and just when she exercises her ability to be self-critical and leaves open the possibility that she may be mistaken in her opinion of D.²⁰ The mother-in-law, M, Murdoch tells us, has a negative opinion about her daughter-in-law, D. "However," she says,

¹⁹ William Turnbull and Jeremy Carpendale have recently published evidence for the role of social interaction in the development of both social understanding and the acquisition of the language of social interaction, i.e. mental state terms. (Turnbull and Carpendale, 2001) For an overview of their study, see Appendix A.

²⁰ In fact, Murdoch's use of the words "loving" and "just" is a problem. We are much better to follow Weil here who is perfectly clear, when she speaks of justice as love, that she has in mind attention to those who suffer and who, in their suffering, are not acknowledged. At the heart of this conception of love and justice is a concern to preserve in others the capacity for consent. Murdoch has none of these considerations in play. Furthermore, as I have already argued, Murdoch has confused the faculty of attention with morality itself. (See page 25.) Consequently, her claim, "When M is just and loving she sees D as she really is," is a distortion of Weil's notion of attention, and a serious trivialization of the concept of love as Weil elaborates it. After all, seeing D as spontaneous instead of as undignified, is hardly the same as recognizing the submission, for the sake of being able to eat, of industrial workers to the numbing brutality of their working conditions. (Note here my emphasis on the submission of the workers, as opposed to the conditions in which, and the circumstances under which, they work.) And to better respect the notion of attention as we find it in Weil's work, it would have been better to say, when M lets D be as she is, she is being just and loving. Murdoch acknowledges that she borrows the term "attention" from Weil. She almost certainly derives from Weil as well the notion of being just and loving. In short, she mishandles all of these concepts, to the detriment of her own work, and with the result of distorting and misrepresenting Weil. I will say more about this below. For now, in aid of my exposition, I continue with Murdoch's use of the terms "loving" and "just".

the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. (SG, 17)

"I am certainly jealous," Murdoch writes into the example. As if to emphasize this aspect of the scenario, she says just a bit earlier, "M feels that her son has married beneath him". (*ibid.*) Jealousy is a mental concept, and here points to the larger social situation of which M and D are a part, a situation that would not exist without M's son, who is now also D's husband. Except for this man, *M and D have nothing to do with each other*. The attention M gives to D makes sense only against the backdrop of the social situation that includes M's son. And even though M herself may not assign particular significance to that situation – it being, perhaps, all too obvious – Murdoch, as a moral theorist, ought to assign importance to it. She does not, however, say anything about it.

To restate these points more succinctly: M's view of D changes not because of her attention to D in and of itself, but because she exercises her ability to be self-critical. That is possible only by M recognizing the context of her relationship with D. Put another way, M's ability to be self-critical is possible only as she situates herself in a world that is larger than the world of just her and D, and such a larger world – a world of individual, shared, and common purposes – is the world in which mental concepts get their meaning, because that is the world that they implicitly refer to.

Earlier I argued – on pages 57-58 – that Murdoch's understanding of what people are does not so much as allow for reciprocity in human exchanges. We can see now that the problem is not that Murdoch does not understand reciprocity, but that she makes no theoretical room for it. Without offering a definition of "reciprocity", I am using it in this instance in the sense that as attention to another exposes the other, it also has the

redounding effect of exposing oneself, and vice versa – if one is honestly, as opposed to indulgently, self-critical, one will tend to see others in an equally honest light. This is related to Weil's observations of encountering affliction: that we recoil from it. The recoil is a refusal to see oneself in the misery of the other. Mostly quoting from Weil's *Notebooks*, Richard Bell writes,

To refuse to accept one's own suffering 'places an obstacle in the way of compassion. It is the refusal to recognize oneself in the misery of others – which necessarily wears an ugly appearance. (Lack of humility; compassion is never pure without humility.)'²¹ (Bell, 94)

If a person begins, as does M in Murdoch's example, from a place of humility, it is easier to see another person fairly. In general, the quality of the view we have of another is occasioned by the quality of the view we have of ourselves. Presumably, M, in the example, comes not only to see D in a good light, but also ceases to be jealous of her. This would, one would think, also involve a change in M's attitudes toward her son, so that she becomes less protective and less possessive of him, for instance. Murdoch, however, does not speak to these things.

The criterion for loving and just attention is a contemplation of the social situation together with an engagement with one's own self-image. M comes to see D fairly only when she considers the evidence for her own views; this engages her in a consideration both of the social context of her views, and of the views themselves.

At this point I must make a clarification, already discussed in footnote 20 on page 64. The passage just quoted from Weil is about suffering and misery, not about whether another person is impertinent or spontaneous. If there is love in Murdoch's example it is in the mother being able to renounce her claim upon her son, not in the pretty words that

²¹ I did not manage to obtain a copy of Weil's *Notebooks*, and so am quoting Bell which is the only source I have for this passage.

she comes up with to describe her daughter-in-law. When Weil discusses justice in terms of a spirit of attention and love, she says unambiguously that the concern at issue is a concern that others be not harmed; her concern, in the limit, is with affliction. Murdoch's use of the notions "loving" and "just" is suggestive and nice-sounding, but without any reference to their careful use by Weil – and Murdoch admits the connection with Weil when she acknowledges her borrowing of the word "attention"²² –, is nothing short of a misappropriation that in the field of morals does far more harm than good. The potential to slight may enter into Murdoch's example, but humiliation occasioned by pain or the threat of pain does not.

Murdoch contemplates M and D as individuals and acknowledges their shared social circumstance which includes M's son who is also D's husband; it is another thing, however, to contemplate the social circumstance, by which I mean to recognize as theoretically relevant the social context, or contexts, that M and D share. This inability to contemplate the social, it should be clear, runs throughout Murdoch's book. And because she does not contemplate the social, she cannot see affliction. This is why when she talks about seeing misery it sounds like she is reporting to us something that she has overheard, and this, generally, is the quality of her reading and interpretation of Simone Weil. Murdoch's appropriation of Freud should be seen in this light because without the broader framework of society as a part of her philosophical reflections, the only self that can possibly enter into her theory is a self constituted by its own phenomenological and psychological reality – which is not the same thing as evidence for a substantial self.

These observations help to explain some further oddities about Murdoch's thought experiment. "*Ex hypothesi*," Murdoch emphasizes, "M's behaviour, beautiful from the start, in no way alters." (SG, 17) This does not seem plausible, and gives, moreover, a

²² "I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." (SG, 33)

peculiar cast to the thought experiment. It seems implausible because there are changes in behaviour that occasion changes in vision and understanding of another person, whether we have a more truthful image of that person or not.²³ We may be more or less prone to anger, for instance, more or less joyful, more or less relaxed around the other person, and so forth. In more extreme cases our image of another person may shatter, with the result that our view of ourselves and of the world may be seriously called into question, and we may be depressed, anxious, and unstable. That M's behaviour should in no way change seems also peculiar, for the very countenance of M toward D should be different before and after her change of heart, otherwise what could it matter what she thinks of D? M's 'correct' conduct, as Murdoch puts it, if the same before and after her change of heart, can only derive from norms that have nothing to do with the activity that Murdoch is trying to get us to acknowledge as moral. Whether she sees D justly or not, then, has nothing to do with D. Murdoch, in fact, says as much.

Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind. (*ibid.*)

Murdoch wants us to believe that M's change of heart is moral, that, as she says, "M has in the interim been *active*...." (*ibid.*, 19), and that what is happening "happens entirely in M's mind". In other words, according to Murdoch, morality need not have any issue. If I have been invited to testify in court on behalf of an unsavory character, and resolve, after much honest deliberation, to do so because I believe that he deserves support in his case,

²³ This is not to slip into essentialism. I believe that there is some sense to the notion of the way a person is, or of the kind of person a person is. It is easy to imagine the following eulogistic comments: "He was kind, kept to himself, polemical when it came to sports and politics, good with children, shy in crowds, but animated in close company, even quick with a bawdy joke when he'd had a couple of drinks." These are highly contextual observations and do not depend on there being an essence to the person.

and on the way to the courthouse I am run over by a bus and killed, there may not be issue to what is clearly – whatever one may think of my actual decision – moral behaviour on my part. Murdoch, however, seems to be treating M’s deliberations as *sufficiently* moral, as if, having resolved to testify on the other person’s behalf, I then remained at home. I can see absolutely no defence of this view.

Murdoch says as well:

M’s activity is peculiarly her own. Its details are the details of *this* personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately. M could not *do this* thing in conversation with another person. (*ibid.*, 22, italics in the original)

I tend to think that an attentive confidante could, in fact, be of some help, but the point that Murdoch is making is essentially the point Weil made about the operations of the mind in solitude. “A group of human beings cannot even add two and two,” Weil says. “Working out a sum takes place in a mind temporarily oblivious of the existence of any other minds.” (SWA, 56) (And though the details are the details of the person reflecting, humility occasions disinterest for the person herself.) That M requires solitude to see her situation clearly – and note, that I say “her situation”, and not simply “D” – does not by itself make her reflections moral, though Murdoch says that “M’s activity is hard to characterize ... *precisely because it is moral*”. (SG, 22, italics in the original) I acknowledge that Murdoch was at pains to countenance facts of moral life that seemed not to be well accommodated within the reigning views of her day, but this claim is stipulative. Murdoch’s account of moral behaviour has broadened the notion of moral choice to include the influence of the quality of attention we bring to our ongoing situations. She has gone too far, though, in cutting off her concern with moral behaviour at the point of overt action and consequence for others.

Murdoch is clearly concerned with M as a moral agent, but for all that she talks about a just and loving vision of D, D is surprisingly incidental to our appraisal of M, and to whether or not M is, or has been, good. Speaking of M, Murdoch says that “some people might say ‘she deludes herself’ while others would say she was moved by love or justice. I am picturing a case where I would find the latter description appropriate.” (*ibid.*, 18) All of this is just self-flattering. If M’s behaviour in no way alters over the course of her change of view, we might go so far as to suggest, even if M is a woman who upholds the highest standards of Victorian propriety, that she has been disingenuous toward D, that her behaviour does not deserve to be called beautiful, and that she cannot be said to have been, as Murdoch would like us to think, “moved by love or justice”.

If M could attend to the social situation around her, she might simply recognize that her daughter-in-law is a person whose situatedness in the world is specific and subject to constant influences, her responses to which will arise from the full constellation of her past experiences, with results that can be dramatic or thoroughly mundane. M might simply let her go about her business, adopt the attitude ‘judge not that ye be not judged’, and perhaps, by and by, discover that she and D have some things in common. It is the shared circumstances of the people in question that give rise to the judgments that are of such concern to Murdoch.

It is the shared circumstances, as well, that give meaning to mental concepts. One can only speculate why we find in Murdoch a retreat to a vaguely reified inner world wherein she postulates the criteria for the meaning of mental concepts, all in defense of an agency which has no connection with a world of others. Murdoch wrote that “The vanishing of the philosophical self, together with the confident filling in of the scientific self, has led in ethics to an inflated and yet empty conception of the will, and it is this that I have been chiefly attacking.” (*ibid.*, 74) Wittgenstein himself, always in the background,

said, “And now it looks as if we had denied mental processes. And naturally we don’t want to deny them.” (Wittgenstein 103, para. 308) Murdoch is not, as she thinks, rescuing morality from science. If ever that was done, it was done by the very philosophy that she is treating as the culprit: the philosophy that eliminated any talk of the privacy of evidence.

One of Murdoch’s underlying intuitions is that the moral philosophy of Hare and Hampshire and others, deriving in part from the private language argument, omits something that moral philosophy cannot do without. So strong is her intuition that she claims that “people may begin to protest and cry out and say that something has been taken from them.” (SG, 13) She continues:

Surely there is such a thing as deciding and not acting? Surely there are *private* decisions? Surely there are lots and lots of objects, more or less easily identified, in orbit as it were in inner space? It is not, as the argument would seem to imply, silent and dark within. (*ibid.*)

My argument has been that Murdoch reifies the ‘inner space’ psychologically, and that she sidesteps, if she does not misunderstand, the full extent of Wittgenstein’s insights about the public nature of language. The second of these two points is particularly important where the meaning of moral concepts is concerned. First, because she downplays – even ignores – that a word like ‘repentance’, even if more difficult to learn than other words, nevertheless is used in accordance with certain types of human experience that are recognizable as experiences of that type. If, as she suggests, a person has to go into his privacy to learn the meaning of the term, the question is, how, unless the meaning is public, can the person know, or come to know, what is and what is not relevant to the meaning of the term? If he uses the word incorrectly, that does not reveal anything about moral concepts *per se*, and, the details of learning how to use the term aside, he is not in a significantly different position from the child who calls a chair a couch, or a slipper a shoe. Second, Murdoch’s appeal to the notion of an ideal limit for the meanings of moral

concepts is spurious, much for the reasons just given. The concept love, Murdoch urges, has an ideal limit because as our experience grows and deepens, so too does the meaning we attach to the word 'love'. Only, a part of human experience is the experience itself of growing older and seeing the stages of life and reflecting upon them. Others have gone through this and have been able to talk about it, and to talk about other life experiences from the perspective that goes with aging²⁴ and reflection, and that is why the meaning of the word can grow and deepen in one's own use of it. The field of application, we may say, is extensive. Consider now that a person designs and builds a chair that is unlike any other chair ever seen but is still, obviously, a chair. Though there are many disanalogies between the concept 'chair' and the concept 'love', does my example mean that there is an ideal limit to the concept 'chair'? I think not, and that we can dispense with the notion of an 'ideal limit' without impugning any of the facts of language acquisition and language use. Finally, Murdoch fails to register the importance of social context, both for the meanings of mental state terms, and for morality itself. Meaning is tied to a context, but the social world – social context – is itself the context for mental state terms, and *a fortiori*, for moral concepts. Words like 'tree' and 'house' refer to a physical world (even though a house is a human artifact), but 'believe' and 'lie' and 'repentance' refer to a social world.²⁵

²⁴ Though not too much need be attached to the notion of aging here. Consider, if only to keep from romanticizing the old, Thoreau's remarks: "Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned any thing of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons, as they must believe; and it may be that they have some faith left which belies that experience, and they are only less young than they were. I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me any thing, to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it." (Thoreau, 111)

²⁵ We may ask, what of words like 'courage' and 'prudence'? One can be courageous or prudential without other people being obviously involved, as in the case of someone on a solo expedition in the wilderness. These words clearly have, as well, though, meanings tied to social contexts, and it is possible that these words derive their non-social meanings from their social ones. Their meanings are also connected with human purposes whether in isolation or in the context of others. Only so much can be made of that point,

Murdoch says, clearly enough, that the good man “must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims”. (*ibid.*, 57) Her very next sentence, however, is that “The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy; the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.” (*ibid.*) The task of morals is not – or not merely –, as she claims, “the purification and reorientation” of the soul; it is, importantly, to take into account other human beings in a way that respects them and oneself in all the ways that pertain to their well-being in a context that includes one’s own well-being and the well-being of others – to respect them, in other words, emotionally, psychologically, physically, in consideration of their needs, wants, goals, and purposes, and so forth. For all her emphasis on clear vision in human relationships, Murdoch never shows us persuasively what this comes to. Her best example is of M coming to see D in a way that is “just and loving”, but even here there are many sides to the example that are not developed, and some things, like the correctness of M’s unchanging behaviour, make the example unconvincing and unclear. Over and above these observations, when Murdoch says, comparing attention to others with attention to *technai*, that “selfishness operates in a much more devious and frenzied manner in our relations with [human beings]” (*ibid.*, 88-89), she does not acknowledge the operations of the selfish ego in others, only in oneself.

Murdoch helps us to see that there is a great deal that is relevant to morality that is the stuff of daily living and ongoing relationships, but she does not capture these things in a way that is theoretically sound. The other, for Murdoch, is, and remains, a kind of ideal, not to be sullied by contact, and whose otherness is preserved by a theoretical

however, since the verb “build” is often tied to a social context and human purpose but is not in any obvious way a mental state term, let alone a moral concept. These reflections do not undermine my arguments, however. What they demonstrate is that the world of shared human purposes has to do with more than understanding and morality.

retreat into a substantive conception of the self which serves the double duty of keeping one's own self inviolable. And paradoxically, it is the "powerful egocentric mechanism", what she has identified as the enemy to morality, which provides the substantive conception of the self she claims we need. In sum, her view of morality comes off terribly unbalanced.

Murdoch's underlying intuitions also run in a direction away from the self, and altogether away from others. "There is," she says, "something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human beings which automatically suggests that 'there is more than this'." (*ibid.*, 71) Earlier I observed that she introduces the concept 'good' just at the point where she should be making contact, theoretically, with others. We see the same thing here. Not only does Murdoch speak of looking compassionately instead of being compassionate, but compassion seems subordinate to this something other that is "more than this". This is where Murdoch's interest in religion enters into her work. "Morality," Murdoch tells us,

has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience. (*ibid.*, 72)

This I can only call bizarre from beginning to end. First, it would seem that Platonist though she is, Murdoch has forgotten the lesson of the *Euthyphro*: morals do not derive from the gods; whether or not they have been associated with the gods is irrelevant. Second, in all of human history there have been hundreds if not thousands of religions – some animistic, some pantheistic, some monotheistic, some without gods, and so forth. The particular relevance she sees between morality and religion should therefore be spelled out, at least a little bit. This does not even begin to touch on the role of mysticism in this regard. To say nothing of the varieties of mystical beliefs and practices, I doubt that we can even be sure what the appearance of mysticism in human history is. The only records

we have for individual religious enlightenment – for example, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Socrates (perhaps), the Pythagoreans (perhaps) – are all fairly recent in the long history of humanity as a social and linguistic animal, and whenever it was that language appeared on the scene, it was a very long time before humans became agricultural and founded cities (about ten thousand years ago). It may be, for all we know, that a sedentary way of life was a necessary condition for mystical traditions to become established and influence religious and moral life. And that gets at the heart of the matter. For it makes perfectly good sense to say that the morality of a religious person or a mystic will be informed by her religion or mysticism, or at the least, continuous with it – and one would expect as much. But this in no way makes mysticism a legislator of morals *tout court*. Finally, Murdoch's own formulation of mysticism as "a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience" is a puzzling blend of the transcendent and the pessimistic. On the one hand, she thinks that the concept good gives unity to experience – in fact, as I read her, the only unity we can achieve, and one which we are impelled toward –, but on the other hand, she thinks that the unrealizability of good bequeaths to us a pessimism. (See again page 26, above) Her unesoteric mysticism – if it be a mysticism at all – is thus a pessimistic mysticism. The pessimism she describes is strongly reminiscent of authoritative Christianity, but, unless I am mistaken, Christian mysticism is generally ecstatic, or joyous, or both. These observations do no more, perhaps, than suggest confusions inherent in Murdoch's account, but her situation is not helped when she identifies her mysticism-of-the-Good with morality, as when she says, "One might say that true morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsolated love of the Good." (*ibid.*, 90) At points like this in her work it is hard to know where we are.

The matter is made only worse by Murdoch's numerous appeals to the "ordinary person's" intuitions about morality. She would like to honour the "virtuous peasant", (*ibid.*, 2) and to uphold "serious common sense" and "an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals". (*ibid.*, 37) At the same time, she admits that "it is characteristic of morals that one cannot rest entirely at the conventional level, and that in some ways one ought not to." (*ibid.*, 29) When these various thoughts are considered in light of her remarks about religion and morals, it is not clear if the ordinary person is to have the resources of a nonesoteric mystic, or if that is to come later in her moral development – and moral development, after all, is, for Murdoch, a feature of moral life, though when it comes to the virtuous peasant, he seems to be exempt. Using the verb "know" first intransitively and then transitively, Murdoch says that "The virtuous peasant knows, and I believe he will go on knowing, in spite of the removal or modification of the theological apparatus, although what he knows he might be at a loss to say." (*ibid.*, 72) This passage, unfortunately, tells us nothing more than that some people are virtuous and that theology is not necessary to the fact.

Murdoch comes closest, perhaps, to an enlightening observation when, in the following quotation she answers her own question.

What is it for someone, who is not a religious believer and not some sort of mystic, to apprehend some separate 'form' of goodness behind the multifarious cases of good behaviour? Should not this idea be reduced to the much more intelligible notion of the interrelation of the virtues, plus a purely subjective sense of the certainty of judgments? (SG, 59)

If that, however, is the direction of her thought, then we are left to wonder at the value and necessity of her references to mysticism and religion. It would seem that a project of discovering the world and one's place in it alongside one's fellow humans were the order of the day, and a sufficient order at that. That, however, only brings us back to square one and the question: in what does morality consist? For Murdoch, as we have

seen, morality is about seeing clearly, we learn how to see clearly through attention to nature, art, and intellectual disciplines, and “true vision,” she says, “occasions right conduct”. (*ibid.*, 64) Early in this thesis (page 24) I reformulated this last claim into a much weaker and contingent claim for the reason that Murdoch treats true vision (already question-begging) as a necessary and sufficient condition of right conduct when that is precisely what we want to know about. The positive contribution of her work is that she shows us that discerning right conduct is much more subtle and complex and ongoing than other theorists had recognized; a serious problem with her work is that she fails to show the connection between discernment and right action.²⁶ Defining a relationship between the two arbitrarily absolves her of attending to a very important theoretical matter. In truth, Murdoch does not have the resources to deal with this. Part of the problem is that she takes Weil’s notion of attention, holds it up as a moral ideal, and creates a theory of morality around it, so that any act of attention is a moral act. Unfortunately Murdoch is unable to tell us very much about acts of attention beyond cases of isolated, contemplative activities where the object of attention may be said to keep still. When it comes to other people she speaks in terms of virtues, which allows her to speak of other people descriptively, and in terms of the concept good, which allows her to transcend the matter of human relationships, and to view it from the safety of an abstraction. The notion of attention in her hands, therefore, ends up doing both too much and too little work – too much in cases that are not moral cases, and too little when it comes to cases that involve other people.

Whatever the details of a moral theory, it must countenance, in one way or another, human relationships, and that is to countenance the social world. I am not offering a complete moral theory in this thesis, but I am offering reflections that should, I think, bear upon any moral theory. I turn now to the final section of this thesis to explore a view

²⁶ See also my discussion on page 43, including footnote 2.

of human relationships owing to Simone Weil and that, without being phenomenological, takes account of the possibilities for expression and the voluntary directing of one's attention in relation to the structures of the human relationships of which one forms a part. It is a view of human relationships that is simultaneously, to speak somewhat metaphorically, from within and from without. The notion of context will play a role in my analysis which turns on the fact that contexts may themselves be contextualized. These observations figure into my discussion of affliction, and in turn lead to my proposal that there are four stages of awareness in the thought of Simone Weil.

Part Three – Seeing Weil Clearly

The moral problem, as I discussed it at the end of part two, concerns right action, but it also implicitly concerns the notions of responsibility and blame. Murdoch, as I have argued, defines these problems away by claiming that right action follows upon true vision. Another way of formulating her claim is to say that if a person behaves poorly, it is because he has not seen truly and well. Adolf Eichmann was held accountable for his crimes, but there is nothing in Murdoch's theory to tell us why. It is not enough to say that his behaviour was reprehensible, and perhaps fatuous to say that he did not have clear vision. A part of Eichmann's defence which has become famous is that he was following orders. History has rejected this defence on the part of a rational man. If, however, an intellectually deficient person does something wrong having followed someone's orders, should he be blamed? What if, instead, the person is not intellectually deficient, but merely inexperienced, say an adolescent thrust into a situation of responsibility without adequate preparation? These examples contain within themselves considerations relevant to assessing blame in each case; and we can see that acting rightly or wrongly has to do with more than clear vision or the lack of it.

Implicit in many (and perhaps all) moral considerations is the matter of responsibility, to which is related the notion of 'being responsible'. There are two senses of 'being responsible' worth distinguishing. One is the sense of being responsible for a specific action or outcome; the other is the sense of being a responsible person, by which I mean not so much being trustworthy as being blameworthy. The second sense is a prerequisite

for the first.¹ In connection with this is the fact that responsibility is given in part by the structure of a situation. There can be no responsibility where there are no purposes, and where there is no world in which those purposes may be pursued and possibly fulfilled. A child may proclaim that he is the leader of a great army, but the fuss he makes in the evening at taking a bath, and his struggle the following day with a class dictation may well belie his assertions about his military status. Similarly, to say of a man that he is responsible and yet for there to be nothing that results from his direction or intervention is to assign him an empty honorific. To see the double sense of 'being responsible' we have only to imagine a person hired for a job in which, for instance, she is to assume responsibility for the year-end statements of a corporation. It would seem to follow that if some of those statements are poorly handled, that she is responsible for those oversights or errors. (Preoccupation with responsibility in this way keeps politicians very busy.) A feature of this last example is that the new employee's blameworthiness attaches specifically to her job description. Where moral considerations of a more general sort are concerned, blameworthiness is a character trait that we expect others to have. Generally speaking, we treat other people as though they are capable of assuming responsibility for themselves, and consider it a shortcoming if they cannot. The man who repeatedly commits driving offenses has his license revoked. The man who repeatedly steps on others' toes, or disappoints others, or embarrasses others, or repeatedly lets them down, will be deprived of their company or treated with disdain or, in the worst case, contempt. Simply put, others will turn away from him. There is an affinity here with the phenomenon of recoil that Weil describes is a response to affliction. Not incidentally, Weil observes that "Contempt is the contrary of attention". (WG, 153) "Men think they are despising crime," she says,

¹ In the Eichmann case, Eichmann's defense was an insult, for his role in the deaths of countless humans was never at issue. The Nazis valued his work, the rest of the world condemned it. He was responsible, that is, in both of the senses I am highlighting here.

when they are really despising the weakness of affliction. A being in whom the two are combined affords them an opportunity of giving free play to their contempt for affliction on the pretext that they are scorning crime. He is thus the object of the greatest contempt. (*ibid.*)

The exceptions to this, she explains, have everything to do with the prestige associated with a crime, but not with crime *per se*. Thus a murder, “on account of the fleeting moment of power which it implies,” (*ibid.*, 153-154) might not elicit contempt, whereas theft, because attachment to property is so strong, tends to elicit strong indignation. We may notice further that contempt, being dismissive of a person, is the very attitude which expresses that another is not blameworthy. Corresponding to the two senses of ‘being responsible’ that I have identified, there are two senses of ‘blaming’: one can be blamed for the quality of one’s character, and one can be blamed for one’s actions. Character and behaviour go together, of course, but a virtuous man may still commit a crime, and a hardened criminal may still act virtuously, so it is as well to keep the distinction in view.

We can begin to see the importance of attention *interpersonally* for morality. How one is viewed by others and how one views other people – with attention or with contempt – makes all the difference in the quality of our social relations. Attention honours others as beings worthy of participation in the realm of activities. What is extremely difficult is to maintain an attentive attitude toward others. For it is so often the case when a person does not toe the line that he becomes an object of contempt. In the example I gave above, when a person disappoints repeatedly, or repeatedly lets others down, there are two distinct ways in which others may come to avoid him. One is with contempt, the other is with shame which is attentive.

When one person assumes toward another an attitude of contempt, the message is precisely that the other is not responsible, is not capable of making sound decisions. Bringing attention to bear, however, treats the other in a relationship – any relationship – precisely as though she is responsible, which is to say blameworthy. Being responsible –

being blameworthy – requires, generally speaking, the attention of other people. The attention of others occurs only in a shared context, a context of purposes, obligations, needs, desires, and so forth: in short, in a mutually recognized world of human activity. Each of us, in measure as we take part in such a world, is a moral agent. The structuring context of human social life is essential for morality.²

To ground morality in the context of human activities does not guarantee that everyone will behave impeccably all the time. To treat someone as a moral agent is to honour a standard of behaviour. If it were not, the notion of blame would be vacuous because a moral agent would only be the person who behaves well or rightly; if she behaved poorly on an occasion she would be seen, in virtue of her behaviour as not moral on that occasion, and so not deserving blame. Blameworthiness applies to people all of the time, unless overriding considerations come into play, such as the effect of an emotional trauma.³ Those who are moral agents are capable of doing wrong, and their wrongdoings need to be acknowledged in a way that restores them to their place – taking it as given that this is a place of dignity – in the world of their fellows. In cases when the wrongdoing is sufficiently severe, this process of restoration to one's place among others is, according to Weil, precisely what punishment is for: to communicate that a person who has done

² An example may help to ground my abstractions. When Simone Weil worked in the factories her foremen blamed her, or scolded her, when things went wrong. If my account of blameworthiness is taken too narrowly, it would appear that Weil's factory experience was a prime case of a moral context that upheld her dignity because she was considered worthy of blame. The problem in the factory was that things were terribly out of balance. A problem in factory production was owing to a great many things – the required pace of the work, the worker's ignorance of the workings of the machine, the demoralizing effect of being subject constantly to orders, and so forth. When a worker was blamed, the blame brought an inordinate weight of responsibility down upon her. Moreover, the workers were hardly accorded any respect for having the capacity to think and judge as concerned their work, and for all intents and purposes were accorded none otherwise.

Weil's factory experience is worthy of study in its own right. See her "Factory Journal" in *Formative Writings 1929-1941*, and see several of the letters in *Seventy Letters*, particularly those to Albertine Thévenon, and "Monsieur B.," a factory manager. For now it is enough to consider the following passage from "Human Personality". "Modern societies, even democratic ones, seem to go about as far as it is possible to go in the direction of evil. In particular, a modern factory reaches perhaps almost the limit of horror. Everybody in it is constantly harassed and kept on edge by the interference of extraneous wills while the soul is left in cold and desolate misery. What man needs is silence and warmth; what he is given is an icy pandemonium." (SWA, 79)

³ Being able to discern these cases is itself part of moral behaviour and, though, important, I will not pursue the matter beyond this acknowledgement of it.

wrong is capable of doing otherwise, that she is worthy of better comportment, and to move her in the direction of such comportment. In language suitable for serious crimes, and drawing upon the notion of consent, Weil explains that “Justice in punishment can be defined in the same way as justice in almsgiving. It means giving our attention to the victim of affliction as to a being and not a thing; it means wishing to preserve in him the faculty of free consent.” (WG, 153) Those who are wounded, but in whom the wound is not too deep, Weil says, “may be cured naturally by a spell of well-being”. Those whose wounds are terribly deep, “in whom the wound is a laceration of the soul”, “require good in its purest form to assuage their thirst.” In some, their wounds and their need for healing do not readily show themselves. Thus, “sometimes it may be necessary to inflict harm in order to stimulate this thirst before assuaging it, and that is what punishment is for.”⁴ (SWA, 74) It is worth noting that she observes with all due concern that “we have lost all idea of what punishment is. We are not aware that its purpose is to procure good for a man. For us it stops short with the infliction of harm. That is why there is one, and only one, thing in modern society more hideous than crime – namely, repressive justice.” (*ibid.*, 75)

The notion of consent is extremely important in Weil’s later work. Without it, the notion of blameworthiness and of restoring a person to her place in the world of her fellows, as I have put things, could easily be construed as making allegiance to a social order a prime objective of human life. Simone Weil cared about citizenship, and she cared about traditions that nourish and sustain well-being and dignity. In *The Need for Roots*, she says, for instance, that “A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.” (NR, 43) She

⁴ “Even capital punishment,” says Weil, “although it excludes reintegration with society in the literal sense, should be the same thing.” (SWA, 75)

trusts, generally, that a society that is informed with an adequate moral spirit is one which will organize itself on moral lines. Thus, her vision of morality is one that strives to be adequate to the peasant farmer, the industrial worker, as well as the intellectual and the statesman, and it is a vision in which each of these persons can acknowledge and respect the work of each of the others. The way to ensure that, as she sees things, is to ensure that each person is free, among other things, to think for himself, and direct his attention wherever he wishes. Thus, her social vision is directly connected with a respect for each person's capacity to assume a meaningful role in the overall life of the community, and that, whatever the person's profession, vocation, or occupation, that it should be one in which the constraints upon his person and his mind are absolutely minimal. "Whatever a man may want," Weil says, "... the essence of his desire always consists in this, that he wants above all things to be able to exercise his will freely." (WG, 147)

"A man standing ten paces from me," Weil says, "is something separated from me by a distance (ten paces), but also another point of view from which all things appear." She also says that "we should transport ourselves to that centre of thought from which the other person reads values; contemplate the values destroyed by what we are going to do." (Both passages from Weil's *Notebooks* and quoted in Winch, 118.) When she says that we should "contemplate the values destroyed by what we are going to do," she means that in our relations with others that we should go out of our way to preserve the capacity for consent in the other, to be sure that the impact that we have on another person is one that he would consent to. This threatens to become paralyzing except as we situate ourselves in a public world of shared purposes; then the other person's capacity to shape and influence the circumstances he finds himself in, and his ability to relate himself to the world around him, are valued, not just in terms of one's own actions, but in and of themselves. Attention operates through all of these considerations. Attention *by itself* has nothing to do with

morality. It should be, however, and following Weil, a constant element of moral life since one's capacity for consent, one's "power to refuse",⁵ as Weil also puts it, must always be guaranteed. And not just one's own, but each one's. A condition of moral practice on Weil's view, is that we each become guarantors of the other's capacity for consent.

Many situations in our lives are moral situations, and we can regard those situations and the people in them with attention or with contempt. If we are genuinely oblivious, we may be in need of moral education; if we are indifferent, or feign indifference, we abdicate responsibility, and with that, our status as moral agents, in measure with our indifference, which means that our claim to dignity is also thereby diminished. So much depends upon the norms of the day; when, for instance, do the expressive and self-determining needs of a traditional housewife become a matter of her husband's concern, or of her own? If we are *in* a moral situation, perspective may be hard to gain, but, in general, it remains possible to assume either an attitude of attentiveness or one of contemptuousness. What is at issue is knowing what to give one's attention *to*.

This is a matter of ongoing concern for moral philosophers whose proposals have, on the side of the Utilitarians, stressed the consequences of actions, on the side of Kantians, the universalizability of conduct, and a notion of duty, and on the side of Aristotelians, practical reason – to paint the scene with but three broad brush strokes. Utilitarian and Kantian influences are with us still, but the Aristotelian influence has been strongly felt recently, in part, though the influences are many, because of Murdoch's observation that morality is an ongoing affair to which the stuff of daily life is relevant, and also, because of Martha Nussbaum's more recent contribution – as expressed, in particular, in her book *Love's Knowledge* – which emphasizes the role of literature in moral philosophy and moral

⁵ See Winch, chapter 9.

education, and the importance of emotions and of “standing commitments” in our personal relationships and, if it is not redundant to say, in moral life.⁶

Standing commitments are the implicit obligations that any two people have to each other in virtue of the concrete situations that they share. Within reasonable bounds, for instance, colleagues will take up the slack for an absent worker. What the reasonable bounds are will depend on the particular circumstances and will determine the nature and extent of the standing commitments in any given case. The better one recognizes and respects the commitments and obligations that one has to others in virtue of the various ways one is related to others, the better one is able to perceive one’s duties and to make sound moral judgments. Duties are not simply given, nor are they set in stone. One’s perceptions of duties and of standing commitments is always subject to change based on the particulars of the situation.

Nussbaum’s characterization of the moral landscape is rich and suggestive where Murdoch’s account leaves us with little sense of what moral life is like. Nussbaum’s account, however, does not address what happens when one’s commitments are not altogether standing, or when some are standing and some are missing. If we are to proceed and to succeed in our daily lives, we must negotiate our ways amidst the purposes and needs and wants of other human beings, and it can be fulfilling and rewarding to develop a sensitivity to the attachments and demands of others such that their goals and their purposes, as well as one’s own, and their needs and wants, as well as one’s own, are

⁶ Peta Bowden’s article, “Ethical Attention: Accumulating Understandings” traces the notion of ethical attention from Weil to Murdoch to Nussbaum and finally to the work of Maria Lugones. Bowden deserves credit for reading behind Murdoch and giving Weil her place in the discussion as the originator of the concept of attention as a philosophical and ethical notion. Unfortunately, she gives us a distorted view of Weil’s concerns because, on the one hand, she lifts them out of the broader social and political concerns that Weil had, and, on the other, she fails to understand the religious dimension of Weil’s thought (about which I will say more in the discussion that follows).

Nussbaum’s contribution, extending and underscoring Murdoch’s claims about the importance of literature for morals, is a valuable one. Her Aristotelian bias, however, tends to dictate what, in literature, is relevant to morals, and what is not, and this tends to prejudice the possibilities for theoretical insights in moral philosophy that can derive from literature. See Bowden and also Nussbaum, 1990 in the references.

respected and honoured. Such sensitivity, however, does not easily operate in respect to those who do not share in our purposes, whose vested interests do not overlap with our own, who are not, in any obvious way, near and dear to us, who may not even be able to form a partially coherent conception of our wants and desires, and who may be without any particularly clear conception of their own. Here Nussbaum's view of morality breaks down. For her view requires that there be shared human purposes – after all, without shared purposes there can be no standing commitments to honour.

Murdoch, I argued, did not incorporate the social theoretically into her moral philosophy. Peta Bowden⁷ correctly criticizes Murdoch for remaining theoretically tied to an image of the self as constrained by its selfishness. As Bowden observes,

... while Murdoch emphasizes the significance of a just and loving vision, rather than the intermittent decisions of a rational will, she gives few leads as to how to identify that perception in the world, apart from specifying its disconnection from the self-absorptions of the willful ego. (Bowden, 66)

Nussbaum, in a recent book review of one of Murdoch's biographies, offers a related, and more direct, charge when she says that "all too rarely does Murdoch suggest that goodness requires reflection about social justice." (Nussbaum, 2001, Part III⁸) Making the point more fully, she says that

[Murdoch] seems almost entirely to lack interest in the political and social determinants of a moral vision, and in the larger social criticism that ought, one feels, to be a major element in the struggle against one's own defective tendencies. Her examples, and her characters, are almost always undone by something universal about the ego and its devious workings, almost never by prejudice or misogyny or other failings endemic to a particular society at a particular time. (*ibid.*)

I find this response to Murdoch both astute and strange. I think it is astute because I think Nussbaum is simply right that one's vision should be sufficiently broad to take into

⁷ See previous footnote.

⁸ This comes from an online article and therefore there are no page numbers.

account, when one is doing moral theory, social determinants of attitudes and behaviour. There is a level of analysis, however, that sits mid-way between Murdoch's preoccupations with the ego, and the kind of concerns Nussbaum is addressing in this last quote. And this is why I find her response strange, because she, who wrote so forcefully about literature and standing commitments, might have seen that an analysis in terms of the structures of personal relationships could be just the hinge that is needed between Murdoch's introspections and issues of social justice which require a level of analysis pitched beyond personal relationships at what John Rawls calls, simply enough, "the basic structure of society". (See Rawls, 3) Weil's understanding of attention and my emphasis on a public world of shared purposes, gives us, I think, the level of analysis required.

The following example, from E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, will help to reveal the level of analysis that I have in mind.⁹ Maurice has perceived that his attraction to Alec, a gamekeeper, establishes a hideous situation because of class distinctions and because of sexual taboos. "Oh, the situation was disgusting – of that he was certain, and indeed never wavered till the end of his life. But to be certain of a situation is not to be certain of a human being." (Forster, 179) And Forster gives us a striking insight into what certainty about a human being comes to when Maurice and Alec shake hands after a drawn-out and emotionally intense encounter. Alec offers his hand to Maurice and Maurice takes it and this allows them to acknowledge mutually the intimacy they have shared and the ignorance they have had of each other. "Not as a hero, but as a comrade, had he stood up to the bluster, and found childishness behind it, and behind that something else." (*ibid.*, 198) Nussbaum's reaction to Murdoch is, staying with this example, at the level

⁹ In discussing Forster's *Maurice*, I am taking a page out of Nussbaum's book, so to speak, continuing the kind of discussion of novels that she began in *Love's Knowledge*. Nussbaum's book invigorated moral philosophy, though she was not the first to make detailed illustrative use of literature. Notably, in respect of this thesis, Weil's essay on the *Iliad*, predates Nussbaum's book by 50 years.

of class distinctions and sexual taboos.¹⁰ These are important concerns, and Forster's book would make no sense in the absence of them. There is, however, another level of analysis relevant to morality, which is the level of the relationship between Maurice and Alec, the level at which the two must negotiate their feelings for each other, and find their way together. It is also the level at which they must situate themselves in relation to the larger social structures that conspire against them.

Nussbaum is far from insensitive to relationships at this level of concern as is evident, for instance, when she writes about Henry James's characters, Maggie and Adam Verver.¹¹ And yet her criticism of Murdoch, although sound, eclipses the absence, theoretically, in Murdoch's work, of attention to social context at the level of personal relationships. Nussbaum, I presume, takes it that Murdoch captures this in her fiction, for she writes:

The novels are a major part of Murdoch's philosophical contribution, because one cannot fully make the case for the moral significance of the strivings of the inner world without narratives that show at length and in detail what Henry James called "the effort really to see and really to represent," as it contends with "the constant force that makes for muddlement." (Nussbaum, 2001, Part I)

This is, however, glib. Murdoch, as I have shown, does not make reference to literature when she should, or in ways that would be useful to her philosophical purposes; relatedly, Nussbaum is forcing an interpretation on Murdoch's *œuvre* that makes it sound like Murdoch's overriding purposes were philosophical when an argument could easily be made that her overriding purposes were artistic, and that it is in virtue of that that her philosophy fails in the ways I have shown it does. Nussbaum is here making a case, I believe, more for her own view, than for Murdoch's. Either way, her remarks do not dispense with the possibility of an analysis of the structure of relationships. Nor, to stress

¹⁰ Nussbaum acknowledges that Murdoch was outspoken in respect of the social and political struggles of gay men, but that this was an exception rather than part of a concern for social and political issues generally. See again Nussbaum, 2001, Part III.

¹¹ See "‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination", in Nussbaum, 1990, 148-167.

the point, does Nussbaum's own theoretical work, though superior to Murdoch's, offer such an analysis. Her focus on standing commitments is too specific for the purpose because in situations where such stable structures are not in place, or are undesired or undesirable, since the notion of standing commitments is central to her account, she is left without an analysis. Put another way, the notion of standing commitments is a fixture in Nussbaum's theory and places a limit on the view of moral life she is able to offer, including her observations about perception and the life of the emotions, insightful and important though these often are.

With the example I have given from Forster's *Maurice*, I have indicated the level of analysis I'm concerned with. I return now to Forster's novel to further explore this level of analysis.

Maurice and Alec are driven into a life of anonymity with respect of the lives they have known. Maurice has to abandon his social position, his work, his privileges, in order to be with Alec. Is it enough to say that their society considers sexual love between men an abomination? Their intimacy is a private matter between them, so what could that matter to anyone else? The conflict arises for them because there is no context that will support the reality of their relationship. Until he resolves his problem, Maurice conceals it from those around him, but is left in a state of duplicity that tears him apart because he cannot consort with Alec the gamekeeper – cannot so much as publicly call him by his first name, in fact –, and he cannot be at peace with his homosexuality, because he must act as though it does not exist. The conflict is so strong for Maurice that he becomes physically ill. This is the touch of affliction. Here is part of what Weil says about affliction, and which I already quoted in part one.

There is not real affliction unless the event which has gripped and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical.

The social factor is essential. There is not real affliction where there is not social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another. (SNLG, 171)

During this time, Maurice seeks out the help of a hypnotist, in the hope that he can be cured of his homosexuality. (Forster, by the way, recounts these scenes with the hypnotist with such skill that they are no more strange to us than would be a troubled man's visit to a psychoanalyst.) The hypnotism fails to cure Maurice, but the hypnotist is sufficiently disinterested in Maurice's situation that Maurice's consultations with the specialist help him to be honest about his sexuality. The problem, though, at this stage – made conspicuous because Alec is imploring him with messages to visit –, is that he cannot live with being homosexual, nor can he live without it. Bravely, he figures that such is his lot. "After all," he asks himself rhetorically, "is not a real Hell better than a manufactured Heaven?" (Forster, 188) There is an echo of Weil here who says that "we must prefer real hell to an imaginary paradise." (GG, 53)

Forster deliberately set out to write a book with a happy ending. How happy it is, one has to decide for oneself. Yet, at the end of the book, Maurice is able to declare his new-found liberation to his old friend, and previous all-but-lover (they had been chaste), Clive. This is a moment of liberation, but also a mark of his liberation. The fact that he can now speak is owing to his resolve, together with Alec, to forge a new life together. They have taken it upon themselves to find a way to live together. In terms of the analysis I'm after, they have set out to create a new context for themselves. Indeed, Maurice's talk with Clive is to be their last. What has been for Maurice unliveable until then, is now possible under different, though unclear, circumstances.

Weil tells us that "Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction." (SWA, 70) The reason for this is that the afflicted suffer precisely because the social situation is what it is. That which abets the lives of some proves to be crippling to the lives of others. Affliction, in this regard, is very much a blow suffered at the hands of others,

but which they are unaware of inflicting. When Maurice first consults a retired physician who is a long-standing acquaintance of the family, the man first assumes that Maurice has come to see him because he has contracted a venereal disease, then guesses that Maurice is worried that he is impotent. Finally Maurice tells him what his problem is.

At last judgement came. He could scarcely believe his ears. It was 'Rubbish! Rubbish!' He had expected many things, but not this; for if his words were rubbish his life was a dream. (Forster, 139)

When he has his final talk with Clive, a similar thing takes place, only now Maurice can meet it with equanimity. Maurice tells Clive that he has shared with Alec "All I have. Which includes my body."

Clive sprang up with a whimper of disgust. He wanted to smite the monster, and flee, but he was civilized, and wanted it feebly. After all, they were Cambridge men ... pillars of society both; he must not show violence. And he did not; he remained quiet and helpful to the very end. But his thin sour disapproval, his dogmatism, the stupidity of his heart, revolted Maurice, who could only have respected hatred. (*ibid.*, 213, ellipses in the original.)

There is an irony in this scene, as well, since early in the book, when Clive and Maurice are beginning their relationship at Cambridge, Clive professes his love to Maurice and it is Maurice who slams the door contemptuously in Clive's face.

Relationships cannot endure contempt without becoming malformed. In numerous passages, Simone Weil registers the effect that this kind of harm has on us. For instance, she says that "It is impossible to forgive whoever has done us harm if that harm has lowered us. We have to think that it has not lowered us, but has revealed our true level." (GG, 6) "When we are harmed by someone," she observes, "reactions are set up within us." (*ibid.*) In order to forgive the other who has harmed us, we must absorb the harm, not send it back out to the other. This is the meaning of the Christian injunction to turn the other cheek. "The only way to preserve our dignity when submission is forced upon us," Weil says, "is to consider our chief as a *thing*. Every man is the slave of necessity, but

the conscious slave is far superior.” (*ibid.*, 157-158) There are four things to pay attention to in this last passage. One, is the desire to preserve one’s dignity; another is the specific condition of having submission forced upon one; a third is the possibility of regarding another as a thing; and the fourth is the possibility of being conscious of what Weil describes as being a slave of necessity. The first two are easily enough understood, but the other two require a shift in perspective from life at the level of the social world, to seeing our lives against the backdrop of the material world, and human existence as only one more natural fact. One cannot preserve one’s dignity at the level of social relations when submission is forced upon one; one has to adopt a different perspective. Weil’s love of the *Iliad* is owing to its author’s ability to tell the story of Agamemnon at Troy from that perspective. Violence is in the hearts of men and women. When people betray a social trust by imposing submission of one sort or another on another person, they have already reduced the victim to the status of a thing. It is the victim’s recognition of this fact that will allow him to preserve his dignity though he may be tortured, though he may be killed. Thus Christ’s words: “forgive them for they know not what they do”.

Maurice’s situation, before he and Alec make their pact, is impossible to live. It is a situation between him and his society, represented in the people of his life with the exception of Alec. In his “Terminal Note”, Forster describes Maurice and Alec as outlaws, distinguishing them from gangsters who can hide because they are members of society. Maurice and Alec move outside of society.¹² We might conclude that the problem is simply that in a class-conscious society with stringent sexual taboos, Maurice and Alec cannot survive, and we might take it as a moral that we need to ensure that we have sufficiently liberal laws and customs that the likes of Alec and Maurice may be spared

¹² And should anyone doubt that there is splendour, or triumph, in such a move, Forster writes: “They must live outside class, without relations or money; they must work and stick to each other till death. But England belonged to them. That, besides companionship, was their reward. Her air and sky were theirs, not the timorous millions’ who own stuffy little boxes, but never their own souls.” (Forster, 208-209)

having to resort to anonymity in order to escape ignominy. That is certainly so, but it misses the point I am making that *whatever* the structural features of a situation, the possibility will always remain, if it is not a certainty, that some are harmed for the very fact that social structures, be they microstructures or macrostructures, and however caring and careful and considerate their members, abet the lives of some at the expense of others.

Social structures, which provide the context for the lives people live, and which are generally barely recognized by the people who live within them, may themselves be seen when viewed from an external vantage point. Some people suffer as a function of the structure of social groups, sometimes as a function of the structure of society itself. From the perspective of someone who suffers because his situation robs him of his dignity, unless he has the resources to recognize what is going on, or unless he has recourse to some other social context, even if it be an imaginative one (which ought, at last, to be abandoned if he is to join with his fellow humans) – misery will take root in him and act upon him like a poison.

Murdoch's example of M and D, in which we are told that M "is certainly jealous", is a perfect example of a social situation being recognized but barely, as opposed to being understood structurally. Such a structural understanding might take the form of: D is married to S, M's son; M has not seen S without D ever since S and D have been together; S used to visit twice a month; S and D visit once a month, and D does most of the talking, and so forth. M might well be jealous in such a situation. M might also simply suffer if S has allowed her, in the past, to talk about her life, but now that he is with D, he has transferred that kind of attention to D, to the exclusion of M, unaware that this is the result of his new interpersonal life with D, and so also unaware that M is now left without someone to talk to. This type of analysis does not rely upon an overriding need to assess the characters of any of the people involved, but it neither dismisses such a concern, nor

does it dismiss what any of the people feel, nor the standing commitments that exist among them. From this nuclear analysis, it is also possible to draw lines of connection with other people and other contexts. All that is required is that the way that the people in question are situated relative to each other be open for scrutiny so that the structure of their lives together may be seen. Once we have this picture in view, if M is truly suffering, we may begin to ask some pertinent questions, such as, “Who are the other people in her life besides S and D?” “What kind of contact does she have with the world outside of her contact with S and D?” And so on. If we remain within the situation, however, and M is suffering, what we will see is “the reactions set up within” her, to use Weil’s phrase, when S and D are around. Murdoch asks us to consider moral situations from within them, but gives no indication that there may be value in viewing them from without, let alone in what that value might consist.

Consider now the case of a relationship that is in many ways defined by contempt, e.g., a worker in a sweat shop, or a child raised by an abusive parent. For the person who is subject to chronic contempt, the situation is effectively impossible to bear. Someone who is the object of sustained or systematic contempt and who persists in a relationship with the contemnor, humiliates himself, though he may not be aware of it; if he acts as though he is worthy of the contempt, he forces a division within his own soul. Simone Weil repeats several times the Roman observation that the day a man becomes a slave, he loses half his soul. If the person in such a terrible situation has no recourse to some anchoring, external context that provides at a minimum non-violent respite, the result may be terrible. Repeated, sustained contempt will break the back of confidence, which can destroy a person. In such cases, or cases where there is not so much contempt but simply the lack of nurturing attention, or a mixture of these conditions, the result may be one form or another of madness. R. D. Laing and A. Esterson conducted long-term case

studies in the 50's and 60's of the families of schizophrenic women specifically in order to gain insight into the social milieu of the condition. Summing up the case of one of the women, Ruby Eden (not her real name), Laing and Esterson observe that

Firmly within this situation of contradictory attributions, inconsistencies, multiple disagreements, some avowed, some not, not able as we are to see it from outside as a whole, Ruby could not tell what was the case and what was not the case, she could not have a consistent perspective on her relation to herself, or to others, or on theirs to each other, or to her.¹³ (Laing and Esterson, 143)

An interesting feature of the Laing and Esterson case studies is that they all include an analysis of the social situation along the lines I have argued for here.

Context is essential for the meanings of words, but it is also essential for sanity and dignity. When there are profound difficulties within one social situation, there are only a few means of recourse. One, as in Maurice and Alec's case, is to find a way to live outside of the conflicting situation. More generally, we may say that what is required is finding simply another context. Most of us acquire new social contexts when we move through adolescence, and find ourselves, in adulthood, with different vantage points from which to view the different social worlds we inhabit; but even at that, we tend to have a preferred social context, the one we will retreat to when the going gets rough, and sometimes when that is not available, any port in a storm will do. If, however, it is not possible to find a new, or alternate, situation, one must, it would seem, if one is not to live in a state of illusion – some form of imaginary paradise –, become resigned to one's hell. This is virtually impossible, and maybe is impossible without loss of dignity. Maurice was reduced to being ill. It is a feature of affliction, in the way that Weil writes about affliction, that

¹³ Laing and Esterson's case studies of schizophrenics and their families deserve serious attention, notwithstanding that they are almost forty years old. One of the things that emerges from these studies is that the families of schizophrenics are generally closed and unable, in their day to day communications, to make consistent reference to a world beyond their own borders, and that makes it virtually impossible for them to make consistent reference to the world *within* their own borders because there is very little to ground discourse. The children who become schizophrenic – and it is an interesting question why some do and not others – are unable, in such confusion, to form a consistent image of themselves.

affliction has no voice, and is not recognized by anyone. If the afflicted could recognize their affliction, they would already be one step away from it. Their situation itself needs to be situated in a larger context of social situations. But for the truly afflicted, the world they inhabit is only the world that gives rise to their particular conflict. (The placement of “only” in that sentence is deliberate.) The others in the situation cannot acknowledge the afflicted person’s affliction because they could not live with the vision of themselves that would result. A man who is violent towards his wife would not be violent if he understood her horror and humiliation; and that gives an indication of what he needs to understand before he can stop being violent, which is to say that he must, in important ways, become another person. The only other way of contending with such a terribly compromising situation is to see it as something that has nothing to do with oneself as a social person at all, which is to transcend the situation, to see one’s chief as a thing, as Weil says, in other words to recognize that one retains the potential for existing as a social being, but that the situation itself does not support dignified social life. One need not deny that one’s oppressor may yet prove to be a dignified person, but one *must* not pretend that he is such a one.

We can reconnect this discussion with the notion of blame. Blame should attach either to poor conduct, or to poor character. It may be much easier, however, for a person faced with someone who has done something he ought not have done to fault him for lack of a talent or for an impoverished faculty, or some other inability, essentially a handicap.¹⁴ That way, the person blamed is not really blamed – something over which he has no control is being cited as the cause of the situation at hand. But this is patronizing for the very fact that it seeks to absolve the person of blame when blame is owing, and it is also insulting for drawing attention to the person in virtue of something over which she

¹⁴ I have been helped in these thoughts by Linda Zagzebski’s discussion of virtues as distinguished from skills, talents, and faculties. A person may be blamed for lack of a virtue, but not, she argues, for lack of a talent or faculty. See Zagzebski, 102 ff.

has no control, and which is, in any case, irrelevant to the situation, which should be, to emphasize the point, one of responsibility. Imagine a child has knocked over a glass of milk, and that his parent becomes angry and calls the child “stupid”. A child, unless he is very young, will recognize that he is, in fact, being blamed, because that is what the actions tell him. To be scolded is not the same as to be blamed, but even many adults do not know the difference. The words, however, tell the child that he is *not* being blamed. The intelligent but impossible response is, “If I am truly stupid, then why do you get angry with me? It’s not my fault if I am stupid. If it is my fault, then I should be spoken to in a way that allows me to assume responsibility for what I have done.” These reflections might be put in these, more forceful, terms: “If you do not wish for me to assume responsibility for what I have done, then why do you get angry with me? If you *do* wish for me to assume responsibility for what I have done, then why do you get angry with me? (Punishment may be in order, but anger is not punishment.) Which is to ask, “Why do you hurt me?” Which is to ask “Why is harm being done to me?” Which is the cry of the afflicted.

To be afflicted is to be subject to, among other things, a social force: the structure itself of the situation of which you are a part bears down upon you. If you try to escape it, you will be despised from within; if you remain in it, you will be despised from without. We are also physical beings, and social torment has its counterpart in the flesh. Affliction, Weil makes clear, must have a physical component to it because pain or the fear of it is what roots us to the spot. (See SNLG, 171) The subjection to force, Weil says in “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force”, “is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own virtue. No one in the *Iliad* is spared by it, as no one on earth is.” (*ibid.*, 191) Weil further understands the threat of force to the innocent. “Whoever, within his own soul and in human relations, escapes the dominion of force is loved but loved

sorrowfully because of the threat of destruction that constantly hangs over him.” (*ibid.*) She is here pointing to the possibility of remaining within the social world, which the *Iliad* has shown us is dominated by the blind play of force, and yet not being swept along by the tides of violence. How can this be accomplished? One must see the dynamics of violence, the arbitrariness of prestige, for what they are. Many are those who pretend to being above or outside the fray, but if they do not see these things clearly, they “wear the armour of the lie”, (*ibid.*, 194) as Weil puts it. They strike up allegiance to their company, their church, a political party; they believe that prudence is part of righteousness; good deeds form part of their self-image. Only he who does not wear the armour of the lie, or who has rejected it, can avoid transmitting violence to others. However, and here we see the unsparing clarity of Weil’s vision, if you are going to remain a part of society and yet not transmit violence, you must then bear the violence that comes your way. “The man who does not wear the armour of the lie cannot experience force without being touched by it to the very soul,” (*ibid.*, 194) she says. As she writes elsewhere:

The man who receives and transmits malediction does not let it penetrate to his core. He does not feel it. But it penetrates to the core of the man upon whom it settles, the man who arrests it. He becomes a curse. To become a curse, it is necessary to be pure.

The plenitude of joy is necessary in order to make a being so pure that he can become a curse.

Pain and joy in alternation purify a being until he is pure enough to become a curse and to have at one and the same time the plenitude of pain within him and the plenitude of joy above him. (FLN, 69)

Those who receive and transmit malediction do not feel it, Weil says. Violence is like the bomb with a lit fuse that cartoon characters toss back and forth: only one of them will get blasted and feel the force – he upon whom it settles at the last moment. Only in our everyday human lives, violence can be passed on for any length of time, sometimes it is terrible and quick, sometimes it may survive generations. Weil’s observation is that when

we express anger to others, we are passing violence along in a refusal to bear its impact ourselves.

To be able to hurt others with impunity – for instance to pass our anger on to an inferior who is obliged to be silent – is to spare ourselves from an expenditure of energy, an expenditure which the other person will have to make. (GG, 6)

The other person will have to make the expenditure of energy unless he can find yet someone else to inflict the anger upon, perhaps the person he got it from.

Weil calls our attention to the possibility of remaining inside the fray without transmitting malediction, in other words, to the possibility of arresting malediction. “The Gospel,” she says, “contains a conception of human life, not a theology.” (FLN, 147) Among other things, what the Gospel shows us, in the example of the Passion of Christ, is that we can bear the insults that we receive in our daily lives – not, as Weil aptly observes, the petty problems of day to day living (see SNLG, 185) –, but our true contacts with the forces of the social world, and with the forces of the material world. “The man who does not wear the armour of the lie cannot experience force without being touched by it to the very soul,” Weil says, and then adds: “Grace can prevent this touch from corrupting him, but it cannot spare him the wound.” (SWA, 194) Those who can reject the armour of the lie will suffer the contempt of others. As for those others, Weil says at the end of “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force”, in reference to the people of Europe:

Perhaps they will yet rediscover the epic genius, when they learn that there is no refuge from fate, learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate. How soon this will happen is another question. (SWA, 195)

Weil wrote her essay on the *Iliad* in the first year of the Second World War. She died about three years later. At the end of 1943, a young Primo Levi was captured by the Fascist Militia; a couple of months later, he was sent, along with others, to Monowitz, a concentration camp close to Auschwitz. After five days of travel, not having had a drink

in four, after hours and hours of sleeplessness, having been separated from their women, having had their clothes taken from them, and their hair shorn, after a brief five minute hot shower, Levi and his fellow Italians were thrust, naked and barefoot, into the cold snowy morning with a handful of clothes assigned to them which they put on in the next hut a hundred yards away. "When we finish," he says, "everyone remains in his own corner and we do not dare lift our eyes to look at one another. There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable and sordid puppets." (Levi, 22) He continues:

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains. (*ibid.*)

Simone Weil, who I think would have staggered in sorrow before the reality of the death camps, would also have understood their horror better than most anyone. She writes:

To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: 'I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort. (SWA, 70)

Affliction is not merely an extreme of suffering, but a category of suffering unto itself. "There is," Weil explains,

both continuity and a separating threshold, like the boiling point of water, between affliction itself and all the sorrows which, even though they may be very violent, very deep, and very lasting, are not afflictions in the true sense. There is a limit; on the far side of it we have affliction but not on the near side. This limit is not purely

objective; all sorts of personal factors have to be taken into account. The same event may plunge one human being into affliction and not another. (SNLG, 171)

In “Human Personality” she makes the point again about the difference between suffering and affliction, but gives us a further clue about the nature of affliction. “Affliction is a different thing from suffering,” she says.

Affliction is a device for pulverizing the soul; the man who falls into it is like a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cog-wheel. (SWA, 70)

A physical wound, if it is not too severe, will heal in time, sometimes a very short time. It goes away, and even if we can attach no purpose to it, it holds no power over us. But to have pain or the fear of it, as Weil explains, be associated with wounds that are psychological and social in nature, is to be rooted to the spot in an agony from which there may be no issue or escape. So long as one has not altogether given up, one’s very state will be expressive of the question, “Why?” Weil says that “the soul is constrained to repeat it incessantly like a sustained, monotonous groan.” (SNLG, 196) But the question, “‘Why?’ does not mean ‘By what cause?’ but ‘For what purpose?’” (*ibid.*) To this there is no answer. One either submits as a thing, or, if one does not cease to exercise one’s capacity for consent, and one’s ability to direct one’s attention, one may consent to the affliction itself, which is to consent to the existence of the universe. “Affliction,” Weil says, “is a simple and ingenious device to introduce into the soul of a finite creature that immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold” “that is the whole of necessity throughout all space and time.” (*ibid.*, 182)

The man to whom such a thing occurs has no part in the operation. He quivers like a butterfly pinned alive to a tray. But throughout the horror he can go on wanting to love. There is no impossibility in that, no obstacle, one could almost say no difficulty. Because no pain, however great, up to the point of losing consciousness, touches that part of the soul which consents to a right orientation.

It is only necessary to know that love is an orientation and not a state of the soul. Anyone who does not know this will fall into despair at the first onset of affliction. (*ibid.*, 182-183)

The discussion of the preceding several pages has been an attempt to consider the social from within social contexts, to acknowledge the multiplicity of social contexts, and to acknowledge further that all of social life takes place against the backdrop of a material universe that has no interest in human affairs. Beyond the case I have made to pay attention to social structures and social contexts, there has been little in the way of argumentation. I will end, however, by making a case for a four-stage schematism operating in the thought of Simone Weil. Thus, I am not arguing for her views, but for a way to interpret her views. Once that is out, the preceding discussion about affliction should reveal itself, if it is not already obviously so, as religious discourse. And I shall take it as a contribution both to the study of Simone Weil and to philosophy to have been able to shine a light on a kind of discourse that itself has its justification in the light it shines on things.

To begin, it is important to recall from the Gospel that the devil tempts Christ with all the things of this world. The devil is sometimes referred to by Christians as “the Prince of this world”. In a letter to her friend Father Perrin, Simone Weil argues that since the devil was able to offer Christ all the power and glory of this earthly world, that “the social is irremediably the domain of the devil.” Her next statement is: “The flesh impels us to say *me* and the devil impels us to say *us*....”

The schematism that I propose represents four stages of awareness. At the first stage is the individual, at the second, all things social, at the third, the natural world viewed as necessity, and at the last stage is God. At each level of awareness, the previous level is seen differently. And each level is a larger context in terms of which the previous level may be understood. It may help to recall that, in my discussion of social context, I distinguished

between barely recognizing the structural features of a situation and bringing them front and centre.

At the first level of awareness, the unexamined individual is an egocentric *me*; the examined individual is a *self* against a social backdrop which is unexamined.

At the second level of awareness, the unexamined social world is a *we*; the examined social world is viewed, following Weil, as *force*, and is seen against a backdrop of natural forces, or *necessity*. Human suffering related to a social context is seen at this level as *oppression*.

The unexamined natural world is *necessity*; the examined natural world is *obedience*. Socially-related suffering is seen at this level as *affliction*.

When the natural world is perceived through the destruction of one's conception(s) of self, it – nature, necessity – is seen against the backdrop of the love of God.

With this schematism, we can begin to understand from where Simone Weil speaks when she says such things as: "Obedience of things in relation to God is what the transparency of a window pane is in relation to light. As soon as we feel this obedience with our whole being, we see God." (SNLG, 179) This statement will not be comprehensible to an egocentric person preoccupied with his own thoughts and feelings; it will also be puzzling to someone whose concerns are taken up with social matters.

Weil says that

wrong humility leads us to believe that we are nothing in so far as we are ourselves – in so far as we are certain particular human beings.

True humility is the knowledge that we are nothing in so far as we are human beings as such, and, more generally, in so far as we are creatures. (GG, 128-129)

In this quote she is making reference to both the second and third levels of awareness. A reference to the third level, with an eye on the fourth, is the following: "We can only know one thing about God – that he is what we are not. Our wretchedness alone is an image of

this. The more we contemplate it, the more we contemplate him.” (GG 121-122) We are wretched when we are pulled out of social contexts. Examining ourselves under the aspect of necessity leads us to God. Since this analysis leads from one larger context to the next, when we get to God, there is no larger context. And since you need a context to so much as give a name to something, there is no name for God, there is nothing you can say about God. This is consistent with the theology that Weil offers to us. All one does is behold, but that is possible only for the person who has gone through the ordeal of seeing oneself as nothing. It is not possible to search for God, because to conduct a search, one must be led by this or that conception, and conceptions are not available to us where God is concerned. We may also note that what is at a lower level of awareness does not itself change, but the way it is viewed changes. That gives sense to Weil’s claim that “the proper function of religion is to suffuse with its light all secular life, public or private, without ever in any way dominating it.” (NR 118)

This way of reading Weil makes sense alongside my critique of Murdoch, in virtue of Murdoch’s inability to make room in her theoretical views for the social, and it makes sense in terms of the importance of context for meaning. It also situates the notion of justice concerned with rights at the level of the individual and society, against a backdrop of the natural world. The notion of justice as love is at the level of the individual who is subject to the workings of society as force and to the impact of the material world, against a backdrop of the love of God.

Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springstead, in their chapter on Weil’s notion of reading, make several references to levels and perspectives from which to understand things, and these observations are all consonant with the schematism I have proposed. “Given a level,” they say, “often what we read is indeed what ought to be read from such a level. Painful and pleasurable sensations as such, for example, are not illusions. But because

they are read from a limited perspective, they are not an adequate reading of reality.”¹⁵ (Allen and Springstead, 59) What is missing in their analysis is an indication of how many levels there are, and in what they consist. Their discussion comes so close to the schematism I have proposed, it is a wonder that they did not propose it themselves. They quote the following from Weil, for instance: “to read necessity behind sensations, to read order behind necessity, to read God behind order.”¹⁶ (GG 136) (Moreover, Weil herself calls these “superposed readings”.) Though the reference here is to order and not obedience, Allen and Springstead, making a reference to a passage from Weil I quoted a few paragraphs back, rightly observe that

Crucial to the highest reading is the ability to read nature’s order as obedience to God. When we see the order of nature as obedience to God, then the natural world becomes *transparent*, as is a windowpane, and we see God. (Allen and Springstead, 61)

The notion of reading is essentially about interpretation, and as interpretation requires a context, and there is no context at the level of God, Weil observes that “I cannot apply to the being that I conceive when I speak of God this notion of reading.” (Quoted in *ibid.*, 74) To which Allen and Springstead comment, altogether in line with my own observations, that “God does not read, because God does not have a perspective.” (*ibid.*)

¹⁵ Allen and Springstead speak more than once of “adequate readings.” There is justification for speaking this way, though I find it has a patronizing tone to it which one does not find in Weil’s own writings.

¹⁶ A very close formulation in their part of the schematism I am here proposing is on page 63 when they write: “To read from the level of our sensations, as does a passenger, is a much more limited perspective than to read necessity behind sensations, as does a captain. Ultimately, when we read order behind necessity and God behind order, nature becomes transparent to the presence of God.” The reference to a passenger and a captain are owing to Weil whom Allen and Springstead quote a couple of pages earlier. “For ... the experienced captain,” Weil says, “whose boat has become a sense to him like an extension of the body, the boat is an instrument for reading the storm and he reads it quite otherwise than the passenger does. Where the passenger reads chaos, limitless danger, fear, the captain reads necessities, limited danger, resources for escaping them, and obligation of courage and honour.” (Allen and Springstead, 60)

Allen and Springstead do not get a good grip on the place of the social in the hierarchy of levels of awareness. Their brief discussion of “Meanings Supplied by the Social Order” (*ibid.*, pp. 67-70) treats the social in isolation from the levels of impressions, necessity, and God.

When we reach the fourth stage of awareness, the only thing that we can see is the love of God; there is nothing else to see. Weil resorts to the language of mystics at this point and says that we are able to discern a silence which is the Word of God. From this perspective, questions of blame and responsibility, with which I began this section, take on a wholly different aspect. One no longer blames, but forgives.

Conclusion

I have claimed, in a way that I believe is consistent with the thought of Simone Weil, that the structures of social life will inevitably lead to the suffering of some. This is a difficult proposition for us to accept, especially in the contemporary revival of political philosophy which is coloured by a rational optimism that we can, without seeking to dominate people, structure our collective lives to the betterment of all. We *should* aspire to a world that minimizes suffering, but, to put the matter as strongly as perhaps it ought to be put, some will always suffer because of the structures of the relationships of which they form a part, and that because we typically do not see these structures. In a more technological frame of mind, Marshall McLuhan observed that

The very success we enjoy in specializing and separating functions in order to have speed-up ... is at the same time the cause of inattention and unawareness of the situation. ... Self-consciousness of the causes and limits of one's own culture seems to threaten the ego structure and is, therefore, avoided. Nietzsche said understanding stops action, and men of action seem to have an intuition of the fact in their shunning the dangers of comprehension. (McLuhan, 93)

It might seem strange to speak of McLuhan side by side with Weil, except that McLuhan's masterwork, *Understanding Media*, is subtitled "The extensions of man", and Weil, as I have indicated, gave particular attention to the notion of limit (see page 13), with which goes the notions of equilibrium, measure, and proportion (see pages 37 ff.). One has only to read "Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression" and her discussion of working life in *The Need for Roots* to know that Weil had an intimate sense of the ways

in which tools and technology, and production generally, structure life. In fact, she anticipated McLuhan by thirty years when she wrote that

Who knows whether an industry split up into innumerable small undertakings would not bring about an inverse development of the machine tool, and, at the same time, types of work calling for a yet greater consciousness and ingenuity than the most highly skilled work in modern factories? We are all the more justified in entertaining such hopes in that electricity supplies the form of energy suitable for such a type of industrial organization. (OL, 115)

McLuhan, in the same paragraph from which the above quote is taken, says that “If we understood our own media old and new, [the] confusions and disruptions [we experience] could be programmed and synchronized.” (McLuhan, 93) Because we do not understand these things, we are not just subject to, but vulnerable to, the influence that they have upon us. Weil’s remarkable insights, as in her essay on the *Iliad*, register a blindness at the level of human affairs themselves, independent of time or place. Contemplating this led her to speak increasingly in religious terms. She retained, however, a clear sense of social justice, saying, for instance, that “We must eliminate affliction as much as we can from social life, for affliction only serves the purposes of grace and society is not a society of the elect. There will always be enough affliction for the elect.” (GG, 158)

I offer these thoughts more for the sake of indicating further paths of inquiry than of summing up my discussion. There is so much that I have not been able to address. For instance, I have only touched upon Weil’s thoughts on the love of the neighbour, and have barely made reference to her thoughts on friendship and personal relationships. In a letter to her friend Joë Bousquet, Weil says

That divine love which one touches in the depth of affliction, like Christ’s resurrection through crucifixion, that love which is the central core and intangible essence of joy, is not a consolation. It leaves pain completely intact.¹

¹ Recall Weil’s thought from page 99: “Grace can prevent this touch [i.e. the touch of force] from corrupting [a man], but it cannot spare him the wound.” (SWA, 194)

I am going to say something which is painful to think, more painful to say, and almost unbearably painful to say to those one loves. For anyone in affliction, evil can perhaps be defined as being everything that gives any consolation.
(SL, 142)

A full development of the project that this thesis represents would include discussion of Weil's thoughts on love and friendship.

I believe that the structural account of human relationships that I offer in part three of this work is a way to make connections between philosophy and psychology. The kind of structural account of relationships that I offer is perhaps most commonly encountered in clinical psychology, though I intend it to apply to social contexts generally as an interpretative tool, a lens. It clearly needs to be developed philosophically if it is to serve for moral theory, but that may well be possible.

In the background of this discussion is the matter of religion. Weil's observations are distinctively religious observations, and, as I am trying to show, they are accessible, and perhaps, in some way or another, they recommend themselves when enough connections are made to our lives inside and outside of social groups (of whatever description). That is for each reader to decide, and I would emphasize, that it should be each reader of Weil, not of this thesis, to decide. And that is simply to say that, as this work itself makes plain, that I believe that Weil is worth reading. I have written this thesis as one who is informed and inspired by her thought, and to show how one can approach contemporary problems from such a perspective.

I would like to make one philosophical and literary observation, which is that the schematism I have proposed for Weil's work bears an uncanny affinity with another four-stage system, owing to someone whose name I have never seen in print alongside Weil's: Charles S. Peirce. Peirce's four stages of belief fixation, to which are related his three levels of clarity, is both structurally and functionally similar to the schematism I have suggested lies behind Weil's work. What distinguishes the two, to put the matter very simply, is that

Peirce is concerned with reason and Weil is concerned with faith. At the fourth level, Weil has God and Love and Peirce Science and Truth. I believe the matter wholly worth pursuing as a separate project.

One further observation about Weil's work deserves mention, and that is her tendency for rhetorical emphasis, a liberal use of categorical qualifiers and quantifiers, for instance. One of the more ironic examples of this is the passage I quoted on page 39:

To keep to the social level, our political universe is peopled **exclusively** by myths and monsters; **all** it contains is absolutes and abstract entities. This is illustrated by **all** the words of our political and social vocabulary: nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, property, democracy. We **never** use them in phrases such as: There is democracy *to the extent that ...* or: There is capitalism *in so far as ...* The use of expressions like 'to the extent that' is beyond our intellectual capacity. (SWA, 222, italics and ellipses in the original)

To be true to her own observations, she should have said that "to the extent that our political universe contains absolute and abstract entities, it is peopled by myths and monsters ...". As soon as we rephrase her text that way, however, it becomes obvious that she was not engaged in an academic exercise of precision, but was trying to draw attention to the state of affairs as she saw them. In his book, Winch critiques her tendency to generalize. Winch, who is wholly respectful of Weil and gives her plenty of room to speak as she does, nonetheless cannot contain himself when, at times, the way she writes gets under his linguistically sensitive skin. In general, though, Weil, I think, would not have minded the critique. She wanted language to be used with care, and was certainly capable of it herself; she only wished – for practical and not pedantic reasons – that others would demonstrate that they were capable of it with, for instance, the use of such qualifiers as "to the extent that," or "in so far as". When it comes to religious mysteries, she is even downright insistent that care be the order of the day. "Intelligence," she says,

can never penetrate the mystery, but it, and it alone, can judge of the suitability of the words which express it. For this task it needs to be keener, more discerning, more precise, more exact, and more exacting than for any other. (GG, 131)

Her excesses I think are forgivable, for they are almost always for emphasis; she writes to tell us something.

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APPENDIX

Psychological evidence of the relevance of social context
for the meaning and acquisition of mental state terms

In their study, “Talk and the Development of Social Understanding”,¹ William Turnbull and Jeremy Carpendale studied children’s acquisition of mental state terms and demonstrated that the environment of learning consists of an interactive modeling. On their view, talk is itself an environment for learning how to talk, and social understanding as well as the language of social interaction are learnt through social interaction. Mental state terms, such as “knows” and “believes” are relevant to social interaction, and here the influence of Wittgenstein enters since Wittgenstein made evident the need for public criteria for the application of a word. If we accept this, then learning the language of social interaction requires learning what is criterial for the use of words relevant to social interaction, in particular mental state terms.

Turnbull and Carpendale’s research involved the interactions of mothers with their young children in constructing a story based on a picture book without text.

The pictures show two children, Billy and Sarah, getting chocolate bars from their mother. Sarah immediately gobbles hers, making a mess in the process. Billy eats some but decides to save the rest for later by hiding it under the sleeping dog. But, unbeknownst to Billy, Sarah sees him hide it and, while he is outside playing, she takes it and puts it in her pocket. When Billy returns to get his chocolate bar he, of course, has a false belief about its location. At this point the story gets more complex ... because Billy’s suspicions are immediately aroused when Sarah laughs. Then Billy gets angry, pushes Sarah, and the chocolate bar falls out of her pocket. At this point Billy and Sarah’s mother intervenes. This task was designed to encourage talk about the mental world because the story involves hiding, trickery, false beliefs, emotions, and morality, yet the task does not restrict what the mothers and their children say nor how they say it. (Turnbull and Carpendale, 14-15)

¹ See Turnbull and Carpendale in the references. The overview presented here is based on an earlier, unpublished version of this paper.

What the study demonstrates is that the criteria for believing something is crucially tied to the situation at hand and can only be understood in terms of that situation. As children struggle with understanding what Billy knows and does not know, they never use the word “know” – and crucially, the mothers do not use the word. Turnbull and Carpendale conclude, among other things, that

children learn about the world of mind, emotions and morality through adults teaching them ways of talking about experience and activities. Wittgenstein argued that the mental world is not a hidden, inner private domain that is inaccessible to others. In talking with young children, adults use words referring to knowledge (e.g., ‘guess’, ‘forget’, ‘remember’, ‘think’, ‘see’, ‘hide’), emotions (e.g., ‘sad’, ‘upset’, ‘angry’, ‘happy’), sensations, intentions, and desires. Adults generally encounter no special difficulty in using these words, and everything needed to use them correctly is open to view and available in the ongoing activities of social life. When misunderstandings about the mental world do occur, they are dealt with and repaired, just as in any interaction. It is through children’s experience of being embedded in and jointly negotiating social interactions that they begin to learn the criteria for the use of words referring to the mental world. Of course, this is a slow and gradual process because there are multiple criteria for the use of psychological words, and such terms are especially complex and can be used in different ways. Children may begin using words after only acquiring a subset of the more obvious criteria. The uniquely human ability to talk about the mental world thus enables individuals to reflect on and understand their own and others’ experience. (*ibid.*, p. 31)

The picture of the development of mental state terms that emerges is that as children develop in their ability to assess situations of false belief, they are better able to attend to the criteria in a given situation that will allow them to evaluate what others are thinking and feeling, and in this manner (glossing over a host of considerations), they learn by a kind of bootstrapping process to participate in social understanding.