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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE GOOD

What if the private linguist were a poet? Iris Murdoch on privacy and ethics

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The historical individual, or rather the absence of the historical individual, in modern philosophy is at the centre of the three lectures collected in *The Sovereignty of Good* and at the centre of Murdoch's moral philosophy taken as a whole. Murdoch is driven by the insight, and the anxiety, that the conceptual resources available to moral philosophy are catastrophically diminished by a picture of the human individual as 'an isolated principle of will, or burrowing pin-point of consciousness, inside, or beside, a lump of being which has been handed over to other disciplines' (GG 338). Though her contemporaries might not recognise this rather grotesque character as the hero of their philosophy, Murdoch believes that the presence of this 'soul-picture' in their work is betrayed by the anaemic character of the moral scene they describe. Such a soul-picture, Murdoch argues, has left ethicists with the resources to speak only of reasonableness, rationality, authenticity, sincerity and correctness and has transformed moral progress from a demanding personal struggle towards unachievable perfection into a 'mediocre achievement' (GG 340) consisting in 'the making of sensible choices and the giving of sensible and simple reasons' (HT 177; GG 340; SG 364).

Murdoch argues that moral philosophy must be able speak in terms of good and evil, piety and salvation, humility and love—concepts that are connected to perfection, not mediocracy—and she thinks that these concepts get application only against a background picture of humans as substantive individuals or selves, each with a personal history, and a rich, unique, and ultimately private, inner life (e.g., GG 343). She proposes such a soul-picture, one that foregrounds the privacy of individual consciousness and links both practical rationality and the moral significance of action to the irreducible particularity of 'an individual living in time' (MGM 273). This soul-picture, Murdoch thinks, will allow us to recognise that 'the area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy [is not a] hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but [covers] the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world' (SG 380)

In this short piece, it will only be possible to explore a tiny corner of the Murdochian vision just described. The discussion will focus on the role in which Murdoch casts Wittgenstein in this drama between two opposing soul-

Abbreviations: GG, 'On "God" and "Good"'. Page numbers for Murdoch, 1999; IP, 'The Idea of Perfection'. Page numbers for Murdoch, 1999; MGM, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.; NP, 'Nostalgia for the Particular'. Page numbers for Murdoch, 1999; SG, 'The Sovereignty Of Good Over Other Concepts'. Page numbers for Murdoch, 1999; TL, 'Thinking and Language'. Page numbers for Murdoch, 1999.

pictures. Murdoch's engagement with Wittgenstein's writings on the meaning of mental concepts, including the so-called 'private language argument', spans her whole philosophical life.[1] Her first two publications—'Thinking and Language' (1951) and 'Nostalgia for the Particular' (1952)—are concerned Wittgenstein's impact on philosophy of mind and ethics. Her *MGM* (1992) includes a chapter on Wittgenstein that centres on a discussion of the private linguist.

Murdoch's relationship with Wittgenstein's later thought is far from that of a disciple, and though she presents herself as staying within the broad contours of his philosophy of mind and language,[2] her reading is an exploration of her own temperament as much as it is a cool appraisal of the text.[3] But despite the novelty of her approach, her serious and systematic engagement with Wittgenstein's work illuminates links between the central themes of *Philosophical Investigations* and the project of virtue ethics that many interpreters of Wittgenstein have missed.[4] Some of these links are illuminated (though from a different angle) by her friend and interlocutor G. E. M. Anscombe; others are peculiar to Murdoch.[5] Murdoch's task, as I see it, is to speak of the importance of privacy and individual consciousness in moral life in a way that is consistent with Wittgenstein's insight that we acquire mental concepts by mastering a technique for the use of a term in a public linguistic practice.

2 | ETHICS WITHOUT PRIVACY

Murdoch begins 'The Idea of Perfection' by sketching the 'theory of human nature' (IP 300) that she finds at work in much modern—by which she means, post-Wittgensteinian British—moral philosophy, of which the work of Hare (1952), Nowell-Smith (1954), and Hampshire (1959) is representative. The theory is connected with a 'powerful image' (IP 305) or 'picture of the soul' that (she says) is rarely fully articulated by these writers, but which she will seek to extract and describe (IP 300). What strikes Murdoch about this 'image'—and what, as we will see, makes it so damaging to the prospect of a perfectionist ethics—is the extent to which it downplays or eradicates what is inner, private, personal and individual in favour of what is outer, public, universal and general, and describes a subject who is 'for ever capable of "stepping back"' (GG 399) and postponing his attention to the 'the reality that surrounds [him]'.[6]

Characteristically, Murdoch alerts us to the presence of this soul-picture by noting a change in imagery: for this picture 'touch and movement, not vision, supply our metaphors' (IP 301).[7] In place of a subject who observes, searches, contemplates, reflects, and introspects, this new Hero is first and foremost an agent, a locus of material change, manipulating his surroundings, 'moving things about in a public world' (IP 302).[8] Picking up, pushing, shaping, carrying, holding, fetching, making. His thought, indeed all his inner life, is directed outward, onto the world, and is treated as real, definite and significant only insofar as it concerns and issues in publicly observable action.

Central to this Hero's mental activity are intention and decision; but not the idle kinds. Not for him the speculative musing, 'one of these days I will return to the land of my father', or the diffuse decision to be a little braver in love. Instead, the intention to leave now, immediately acted upon; the decision to get engaged, followed straightaway by a proposal of marriage. Idle and diffuse intention and decision, if such things are admitted at all into this soul-picture, are 'merely day-dream' (IP 304). Murdoch calls the image *behaviourist* (IP 305): the Hero's mental activity is manifested in his public acts.

This change in image, Murdoch tells us, goes hand-in-hand in the writing of modern moral philosophers with a view about the relationship between will, or desire, and value. The 'public world' in which our Hero moves is 'potentially open to all observers' (IP 304): it is the world of scientific, value-neutral, interpersonal facts. This Hero is the source of value in the world, and it is his choices, his desires, that confer value on value-neutral objects in a value-neutral world (IP 305). Because movement not vision provide the metaphors, and because the public world is observer-neutral, there is no talk of this man *seeing*, *recognising*, *apprehending* what is good, independently of his individual will.[9] Rather his 'will is pure choice, pure movement' and enjoys an unconstrained 'omnipotent' freedom, as it is his will alone that determines value (IP 305). It is this radical, individual freedom that leads Murdoch to label the image *existentialist* (IP 305).

The Hero's choices determine what is of value. But once he has chosen, public universal rules for action, based on utility-calculations, determine the most rational course of action for him to take. For example, given a desire to alleviate his thirst and the presence of a glass of water, he will (should, ought rationally to) form the intention to pick up the glass and drink from it. The force of this practical 'ought' comes from a universal rule: 'Anyone with the desire to alleviate thirst ought *ceteris paribus* to drink a glass of water'. This rule involves a flight from the particular to the universal: there is nothing about him, *qua* individual, that makes it the case that *he* ought to do such-and-such; rather he ought because *anyone* in his situation ought. The *ceteris paribus* clause again makes no reference to *him* as an individual but is filled out with general descriptions that delimit the situations in which the rule applies: such as 'if the glass is easily available', 'if no great harm will be done by drinking it' and so forth. So-called 'moral norms' or 'moral principles' also govern what a man ought rationally to do, and the aspiration of a moral philosopher who adopts this Hero is to show that it is always most rational—prudential—for him to act under moral principles (*ceteris paribus*). The good, Murdoch writes, is on this view 'the tool of every rational man'—a contention that diminishes and domesticates the Good by identifying it with this rational procedure (IP 301). Murdoch—albeit idiosyncratically—calls this 'utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts' (IP 305).

The picture is complex and multifaceted. It would be a task for another place to investigate the extent to which the existentialist, behaviourist and utilitarian elements Murdoch identifies in this picture can be separated out and made components of other, different, soul-pictures, or whether Murdoch has identified a single, mutually entailing cluster, logically or metaphysically bound together. This question does not arise for Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good*, because her aim is only to describe a picture she finds at work in modern moral philosophy and, she says, in 'almost every contemporary novel' (IP 304). Whether that Hero might have been different is, in the context of Murdoch's project here, a question of historical speculation and not of logic.[10]

Murdoch is struck by the difficulty this picture of human nature poses for the moral concepts that are characteristic of the Christian tradition. This recalls Anscombe's complaint in 'Modern Moral Philosophy' that it would show a certain 'provinciality of mind' not to take as highly significant the 'incompatibility' of modern moral philosophy with 'the whole of the Hebrew-Christian ethic' (Anscombe, 1958: 34). Here, Anscombe is reflecting specifically on the consequentialist tenor of modern philosophy, but like Murdoch she traces the roots of consequentialism to the absence of a 'philosophy of psychology' that can sustain talk of human goodness (Anscombe, 1958: 38ff). Murdoch makes her version of this point in terms of imagery: the source metaphors of modern moral philosophy are at odds with those of Christian ethics; there has been a shift in our moral language from metaphors of vision to metaphors of choice, and this shift has far-reaching implications for our thought and talk about morality.[11] The Hero of modern philosophy is a man busily engaged in public deeds, thinking of himself only under categories that are universal and general, conducting his business according to abstract rules of rational conduct. The moral enters into his world at discrete and isolated moments of freely chosen action. He is quite different to the individual of 'the Christian ethic', the centre of whose ethical life is prayer, repentance, personal salvation and love, and for whom goodness is something that is attained—or at least aimed at—over a whole lifetime of thought, word and deed.

Murdoch offers a genealogy which, like Anscombe's, seeks to show why a set of concepts that were once central to ethics have ceased to be so, or have ceased to be usable for moderns.[12] Both find their answer in the changes in philosophy of mind and psychology that begin with Descartes and which have altered, or indeed removed, the 'permanent background to human activity' against which those concepts have their use.[13]

3 | THE GENEALOGY OF THE HERO

In these essays, Murdoch's way into the 'heavily fortified position' that is the modern Hero (IP 311) is via recent (mid-20th-century) disputes about 'the status of what is "private"' (IP 306). By focussing on these disputes, she is

able to track the influence of Wittgenstein's attack on the 'private theatre' of the Cartesian mind (TL 31) on moral philosophy's image of man. This, in turn, enables her to find a foothold for the notion of an inner life in the wake of Wittgenstein's philosophy.[14]

Modern moral philosophy's scepticism about, even hostility toward, that which is 'private' is the terminus of a process of change that can be thought of as having two distinct phases. *The Sovereignty of Good* focusses on the second phase, however if we are to understand Murdoch's genealogy and identify just how she reintroduces privacy into ethics, we will also need to remain alert to the earlier phase. In both phases, the change in the status of what is 'private' is associated with a change in imagery or metaphor.[15]

The first phase, Descartes inaugurates a new image of the human mind as an 'inner world'. The metaphors are supplied by space—each subject enjoys special access to their own 'subjective realm', a 'private theatre' in which take place events to which she is (necessarily) the only witness. Others find out about that world indirectly—relying on her first-person reports or making uncertain inferences on the basis of her behaviour. Familiarly, this picture of the mind imposes a structure on the way we think about first-person experience and authority, the meaning of mental concepts, knowledge of other minds, and the privacy of the mental. It provides fertile ground for solipsism and scepticism. The proposition 'my sensations are private', when it placed against this background, asserts the existence of my inner realm and locates my sensations within it. It is equivalent to the assertion 'Only *I* can experience *this*', with 'this' accompanied by an act of inward pointing (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953: 246).

This picture of privacy, and of the nature and role of inner objects, dominates the Western philosophical tradition after Descartes and, as Murdoch and many others of her generation saw it, was not seriously challenged until Wittgenstein's work from the 1930s onward. Wittgenstein's challenge marks the start of the second phase of change, in which the view of privacy that is Murdoch's target is generated. This phase is characterised by an attempt to dismantle the Cartesian picture via, among other things, an attack on the theory of meaning that props it up. This attack, in turn, makes it possible to reject the Cartesian 'private object', which is associated with solipsism and scepticism.

In short, it is a central part of the Cartesian picture that each individual establishes the meaning of sensation words and mental concepts through acts of inner ostension. To picture my mind as an inner realm is to rule out the possibility of common meaning, as only I can access my 'private theatre'. The public sign, 'pain', has a shared use, perhaps, but I must look inward to determine what *I* mean by 'pain'. Wittgenstein's attack on this idea in the so-called 'private language argument' and in his broader exploration of the connection between meaning and use seeks to undermine the idea what gives mental terms (and indeed words in general) their meaning is a 'constant and rigid connexion between language and experience' (NP 243).

Murdoch tells us that the modern Hero came to be when Wittgenstein's attack on the Cartesian picture of meaning (as something connected with baptismal acts of ostensive definition) was taken to establish that 'mental concepts must be analysed genetically' (IP 306). Someone who holds that 'mental concepts must be analysed genetically' insists that the meaning of a mental concept is exhausted by what is learnt by a child who picks up the use of a word. What is learnt, Wittgenstein tells us, is not a 'private' skill for conducting ceremonies to baptise private, inner, objects, but a public skill with shared standards by which we—her linguistic community—can measure her success; this is the case for all concepts, including mental ones.

To recall, Wittgenstein reminds us that a language-learning child is taught techniques for the public use of words.[16] The use of words is interwoven into complex patterns of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour, and a large part of what must be learnt is the ability to participate in those practices in which words have their home. This will involve learning much that is not straightforwardly 'linguistic'.[17] A child is taught explicitly (in the sense that these things belong to the activity we call 'teaching a child the meaning of a word') by a combination of ostensive definition, guided listening, linguistic and non-linguistic explanation, and so on. But perhaps, the more important part of her teaching is implicit and is the result of her being welcomed, by her parents and by other adults who care for her, as a participant in the form of life into which she is born. This 'welcome' involves, for example, 'as if' participation; play, singing, simplified versions of complex rituals, being around adults who speak with each other and to her, and

so on. The child is said to have acquired the concept that a word denotes when she is fully able to participate in the practices in which the word has application, one criterion of which is that she uses the word spontaneously in ways that accord with the linguistic practices of her community.

The claim that 'mental concepts must be analysed genetically' is not the (mere) claim that to acquire mental concepts is to acquire techniques for the public use of words. It is this, plus the additional claim that the techniques learnt exhaust the meaning of mental concepts. As Murdoch puts it, it is the claim that 'I do not "move on"', that the 'outer structure' that characterises the public practice for the use of the word, and that I learn at the beginning of my life as a language-using animal, is (and remains) 'the essence of the matter' (IP 309).

This is the place to situate Murdoch's explanation of the dominance of the behaviourist-existentialist-utilitarian soul-picture. If mental concepts are analysed genetically then only those publicly observable patterns of behaviour that can contribute to the mastery of a public technique are relevant to the meaning of mental concepts. This rules out the sort of deepening or development in understanding that might occur from 'more careful consider[ation]' (IP 309) on the part of the learner, except where that consideration is oriented outward onto features of the public practice that might involve more subtle dimensions of behaviour and speech. The idea of moral growth—for example, increasing clarity about the meaning of friendship or the quality of love—can be understood only as that of ever more skilful mastery of a public technique. As the significance of anything 'inner' or private for the meaning of mental concepts is diminished, to the point of vanishing, moral concepts must also find their application in the public sphere at moments of freely chosen action. We also see here why, for Murdoch, a moral philosophy that arises from the supposition that mental concepts must be analysed genetically will tend toward mediocracy. A study of what is learnt when a child masters the technique for the use of a word is necessarily a study of the ordinary. The use of words cannot be taught by appeal to what is extraordinary, transcendent, superlative, remarkable but must rather look to what is common, banal and everyday (these terms, of course, being relative to what is being taught).[18]

4 | WHAT IF THE PRIVATE LINGUIST WERE ALIVE?

Murdoch wants to accept much, perhaps all, of Wittgenstein's attack on the Cartesian picture of the mind. Wittgenstein's description of language learning aims to break the hold of view of meaning that is integral to that picture. Wittgenstein demonstrates that structure necessary for linguistic meaning ['the rigidity that creates meaning' (NP 247)] is located in the 'social framework' (NP 244). The idea of a 'constant and rigid connection' between word and object is a myth, as much for the names of material objects as for those of inner experiences. Wittgenstein's descriptions remind us that the language we use to speak of our private experiences, the language in which the would-be solipsist frames his hypothesis, is itself the product of our lives together. Anything that is private 'cannot form part of the structure of a public concept' (IP 306).

However, Murdoch does not accept the idea that mental concepts must be analysed genetically, an idea that emerges when the specific the target of Wittgenstein's argument—the Cartesian picture of meaning—is forgotten, thereby transforming it into a quite general attack on the idea of privacy. Murdoch's insight is that any attack on privacy made by Wittgenstein is an attack on the Cartesian conception of the private object and as such is not an attack on privacy, or the private object, as such.

Recall that modern philosophers' rejection of the private is the terminus of a process of philosophical change with two distinct phases. The second phase, on which we have focussed, involves rejecting objects that populate the Cartesian 'inner realm' as the source of meaning for mental concepts. With that rejection, modern moral philosophers come to locate everything that is significant to meaning, including the meaning of mental concepts, in the public realm. But it was the first, Cartesian, phase that established the framework—associated with metaphors of space—within which the notion of 'privacy' that is Wittgenstein's target is understood. As Wittgenstein's target is that framework, Murdoch is surely right to suppose that in insisting that what is private 'cannot form part of the structure of a public concept' his target is not privacy as such, but privacy as it is explained or understood within the Cartesian

framework. Wittgenstein does not say that the proposition 'sensations are private' is false or nonsense but rather: it is comparable to 'One plays patience by oneself' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 248). Murdoch insists, in words that are reminiscent of Wittgenstein's own, '[t]he choice must be rejected between logical behaviourism and the private theatre' (TL 31; compare Wittgenstein, 1953: 308). As Wittgenstein sweeps away the Cartesian picture of the private inner realm, there is no reason to suppose that the picture of the human he leaves behind is not a suitable background for another, ethically significant, notion of privacy. This is Murdoch's contention.

One 'change in imagery' that Wittgenstein advocates as part of his attack on the Cartesian picture of mind, is to adopt the whole human animal, including her life with other such animals, as the object of philosophical investigation. This move means drawing metaphors from the concept of life and not geometry.[19] With life comes notions of habitat and culture, instinct and activity, games, gestures, children and suffering, as well as the historical individual, temporality, change and growth. Murdoch follows Wittgenstein here, seeing that she can locate the privacy of the inner in the use that a person who has acquired a public concept goes on to make of it as she progresses through her life. Murdoch reflects that 'in real life' someone who has learnt the technique for the use of a word and has mastered all there is to master in a public practice, is 'an individual living in time' and has (in virtue of this fact) a unique past behind her and a unique future ahead of her (MGM 273). This future will make particular demands on the concepts she has acquired, demands that may lead her beyond what she was taught, either explicitly or implicitly, in the life she has so far led. The simple fact of her individuality—she alone is living her life—means that the tools she acquired when she learnt a language will themselves become particularised, personalised, over time. It is here, in this process of individualising—a process possible only for a human who is already one among others, speaking a shared language—that Murdoch re-finds the private.

We might use Murdoch's famed discussion of 'M and D' to illustrate this process (IP 312), but instead I want to take her less familiar example of a 'man trying privately to determine whether what he "feels" is repentance or not' (IP 312, 319). This example is striking for a number of reasons (not least its connection with the Christian concepts of sin and salvation)—but I choose it here because with it Murdoch provides us with a flesh-and-blood version of Wittgenstein's 'private linguist' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 258). This is a novelist's trick she also pursues in MGM (269–91).

Like Murdoch's man, Wittgenstein's linguist is trying privately to work out what he feels. But where Wittgenstein's private linguist seeks to name a private object, 'S', using only the resources that would be available to him were the mind as the Cartesian pictures it, Murdoch's man is an 'individual living in time' (MGM 273). Wittgenstein's private linguist, Murdoch writes, remains 'trapped' in a 'fable' that contains a philosophical moral for a theorist who has accepted the Cartesian picture (MGM 273). To make him flesh and blood, writes Murdoch, we will have to settle 'an immense number of details about character and situation', details that Wittgenstein's fable leaves out: 'Is he mad, a trickster, a liar, a foreigner, a genius, a poet, almost anyone trying to "make something out"?' (Wittgenstein, 1953).[20] In IP, Murdoch takes up the last of those suggestions: he is almost anyone trying to 'make something out', viz. whether what he now feels is repentance.

Far from striking us as a logical impossibility, this man's struggle—to describe his feeling, to decide whether what he is feeling is properly captured by the name 'repentance', to figure out whether what he now feels is the same feeling as before, when he was confident in naming it such—is a familiar one. It provides subject matter for numerous novels, diaries and confessions. Is what I feel love or infatuation? Guilt or remorse? Nausea or excitement? Or something new and quite sui generis? As we bring the linguist back into human life we must keep fixed what we learnt from Wittgenstein: here is an historical individual who was born into a word structured by human concepts—patterns of speech, action and behaviour—that he mastered as he has 'grew to the age of reason in a shared world'.[21] He learnt mental concepts by mastering public techniques for the use of words; private ostensive definition was no part of that training and his own, perhaps idiosyncratic, experiences did not enter into the meaning of the words he acquired. And yet, despite his mastery of these techniques, he now finds himself, in a way that is familiar, struggling with the words he has.

Suppose our linguist says, out loud or to himself, 'I repent', in the context of the proper religious ritual or setting (cf. IP 311). The language he has learnt puts him in a position both to utter these words meaningfully and to pose a question: 'But do I *really* repent?'. That question is surely not the same as the question 'have I properly performed

the public ritual that gives the concept its application?' To answer either question he can, and may, make use of our shared rules for the use of the word 'repent'. He may, with Austin, consult the dictionary or the law-book.[22] He may reflect on his own behaviour—for example, he may consider whether he uttered the words 'I repent' timidly or in a sarcastic tone. But such explorations, if they are conducted in a spirit of serious moral reflection (particularly, if they take place within an ethical frame that sees genuine repentance as central to moral progress and to goodness), may at some point require him to step beyond 'the impersonal world of language' and to focus his attention inward (IP 319). He may consider what repentance would be for him, the individual that he is, with a life and history that is his alone. He may worry that the feeling he has is not sharp enough, painful enough or consuming enough; or he may be concerned that its temporal structure belies a shallowness inconsistent with the real thing.[23] Here, Murdoch writes, he will be 'making a specialised *use* of a concept', one in which he 'takes [the concept] away into his privacy' (IP 319).[24] This 'taking away' must be temporary if he is to remain one who lives among others and whose language is a tool for living that shared life. But, for Murdoch, the work that he does with and on his concept when he retreats to private reflection gives *his* concept—though not *our* concept—structure that is idiosyncratic and which makes that work properly characterizable as 'moral activity'. When he returns to the public realm with his concept, new patterns, structures and connections will be visible to him: he may, for example, now at last see his mother's slavishness to his father as an expression of her guilt, or a stranger's story as a vehicle of confession. He may see his own past anew.

Before drawing out some of the ethical implications of this move, it will be helpful to compare the notion of the 'inner' or 'private' that emerges here in Murdoch's thought with that which John McDowell (1989, 1993) has sought to make available, also in the aftermath of Wittgenstein's 'private-language argument'.[25] For McDowell, the 'inner realm' is regained by replicating the conceptual structure of the 'social framework' in the mind. The lesson he takes from the private language argument is that just as the public realm is conceptually structured, so is the private.[26] There is no 'pre-conceptual given' on the outside, and nor any on the inside. This move commits McDowell to a number of theses that are quite alien to Murdoch, of which I highlight three. First, McDowell's full-blown conceptualism locks the inner and outer structure together, so that objects of inner contemplation are presented to the subject always already with the conceptual structure that characterises linguistic thought. For McDowell, there can be no inner experience that lacks the articulacy of language. Second, McDowell's picture makes no sense of the sort of growth and change that Murdoch describes as the result of 'taking a concept away into privacy'. Private reflection, for McDowell, will be fully constrained by 'the impersonal world of language', and, like the limited conceptual development available on the genetic theory of meaning, it can amount only to ever more skilful mastery of a public technique. Third, because McDowell's notion of experience is articulated in terms of propositional content (the basic form of experience is *that p*; *that things are thus and so*), inner experience must be understood as experience of *facts* not *particulars*.[27] In contrast, for Murdoch an individual's reflection on her experience involves unmediated attention to the particular, attention that may reveal the inadequacy of public concepts. As such, Murdoch's picture contains the possibility of an individual moving beyond public concepts that would lock her into a particular set of conventional descriptions.[28] This sort of reflection, for Murdoch, involves her 'moving away from the shared world into which she is born'—moving away, that is, from the 'conceptual scheme' reflected in her language.

To situate this difference in the context of Murdoch's genealogy, we might say: McDowell accepts the change in imagery that comes from Descartes, and seeks to accommodate Wittgenstein's insights within a picture dominated by Cartesian metaphors supplied by space: 'inner realm', 'theatre of consciousness', 'inner experience' (cf. McDowell, 1989: 279–280 and McDowell, 1993: 297). Murdoch follows Wittgenstein in seeking a return to metaphors supplied by life.

5 | WHAT IF THE PRIVATE LINGUIST WERE A POET?

As I have presented it, Murdoch's view is that the possibility of the private use of public concepts is not one that is at odds with Wittgenstein's insight that the public human world is structured by concepts, and that what a child must do in

order to belong to such a world is catch on to those structures (rules) and live within them. What creates a problem for privacy is the genetic analysis of concepts, which treats language-users generically, leaving them constrained, trapped and determined by the rules that structure their world. Murdoch asks us to remember in our ethics the particular individual—someone who lives her life in amongst this structure – and not think only of what is general and shared.[29]

We can now locate this contrast between a life lived by rules and a life living in amongst rules in Murdoch's ethics. Although Murdoch's focus on moral vision has attracted more attention, she is in no way hostile to the idea that rule-governed activity is a large-part of moral life, and that in these areas the modern moral philosophers against which she sets herself were right to think that the individual is of no special significance. If I am acting under a general moral principle, I may be anyone—a rule is 'impersonal' in that sort of way:

> In a simple easy unimportant choice there is no need to regard "what goes on" as anything beyond the obvious sequence of reason, decision, action, or just reason, action; and such choices may be properly regarded as "impersonal". "Shall I go on? Oh yes, I promised to." I receive my bill and I pay it. (IP 328)

This area of the moral life does involve 'giving of sensible reasons' and is characterised by full and unproblematic articulacy about what is done and why. But, this area of moral activity is a sub-area of human activity—a part of a whole. What Murdoch adds to this is a description of moral activity that shows moral life to be our life as such, shows ethics to be 'the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world' (SG 380). Her picture of the private use of concepts by an individual—their taking public structure in a private realm, and there augmenting, altering, deepening that structure, before returning it back to a life among others—entitles her to this. If what is 'open to [an] observer' is what she can grasp in thought, and if what she can grasp in thought depends on the concepts she has, this activity alters the world in which that individual lives: 'it is an activity which puts in question the existence of such an impersonal world' (IP 319).

These two activities—the public use of concepts in the impersonal sequence of reason, action, and the private use of concepts by an individual—exist side-by-side in the life of an individual. A life with too much of the former will look slavish, unreflective, shallow; a life with too much of the latter will look self-serving, precious, isolated. (It may attract the moral or religious form of Wittgenstein's injunction: 'Do not try to analyse your inner experience' (MGM 270)). At any moment 'Oh yes, I promised to' may throw up a question about friendship or justice or sincerity; equally the impersonal demand of duty (I must collect my child from school) may intervene in a private meditation on parental love. A rich ethical, human, life will involve both moments in balance.

To close, I want to situate one final, crucial, aspect of Murdoch's ethics in this context: the role of metaphorical language in the moral realm. Again, Murdoch has resources available here that McDowell does not, so this marks another dimension of difference between them.

Above we followed Murdoch's suggestion that one way to bring the private linguist to life was to think of him as almost anyone trying to 'make something out'. At the end of exploring that case, I said that the additional structure this individual gave to his concept of remorse (that was the example) was structure that belonged to *his* concept, and not to *our* concept. But Murdoch offers several other imaginative suggestions that we have not yet explored, amongst which is the possibility that the private linguist is a poet, and it is the poet-linguist who I end by presenting.

Murdoch writes:

> We naturally create metaphors in the context of certain kinds of attempt to describe. … This is typical of our use of language to fix in a semi-sensible picture some aspect of our activities—and such fixing is using, or creating, concepts. This is not to say, again, that the notion of a concept as 'how a word is used' is not a useful, even essential one. It is to say it is perhaps not the only one of philosophical interest. (TL 33)

In his earlier incarnation, the everyday linguist took a public concept (remorse) 'away into privacy' and in doing so gave new, individualised, structure to his concept, with which he then returned to the public world. The poet linguist has the potential to do something far more radical. Her attempt to articulate particular feelings and experiences for which she has no ready-made words, leads her to form metaphors and similes in an attempt to be articulate. If she is a great poet, those metaphors will be ones that others can understand, take up, and use for themselves. This is why, for Murdoch, 'the renewal of language' is '*par excellence* the task of poetry' (TL 28). The possibility described here is not the individual achievement of the renewal of *my* language, but renewal of *our* language, and renewal of this kind – as the shifting of metaphors from vision, to space, to movement, to life, reveals—can have profound implications for the 'permanent background to human activity'.[30]

ENDNOTES

[1] Much less than one would like has been written on 'Murdoch's Wittgenstein'. For exceptions, see Mac Cumhaill, (2020) in this volume; Hämäläinen, 2014; Forsberg, 2013.

[2] In her earlier writing, she is more inclined to limit her disagreement to Wittgenstein's followers, while Wittgenstein himself 'remains sphinx-like in the background' (IP 311). Later, in MGM, she takes a somewhat more critical stance, describing him, for example, as 'at times like a Martian staring at human affairs' (280) and asking why he is 'so anxious to set up this machinery which so pointedly excludes the individual peculiarity of speaking humans?' (281). But even there she is ambivalent, pointing to remarks in Wittgenstein, 1977 as evidence of agreement (283).

[3] The opening line of GG: 'To do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth' (337).

[4] We have been slow to appreciate the ethical significance of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Even if we accept Williams and Montenfiore (1966) view that in his later work Wittgenstein's 'concern is with philosophy itself, in particular with the philosophy of logic and language' and not with 'moral or political topics' (12), this should not obscure for us the ethical significance of that work. Placed alongside *Culture and Value* (1977) the ethical dimension of that text is clearer still. For an overview of Murdochian virtue ethics see Bridget Clarke (2018).

[5] In Anscombe, 1958. Unfortunately, I do not have space in this essay to explore these connections in the depth they deserve.

[6] Murdoch in Mehta (1962) describes herself, Philippa Foot and G. E. M. Anscombe as interested in 'the reality that surrounds man' (52).

[7] Moore's (1903) moral philosophy provides the contrast here, it being an ethics which begins from the 'image of vision' (IP 301). Murdoch writes: 'let me say in anticipation that on almost every point I agree with Moore and not with his critics' (IP 301).

[8] I use male pronouns here self-consciously. This hero is certainly to be pictured as male.

[9] G. E. Moore reference. Plato's ethics is, of course, also built around the image of vision.

[10] A second, more relevant, question is whether Murdoch has accurately characterised the work of her opponents. Carla Bagnoli raises the concern that Murdoch mispresents Hampshire's position in 'The Exploration of Moral Life' in Broackes (2011), 205, fn. 25. It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper to explore this issue.

[11] See also Murdoch, 1956.

[12] This is not, of course, to say that we have stopped using these *words*: 'Words may mislead us here since words are often stable while concepts alter' (IP 322)—this goes for the individual and for the community. The use of a word can continue long after the background against which it has meaning has ceased to exist—for example, 'witch' and 'phlogiston'—or can be retrospectively applied to a time or culture in which the background was not or is not present (e.g., applying the words 'morally right' to the Greeks). A source of a great many practical and political problems in human life is the difficulty we have in perceiving when our use of a *word* is associated with a functioning concept, and when it is not. Mary Midgley, a close friend of Murdoch's, writes on this topic extensively (cf. 'Philosophical Plumbing', 'Is "moral" a dirty word?', *The Myths we Live By*). The discussion of Wittgenstein on language, below, elucidates this point. See also Mac Cumhaill 2020, in this volume.

[13] This phrase is Murdoch's (GG 343). See also Anscombe, 1958, 38.

[14] Readers familiar with Murdoch's philosophy will know that there are many paths through her work, and that the lines of argument are tightly woven and interlacing. In focusing on this theme, which is a dominant one in these essays, I pick one path and leave others untrodden.

[15] It seems to me that this notion of a change in image or metaphor is connected with what Wittgenstein calls 'the first step' that 'altogether escapes notice' in philosophy (1953: 308). We adopt a picture that then constrains our philosophical thinking. Going back to the 'first step' often involves making explicit the metaphors and images that are at work in our thinking and showing that they can be otherwise.

[16] This is paragraph is a highly compressed summary of the first part of Wittgenstein, 1953. For more detailed exegesis along these lines see, for example, Anscombe, 1976, Baker, 2004a and 2004b.

[17] For example, the builders of §2 learn 'slab' and 'pillar' in the context of learning to build. See also Anscombe (1976: 117) for an illuminating discussion of 'length' and Cavell (1979: 177) for remarks on 'love'.

[18] It goes without saying that there is much more to be said about Murdoch's genealogy. For a helpful and detailed overview, see Broackes's (2011) introduction. See also Mac Cumhaill (2020) in this volume.

[19] We could follow Anscombe and Foot in seeing this as a move to Aristotelian or Medieval categories (e.g. in Anscombe, 1958 and Foot, 2001) but this association is more problematic in Murdoch's case given Platonic, rather than Aristotelian, sympathies.

[20] Compare the character Bruno in *Bruno's Dream*. Browning (2019) suggests with think of Bruno as M (in M & D) (178), but a comparison with the private-linguist made flesh in MGM is perhaps more fitting. Whether Bruno is 'mad, a trickster, a liar' or 'almost anyone trying to "make something out"' seems to me to be left open by Murdoch the novelist.

[21] This locution is Anscombe's (1957: 8). He must have mastered those techniques if we are to make sense of him as 'trying to make something out'—if he had not mastered those techniques we would perhaps move him to the first category ('mad') or to some other category that would recognise that he had failed to grasp the patterns that constitute our shared form of life.

[22] Austin (1957: 15) describes the philosopher's tools as the dictionary and the law. The distance between Murdoch and Austin here illuminates the distance between Wittgenstein's view of language, and that of the so-called 'ordinary language' philosophers.

[23] It is familiar enough that people who are struggling with grief or guilt may question the depth and sincerity of their feeling in just these sorts of ways, and that such questioning may in fact compound their grief and deepen their feeling of guilt.

[24] It is interesting to note that Murdoch thinks such a retreat may also be possible 'in limited societies' or 'communities of two' (TL 29).

[25] I discuss McDowell here because he is often thought of as a virtue ethicist of a Murdochian stripe (c.f. Broackes, 2011: 8–10, Clarke, 2018: 35ff). If I am right, McDowell's picture of the mind rules out deep affinity between his ethics and Murdoch's. For the purposes of this paper I ignore McDowell's recent appeal to 'intuitional content' in experience; after all, it is in his 1979 paper, 'Virtue and Reason', that he compares his moral philosophy to Murdoch's.

[26] McDowell insists that this is an articulation of Wittgenstein's own view, though he acknowledges that his reading must 'query [Wittgenstein's] sureness of foot' in §293 and §304 (McDowell, 1989: 283).

[27] For connections between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1921) and McDowell's discussion of PLA, see Wiseman (2009).

[28] See, for example, 'Considered as a content of thought, language may have a revelatory role…or it may have the opposite role…. Language and thought are not co-extensive. That this is so is obvious if we consider the experience of attempting to break through a linguistic formulation grasped as inadequate to an obscurely apprehended content. We know too what it is like for thought to be stifled by a conventional description, or for a verbal summary to replace a memory image.' (TL 28).

[29] The extent to which Murdoch disagreement with Wittgenstein here is a matter of emphasis rather than substance is unclear. In MGM she is inclined to be more critical of Wittgenstein (rather than merely his followers) than in SG and the earlier writings.

[30] Thank you to the philosophy department at Queen's University, Canada—especially Christian Sypnowich, David Bakhurst, Lesley Jamieson and Jacqueline Maxwell—for organising and inviting me to their Murdoch Centenary Conference, and to the audience at that conference for stimulating papers and discussion (in particular Gary Browning and Laurence Blum). My deepest thanks, once again, to Clare Mac Cumhaill for many discussions and detailed comments on this piece.

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