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*edited by*  
JUSTIN  
BROACKES



# Iris Murdoch, *Philosopher*

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

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## Preface

Iris Murdoch's philosophical reputation is still, fifty years after she reached her prime, at a formative stage. When some years ago the Philosophy Department at Brown University was considering the idea of putting on a Murdoch conference, my impression was that for most of us (myself included) Murdoch was a rather vague figure one might connect with existentialism and aesthetics. Her philosophy was perhaps likely to be of only moderate interest to us; but it might appeal more to a wider group, we benignly supposed, including undergraduates and people in other departments. And there were signs of some significant philosophers talking about her too, though we didn't know quite what they were debating.

But what—or, in case one might almost be embarrassed at the directness of the question—what *exactly*, did Murdoch say?

This was a question that I, and I think others in the discussion, could not pretend to answer. I could, however, admit to having read, or read part of, *The Sovereignty of Good*. People looked surprised and delighted—perhaps slightly as if I had confessed a secret interest in Gurdjieff or that I had learned Danish to read Kierkegaard. (I didn't tell people that it had been in my first week of undergraduate Moral Philosophy—for a tutorial with John McDowell on Fact and Value and Reason and Desire, for which I had undergone the trial of reading Hume, Moore, Hare, Searle, Mackie, Nagel, Foot, and Murdoch. I had had the impression of understanding something of all the others and next to nothing of Murdoch.) 'It's good,' I said, uncertainly. By the strange ways of academic accident, this was qualification enough. I ended up running the conference, together with two colleagues no doubt better qualified than me.

This collection of essays is, though rather indirectly, the result of that conference. It is, I hope, a way of showing that Murdoch is of importance and interest to the same people as read the moral philosophy of Kant and Plato or Philippa Foot and John McDowell. The Introduction is an attempt to do a better job than I could before, of saying what Murdoch said, and why. Having fallen more or less by accident into the job, I have had a lot of work to do. What I have learned has surprised me. Murdoch's main achievements are, I think, not particularly in what she had to say about existentialism or aesthetics, nor in her early philosophy of mind—though those things are substantial enough—but in her moral philosophy and the correlative metaphysics. Her recurring concerns—like those of Kant and Plato—are with the discovery of our own nature as beings capable (very variously, but improbably) of reasoning and moral attention, and, correlatively, with the conception of the (moral and other) nature of the world, of which we are rather imperfectly conscious. What Murdoch had to say on those topics is never going to be easy; but as an interpretative tradition builds up and

there are more and better guides available, I hope that new readers will be able to find their way around more easily, to see what's there and what they can do with it. It has been a delight to study her work.

Many of the papers of this volume had an ancestor that was presented in the Murdoch conference at Brown in 2001; others are entirely new. I am particularly grateful to John Bayley for graciously permitting the publication of a chapter from the book on Heidegger that Iris Murdoch left unfinished, as well as for his own contribution to the volume. Peter Conradi has been a generous supporter of the project. I must thank all the contributors not only for their work, but also for their endurance during the time it has taken me to bring our work to completion. Peter Momtchiloff, Catherine Berry, Eleanor Collins, and Carla Hodge, editors at OUP, have been models of interest, guidance, and well-timed demand; and Joe Soave has been a terrific copy-editor with a difficult text. Robert Lacey and others at HarperCollins helped, when the cover photo needed some technical assistance. I would particularly like to thank Mark Shapiro, a former student of Philosophy at Brown and now a benefactor of it, who first suggested the idea of the conference, and who most generously supported it. And above all I would like to thank John McDowell: who, over weeks and months of tutorials, first guided me in moral philosophy and gave me the beginnings of what understanding I have developed of Murdoch since I returned to her, more or less accidentally, over twenty years later. There are things he said in that first tutorial that I believe I understood for the first time just a few months ago.

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# Abbreviations

Abbreviations for Murdoch's own writings, and a few other important works, are given below. Any other abbreviations are normally explained on their first occurrence in any of the essays. References are given, where possible, to the reprints of Murdoch's philosophical works in the collection *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997), edited by Peter J. Conradi. For the three essays (IP, OGG and SGC) that make up *The Sovereignty of Good*, page references are given both to the 1970 book publication and to the reprints in *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997), separated by a forward slash.

AD	'Against Dryness' (1961), E&M 287–95
Ak.	Kant, <i>Gesammelte Schriften herausgegeben von der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften</i> , 1st division, 9 vols. (1902–23)
BP	<i>The Black Prince</i> (1973; Penguin, 1975)
DPR	'The Darkness of Practical Reason' (1966), E&M 193–202
E&M	<i>Existentialists and Mystics</i> (1997), edited by Peter J. Conradi
E&I	'Ethics and the Imagination', <i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i> , vol. 52, 1986, 92
EPM	'The Existentialist Political Myth' (1952), E&M 130–45
F&S	<i>The Fire and the Sun</i> (1977), E&M 386–463
FFE	<i>The Flight from the Enchanter</i> (1956; Penguin, 1962)
FTC	<i>From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch</i> (2003), edited by Gillian Dooley
GMS	Kant, <i>Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten</i> (1785): <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> . Page numbers refer to vol. 4 of the Ak. edition
HMD	'Hegel in Modern Dress' (1957), E&M 146–50
HT	'A House of Theory' (1958), E&M 171–87
IML	Peter J. Conradi, <i>Iris Murdoch: A Life</i> (2001)
IP	'The Idea of Perfection' (1964), SG 1–45, E&M 299–336
KpV	Kant, <i>Kritik der praktischen Vernunft</i> (1788), <i>Critique of Practical Reason</i> . Page numbers refer to vol. 5 of the Ak. edition
KV	'Knowing the Void' (1956), E&M 157–60
MDH	'The Moral Decision about Homosexuality', <i>Man and Society</i> , 7 (Summer 1964), 3–6
M&E	'Metaphysics and Ethics' (1957), E&M 59–76
MGM	<i>Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals</i> (1992)
NM	'The Novelist as a Metaphysician' (1950), E&M 101–7
NP	'Nostalgia for the Particular' (1952), E&M 43–58

OGG	‘On “God” and “Good”’ (1969), SG 46–76, E&M 337–62
PAS	<i>Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society</i>
PASS	<i>Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society</i> Supplementary Volume
PI	Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> (1953), tr. G. E. M. Anscombe
Rep.	Plato, <i>Republic</i>
S&G	‘The Sublime and the Good’ (1959), E&M 205–21
SBR	‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’ (1959), E&M 261–86
SE	<i>Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud</i> , ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (1953–1966)
SG	<i>The Sovereignty of Good</i> (1970)
SGC	‘The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts’ (1967), SG 77–104, E&M 363–85
SRR	<i>Sartre: Romantic Rationalist</i> (1953; 1987)
TA	Hampshire, <i>Thought and Action</i> (1959)
T&L	‘Thinking and Language’ (1951), E&M 33–42
UN	<i>Under the Net</i> (1954; Penguin, 1960)
VCM	‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ (PASS 1956, 32–58), repr. (with omissions) in E&M 76–98

When line numbers as well as page numbers are given, they follow a full stop or point: thus IP 29.19/320.11 refers to ‘The Idea of Perfection’, page 29 line 19 in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and page 320 line 11 in *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997). There is also a later edition of *The Sovereignty of Good* (2001): pp. 1–104 of the 1970 edition correspond to pp. 1–101 in the 2001 edition.

# Notes on Contributors

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# Introduction

*Justin Broackes*

For fifteen years, from 1948 to 1963, Iris Murdoch was a Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at St Anne's College, Oxford.\* She was both brilliant and, I think, immediately recognized as such. By the time her first published novel *Under the Net* appeared in 1954, she had already produced a small book on *Sartre* (1953), two substantial papers at the Aristotelian Society, and some reviews for *Mind*—as well as a couple of radio talks on existentialism and an ambitious piece on existentialist politics for the *Socratic Digest*. At opposite ends of her work, she was both a thoroughly professional combatant—debating with Ryle whether he had underestimated the notion of 'private' experience—and a cultural commentator of wide range and socialist sympathies—enquiring, for example, with Lukács, Oakeshott, and Merleau-Ponty whether Existentialist politics were an adolescent evasion, whereas Marxism and capitalism in their different ways at least had the recommendation of being 'an incarnation of ideas and values' (EPM 142). For a good ten years, Murdoch was a philosopher who wrote novels, not a novelist who taught—or had taught—philosophy. And her work in moral philosophy—beginning with two articles in the mid-1950s and culminating in the three papers that were collected together as *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970)—was important, difficult, and distinctive. It rejected the approach to morality of the two dominant movements of the time—Anglo-American 'analytical philosophy', with its emphasis on language and behaviour, and Continental existentialism—and opened up a third path. Murdoch proposed a form of moral realism, allowing the world to contain such things as the courage of an individual person or the meanness of some petty act—something like 'moral facts' (VCM 54/95), conceived as *what meets the eye of a just and loving moral perceiver*. She argued for this with a broadly Wittgensteinian approach, in opposition to a narrower method that (as in R. M. Hare) looked to behaviour and linguistic analysis to delimit the nature of morality. And Murdoch combined with this a moral psychology (what today might be called a theory of

\* For comments, advice, and conversation, I am grateful to Melissa Barry, David Charles, Peter J. Conradi, Roger Crisp, James Dreier, Ivan Gaskell, Dana Howard, Mark Jenkins, Charles Larmore, David Matthews, David Robjant, Barbara Sattler, Dominic Scott, Jenifer Wakelyn, Kenneth Winkler, and Steven Yamamoto.

motivation and practical reasoning) and a conception of a training in the virtues that went back to Plato. Surprisingly perhaps for a kind of moral realist, she was also a great believer in historical and individual differences in moral perception and conception, and in the difficulty and duty of working for mutual understanding, enlargement of view, and (where a part of our conceptual repertoire itself embodies an injustice) conceptual reform—something more radical than merely changing our minds on the judgements we can already make with our present concepts. Most remarkably, perhaps, Murdoch believed—as Plato and Kant had done, but absolutely in opposition to the mainstream of her time—that moral philosophy should contribute, not just to abstract debates on the nature of morality, but to the practical question, ‘How can we make ourselves morally better?’ (OGG 52/342; cp. SGC 83/368.) But Murdoch’s proposals on that question were deliberately modest: the good is distant and we know it only as seen in reflections, darkly—but we can talk of the main obstacles to perceiving it: social convention, neurosis, fantasy and, above all, the selfish ego, operating obscurely in ways we hardly understand, but which Freud and Plato so richly display for us. In this Introduction I shall say something of Murdoch’s philosophical career and reception; I shall go on to introduce the ideas of her earlier papers from the 1950s and 60s and, especially, *The Sovereignty of Good*, and then, more briefly, some of her later work; I shall end with some comments to introduce the papers in this collection.

## 1 Biography and philosophical career

Murdoch went up to Somerville College, Oxford in 1938, at the age of 19. She appears from the start to have led a rather fabulous existence: ‘Practically the very first thing I did’, she reported, somewhat dramatically, later, ‘was to join the Communist Party’, while throwing herself into a ‘hurricane of essays and proses and campaigns and committees and sherry parties and political and aesthetic arguments’.<sup>1</sup> She read Mods and Greats—that is, Latin and Greek, Ancient History and Philosophy—, was thrilled and terrified (and fondled) by the magisterial Eduard Fraenkel, whose Aeschylus classes she attended, and formed intellectual and passionate friendships to last a lifetime. It was a remarkable philosophical generation: Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch all took finals from Somerville in 1942. (Elizabeth Anscombe, at St Hugh’s, had taken Greats the year before—but she and Murdoch really became friends later, particularly in 1947–48.) Murdoch and her friend Mary Midgley—at that time Mary Scrutton—were the only candidates in Greats from Somerville that year; both got Firsts, as did Philippa Bosanquet—better known, after her marriage, as Philippa

<sup>1</sup> For Murdoch’s life, and a wonderfully vivid picture of these early years, see Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (2001, henceforth abbreviated as IML), on which I have drawn freely in this section. I quote here from Slavcho Trunski, *Grateful Bulgaria* (1979), 14, and from IML 83, which in turn quotes Murdoch from the *Badminton School Magazine* 79 (Spring–Summer 1939).

Foot—who was taking Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. Somerville at the time had no philosophy tutor, so Murdoch, Midgley, and Foot were all taught by Donald MacKinnon, the philosophy Tutor at Keble—a somewhat shambling, powerful man of extreme devotion to matters philosophical, moral, and spiritual,<sup>2</sup> who was to become Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy at Aberdeen (1947–60) and Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge (1960–78). One might wonder at the strength and independence of this generation of women philosophers—features which Mary Midgley has linked with the relative absence of men from the student body at the time and with the unstinting attentions of their extraordinary tutor.<sup>3</sup>

After Oxford, Murdoch had five years in the larger world, first at the Treasury in London (1942–44) and then with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration UNRRA (1944–46), which took her to Belgium and Austria, working in scenes of extreme destruction, injury, hunger, crime, and bereavement. It was largely the excitement of existentialism, as it reached her and many others in Belgium, that revived Murdoch's philosophical interests.<sup>4</sup> She met Sartre in Brussels in the autumn of 1945 after he gave a talk there (IML 215), and found him gentle and carefully attentive the next day at a *café-séance* with a series of young people 'who were dying to talk to him without having anything much to say'.<sup>5</sup> In the excited months that followed, she read everything of Sartre's she could lay her hands on (IML 215–6). Working with UNRRA in Innsbruck in February 1946, Murdoch also met the author Raymond Queneau, who became a friend, as well as literary model with his novel

<sup>2</sup> Murdoch writes, in a letter to Frank Thompson of 29 January 1942:

It's good to meet someone so extravagantly unselfish, so fantastically noble, as well as so extremely intelligent as this cove. He inspires a pure devotion. One feels vaguely one would go through fire for him, & so on. Sorry if this makes him sound like a superman. There are snags. He's perpetually on the brink of a nervous break-down. . . . He is perpetually making demands of one—there is a moral as well as an intellectual challenge— & there is no room for spiritual lassitude of any kind. (Quoted in Conradi, IML 123)

<sup>3</sup> 'Most of the men were away at the war. Classes were small, and they contained about as many women as men. The loud contests of competing male voices were not there. This was helpful, and I think it had a lot to do with allowing me, along with the other women, to be heard and work out our own ideas—an invaluable experience. . . . I should say that Philippa, Iris and I owed a huge debt to a wonderful male tutor who was wedded to large questions and gave us unstinted time to discuss them.' (Mary Midgley, *The Guardian*, 3 Oct. 2005.) 'Wedded' is a telling word here: MacKinnon apparently told one student that he 'had so terrible a conscience about not being in the forces [at this stage in the Second World War] that he lived in his college rooms, and left his newly-married wife living twenty or thirty yards away, working far too hard in order to justify himself'. (Conradi, IML 125) On this world of women philosophers, consider a journal entry following a trip to Oxford, when Murdoch was finishing her time at Cambridge in 1948: 'Back from Oxford. A world of women. I reflected, talking with Mary, Pip & Elizabeth [i.e. Midgley, Foot & Anscombe], how much I love them.' (Journal, 12 June 1948, IML 268)

<sup>4</sup> 'Everyone was in a state of frenzy about existentialism': Murdoch, in Interview with W. K. Rose (1968), repr. in G. Dooley, *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction* [FTC] (2003), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Murdoch, Interview with Harold Hobson (1962), FTC 98.



*Pierrot mon ami* (1943)<sup>6</sup>—and who may have helped in her first successful encounters with Hegel.<sup>7</sup> Murdoch returned to academic life with a brief stay in Cambridge (1947–48). She arrived intending to write a Ph. D. thesis on Husserl,<sup>8</sup> but quickly abandoned the idea in favour of arguing about Wittgenstein. Unfortunately for Murdoch, Wittgenstein himself had just stopped lecturing and, after a Michaelmas term sabbatical, was giving up his Professorship at the end of 1947. But Murdoch met him, was supervised by John Wisdom (after a brief spell with C. D. Broad), and spent huge amounts of time in philosophical friendship with members of the Wittgenstein circle which included Yorick Smythies, Georg Kreisel, Wasfi Hijab, and Kanti Shah. Before the year was out, she had been elected to a Fellowship at St Anne's, and began teaching in the autumn of 1948.

She could hardly have been more enthusiastically received into the philosophical world. She had two reviews almost immediately in *Mind* (1950). In 1951 she appeared at the main British philosophy conference—the Joint Session of the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society<sup>9</sup>—reading a paper to which A. C. Lloyd and Gilbert Ryle presented replies. Gilbert Ryle was some twenty years her senior, Waynflete Professor at Oxford since 1945, and fresh from the success of *The Concept of Mind* (1949), to which Murdoch's paper raised some forceful resistance. Murdoch's paper must have made quite an impression, for she was invited to give another Aristotelian Society talk in London less than a year later—rather exceptionally, given the way the limited number of lecture invitations are usually distributed. She published a short book on *Sartre* (1953), and another Joint Session paper, 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956), which was her first large-scale move into the field of moral philosophy, challenging the views of R. M. Hare. She had also talked on 'Metaphysics and Ethics' in a BBC radio series the year before (1955) on *The Nature of Metaphysics*—where she appeared in the company of H. P. Grice, P. F. Strawson, David Pears, Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams, Gerd Buchdahl, Patrick Gardiner, G. J. Warnock, Gilbert Ryle, Mary Warnock, and Anthony Quinton.<sup>10</sup> These were the most brilliant of the rising generation, appearing with

<sup>6</sup> Murdoch made a translation of Queneau's novel, though it was never published (IML 231–4), and the book was a very visible influence on her own novel *Under the Net* (1954).

<sup>7</sup> Queneau was the editor of Alexandre Kojève's hugely influential lectures on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, published as an *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (1947)—and he gave Murdoch a copy of the book in September 1947, which she read carefully. (It is now in the Kingston University archive.) See also IML 640 n. 1. Murdoch already had Baillie's translation of the *Phenomenology* (her copy is dated Aug. 31, 1946)—and some of the fruits of her appreciative reading of it can be seen in her BBC talk, 'The Novelist as Metaphysician' (1950): esp. E&M 102–3.

<sup>8</sup> See the Heidegger typescript in the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University, 83.

<sup>9</sup> For those unfamiliar with the British philosophical world, the Aristotelian Society has in practice nothing particularly to do with Aristotle: it is the society under whose aegis a series of a dozen or so talks by invited speakers are given through the academic year in London, on topics from the full range of academic philosophy; and it sponsors an annual conference, in the form of a 'Joint Session' with the Mind Association (itself more or less equivalent to the body of subscribers to the journal *Mind*), which occupies two or three days in July each year.

<sup>10</sup> See D. Pears, ed., *The Nature of Metaphysics* (1957). In his review of the volume, W. H. Walsh described Murdoch's piece as 'without doubt the most striking and perceptive essay in the book' (*Philosophy* 34 (1959):

Ryle their senior, and they represented the new blood of Oxford Philosophy in one of its heydays: the people who would (together with Elizabeth Anscombe and Michael Dummett) lead philosophy in Britain for the next 30 years and more. When Ved Mehta profiled Oxford intellectuals for the *New Yorker* in 1961 and 1962, after briefings in London from Ernest Gellner and Bertrand Russell (who warned him against Ryle and the heritage of Austin), he made his first visits in Oxford to Hare and to Murdoch,<sup>11</sup> before calling later on Warnock, Strawson, and Ayer.

Along with her St Anne's College Tutorship, Murdoch took a University Lecturership as from October 1951—adding an income of £300 per year to the £600 which came with the College Fellowship. (The older established men's colleges meanwhile offered salaries of about double.<sup>12</sup>) Her lectures were no bread-and-butter coverage of 'Ethical Theories' or an 'Introduction to Ethics' (Hare's topics at the time). The titles show the ambition and the development of her interests: 'Meanings, Descriptions, Thoughts' (H51),<sup>13</sup> 'Concepts and Images' (M51), 'Some Problems in Bradley' (T52), 'Imagination' (H53), 'Existential Moral Philosophy' (T53), 'The Naturalistic Fallacy' (H54), 'Analysis in Moral Philosophy' (a Graduate Class, given with Philippa Foot and Basil Mitchell, T54), 'Moral Philosophy and the Ethics of Liberalism' (H55), 'Art and Morals' (a Graduate Class with Patrick Gardiner, T55), and 'Morals and Politics' (T56 and H57).

From the later 1950s, however, one may discern Murdoch taking a more abstracted path. She did not ask for a continuation of her University Lecturership when it came up for renewal in the summer of 1957, though she continued with her college teaching.<sup>14</sup> (Among her pupils in 1959–60 was the 18-year old David K. Lewis, later the distinguished philosopher, visiting Oxford from Swarthmore College, accompanying his

53–4). In 1960, when a similar BBC Third Programme series debated *Freedom and the Will* (publ. in book form, 1963), Murdoch appeared again, in discussion with Stuart Hampshire, Patrick Gardiner, and David Pears; other broadcasts in the series were by Bernard Williams, H. L. A. Hart, P. F. Strawson, J. F. Thomson, G. J. Warnock, and Mary Warnock.

<sup>11</sup> Murdoch doesn't seem to have made a particularly good impression on Mehta. They talked briefly of her interests in Sartre and Kierkegaard when she worked in Belgium, and then of Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Foot, and of existentialist challenges to the couching of morality entirely in terms of *principles*. 'As she talked on, it became clear to me that she was much more an intuitive person than an analytic one, and regarded ideas as so many precious stones in the human diadem. Unlike Hare, she found it hard to imagine the diadem locked up in an ivory tower, or like the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London' (*Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (1963, 1965), 53). I have slightly the impression that it may have been precisely for the self-compromising charm of Crown Jewels in an ivory tower that Mehta was searching Oxford.

<sup>12</sup> The St Anne's advertisement inviting Applications 'for the post of Tutor (woman)... to teach Philosophy' (also 'to direct and take a share in the teaching of Latin') appeared in the *Oxford University Gazette* for 21 April 1948 (651): it offered a minimum of '£400 a year, rising to the £600 at the end of two years'. A men's college would have offered e.g. '£650 per annum initially, rising to a maximum of £1,350 per annum' (from an advertisement for a comparable post at Magdalen).

<sup>13</sup> M, H, and T (along the last two digits of the year) stand for the Michaelmas, Hilary, and Trinity (i.e. autumn, spring, and summer) terms of the Oxford academic year. Lecture Lists at the time were published in the *Oxford University Gazette*.

<sup>14</sup> I take the dates from the Oxford University Archives. Cp. also Conradi, IML 457n.

academic parents for the year.) Murdoch published two papers linking ethics and aesthetics with more general cultural criticism: 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959) and 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959). They must, however, have been less noticed in philosophical circles, appearing as they did in the *Chicago Review* and the *Yale Review*. (The second had been a lecture at Yale when she was invited there for a month in the autumn of 1959. In the journal's Notes on Contributors, where others talk of their teaching and employment or institutional affiliation, we read simply: 'IRIS MURDOCH is a well-known British writer.') At the same time, she was producing a good stream of reviews of philosophical books in more general publications like the *Listener* and *Spectator*, the *New Statesman* and *Encounter*,<sup>15</sup> as well as the acclaimed and much-reprinted article 'A House of Theory' (1958), a manifesto for a more theoretical socialism than was evident in the Labour Party of the time.

There are people who suspect now, I think, that Murdoch was either not quite a serious and substantial philosopher or not quite a professional, recognized by her fellows. Of the seriousness and substance of her work, the remainder of this volume, will I hope be sufficient confirmation; of her professionalism and recognition, her public career in the 1950s could hardly give more evidence. Philippa Foot, who became perhaps the most admired figure in British moral philosophy, was in the first twenty years of her career no more prolific;<sup>16</sup> and while Foot's paper 'Moral Beliefs' (PAS 1958–59) became something of a classic, it would have been hard to tell either in 1960 or in 1970 which of the two presented a more powerful challenge to the dominant moral philosophy.<sup>17</sup> In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch developed what

<sup>15</sup> And elsewhere: not all are reprinted in E&M. There is, for example, in the *Partisan Review* (Spring 1960), a sharp discussion of Ernest Gellner's *Words and Things*, in which Murdoch talks of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy, very much as an insider.

<sup>16</sup> By the end of the 1950s, Foot had five main papers (*Philosophy* 1952, PASS 1954, *Philosophical Review* 1957, PAS 1958–59, *Mind* 1958); Murdoch had published three similarly academic pieces (PASS 1951, PAS 1951–52, PASS 1956), two articles on the Sublime, and the small book on *Sartre*. In the decade of the 1960s, Murdoch produced the three big papers that became *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970); Foot published three smaller but highly respected articles (PASS 1961, *Oxford Review* 1967 ('The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect'), and a piece for David Pears's *David Hume: A Symposium* (1963)); and she edited the collection *Theories of Ethics* (1967). Foot gave a talk at the British Academy in 1970 ('Morality and Art') and was elected a Fellow in 1976.

<sup>17</sup> Murdoch's own estimate (to David Hicks, about 1945) was: 'Philippa is much the better philosopher than me' (see Conradi, IML 209). Philippa Foot, looking back later, places herself in the mainstream, and Murdoch outside it: 'We were interested in moral language, she was interested in the moral life . . . She left us, in the end' (to Conradi, IML 302). But Murdoch was, if anything, I think, the more prominent of the two in the profession in the mid-1950s: witness, along with the Aristotelian Society invitations and the series of Radio talks, e.g. her appearance with Anthony Quinton, Stuart Hampshire, and Isaiah Berlin in the 'Special Oxford number' (June 1955) of the monthly review *The Twentieth Century*, which devoted nearly 30 pages to 'Philosophy and Beliefs: A discussion between four Oxford philosophers'.

For the love and friendship between Murdoch and Foot, see Conradi's biography, from their time as undergraduates together (IML 85, 97, 127–8) to the end of Murdoch's life (593, 597). They shared a London flat in 1943–44, in Seaforth Place, near Victoria Station—with wartime shortages and night-time bombings, and transformations in their relations with the men in their lives that left an uncomfortable imprint on their own friendship (IML 142–7; 165–9, 175–9, 205, 223). There was a reconciliation in 1946–47 (IML 252–4) and Murdoch lived with Philippa and Michael Foot (the historian, not the Labour politician of the same

might be called a substantial, unified, and very distinctive overall position—the kind of thing that a new young philosopher could spend months studying and years either challenging or developing.

What is true, however, is that Murdoch had much less of an academic following, and if there was such a new young philosopher to develop and take it forward, he was not to appear until the arrival of John McDowell—particularly with his articles ‘Virtue and Reason’ (1979) and ‘Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following’ (1981)—more than fifteen years after Murdoch herself had left the profession.<sup>18</sup> Philippa Foot’s classic paper ‘Moral Beliefs’ (PAS 1958–59) was accessible, soon reprinted in other places, and would have appeared on almost any undergraduate reading list for ‘Fact and Value’ or some such topic. Murdoch’s ‘Idea of Perfection’, which I think is no less of a masterpiece, appeared, by contrast, in the *Yale Review* (1964), where it was unlikely to be seen either by students or their teachers; it became part of *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) but was otherwise, I think, not reprinted until 2001.<sup>19</sup> If it appeared on an undergraduate reading list at all, it might as easily—or hardly—have been classified under ‘Fact and Value’, ‘Reason and Desire’, ‘Freedom’, or ‘Moral Perception’ (itself a topic that hardly existed in 1965 as a subject for an undergraduate study), not to mention other issues which figured under no standard heading at all. And of course Murdoch’s style—allusive, all-embracing, non-aligned in the cold war of analytic and continental philosophy, and, quite simply, *hard*—was going to be appreciated by few without the help of a teacher. But by the time ‘The Idea of Perfection’ appeared in Spring of 1964, Murdoch had already left Oxford, where she had anyway stopped

name) in her first year back in Oxford (1948–49); but the friendship seems to have been fully renewed only in 1959 after the separation of Philippa and Michael Foot (IML 430–1). Foot appears in Murdoch’s fiction in various mostly intimidating guises—Paula in *The Nice and the Good* (1968) is a portrait (IML 485). They seem to have had a varying and undying love. Philippa to Iris was her ‘life-long best friend’ (IML 128): ‘My God, I did love her’, she had said of those intense London months (to David Hicks, Nov. 1944, IML 220). Of Iris, Philippa said, ‘She was the light of my life’ (IML 592–3).

<sup>18</sup> One should mention others who took up her work about the same time or slightly later, including Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and Charles Taylor—to all of whom Murdoch may have been of particular interest as showing one way for an ‘analytic’ philosopher to leave the fold, or at least to argue over the grazing rules. Rorty in his 1979 NEH Summer Seminar for University & College Teachers, on ‘Epistemological and Moral Relativism’, included *The Sovereignty of Good*, along with texts of Kuhn, Davidson, Putnam, Sellars, MacIntyre, Wiggins, Nagel, and Harman. Rorty seems (as Ken Winkler reports to me from his notes at the time) to have read Sellars (in *Science and Metaphysics*) as coming close to Murdoch on attention, community, and what it is to take up the moral point of view—or at least, as being on the verge of saying Murdoch-like things, but as being held prisoner by the vocabulary of analytic philosophy. From such an admirer of Sellars, these sentiments sound high praise. Putnam was, from at least the mid-1970s, a clear supporter of Murdoch’s (on both ‘faulty moral psychology’ and the problems of Hare’s attempt to disentangle ‘evaluative’ and ‘descriptive’ meaning): see Putnam, ‘The Place of Facts in a World of Values’ (1979; presented in 1976), and ‘Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction’ (1990): both in *Realism with a Human Face* (1990), esp. 150, 166–8. (See also Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (2002), 35–40, 118–19, 128.) Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self* (1989), explicitly presents Part I as pursuing a Murdochian project: that of retrieving modes of conception of the Good, in order to set them in relation to varying conceptions of the Self (see 3; cp. 84, 95–6). For Taylor’s overall placing of Murdoch, see also his ‘Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy’, in M. Antonaccio & W. Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (1996).

<sup>19</sup> It appeared in Elijah Millgram (ed.), *Varieties of Practical Reasoning* (2001).

giving university lectures more than five years before. So there was no band of tutored students to mediate her work to a larger audience. The people most likely to appreciate it were a small number of impressive near-contemporaries—like Hampshire, Anscombe, Foot, and Williams—who had a high regard for her work, but were following their own path.<sup>20</sup> Hare made no reply in print to the criticisms in Murdoch's 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956) and he seems in his publications entirely to have ignored them. (As far I can see, Hare's one mention of Murdoch is—in a discussion of universalizability—a reference to 'Miss Murdoch's delightful novel *Under the Net*'.<sup>21</sup>) Meanwhile, among the more general reading public, Murdoch certainly had a reputation from the *Sartre* book (1953) and her radio appearances, but the former was, actually, a rather difficult work, without showing much of what was to be her mature philosophy, and the really distinctive views argued in the radio talks may have passed by all too fast. So it is perhaps unsurprising if, by the time *The Sovereignty of Good* appeared in 1970, people thought of it as the work of a novelist who had once been a philosopher, rather than (as I think is true) a work of extreme concentration and energy, the culmination of more than a decade of sustained professional attention,<sup>22</sup> advancing a view of large areas of moral philosophy that was ambitious, independent and quite opposite to the philosophical fashions of the time.

It was left, I think, for John McDowell to reinvent or develop Murdoch's position, for that view to have any very definite impact on later philosophers. One might summarize the largest ideas for academic moral philosophy (remembering that other things stand out from other points of view) under five main headings:

- (1) a form of moral realism or 'naturalism'—allowing into the world instances of such moral properties as humility, generosity, and courage;
- (2) an anti-scientism (to escape the view that the world can be said to contain only what science tells us is there or what is clearly reducible to that);
- (3) an anti-Humean moral psychology, rejecting the view that moral action is standardly to be explained as the upshot of belief plus desire (allowing, instead, e.g. that the perception of a child's need may be enough to explain a parent's attention, without our needing to posit an additional desire or 'choice' in the parent, e.g. to meet needs of some relevant kind *k*);<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The graduate classes that Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch gave (together with Basil Mitchell in 1954) certainly did make a mark on Bernard Williams, however, e.g. in his distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' ethical concepts. See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), 218 n. 7, quoted in fn. 37 below; and the discussion of thesis (iv) in the main text below.

<sup>21</sup> R. M. Hare, 'Universalisability', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55 (1954–55), 295–312, at 310—which of course antedates Murdoch's 'Vision and Choice' paper (1956).

<sup>22</sup> On the need for professional devotion to the subject, Murdoch was explicit. In the final sentence of 'On "God" and "Good"': 'there can be no substitute for pure, disciplined, professional speculation' (OGG 76/362).

<sup>23</sup> No less important, I think, is (3') an in some sense anti-Kantian moral psychology—opposing the dualism in Kant's picture of the human being as 'an indiscernible balance between a pure rational agent and an impersonal mechanism' (OGG 54/343): with reason and will abstracted and set in opposition to our

- (4) a resistance to the idea that the content of morality must be statable in the form of universal principles (allowing, instead, e.g. that it might be captured in what would ideally be *seen* or thought of each individual case by a just person)—what some people have called ‘particularism’;<sup>24</sup>

and finally,

- (5) a special attention to the virtues.<sup>25</sup>

sensuous existence. Murdoch’s own conception might be described as affirming in human beings the inextricability of perception and reason and will and desire, which, together and in a single realm, act in essential interconnection, upon a background of habit and inheritance (which itself has evolved through a constant interplay of forces internal and external to the person), the whole personal system being capable of operating at different levels of refinement and understanding and freedom from the selfish ego and other forces of corruption. There are many different familiar dualistic pictures: Hume opposes belief to desire; Kant divides reason and will from desire and sensuous experience; Hampshire (*Thought and Action* ch. 2) keeps ‘a personal will’ as a maximally protected centre of freedom, while abandoning ‘thought’ and reason (as being governed by public rules) to the category of the ideally automatic, and, it seems, determined (IP 40/332, cp. 4–6/302–4). Murdoch opposes to the last of these dualisms (as also to the earlier ones) a more unified conception of the person: ‘Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision’ (IP 40/332; cp. OGG 47–51/338–41). Kant is, I think, for her the greatest guide—the capacities for rational and moral thought are true signs of what may properly be called freedom; but rather than those being (as at least on one reading of Kant) set in ontological and evaluative opposition to our sensual nature, they are, I think for Murdoch, supposed to take a place beside the latter in the ordinary empirical world, a world which philosophers may need to reconceive, but which ordinary people have typically understood as quite capacious enough to contain both such things.

<sup>24</sup> People sometimes treat the seeing of the moral character of particular things and situations as a specially Aristotelian idea (e.g. on the basis of *Nicomachean Ethics* II.2, esp. 1104a7–8); but it is no less to be found in Plato, complete with the imagery of moral perception. ‘Once habituated you will see them [i.e. the obscure things back in the cave] infinitely better than the dwellers there, and you will know what each of the images is and whereof it is a semblance, because you have seen the reality of the beautiful, the just and the good’ (*Rep.* VII 520c). A quite general statement of law could never in one go ‘accurately encompass what is best and most just for all people’ and make, so to speak, a permanently definitive prescription: ‘The best thing is not that *the laws* should prevail, but rather *the kingly person who possesses wisdom*’, i.e. the wise individual who knows how to rule (*Statesman* 294–6, esp. 294a).

<sup>25</sup> For these ideas, see e.g.:

(1) IP, and especially its use of the example of the mother M and her daughter-in-law D: if we accept that ‘When M is just and loving she sees D *as she really is*’ (IP 37/329, my emphasis)—and accept that what she sees is indeed there to be seen—, then we can conclude that D is in reality ‘not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay’ and so on. (Murdoch’s own term for this view is not ‘realism’, however, but ‘naturalism’ (IP 44/335).) Thus goodness is ‘connected with knowledge’: a good person is one who has ‘a refined and honest perception of *what is really the case*, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one’ (IP 38/330, my emphasis). Cp. the talk of ‘moral facts’ (VCM 54/95).

(2) Murdoch’s examples (of repentance and M’s change of view) are chosen particularly to challenge the objectivist (and scientific) conception of reality implicit in philosophers like Hampshire, for whom ‘anything which is to count as a definite reality must be open to several observers’ (*Thought & Action* 162; quoted at IP 5/302 and 23/317). ‘What is at stake here is the liberation of morality, and of philosophy as a study of human nature, from the domination of science: or rather from the domination of inexact ideas of science which haunt philosophers and other thinkers’ (IP 27/320); cp. IP 23.34–34.22/318.7–327.3, esp. 25–6/319–20, 34/326–7. See also OGG 76/362: ‘it is from . . . art and ethics, that we must hope to generate concepts worthy, and also able, to guide and check the increasing power of science’.

(3) IP 34.23–42.32/327.4–334.2; OGG 55.21–56.23/345.1–35. ‘Will and reason . . . are not entirely separate faculties’ (IP 40/331). ‘Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a

At least the first four of these can be described in fundamentally negative terms:<sup>26</sup> anti-non-cognitivism (to use McDowell's term), anti-scientism, anti-Humean moral psychology, and anti-universalism (if I may coin the term). And this is not accidental: they are forms of resistance to the idea that morality can be forced into one particular mould, rather than attempts to specify another mould into which to put it.<sup>27</sup> And in a sense, (5) has that same character too: Murdoch adds the virtues to the many things not to be omitted in moral philosophy, rather than advancing a theory of 'virtue ethics'.

One might also draw out something included in passing under (3) and (4):

- (6) an emphasis on the idea of moral *perception*, and the metaphor of *seeing* moral features of people and situations, and *seeing* what is to be done.<sup>28</sup>

This at once integrates and gives a place to much in Murdoch's other views. To draw out some of the connections: The idea of moral perception brings with it the idea of a moral *fact* (as *what is seen*), as in (1). If, then, we reflect on how our *particular perceptual or conceptual scheme* will influence what kinds of things we are equipped to pick out and talk about (some people talk of *sensibility* and *point of view* here, but Murdoch's interest is above all in what a person sees thanks to their particular 'scheme of concepts' (IP 32/325) and especially thanks to the *moral* character of those concepts (IP 24–28/318–21)): then we will find those things to include facts of kinds that one can probably

unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees' (IP 40/332, quoted in fn. 23). We should think in terms of 'a world which is *compulsively* present to the will' (IP 39/331). 'If we picture the agent as compelled by obedience to the reality he can see, he will not be saying . . . "I *choose* to do this", he will be saying "This is A B C D" (normative-descriptive words), and *action will follow naturally*' (IP 42/333, my emphasis). A good thing, suitably attended to, is itself 'a source of energy' (OGG 56/345).

(4) VCM 43.27–51.18/84.22–92.2; the 'just and loving gaze directed upon an *individual reality*' (IP 34/327, my emphasis) and, in general, Murdoch's use of Weil's conception of 'attention'; but cp. also the 'turning of attention away from the particular' at SGC 101/383). See also S&G 215.

(5) The central argument of SGC, esp. 84.13–end/369.10–end.

<sup>26</sup> How true this is of (1) is clear from the research description that Murdoch included as part of the application for her University Lectureship in 1950 (now in the Oxford University Archives). Her ambitious project is a study of 'transcendental logic'—drawing out the implications, for metaphysics and the conception of the world, of rejecting the dichotomy of language into the 'descriptive' and the 'emotive'. The aim is to improve on Wittgenstein and Ryle—most urgently where they fail to *describe* our thinking (especially in the domains of imaginative and creative thought, moral decision, and thought about ourselves)—, taking assistance from Kant, Hegel, and Bradley: an *empiricist* task (in Murdoch's understanding of that term), which, however, has been undertaken really faithfully only by idealists. And Murdoch's starting point is the *rejection* of an imposed dichotomy between 'descriptive' and 'emotive'.

<sup>27</sup> For resistance to moulds, see e.g. M&E (1957): 'We should . . . resist the temptation to unify the picture by trying to establish, guided by our own conception of the ethical in general, what [moral] concepts *must be* . . . [I]n the process important differences . . . may be blurred or neglected' (75). Cp. 67 and VCM 44–51/84–92.

<sup>28</sup> The very title of 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956) contrasts the approach of those (like Hare) who put 'choice' at the centre of morality with others (like Murdoch) who emphasize 'vision'. In SG, consider the presentation of M's change of mind ('Is not the metaphor of vision almost irresistibly suggested . . . ? M *looks* at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention' (IP 22/316–7))—and, in general, the use of Weil's conception of *attention*: 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (IP 34/327; cp. 37–9/329–31). See also fn. 92 below.

live happily with only given (2) some kind of anti-scientism. Such facts may include essentially *response-invoking facts*, or facts the appreciation of which is *intrinsically motivating*—in which case we would have (3) the rejection of the Humean model of motivation. Perception is, of course, also typically perception of individual things with their qualities, in a particular environment, as (4) emphasizes. And, as moral perception and its no less important complement, the *acting* upon perception (IP 43.23–9/334.26–31), are things that can be treated as trainable and specially valuable capacities, we have a place for something like the idea of virtue (5). Murdoch's model of morality as *perception of particulars* was therefore radically distinctive. It offered the prospect of freeing moral thinking at once from assimilation to mere feeling or passion, to intellectual intuition, to ordinary 'descriptive' judgement, and even to the issuing of prescriptions. And to the extent that the model presented itself from the start as one of *perception*, rather than of 'sensation' as conceived in the Lockean theory of secondary qualities, it was proof against confusion with some kind of projectivism. Which is not to say, of course, that it could not be attacked or challenged from the perspective of any or all of those rival conceptions: but it represented a distinctive and new conception—something that, whatever its Platonic roots, Murdoch made newly thinkable for her time by a new post-Wittgensteinian presentation.<sup>29</sup>

I do not know in what ways exactly one should talk of their relation, but John McDowell immersed himself at times in *The Sovereignty of Good*, reading and re-reading it with admiration, and he has described himself to Murdoch's biographer as having been 'pervasively influenced' by her (Conradi, IML 303). The five or six ideas I have singled out as distinctive of Murdoch certainly became distinctive of McDowell's moral philosophy<sup>30</sup>—though developed there with much else, not least a readiness (as also in David Wiggins) to allow the notion of truth to apply straightforwardly

<sup>29</sup> Philippa Foot was, of course, also a critic of Hare and much else in 'modern moral philosophy', but not in the same way. If her earliest articles were in some ways ambiguous, she was soon insisting on the conception of 'Morality as a System of *Hypothetical Imperatives*' (to quote the title of her 1972 paper; my emphasis)—explicitly requiring for moral motivation the additional desires that Murdoch's moral psychology wanted to do without. For that reason, the realism one might find in Foot's early work was a realism of a different kind too from that in Murdoch: Foot's moral properties were (in Hare's terms) 'descriptive', rather than, as Murdoch's might be, (in a suitable context) essentially reason-providing or (to come closer to Murdoch) *energy*-providing. On much of this, Foot later changed her mind in the direction of Murdoch and McDowell: see 'Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?' *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* (1995), 4.

<sup>30</sup> A selection of articles would be 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?' (AMR, 1978); 'Virtue and Reason' (VR, 1979); 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following' (NCRF, 1981); 'Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World' (AVO, 1983); 'Values and Secondary Qualities' (VSQ, 1985); and 'Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology' (SIA, 1988): page numbers here refer to the reprints in his *Mind, Value & Reality* (MVR, 1998). For (1) Realism, see, e.g. NCRF and VSQ. (NCRF talks of making a space for 'realism . . . about values' (212); though McDowell later expresses a preference for the term 'anti-anti-realism' (MVR (1998), viii). For (2) Anti-Scientism: e.g. AVO §5; even a subtle non-cognitivism owes its origin to 'a philistine scientism' (VR 72). For (3) the non-Humean moral psychology: AMR §5, and e.g. NCRF §4. For (4) resistance to a requirement of codification in universal principles: VR §4; McDowell will talk also of 'the appreciation of particular cases' (68); cp. also VSQ §5 (e.g. 149), and (for Aristotle) SIA §§4–10. For (5) Virtues: see e.g. VR. For (6) Perception: VSQ; also e.g. in connection with Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a23–30), SIA §5.



to moral statements. And the fundamental rationale for those views in McDowell (namely, I think, a Wittgensteinian return to taking the phenomena of moral thought and talk ‘at face value’) is almost exactly the same as the rationale in Murdoch.<sup>31</sup>

It may also be worth pointing out, however, some other themes important to Murdoch—three that made less of an impact on any later philosophers, and one that had fairly widespread acceptance and development. Perhaps not incidentally, the first three might all be counted as a matter of substantive morality no less than of meta-ethics.<sup>32</sup> The first is part of Murdoch’s response to Hare and others who present morality as primarily a matter of *choice*, and who treat moral *disagreement*, therefore, as a matter of difference in the ways in which people ‘choose’ among straightforwardly surveyable alternatives. Murdoch, instead, emphasizes:

- (i) The dependence of moral thought upon *conceptual scheme*. ‘I can only *choose* within the world I can *see*’ (IP 37/329: my emphasis on ‘choose’). A person’s conceptual apparatus may restrict,<sup>33</sup> or enlarge—or, more importantly (since the issue is hardly one merely of *quantity*), may focus in one way, or another—the range of *options* that she is so much as in a position to recognize as available for her to choose among. The conceptual scheme may in a sense be said to determine and reveal the character of the moral *world* in which she lives.

Most remarkable perhaps are the ways in which Murdoch characterizes these conceptual schemes—with (though this is hardly a single or simple item):

- (ii) An emphasis on *difference* and *disagreement* among people in moral outlook: difference not just in application of shared concepts, but in the repertoire of concepts that different people understand and employ. Hence Murdoch’s interest not just in the phenomenon of *changing one’s mind* about a particular

<sup>31</sup> VCM replies to Hare’s general conception of morality by encouraging us to go ‘back again to the data’ (VCM 97/57) and to reconsider the ‘initial delineation of the field of study’ (76/33): there are many cases of what surely can properly be called moral thought and talk that do not easily fit the mould of Hare’s universalizability requirement or his dichotomy between descriptive and evaluative meaning. ‘Why insist on forcing moral attitudes into the “universality” model when this is contrary to appearances?’ (VCM 84/44). And the result of appreciating this is to see the possibility of a form of ‘naturalism’ (VCM 92–8/51–8). And Murdoch (like McDowell later) wishes whatever ordinary naturalism might emerge to be something like an acceptance of appearances, not a new claim to another form of systematic metaphysics. The central discussion in IP is governed by a caveat from Wittgenstein: ‘Being unable—when we surrender ourselves to philosophical thought—to help saying such-and-such; being irresistibly inclined to say it—does not mean being forced into an assumption, or having an immediate perception or knowledge of a state of affairs’ (Wittgenstein, PI §299, quoted at IP 16/312).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. ‘It is here [with conceptual innovation] that description moves imperceptibly [though not necessarily objectionably, I think Murdoch wants us to understand] into moralising’ (M&E 74).

<sup>33</sup> Note, though, whatever ‘restriction’ that may amount to, we must not suppose it will make it impossible for critics in a social group to see or act upon a need for conceptual innovation. On the contrary, the restriction (in moral as also in non-moral domains) may sometimes be felt as a frustration that itself serves as an impulse to ‘renewal of language’ (TL36).

case; but also in the processes of *revision*, evolution, and ‘deepening’ of moral vocabulary and conceptual scheme (IP 29/322, 31–3/324–6); and particularly, and most remarkably, in a kind of *privacy* of understanding (IP 25–9/319–22).<sup>34</sup>

If we have a conception of our understanding—of moral concepts and of individual people—as being endlessly improvable in the direction of an idealized perfect understanding (Murdoch’s ‘idea’ of perfection), we must also recognize, given our nature and our actual condition, that our own conceptions as they advance may in practice also become increasingly *private*. Our conception of love, for example—or of courage or repentance (IP 29/322, 26/320)—will vary with age and experience; and our deepest and most revelatory experiences may, in a fairly ordinary sense, be remarkably private. Even if in principle they are open to others, the number of people in a position of being suitably like-minded and well-placed and attentive enough to recognize them may in practice be small, and perhaps indeed—as those experiences accumulate in their particularity (though they will also interconnect)—increasingly small. ‘Since we are

<sup>34</sup> On (i) and (ii): Morality is essentially characterized by its employment of concepts that are non-equivalent to the classifications made in science: ‘Moral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up, for different purposes, a different world’ (IP 29/321; cp. (2) and (8) in main text). Conceptual differences—and the consequential differences in the kinds of thing we recognize in the world—are neglected by linguistic philosophy, and especially by Hare: M&E 72–3, VCM 40–3/81–3. ‘We [human beings] differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds’. (VCM 41/82: different people, with different moral and other vocabularies, will discover in the worlds they ‘see’ different ranges of things—and may fail even to understand the classifications made by each other. Cp. (7) in main text below.) On conceptual innovation, see also VCM 42/83 (‘Great philosophers coin new moral concepts and communicate new moral visions and modes of understanding.’); VCM 49–50/90–1 (‘The task of moral philosophers has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of the language’). Existentialism has been very free to introduce new concepts (E&M 133, 152); as have Gabriel Marcel, particularly fruitfully (E&M 126–8), and Elias Canetti (E&M 190–1); cp. also HT 182.20–2. We also need an extension of our conceptual repertoire if philosophers are to find *thinkable* some suitable form of moral ‘naturalism’ or realism: AD 293; cp. IP 45.9–13/336.1–4. Vocabularies may bring with them substantive moral views (and this is true too, though less obviously, of the supposedly ‘neutral’ terms of modern moral philosophy: M&E 74); they may embody injustices. (‘A smart set of concepts may be a most efficient instrument of corruption’, IP 33/325; cp. also IP 3.2–3/300.31–2.) The central example of the mother and daughter-in-law in IP is, I think, meant *not* as a case where the mother merely changes the application of an unrevised set of concepts, but rather as one where the mother appreciates, perhaps dimly, the unsatisfactoriness of whole ranges of concepts she has earlier employed unreflectingly. (She says to herself, ‘I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish.’ IP 17/313.) The implication is, I think, that some more general conceptual reconfiguration takes place as the mother experiences the *difficulty* of consistently and confidently applying her initial set of concepts to the reality of the daughter-in-law before her (IP 31–4/324–6): ‘We . . . *grow by looking*’ (31/324). (Does it make sense, one might ask—filling in what might be one step in the mother’s reflections—, for her to judge her daughter-in-law as being, or *not being*, ‘insufficiently ceremonious’ (IP 17/312)? What kind of ceremoniousness would it be appropriate for her to expect from her daughter-in-law? Is the presumption of a standard here itself something that needs to be put in question?) (In Murdoch’s discussion of the learning of moral concepts at IP 31–4/324–6, there are echoes, I think, of F. N. Sibley on learning aesthetic concepts: see his *Phil. Rev.* 1959 paper ‘Aesthetic Concepts’.) Such reflection and conceptual revision is important also to McDowell (see e.g. *Mind and World*, 81–2; cp. 12–13, 40, 126); but when he presents it with references to the imagery of Quine (as at *Mind and World*, 13n.), Murdoch is at best, I imagine, fairly distantly in the background. (i) is a thought particularly dear to Murdoch; cp. Max Lejour in *The Unicorn* (1963): ‘What we can *see* determines what we choose’ (100). The thought goes back to VCM (41–3/82–4).

human historical individuals’—each of the last three words is worth weighing separately—‘the movement of understanding is onward into increasing privacy’ (IP 29/322). Murdoch was at odds here with a whole academic movement, which had a rather different sense of what we had to learn from the heritage of Wittgenstein.

Murdoch (like Plato and Aristotle and many Hegelians,<sup>35</sup> but in opposition to many academic philosophers of the mid-20th century) sees the topic of moral philosophy as not merely a matter of relatively limited issues of, say, contracts and promises, or even of ‘overriding obligation’, but something much wider: one might say, all that contributes to making a good life good. We may talk therefore of

- (iii) The all-embracing scope of moral thought: ‘The area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can . . . be seen . . . as covering *the whole of our mode of living* and the *quality of our relations with the world*’ (SGC 97/380, my emphasis).<sup>36</sup>

There is, however, one theme that did have wide and visible influence—particularly in Bernard Williams’s talk of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ ethical concepts—:

- (iv) An emphasis on ‘secondary’ or ‘specialised’ words like ‘rude’ and ‘bumptious’ (or more importantly, ‘generous’ and ‘brave’), by contrast with ‘the most empty and general’ moral terms, like ‘good’ and ‘right’ (IP 42/333, 23/317). The latter might seem (e.g. to Hare) applicable ‘freely’ at will to practically anything (subject only to a logical requirement of universalizability); but the former (‘normative-descriptive words’, 31/324) can surely only properly be applied to

<sup>35</sup> F. H. Bradley (in whom Murdoch had a special interest) stresses that ‘our *character* . . . is within the moral sphere’, and, in a sense, ‘*nothing* . . . falls outside of it’ (my emphasis). Even our unreflective actions are evidence of our character, and that character, ‘whether good or bad’, is a ‘second nature’, which has grown and changed under the influence of past actions where we did reflect. (‘Ideal morality’, in Bradley’s *Ethical Studies* (1876, 1927) 218–9 & n. 1.) For the breadth of application of moral consideration in Plato, one might cite not just the role of the Good as essential to the ultimate intelligibility of any and all of the Forms (*Rep.* 509a–c), but also the application of something like moral evaluation—*via* the notions of *grace* and *gracelessness*—to all or most of what we might call general culture, including musical modes, painting, weaving, embroidery, architecture, and household furnishing; see *Republic* 3, 400e–401a.

<sup>36</sup> Even in her 1956 article VCM, Murdoch talks of the ‘moral nature’ of a person’s ‘total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, what they think funny’: all this constitutes ‘the texture of a man’s being or the nature of his personal vision’ (VCM 39–40/80–1). (Murdoch says that the fact that such things are *moral* matters itself shows the need for a conception of morality that is not (like the modern moral philosophers’) limited to the ‘choice and argument’ model.) There is a rather similar protest in Anscombe at the restricted use of ‘moral’ for the domain merely of what one is, or could be, ‘obliged or bound by *law*’ to do—a restricted use that Aristotle is happily free from (‘Modern moral philosophy’ (1958), 5, my emphasis). Here again (as with the phrases ‘modern moral philosophy’ and (particularly inaccurately) ‘moral psychology’: see fn. 77 at start of §5 below), it turns out that Anscombe has become famously associated with a very similar idea to one that Murdoch had no less distinctively, though somewhat less dramatically, expressed in print some years before. For Murdoch’s later development of the idea, see also IP 22/316 (‘fabric of being’); IP 37/329 (‘attention . . . continuously . . . builds up structures of value round about us. . . . The moral life . . . is something that goes on continually’); OGG 54/343 (‘the tissue of that life’). Indeed: ‘All just vision, even in the strictest problems of the intellect, and *a fortiori* when suffering or wickedness have to be perceived, is a moral matter’ (OGG 70/357).

things fitting some relevant evidently factual characterization (though the characterization may not be readily graspable by just anyone—cf. (ii) above and (7) below).<sup>37</sup>

(One might compare Philippa Foot's argument that 'dangerous' is a term that can properly be applied only to things that actually have the characteristic of threatening some 'kind of serious evil such as injury or death' ('Moral Beliefs', 115)—the term 'injury', in turn, inviting further investigation.) It is particularly ascriptions of the specialized terms that are (in relevant situations) immediately motivating, in accord with the anti-Humean moral psychology of (3) above.<sup>38</sup>

There are some important, though lesser or more incidental, points shared by Murdoch and McDowell:

- (7) the view that we are in no position to claim that a person who did not share the evaluative interest of a term would be capable of capturing ('purely descriptively') its extension;<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> There is an early version of the distinction in Murdoch's 'Metaphysics and Ethics' (1955, publ. 1957), 73, and in VCM 41–2/82–3; and related ideas appear in Foot's discussion of 'rude' in 'Moral Arguments' (1958) as well as of 'dangerous' in 'Moral Beliefs' (1958/59). See also thesis (7) below, and references there to Murdoch's VCM. Hampshire quietly takes up a similar distinction (as much else in Murdoch's moral philosophy: *Thought and Action* 197–214 reads as an uprooting and replanting of many of Murdoch's thoughts in an environment that is rather fundamentally at odds with them; and IP is Murdoch's attempt to put them back in the right place): 'The type of moral philosophy that considers only the use of the "purely moral terms"—e.g. "right", "good", "ought"—tends to be as vacuous and uninformative as the type of aesthetics that isolates the purely aesthetic terms—e.g. "beautiful"' (TA 269). (Hare recognized a somewhat parallel distinction (illustrated by 'good' vs. 'tidy' and 'industrious'), but he understood it very differently: *The Language of Morals* (1952) 121.) Bernard Williams (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), 140–2) talks of how 'thick' ethical concepts, like *coward*, *lie*, *brutality*, *gratitude*, are both 'action-guiding' and 'world-guided', and says (as in thesis (7) below) there may be no 'descriptive equivalent' that would enable just anyone to get the extension of the term right without sharing the evaluative perspective of ordinary users of the term or having some imaginative understanding of it. Williams mentions McDowell's earlier development of the point and adds that it is basically a Wittgensteinian idea. (Presumably: outsiders to a practice may be unable to 'go on' and apply the relevant terms to new cases in the way that insiders do.) 'I first heard it expressed by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in a seminar in the 1950s' (ELP 218 n.7)—no doubt, the class they gave with Basil Mitchell in the spring of 1954. Williams had become a Fellow of All Souls in the year he took his BA, 1951, but then spent two years doing national service in the RAF; he returned to Oxford in 1953 and was a Fellow of New College 1954–59, before moving to London as Lecturer at UC, and then Professor at Bedford College (1964–67). A recommendation to study precise rather than dully generic evaluative terms was something of a commonplace among those who had heard, or heard much about, Wittgenstein's Lectures on Aesthetics. (And, as Anscombe said: 'It would be a great improvement, if, instead of "morally wrong", one always named a genus such as "untruthful", "unchaste", "unjust".' 'Modern Moral Philosophy', 8–9.) What was distinctive lay in what one might say about the latter terms.

<sup>38</sup> 'The agent will not be saying, "This is right", i.e. "I choose to do this" [using an "empty" term like "good" and making a "free" Hare-style "choice"], he will be saying, "This is A B C D" (normative-descriptive words), and action will follow naturally' (IP 42/333, my emphasis, quoted also in fn. 25).

<sup>39</sup> 'Communication of a new moral concept cannot necessarily be achieved by specification of factual criteria open to any observer ("Approve of this area!") but may involve the communication of a completely new... vision; and it is surely true that we cannot always understand other people's moral concepts' (VCM 41/82). Murdoch adds a note mentioning Foot's 1954 PASS article ('When is a Principle a Moral Principle?') 'on this and related topics'—though I have to say I have difficulty finding much in Foot's article precisely on this subject. (It may be that Murdoch had a debt to acknowledge to Foot on this, but had nothing better in

- (8) rejection of the use of the term 'naturalism' for a merely scientific naturalism, when we might use the term instead in a way correlative with a broader view of nature that might include in it something like moral facts;<sup>40</sup>
- (9) an emphasis on the idea that moral value is an irreducible kind of value that we should not aim to establish or recommend, for example, on the basis of the *usefulness* or prudential value of morality;<sup>41</sup>

print to refer to. The discussion of 'rudeness' in Foot's paper 'Moral Arguments' (1958) certainly develops the point; and, though it has more to say on the *inextricability* of 'descriptive' and 'evaluative' meaning than directly on the *inaccessibility* of the complex meaning of a moral term to someone lacking a suitable interest or training in its subject matter, the article does in fact end on the latter point. 'It is quite common for one man to be unable to see what the other is getting at, and this sort of misunderstanding will not always be resolvable by anything which could be called argument in the ordinary sense' ('Moral Arguments', 109.) McDowell develops the idea in 'Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following', §2. Murdoch makes the point explicitly at the level of sense and understanding; the same is mostly true, I think, of McDowell: the difficulty is with the idea that 'the extension . . . could be *mastered* independently of the special concerns . . .'; '*Understanding* why just those things belong together may essentially require *understanding* the supervening term' (NCRF 201, 202, my emphasis).

<sup>40</sup> 'The true naturalist . . . is one who believes that as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes' (VCM 56/96). For McDowell's development of the concept of the natural, see *Mind and World* (1994), Lecture IV and Lecture V §3; and 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' (1995). Wittgenstein, of course, stands in the background behind both Murdoch and McDowell here; but cp. also Kant's insistence on using the term *Natur* both for 'the sensuous nature of rational beings in general' and for 'the supersensuous nature of the same beings' (KpV 5:43). (KpV abbreviates Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788), *Critique of Practical Reason*. Page references are given to vol. 5 of the Akademie edition, given in the margin of modern scholarly translations.) For an earlier attempt to put 'requiredness' into the natural world broadly conceived, while acknowledging that it would have no place in a narrower conception of nature as 'a realm of mere existence and of mere facts', see Wolfgang Köhler, *The Place of Value in a World of Facts* (1938): I quote from p. 363 (my emphasis). Curiously, Kurt Koffka, another great emigré figure of Gestalt Psychology, was lecturing on Köhler's book at Oxford in the summer of 1940 (under the heading of the Philosophy lectures in the Faculty of Literae Humaniores), the term when Iris Murdoch, having done Mods in Latin and Greek, was beginning more advanced work in Philosophy and Ancient History. I have no reason to suppose that Murdoch attended Koffka's lectures—and Köhler looks for more of a scientific counterpart to underlie 'requiredness' in the world (namely, he thinks, Forces) than Murdoch (or McDowell) will later think necessary; but his book remains a remarkable challenge to positivist conceptions of reality.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose . . . The only genuine way to be good is to be good "for nothing"' (OGG 71/358); cp. Murdoch's talk of the 'absolute pointlessness of virtue', combined with the 'supreme importance' of it (SGC 86/371; my emphasis); 'the nakedness and aloneness of Good, its absolute for-nothingness' (SGC 92/375; cp. SGC 93.34–94.1/377.9–10; E&M 233.24–6). Cp. McDowell, 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?'; 'The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle's Ethics' §§ 12–13; 'Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology' esp. §12; 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' §2. This is another issue on which Murdoch had very different views from Philippa Foot at the time (see e.g. the last couple of pages of Foot's 'Moral Beliefs'). McDowell specifically associates the view he is recommending with D. Z. Phillips, who in 1964–65 had been saying some very striking things of a similar kind. (McDowell, 'The Role of *Eudaimonia*', 17n.; 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical imperatives?', 86n.) It is worth noting how good a source or kindred spirit Murdoch herself would have been here—as also Plato, in his treatment of Good as a non-hypothetical first principle (*Rep.* 510b) and, e.g. in the view that injustice does not really benefit even the possessor who 'gets away with' his injustice (*Gorgias* 472d–479e; *Rep.* 9.591ab & ff, cp. 10.611ab). I suspect that a similar conception is to be found also in Kant's talk of duty and of Virtue as its own reward (cp. e.g. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. VI.406, 482–3). The moral law is something 'in comparison and contrast to which life and its enjoyment have absolutely no worth' (KpV 5:88). For an interpretation that places Murdoch at a greater distance from Kant on this issue, however, see Crisp's essay in this volume.

and finally and, I imagine, most incidentally—and in Murdoch's case, with a strong counterbalancing influence also from Kierkegaard—:

- (10) a high view of Hegel, both as showing the importance of doing philosophy historically, and as a source of a simple direct realism.<sup>42</sup>

These views, however, are not particularly clear or accessible in Murdoch. (I must have read her work many times before I could have extracted anything like the list of themes I have given here.) And even where the views were clear, their presentation—sometimes essayistic, and with a promiscuity of reference and association, to religion, literature, and philosophical history in several languages, from each of which analytic philosophy was in the 1960s precisely trying to define itself by separation—all that may have given the impression to academic philosophers that those views could be either ignored or regarded with benign indifference. It was McDowell who gave them a new frame and support, in a philosophical context of his own, and showed in sustained and visible debate<sup>43</sup> their power in the philosophical market-place. For all his rejection of a 'coercive philosophy' that 'aims to compel an audience into accepting *theses*',<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Murdoch's 'Thinking and Language' (1951) (mentioning idealists, though not Hegel in particular) proposes a conception of thought as not the representation of the *absent*, but a form of *possession*: 'If we think of conceptualising rather as the activity of grasping, or reducing to order, our situations with the help of a language which is fundamentally metaphorical, this will operate against the world-language dualism which haunts us because we are afraid of the idealists' (T&L 40). For Murdoch, as later for McDowell (*Mind and World*, 44–5, 110–11), Hegel is the true realist whom 'empiricists' (often Murdoch's word for philosophers who take things as they find them: cf. fn. 118 below) should embrace as a friend. (Hegel 'could... be considered as the first great modern empiricist; a dialectical empiricist, as opposed to, say, Hume who might be called a mechanistic empiricist. What Hegel teaches us is that we should attempt to describe phenomena' ('The Existentialist Political Myth' [EPM] (1952) 131).) In fact, 'It is almost mysterious how little Hegel is esteemed in this country. This philosopher, who, while not being the greatest, contains possibly more truth than any other, is unread and unstudied here' (EPM 146). (By the time of MGM, more than thirty years later, Hegel may be admired but should not in general be followed: he is no longer the great recognizer of phenomena but the one who takes phenomena and forces them to fit within his system. 'The most obvious objections to Hegel may indeed be to the outrageous implausibility of the whole machine; but more sinister is a lingering shadow of determinism, and the *loss of ordinary everyday truth, that is of truth*. The loss of the particular, the loss of the contingent, the loss of the individual' (MGM 490).) On Murdoch's view of the need for philosophical understanding to be historical understanding I shall have to leave discussion for another occasion.

Kierkegaard was a constant love of Murdoch's—and an influence perhaps especially on her concerns with the particular and private and her suspicions of the systematic and universal (cf. (4) and (ii) in the main text). *Fear and Trembling* (1843) was one of her favourite books: one of only three philosophical works that she mentions (along with Plato's *Symposium* and Weil's *Attente de Dieu*) when drawing up a list of influences on her. (Journal, on her plans for a 1976 British Council talk, quoted in Conradi, IML 524n.)

<sup>43</sup> Particularly with Simon Blackburn and Philippa Foot: see e.g. McDowell's 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following' (1981) and 'Values and Secondary Qualities' (1985), to which Blackburn replied in 'Rule-Following and Moral Realism' (1981) and 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value' (1985); and McDowell's 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical imperatives?' (1978) (in response to Foot's *Phil. Rev.* 1972 paper) and 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' (1995). There are also McDowell's writings on Williams, including a Critical Notice of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy for Mind* (1986) and 'Might there be External Reasons?' (1995), with a Reply by Williams in the same volume.

<sup>44</sup> From McDowell's Response to Crispin Wright, in Nicholas H. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell on Mind and World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 291, my emphasis.

McDowell made those views in a sense inescapable: they became almost unavoidable reference points even for people who disagreed with them. And whereas Murdoch's views as put forward by Murdoch may easily have seemed 'unreceivable' in the academic world of the 1960s (there may have seemed for many people 'no way to get there from here'), McDowell, following his own very distinctive path, detached them from some of their old associations—left aside the references to religion and literature—and set them in a new environment where they had as neighbours the mainstream 1980s debates about Wittgenstein on rule-following, Davidson on truth, and Dummett on realism: he showed, so to speak, how academic philosophers could indeed 'get there from here'. Even careful readers of McDowell, however, might easily miss the connection—there are, I think, only three references to Murdoch in his main publications<sup>45</sup> and there are followers of McDowell's who show not the slightest recognition of Murdoch.<sup>46</sup> In different ways, recent movements under the banners of Particularism, Moral Perception, Virtue Theory, and Moral Realism that connect themselves with McDowell could as truly trace their history to Murdoch—though she herself was no proponent of theoretical '-ism's'. But few of the proponents do, and many seem almost completely unaware of her.

So what happened? What particularly singled Murdoch out from her philosophical generation and resulted, after such a brilliant debut, in the relative neglect of her most striking work? Her interests in Sartre and existentialism were signs of Francophilia and a search for an alternative to the British philosophical tradition, but neither would particularly have set her against her fellows. (The young Ryle was hardly held back by his famous early interests in Meinong, Husserl, and Brentano.<sup>47</sup>) Sartre was, in fact, hardly a source of insight for Murdoch,<sup>48</sup> and it is hard, I think, to find much positive influence from him upon the distinctive aspects of her thought: indeed, the criticisms

<sup>45</sup> McDowell, nn. 35–7 in 'Virtue and Reason', as reprinted in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (1998), 72–3.

<sup>46</sup> Russ Shafer-Landau's *Moral Realism: A Defence* (2003)—though his realism is rather different from McDowell's—promises (on the book cover) a systematic defence of objective moral standards 'in the tradition of Plato and G. E. Moore'. It is remarkable that Murdoch, who could hardly be a more important defender of a moral realism in precisely that tradition, should receive not one mention in a 10-page bibliography that contains four entries for McDowell and four for Colin McGinn. Elijah Millgram points out ('Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism' (2002) nn. 1 & 3; 191 in *Ethics Done Right* (2005)) that recent defenders of particularism (like Jonathan Dancy, Margaret Little, and David McNaughton) happily connect themselves with McDowell, but often make only the most casual mention of Murdoch, if any at all: 'a recent anthology titled *Moral Particularism* [ed. Brad Hooker & Margaret Little, 2000] contains only one reference to Murdoch [at 292n], and that reference gets the title of her best-known philosophical publication wrong'. A rare exception, giving Murdoch a prime role in the history, is Hilary Putnam, 'Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction' (1990), 166–8; *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (2002), 35, 38, esp. 62. See also J. Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) ix, xii.

<sup>47</sup> For this stage of Ryle's philosophical development, see the fascinating letter and the introduction to it: Brian McGuinness and Charlotte Vrijen, 'First thoughts: An unpublished letter from Gilbert Ryle to H. J. Paton', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 14 (2006): 747–56.

<sup>48</sup> 'I always loved France . . . and getting back to contact with France [after the war] was very much existentialism. I met Sartre actually . . . and I got hold of a copy of *L'être et le néant* when hardly anybody else had managed to get one and things like this. So that was part of that excitement . . . and then somehow I began to see myself as a philosopher. . . . [B]ut I don't think I ever was an existentialist. I think that my

of Sartre by Gabriel Marcel that Murdoch mentions in her book<sup>49</sup> are a much better pointer to Murdoch's mature views than Sartre's own ideas are. In any case, a little interest in Sartre was quite domesticable in Oxford philosophy: Ryle, as editor of *Mind*, very likely himself commissioned Murdoch's reviews in 1950 of English translations of Sartre and Beauvoir; Hare (like Gellner) was perfectly professional, if condescending, in defining his views in opposition to 'the existentialist';<sup>50</sup> and a short book on Sartre was a perfectly proper thing for an Oxford tutor to produce, as Mary Warnock later did with her own *The Philosophy of Sartre* (1966).<sup>51</sup> What really changed Murdoch and set her apart was, I suspect, her reading of Simone Weil.

Murdoch reviewed *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (tr. Arthur Wills, 1956) for *The Spectator* in November 1956, and it made, I think, a huge impact upon her. Her review was penetrating—it was a real achievement to weave together for the review a presentation of ideas so clear, expressive, and fundamental out of the six hundred pages of Weil's wandering and brilliant text. And the material that Murdoch found there was, I think, both fruitful and not at all easily domesticated in the house of Oxford philosophy. It seems to me very possible that there were three main factors that led Murdoch away from Oxford professionalism in the late 1950s: her success and delight at writing novels, the increasing impact of Hare's approach in moral philosophy—and perhaps the fact that her own very thorough criticisms (in the 1956 paper) went more or less unanswered and unacknowledged—, and, finally and above

objections to existentialism went right back to my first meeting with it.' Murdoch in interview with Christopher Bigsby ([1979], 1982), FTC 98.

<sup>49</sup> Sartre, 17/21/49, 25/35/63, 50/77/105, 67/104/132. (I give page references in turn to the 1953 edition (78 pp.), the 1967 edition (126 pp.) and the 1987/1989 edition (158 pp.).) Cp. also Conradi, IML 270.

<sup>50</sup> E. A. Gellner, 'Ethics and Logic' and R. M. Hare, 'Universalisability', both in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55 (1954–1955), 157–78 and 295–312.

<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, it wasn't a way to raise your standing either. 'Soft options for the girls was certainly then the general feeling' is Mary Warnock's comment on the fact that it was three women who were asked in turn (in the late 1950s) if they would contribute a volume on *Ethics Since 1900* for OUP's 'Home University Library'. And 'rather at the last minute' Warnock was called by the General Editor of that series, asking if she could add to the book a chapter on existentialism, 'to set it apart from other current histories of the subject'. Warnock's response to the challenge is instructive:

I had never read a word of Sartre . . . My heart sank, but I agreed to do it . . . So for a cold and windy summer I sat on the beach at Sandsend on the North Yorkshire coast . . . and I read *L'Être et le Néant*. I hated it, and in many ways I still do . . . But I realised, at the same time, that here was a kind of philosophy completely different from the purely "second order" moral philosophy of Oxford. (Mary Warnock, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics* (1998), 12–13, my emphasis.)

Murdoch, by contrast, read Sartre with love and excitement, though 'The Idea of Perfection' is a record of disappointed expectations. Her early response to Sartre was this: 'It's the real thing—so exciting, & so sobering, to meet at last—after turning away in despair from the shallow stupid milk & water "ethics" of English "moralists" like Ross & Prichard . . . Nietzsche's and Schopenhauer's great big mistakes are worth infinitely more than the colourless finicky liberalism of our Rosses & Cook Wilsons' (Journal 3 Nov. 1945: Conradi, IML 216).



all, the difficulty of domesticating within the existing philosophical world the new ideas she was developing from Weil.<sup>52</sup>

What Murdoch found in Weil was a form of Platonism expressed with a heady religious tone.<sup>53</sup> To paraphrase some of the main ideas from Murdoch's own review:<sup>54</sup> Good is a transcendent reality, and 'Good and Evil are connected with modes of human knowledge' (e.g. the good person is one who *knows* or sees things as they are—in their moral and other aspects). The soul has lower and higher parts: 'Until we become good we are at the mercy of mechanical forces, of which "gravity" is the general image' (—we are *weighed down* by our nature—), and these forces are (as psychoanalysis indeed says) only darkly understood by us. To resist gravity is 'to *suffer* the void' (it is to *hold back from filling* a certain kind of vacuum in our existence): a task that humans can perform only with the aid of *grace*.<sup>55</sup> Progress in morality is a matter of 'meditation' rather than simply of action (—Murdoch will talk of the moral character of our 'consciousness' and 'states of mind'—). When we direct our attention to the good, it excites *love* in us, though we recognize that we are ultimately incapable of attaining it.<sup>56</sup> Suffering purifies only to the extent that it is 'pure affliction', though the sufferer is in danger of seeing in it an imaginary *consolation*. And, finally, our ideal is to pay attention to the reality outside us 'to such a point that we no longer have the choice' of what to do (to quote, as Murdoch does, from Weil (*Notebooks* 205)). I here have given more or less the core of Murdoch's report of Weil in her review (E&M 158–9) and more or less every part of it was adopted by Murdoch into her own philosophy. (We might even add (as something only glancingly mentioned in the

<sup>52</sup> The immediate cause of her leaving St Anne's in 1963 was, however, 'to free herself from a mutually obsessional attachment to a woman colleague' (Conradi, IML 457). Murdoch went on to teach as a one-day-a-week tutor at the Royal College of Art until the summer of 1967 (IML 469–76)—where she found some brilliant and congenial colleagues, but many of the students seem to have regarded the requirement to pass 'General Studies' as something between a distraction and a contemptible impediment to making art. (For a fuller picture of Murdoch's life in this world, see the fascinating memoir by David Morgan, *With Love and Rage: A Friendship with Iris Murdoch* (2010).) For the difficulty of philosophy and the impossibility of combining it properly with novel-writing: 'It really needs a lifetime of thinking about nothing else, and I do, if I've got to choose, choose the other game.' (To W. K. Rose (1968), FTC 20) 'I "do" philosophy and I teach philosophy, but philosophy is fantastically difficult and I think those who attempt to write it would probably agree that there are very few moments when they rise to the level of real philosophy' (in discussion in Caen (1978), FTC 78).

<sup>53</sup> For a larger view of Weil, see Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989) and, on her political thought in particular, Lawrence A. Blum & Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>54</sup> 'Knowing the Void', *The Spectator*, November 1956, repr. in E&M 157–60. It was not Murdoch's first encounter with Weil (cf. Conradi, IML 299, also 260); indeed she had given a BBC Third Programme talk on Weil five years earlier (18 Oct. 1951) as a sort of review of *Waiting on God*. But the *Notebooks* made, I think, a different and greater impact in 1956, perhaps because of the ways in which Murdoch's own philosophical interests had been developing: see the visible signs of Weil's influence in the 1959 articles S&G (at 215, though Weil is not mentioned by name) and SBR (at 270; cf. AD 293), as well as, increasingly, in IP (34/327, 40/331–332) and OGG (50/340 and *passim*)—which are in this respect quite unlike what we see in the moral philosophy of VCM and M&E from 1955–56.

<sup>55</sup> My emphasis on '*suffer*'. For 'gravity', see S. Weil, *Notebooks*, i.128–9, 138–9 and around; for 'the void' i.137 and around; or (more accessibly) the selections earlier collected in *Gravity and Grace* (1952) under the headings 'Gravity and Grace', 'Void and Compensation', 'To accept the void', and 'Imagination which fills the void'.

<sup>56</sup> For accessible selections, see *Gravity and Grace*, 'Attention and Will', 'Necessity and Obedience'.

review, but taken up later in ‘On “God” and “Good”’) Weil’s conception of an ‘energy’ for good action, felt as coming from outside when we contemplate the good—in an analogue of the workings of *grace* in Christianity.<sup>57</sup>) The resulting combination of views is almost entirely accepted by the Murdoch of *The Sovereignty of Good*. Not wholly—Murdoch makes no particular use, I think, of the image of ‘gravity’, and she is, in a way, more suspicious of suffering and of other-worldliness than Weil is, and slightly more optimistic about the possibility and actual existence of everyday modest virtue. But by and large, I think, Weil’s views must have struck Murdoch as a kind of philosophy that was both exceptional and important—and extremely hard to integrate into the non-religious, non-mysterious prose of English mid-century philosophy.

It was, I think, Murdoch’s great achievement to see a way to transpose and develop these ideas in a form where they could be combined with the criticisms of Hare and existentialism that she had already independently developed. But it was not going to be an easy task to achieve in the pages of *Mind* or the Aristotelian Society. It was something Murdoch achieved precisely by withdrawing somewhat from the philosophical mainstream which she had entered so brilliantly a decade before—bringing to a culmination her philosophical energies in relative isolation, at a time when she had given up regular university lecturing; and publishing her philosophical masterpiece, ‘The Idea of Perfection’, in a general literary journal rather a long way from home.

## 2 Murdoch’s early philosophical work: questioning behaviourism

Murdoch’s first papers were the responses of a person deeply impressed with Wittgenstein to the behaviouristic tendency, for example in Ryle, to rule out any good sense for talk of ‘inner experience’.

‘Thinking and Language’, Murdoch’s first paper, presented at the Joint Session (in June 1951) was, and remains, impressive. Its main project is to investigate how far the kinds of concern Wittgenstein and Ryle pressed about the ways we learn and employ psychological language imply (as many people supposed) that there is no such thing as ‘inner experience’ (T&L 38). While accepting the Wittgensteinian starting point that meaning is use, Murdoch argues against drawing conclusions that oppose the idea of an ‘inner life’: for, she says, it is internal to the *use* of psychological terms that there is more to their reference than is verifiably present on occasions of correct usage of them.

<sup>57</sup> One might also mention as an influence on ‘On “God” and “Good”’ (an influence largely but not wholly accepted), Weil’s idea of reviving some kind of ontological proof of God—see *La Connaissance sumaturelle* (1950), e.g. 109–10 and 313, a passage which Murdoch particularly noted (as we can see from her copy of the book, now at Kingston University): ‘Even if God were an illusion from the point of view of existence, He is the sole reality from the point of view of the good. I am certain of this, since it is a definition. “God is the good” is as certain as “I exist”. ‘I am in truth [—here Weil echoes the words of Pascal also quoted by Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit* (1927) 139n, *Being and Time* transl. MacQuarrie & Robinson (1962) 492 (n. to 178)), and from him again re-echoed in Murdoch’s chapter in the present volume, p. 102] if I tear my desire away from everything which is not a good to direct it solely towards the good, without knowing whether it exists or not’ (my transl.). On Weil’s influence on Murdoch, see also Conradi in his Preface to E&M, xxvii.

It is surely important that the users of mental words would [, if asked,] often indignantly deny that 'what they meant' was the overt and not the inner. Such an 'idea of meaning' [found among ordinary speakers] proves, moreover, a perfectly acceptable basis for communication, and one without which the use would sensibly alter. (Imagine a people who *really* held that what happened 'in their heads' was irrelevant to the use of words such as 'decide'.) The reaction to this should not be to denounce an illusion and suggest that the inner *is nothing*, or is at best shadowy and nameless. One should attempt a new description. (T&L 38)

Murdoch gives the excellent example from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: 'when Gwendolen hesitates to throw the lifebelt to her detested husband, who subsequently drowns, it matters very much to her [when she later looks back on the event] whether or not at that moment she *intended* his death' (T&L 36, my emphasis): unspoken inner goings-on are not to be relegated, if admitted at all by the post-behaviourist philosophers, to the status of *unimportant accompaniments* of the important overt actions. On the other hand, Murdoch insists that the inner realm should not be conceived in a crudely ontological way either (T&L 39). She ends with some extremely interesting comments on the need to take thought not as 'designat[ing] absent objects', but as 'possessing' or 'grasping' present ones (T&L 40–41)—a suggestion which, together with the recognition of ways in which our mental descriptions are inescapably metaphorical, will operate, she hopes, 'against the world-language dualism which haunts us because we are afraid of the idealists' (T&L 40).

It was an astonishingly independent and brave performance: accepting the fundamental motivations of the modern thinkers like Wittgenstein and Ryle, but buying none of the standard conclusions that were commonly drawn from them.

In many ways, Murdoch's performance at the Joint Session is more interesting than Ryle's: he accepts her point that we talk of mental images, for example, and of speeches rehearsed in one's mind without being given overt expression; but where Murdoch had remarked that we seem forced to employ metaphorical descriptions for a large part of what we call thinking, Ryle replies by agreeing, but declaring this to be simply parallel to the way in which, in many other circumstances, what is called for is a 'history' rather than a blow-by-blow 'chronicle'. (When a soldier gives a report of the battle, he does not 'chronicle' how he tied his shoelaces and what his comrades said to him and when, but rather gives a 'history', for example, of what the strategy and tactics employed were.) This strikes me as replacing a rather interesting point in Murdoch—about the indispensability of metaphor (it 'is not an inexact *faute de mieux* mode of expression, it is the best possible' (T&L 39–40))—with a weaker and less plausible point. I am not at all sure that a description of a mental state which involves metaphor is much like a 'history' of a battle or anything else. It is no doubt true that when 'I was in a fog' is true, there is something more specific going on: *being in a fog* is not the fullest possible description; but it seems quite unclear that the elements of a 'best description' would in all cases (as I think Ryle wants to suggest) be able to do without metaphor or transferred usage.

The second paper, 'Nostalgia for the Particular' (PAS 1952) is harder and, I think, less successful. It considers once again the 'nostalgia for the particular' (NP 55.15, cp. T&L 36.1)—i.e. the desire to bring back and rehabilitate individual mental events after the behaviourists had banished them to the past. (Note Murdoch's stance even in her earliest work: to recall philosophers from theory to phenomena (cp. IP 1/299).) But in this paper, Murdoch allows the Rylean more success: she presents the anti-Rylean rehabilitator as having the task of defending the idea of mental events which are 'self-describing' and which are 'experiences of meaning' (NP 51)—an idea which by the end of the article is pretty much discredited (e.g. because a moving artistic experience would seem a prime candidate for the status of such an event, while the significance of such a thing actually lies *not* in the momentary experience itself but rather in its 'context' (NP 55)). My impression is that the discussion confuses two issues: whether there are mental occurrences that have meaning 'intrinsically', in that (a) they do not require some further 'interpretation' to give them meaning; and whether such things are 'self-describing' in that (b) they wear their character on their sleeve—so that anyone who had the experience would immediately know how best to describe or characterize it. But once again, Murdoch surprises us: in the last paragraph, it turns out that she accepts neither of the two sides that had seemed to be at war, but takes up a third position: we must admit 'symbolic experiences' (i.e. moments like the one she quotes from Rilke, where the 'momentary impression [of a face] involuntarily assumes the proportions of a symbol' (NP 56)), though we need not say that such experiences 'say themselves' or have 'intrinsic sense'; and we can admit inward mental events, without supposing that psychological language is solely in the business of telling us about such things (NP 58.9–10 & 12, 53.15).

### 3 The move to moral philosophy

In the mid-1950s Murdoch turned her attention from behaviourism about the mind in general to behaviourist and linguistic approaches to morality in particular. She presented 'Metaphysics and Ethics' for BBC Radio (Third Programme, 1955; publ. as a book contribution, 1957) and 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (PASS 1956). The latter takes the form of a thoroughly sympathetic reply to R. W. Hepburn (who later became Professor at Edinburgh), joining him in challenging Hare's prescriptivism. In many ways Murdoch dominates the Symposium, though she is officially Hepburn's respondent; and the title of the session, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', makes perfect sense as the title of her paper and almost none as title of his. Murdoch contrasts, on the one hand, the moral philosophy of Hare and others that puts 'choice' at the centre (whether it be 'choice' of 'moral principles' or the taking of a particular practical decision), with, on the other hand, views that treat morality as a matter of 'vision'. (The term is applied first to the moral outlook of an individual, the evolving 'total vision of life', against the background of which particular acts or decisions stand out (see VCM 39–40/80–82, and esp. 40.35–37/82.1–2); it is extended later also to the agent's particular judgements

and decisions themselves—since Murdoch has by the end of the article introduced the notion of a *moral reality* of which moral judgements might be described as being cases of ‘awareness’ (VCM 56/96.) There are, on this new view, what might almost be called ‘moral facts’, ‘observable’ thanks to our possessing the appropriate ‘specialised concepts’ (VCM 54/94–95). From being a metaphor that might amount to little more than everyday talk of moral ‘outlook’ or ‘perspective’, the talk of vision comes to include something like awareness of particular moral facts—indeed, even more ambitiously, ‘visions, inspirations or powers which emanate from a transcendental source concerning which [the thinker] is called on to make discoveries and may at present know little’ (VCM 56/96). The exact nature of the reality in question is at this moment left indeterminate; and Murdoch leaves open also that the transcendental background may be something that we are, at best, entitled to ‘believe’ in, but not claim knowledge of (VCM 55–56/96)—as Kant says too, of the existence of God and of freedom.

I shall pause a little over this impressive work. One sees in it, almost fully formed, though it is Murdoch’s first publication in moral philosophy, many of the more ambitious themes of *The Sovereignty of Good*, advanced with care, control, and brio. And, unlike the later papers, which are not directed explicitly at Hare (even when he is clearly in the target area), it presents a comprehensive investigation of his work. The core of Hare’s position can be seen as combining the approach of ordinary language philosophy with a Humean division of fact and value: there are no such things as moral facts for moral judgements to be describing or stating; ethical sentences are ‘imperatives in disguise’, governed by a general logic of imperatives;<sup>58</sup> the meaning of an evaluative term can be segmented into a ‘descriptive’ component (associating with the term certain purely descriptive ‘criteria’ chosen for its application) and an evaluative component (roughly equivalent, in the case of ‘good —’, to the prescription ‘Choose such things!’); finally, the key feature of moral prescriptions (unlike commands in general) is that they are universalizable: for a prescription to be treated as a moral prescription is for it to be treated as having behind it a *universal* principle (something of the form, e.g. ‘All *f*s that are *g* are good’, taken as equivalent to, approximately, ‘Choose *f*s that are *g*!’). This is the core of the Universal Prescriptivism that took definitive form in Hare’s *The Language of Morals* (1952) and his PAS paper ‘Universalisability’ (1955), and it remained, extended (to include a form of Utilitarianism) but only very slightly modified, as a prime orthodoxy in the English-speaking world for more than 30 years.

Hepburn argues in his paper<sup>59</sup> that, besides making moral claims which they treat as universalizable, people often commit themselves also to a project of making their life as a whole have a certain kind of ‘meaning’ or ‘pattern’—making it constitute a certain kind of ‘fable’, to use a term from the poet Edwin Muir’s autobiography *The Story and the Fable* (1940). And the commitment to make one’s life conform to some such pattern

<sup>58</sup> R. M. Hare, ‘Imperative Sentences’, *Mind* 58 (1949), 21–39, at 23.

<sup>59</sup> R. W. Hepburn, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 30 (1956), 14–31. Page references in parentheses in the present paragraph are to this paper.

may, Hepburn argues, be a recognizably *moral* project, even where it is not a matter of universal or universalizable maxims:

Moral criticism and control... may find expression in maxims, principles, or... as fable. For example; [*sic*] Jesus sought to 'fulfil' the Old Testament fable, partly by precept but far more by acting out 'prophetic symbolism', by parable and by the re-interpreting of religious images like the Throne of David and the Son of Man. (26)

And, as Hepburn argues, to allow such projects to be moral projects, such kinds of evaluation to be moral evaluation, need involve none of the general errors in the philosophy of mind that Hare and supporters warned us against—such as a belief in a substantial soul, or in the infallibility of introspection (22–23); nor (we might add) need it always take a religious form.

Murdoch's response is sympathetic, but she takes Hepburn to be, if anything, too generous to Hare.<sup>60</sup> She arranges her main points under four headings.<sup>61</sup> (1) Even if behaviourists are right to reject introspection as a supposedly privileged source of knowledge of our mental states, that is no reason for rejecting the kind of 'private or personal' vision of life that is quite capable of being expressed 'overtly' as well as 'inwardly' (VCM 37/78). And such outlooks are no less important to the moral life than particular practical decisions, and in some sense may be more fundamental. We must consider, not just the actions and 'choices' emphasized by Hare, but also people's 'personal attitudes':

their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. (VCM 39/80–81)

Morality is a matter of such 'vision' as much as it is of 'choice'.

Perhaps most fundamental for the 'naturalism' that Murdoch envisages later in the paper is (2) her challenge to Hare's view of moral concepts. For Hare, the force of a moral concept for an individual user can be segmented into 'descriptive' and 'evaluative' meaning—in the case of 'brave', for example, (a) the specification of 'factual

<sup>60</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 30 (1956): 32–58, abbreviated as VCM. Page references are given both to the original printing and (following a forward slash /) to the reprint in *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997). Where I give line numbers, these are added following a point. It is worth reading the article in the original printing: the E&M reprint aims to make Murdoch's reply to Hepburn into a self-contained article by removing references to Hepburn but otherwise leaving the text maximally unchanged; the result is that about 45 percent of the opening six pages of the original are omitted, though thankfully very little of the remainder of the article. I suspect the aim was never going to be very successfully achievable even if it was desirable. There are almost inevitable difficulties of detail (e.g. the phrase beginning 'Whereas...' at 82.8 in the reprint is actually a qualification or response not to the sentence that precedes it in E&M, but to a sentence in the original that has dropped out). But, more importantly, I suspect the basic direction of the discussion makes more sense when shown in relation to Hepburn.

<sup>61</sup> The discussions begin at VCM 36.4/78.22, 41.4/82.8, 43.27/84.22 and 51.19/92.3 respectively.

criteria open to any observer' for application of the term and (b) a recommendation of things meeting those criteria ('Approve of *this* area!', VCM 41/82). One criticism—and this is a point on which Murdoch and Foot were particularly influential on McDowell and Williams<sup>62</sup>—is that it may be impossible to find any 'purely descriptive' equivalent—graspable by people who do not share, even in imagination, an evaluative interest in the moral classification made by ordinary users of term. Far from us living all 'in the same world' (of empirical facts available to anyone), someone who lacks a certain area of moral vocabulary may in a sense live *in a different moral world* from someone who possesses it—and it may be harder, therefore, to reach agreement in moral argument, or even to comprehend disagreement, than Hare imagines when he portrays moral disagreement between two people as being either about facts or about whether or not to 'choose' to approve of some particular (descriptively identifiable) class of things or actions. A disagreement may, Murdoch argues, be more a matter of 'vision'—where one party cannot even see how the other 'goes on' to apply the term in question to new cases (to use the phrase from Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following: PI §§139–242, e.g. at §§151, 154), or what might be the point of doing so. And that points to a further conclusion: that morality needs to be studied historically. If 'moral differences are conceptual (in the sense of being differences of vision)' (—in that what one can 'see' in Murdoch's sense depends in part on what concepts one has—), then this 'makes impossible the reduction of ethics to logic, since it suggests that morality must, to some extent at any rate, be studied historically' (VCM 43/84).<sup>63</sup> Even a conceptual investigation would be a study of concepts varying over time and differently available to people according to their evolving historical and (as Murdoch will later stress) personal circumstances and experience.

(3) Murdoch makes two slightly different challenges to Hare's emphasis on universalizability. There are cases where a person regards himself as set apart from others 'by a superiority . . . or by a curse, or some other unique destiny': if one is Napoleon, 'one does not think that everyone should do as one does oneself'. This could be forced into a universalizability model (saying 'if anyone had the same personal destiny, then . . .'); but an important difference remains: between 'moral attitudes which have this sort of personal background' and those which do not (VCM 46/86). The second challenge is perhaps more radical: there are moral outlooks that turn for guidance, not to rules with respect to repeatedly encounterable characteristics, but rather to 'parables' or 'stories', or (rather differently) to the example or guidance of an individual. 'Certain parables or stories undoubtedly owe their power to the fact that they incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual reinterpretation.' (Murdoch cites the parable of the prodigal son: VCM 50/91.) 'Such stories provide, precisely through their concreteness and consequent ambiguity, sources of moral

<sup>62</sup> See above, theses (iii) and (7) in § 1 and references there.

<sup>63</sup> For the 'reduction of ethics to logic', cp. Hare's Preface: 'Ethics, as I conceive it, is the logical study of the language of morals' (Hare, *The Language of Morals*, iii).

inspiration which highly specific rules could not give' (VCM 50/91). There may of course be *dangers* in some such attitudes (Murdoch knows very well the comparisons Ernest Gellner had made with 'the *Fuehrerprinzip*, *credo quia absurdum*, and romantic love': VCM 49n/90n<sup>64</sup>); but there are recognizably *moral* discussions that involve such concerns ('certain idealist views, certain existentialist views, certain Catholic views', e.g. in Gabriel Marcel and Maurice Nédoncelle: VCM 47n/87n), and it cannot be right for the linguistic analysts simply to declare as outside the definition of morality things that might equally be taken as *counter-examples* to their particular definition of it. Their theory, of course, fits well enough the secular liberal conception of morality that dominates in 'modern' societies (cp. VCM 49–50/89–90, 56/96), and it may even in turn seem to give support to that liberal conception. But philosophical disease comes—as Wittgenstein warned (PI §593)—from a 'one-sided diet' of examples.

Murdoch's most radical challenge to Hare lies in (4) her conception of moral freedom. She will conclude, in brief, that freedom does not consist, as Hare believes, in the freedom to 'choose' what to apply moral concepts to (e.g. to call different things 'good' from one's parents, or to reject the evaluative 'criteria' of other people); instead it resides in the freedom 'to "deepen" or "reorganise"' our concepts or, in a process of moral evolution, to 'change' those concepts for others (VCM 55/95; cp. IP 27/321). And that point is important precisely as undercutting an argument against 'naturalism' (or against the reality of 'moral facts'): for if, as Hare believes, the agent is *free* to select with equal right whatever descriptive criteria she wishes for the application of a moral term like 'good', then there can hardly be moral facts outside us (something which would be 'observable' (VCM 54/94), and which 'moral progress' would consist in a progressive 'awareness' of (VCM 56/96)). This is Hare's reason for the 'prohibition on defining value in terms of fact' (VCM 54/94). But though the concept of *good* is thin enough that it may indeed seem associable with more or less any descriptive criteria, this is not true of the 'more specialised concepts which themselves determine a vision of the world' (VCM 54/94)—concepts like those that figure in Murdoch's later example of M & D, *vulgar*, *undignified* and *noisy*, or *refreshingly simple*, *spontaneous* and *gay* (IP 18/313): the kind that Bernard Williams later called 'thick' concepts.<sup>65</sup> And with them

<sup>64</sup> The phrase *credo quia absurdum* ('I believe, because it is absurd') is usually associated with Tertullian (c. 160–c. 240), though the nearest he came to saying it seems to have been '*credibile est, quia ineptum est*' ('It is credible, because it is inappropriate'), in *de Carne Christi* 5.4 (defending the view that the flesh of Christ was real, rather than phantasmic, as Marcion had claimed). The *Fuehrerprinzip* is the idea, dominant in Nazism, that individuals in groups owe absolute obedience to a leader who holds authority over them as subordinates; leaders of the lower groups in turn owe obedience to a higher leader, in a hierarchical structure—and legitimacy and authority derive from the special character of the leader rather than (as in democratic conceptions) from her or his having been chosen by the people. Romantic love was regularly mentioned as being a commitment not subject to a requirement of universalizability: one who loves a person is not required to love her or his double, however similar they may be.

<sup>65</sup> Williams's examples—*coward*, *lie*, *brutality*, *gratitude* (ELP 140)—are in a sense more substantial than Murdoch's: one might ask indeed if the very terms that figure in M's first view of D do not need to be put into question (and not just their application)—*vulgarity* might be a notion that only made sense against a background of class conceptions that would not survive mature reflection. This would be no surprise in