

IRIS MURDOCH ON VIRTUE

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RESUMEN

Murdoch trata del concepto de virtud en diversos textos en los que aparece estrechamente relacionado con otros conceptos que son esenciales para entender su explicación de la teoría ética. Definida como “atención desinteresada a la naturaleza”, la virtud establece la conexión entre los seres humanos y la realidad y puede entenderse en términos de conocimiento y de imaginación; en consecuencia, Murdoch afirma que la virtud mantiene una clara relación con las novelas. La finalidad de este artículo es analizar los textos de Iris Murdoch sobre la virtud para explicar sistemáticamente las características de la virtud, su conexión con otros conceptos y su importancia en el mundo del arte.

ABSTRACT

I. Murdoch deals with the concept of virtue in several texts in which it appears closely related to other concepts which are essential in order to understand her explanation of ethical theory. Defined as “selfless attention to nature” virtue makes a connection between human beings and reality and it can be understood in terms of knowledge and imagination and a result of this Murdoch says that virtue has a clear relationship with novels. The aim of the paper is to analyze Iris Murdoch’s texts about virtue in order to systematically explain the characteristics of virtue, its link with other concepts and its great significance in the world of art.

The philosophical thought of Iris Murdoch proposes that no ethical tradition has ever adequately fashioned a picture of human beings as they truly are, and in the course of her career this was what she used her writing in philosophy and literature to illustrate: a personal vision of man’s morality. If we consider ethicists’ preoccupations in recent history, we might argue that these have mainly been the examination of moral being to justify why humans choose what they choose in particular circumstances, rather than the development of any concept of a ‘moral character’ that might constitute the essential

source of all the moral choices ordinary human beings make. If we acknowledge that such a character does indeed exist, then it will naturally follow that we as humans have an important inner life characterised by a certain degree of essential unity. In the end, what is certain is that our ‘moral character’ becomes apparent in the moment we act, and is itself the result of something that began long ago. And for Murdoch, this was the importance of virtue. Virtue is a result and because she understood that this result may hide the great effort and determination that went into producing it, she would most probably have agreed with Aristotle’s proposal that ‘the life that conforms with virtue is thought to be a happy life; but virtuous life involves serious purpose, and does not consist in amusement.’ (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 9, 1177a2-3). In this paper, therefore, I shall attempt to examine Iris Murdoch’s understanding of such a life, and of the concepts involved in its development.

In *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited*, Murdoch analyses the definitions of virtue proposed by Kant and Hegel, and by the schools of existentialism and empiricism, which she considers as one. She observes that Kant equates virtue with freedom and reason in such a way that he sees virtue as our ability to impose rational order and so ties it to the rational, even though such virtue may not constitute a manner of concrete knowledge. Hegel, she argues, would also consider virtue as a manner of knowledge but would define it more exactly as freedom understood as self-knowledge. Finally, in contrast to the Kantian and Hegelian traditions, empiricism and existentialism have interpreted virtue more properly in terms of will and choice than knowledge. Murdoch may also allow that virtue should relate to knowledge, but she qualifies her definition in more precise terms that challenge the positions of Kant and Hegel: virtue is concerned with the ability to respond and to act, but is tempered by the knowledge it supposes. In *The Sovereignty of the Good*, she has this to say:

“Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness. It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is.”¹

Murdoch is more interested in understanding what prompts virtue – what it needs to come into being – than in examining how a given act might derive from a particular virtue. She has less time for that notion of ‘habit’ in the

1. *The Sovereignty of Good*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 91. The emphasis is Murdoch’s.

sense of ‘habitus’ that has been considered so important by such thinkers as Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, or by their commentators (such as modern ethicist Philippa Foot, who, incidentally, declared the reading of Aquinas to be imperative for any understanding of true virtue). For this reason, the conditioning factors in the analysis of virtue often provide Murdoch with a means of defining virtue itself. So, for example, an accurate perception of what surrounds me is a necessary condition for virtue, but so is the manner in which I actively go about defining it: in Murdoch’s own words, “virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is”.²

Where one of human nature’s principle attributes is this ‘selfish consciousness’, then virtue can be regarded as the highest expression of an individual’s ability to relinquish the ego and learn to look at reality as it is. The prerequisites for virtue are, as Murdoch says ‘a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness’. These are what afford us an accurate knowledge of the world as it stands, and acquiring such knowledge requires an effort from the individual to transcend the self and come closer to all that lies beyond it. Murdoch attributes what she calls ‘clear vision’ to moral imagination and moral effort. In fact, what a person perceives determines their moral faith because we choose from what we are able to see (*SG*, p. 59), and what we know determines how we act. Each of us moves between the self and the reality we must strive to know, between our attempt to open the doors to the outer world and the failure to do so. And in this movement, the deadliest enemy of morality or virtue is the ego. This is why, Murdoch says, personal fantasy carries us still further away from moral excellence because it swaddles the self with desires and reveries that impair our perception of the outer world (*SG*, p. 59). In this sense, she pits the reality of the private and subjective individual against the outer reality of other individuals and all things.

But what can help us open that door when all human determination lies buried in the ego? What makes a man transcend himself and become receptive to outer reality? What can lead an artist to overcome ‘selfish consciousness’ and express what is beyond? In Murdoch’s writing, we find characters who occasionally manage this. So with Bradley Pearson in ‘The Black Prince’, we see the experience of true love guiding one individual’s steps towards the discovery of another, and so it appears that true love can transform because it frees the individual from those damaging bonds of the self and brings us closer to the form of the Good.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Naturally, however, not all forms of love are equally desirable: in her essay *The Fire and the Sun*, Murdoch distinguishes between love that respects, which attempts simply to approach the object of its attention on that object's own terms, and grasping love that would possess and absorb. In the light of this distinction, we might wonder on the nature of self-love. In Murdoch's view, might it be possible for any form of self-love not to be selfish and, therefore, to be moral? Aristotle has already established distinctions between the moral and selfish variants of self-love. Does Murdoch's writing propose that there are objective methods to perceive something as subjective as personal reality? Or can there be no objective knowledge of the self? To my mind, at least, there are as yet no clear answers to either of these questions. Self-deception protects pride, Murdoch observes, and as the muddied reflection of humility, pride loudly declares its inability to muster interest in anything or anyone beyond the limits of what it can gain. The question is whether the self can exercise some manner of protection from its own deception so that that the humble man can be considered to have knowledge of his own being, to have foregone his ego and to have opened the gates to an outer reality that he will be able to fully embrace. I do not know if Murdoch would have believed, like the German philosopher Robert Spaemann, that love for others can provide the path towards moral self-love inasmuch as it benefits the loving being almost as much as it favours him.

And yet it is not only love that can redirect our attention from the self towards other beings, but beauty, too. Beauty is one of the qualities that most successfully bring human beings out of themselves: its presence in Art and in Nature invites selfless, non-possessive contemplation, and it provides us with one of our greatest opportunities to renounce selfish consciousness (*SG*, p. 84). Art, Murdoch observes, is the sanctuary of beauty (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 122). Art has a liberating effect upon the self, freeing it of its own consciousness and guiding it towards beauty, and beauty in turn thus becomes the path towards the Good. Both the artist and the virtuous being share the ability to appreciate the greater reality beyond their person, but although their predisposition towards reality is one and the same, in the artist's case the arrival at this reality is offered to others and therefore becomes an element of moral education. In order for the artist to stand before reality and be able to depict it objectively, his being must be cleansed of all those forms of interference originating in the nature of the self. A pure state of mind is one which has been stripped of vested interests and transcends the selfish consciousness that distracts us from the contemplation of another being and that hampers our ability to perceive its essence. The moral agent, as the artist, must indeed 'pierce the veil' which the self hangs between it and reality. The

virtuous man and the good artist are able to transcend their egoism. Art helps the individual to move beyond what is ‘apparent’ and express truth, where ‘apparent’ means the multitude of devices the self designs for solace and to shield it from confrontation with the fundamental questions of life and death. In this sense, the role of Art consists in revealing to us suffering, pain, and truth, and Art is the goddess in Parmenides’ ‘Way of Truth’, who guides the soul towards *alethea* and away from the treacherous path of *doxa*.

The cornerstone of Murdoch’s theory on the power of Art to stimulate morality is this: good Art serves man by freeing him from his selfish consciousness. This is why we read in her treatise *Acastos* that Art is education and that as a fundamental method of explanation, good Art makes good citizens.

In this reality that good Art can lead us to, we find other important figures: the term which is used to describe the relationship that one human being has with others is attention. Attention is the eye’s steady, just and loving gaze as it regards individual reality; indeed, it is the understanding that others exist. Murdoch proposes that attention is the essential feature of the active moral agent (*SG*, p. 34), and that love, a central concept in the question of morality, is the knowledge of the individual (*SG*, p. 28).

To ‘attend’ is to ‘look’ and not simply to ‘see’. The gaze is cast upon the individual and observes the individual’s particularity. With attention, a person offers their interest and dedication, and accompanies this offering by the act of discarding the self. The perfect model of such attention is offered by the man who is humble, in the sense that “because he sees himself as nothing, [he] can see other things as they are” (*SG*, p. 103-104). However, as Patricia J. O’Connor has observed, this attention must respect the other and must not attempt to turn that other into part of its own reality; for this reason, attention must be accompanied by some degree of detachment, meaning that it has to be managed by a love that respects rather than a love that seeks to possess.³

Vision leads to choice and choice to act. Nothing stands between choice and act, and the latter depends entirely upon vision: “[...] true vision occasions right conduct” (*SG*, p. 66). Choice and act are consistent with vision, and distinct visions lead to correspondingly different acts. Here, as elsewhere in Murdoch’s writing, we find Plato. The difference of conduct can be reduced to a difference in knowledge, and ‘true vision’ cannot lead to conduct that is not also true or right.

3. *To Love the Good*, New York, Peter Lang Verlagsgruppe, 1996, p. 103.

For Murdoch, reality and the no-self condition human choice and impose themselves upon man because in the choices he makes he cannot create his own values. Man is not the measure of all things and cannot create values because he lives under the yoke of a superior law (*Acastos*, p. 119), and indeed, as Murdoch observes in her writing, no ordinary person would imagine that by exercising their power to choose they were actually creating values. Virtue has to do with reality, truth and knowledge. He who would perceive the truth needs special skill to do so and must also have first suppressed his selfish consciousness. What is transcendent is the form of the Good, not the will, and in the hierarchy of virtue, neither will nor freedom come first; both freedom and the just acts that spring from will are the fruit of attention to the Good that holds such an attraction and exercises such power over our acts.

Alongside the concepts of vision, love, truth and beauty, however, readers of Iris Murdoch's philosophy must also negotiate the fundamental question of contingency. The absence of meaning, the slippery nature of those terms at our disposal to define our lives and the impossibility of finding sure, experiential footholds there are all highlighted in many of her novels. Beyond the initially inspiring and positive proposal that our love for others can endow our lives with a fullness of meaning, we must eventually reach a darker, more sceptical terrain, an area of anthropological, existential pessimism, and readers only have to consider some of the reflections voiced, for example, by such characters as Leonard or Julius in 'An Early Honourable Defeat'.

To this point, the substance of my presentation has considered Murdoch's attempt to explain virtue in rational terms that tie it to a knowledge originating in a selfless vision of reality, but many of her texts appear to accept the notion that the process by which an individual is transformed into a virtuous being remains a mystery of sorts, a fundamental change that defies understanding. The presence of goodness in our acts has to do with an act of illumination that takes place in a moment we cannot determine or design. The nature of Iris Murdoch's philosophical thought is original and never systematically slavish, but in it we see the traces of traditions in moral philosophy from all ages: the anthropological pessimism of existentialism, Wittgenstein's ineffable morality, Scheler's intuitive values, the relation between virtue and altruism as studied by the Scottish Sentimentalists or Christianity's legacy of faith.

"How can we make ourselves better? This is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer" (SG, p. 78). In whatever moments Murdoch's philosophical thought seeks to defend the role of Great Art as an agent of education and enlightenment, perhaps that is when the writer most closely

approaches an answer. It is true that for a single instant the beautiful plumage of that bird in flight can capture our attention and make us forget the self we carry with us, but how can we turn the brilliance of an instant into a method of moral education? And if, as Scheler observed, we can only appreciate the beauty of Nature or Art if we have already developed a disciplined state of mind to prepare for the event, then how can we hope to make ourselves sensitive to beauty? Perhaps, as Iris Murdoch might describe it, morality can only be understood as a revelation which, in our natural and ceaseless state of selfish consciousness, we human beings intuit in its passing; a transcendental vision that for one moment we have had the good fortune to witness.