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Iris Murdoch and the Importance of Stepping Outside the Self

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“How recognizable, how familiar to us is the man so beautifully portrayed . . . who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason” (Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,” 78). Humankind has a natural tendency to view issues of morality, beauty, and art based on an inward perspective. As a whole, we are an egocentric species. Philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, throughout the centuries have promoted this predilection to rely on the self, to abolish God as an authority, and to place the self in his stead. Iris Murdoch was a philosopher, essayist, and novelist who died after a battle with Alzheimer’s disease in England in 1999. Her celebrated works addressing moral and personal philosophies oppose these self-centric Kantian notions. As Floora Roukonen eloquently states in her essay “Good, Self, and Unselfing - Reflections on Iris Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” “Murdoch’s objection to this picture might be put as follows: by making morality a matter of a solitary choosing will, the view neglects ordinary human moral experience and instead builds an empty abstraction which it then elevates into a “man-God,” the moral super hero of modern times” (211). Murdoch’s philosophy concerning the self is expressed academically in her essays and examples of her ideas are portrayed artistically in her fiction novels. In her novels, Murdoch advocates that literature can be an educator for areas of moral life while philosophy depicts complex and dry methodical explanations. Observing art and literature can help one understand moral situations and responses with the portrayal of interactions of the characters and their circumstances. This aptitude in literature is quickly found in Murdoch’s 1993 novel *The Green Knight*.

In the novel, Murdoch utilizes multiple genres to depict examples of the moral situations her characters find themselves in, thus artistically conveying her philosophy via their responses and the consequences of their actions and thoughts. *The Green Knight* presents the reader with a cast of characters who are so involved in themselves that they fail to see what is going on around them. Bellamy, the not-quite-so-pious devotee, throws away his worldly possessions in an attempt to become closer to God but instead of finding a higher spirituality, his attentions turn inward and his self-involvement prevents him from reaching his spiritual goals. Another excellent character example is Clement, a major player in the family dynamic of half the cast, whose preoccupations with himself and his own situation prevents him from caring for the women who are close to him and from recognizing his brother’s malice. By analyzing Kantian philosophy versus Murdoch’s philosophy with support gathered from Murdoch’s fiction *The Green Knight*, this paper elucidates her ideas of encouraging unselfing habits to establish a better grounding in morality while utilizing art as an educator.

In Kantian philosophy, concepts of freedom, morality, and reason are closely intertwined. According to Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, first published in 1785, people derive their motives for moral action from the empirical reasoning that precedes the decision to act. Reason is a faculty available to all humans and, as a result, morality is universal as well. The universal nature of this kind of decision making is an exercise of innate freedom of choice and given logic. Kant’s theory involves two kinds of reasoning: the categorical imperative, which dictates that one should act according to a universal code and perspective, and the hypothetical imperative which advocates making decisions to serve a means to an end for the individual. The morality of a decision can be judged by the amount and quality of reasoning supporting it. The categorical imperative is geared toward moral decision making based on universally accepted concepts of virtue. Much of this thinking is reliant on the freedom of one’s will, or the ability to have an autonomous will that is not governed by sentiments, emotions, or a power outside of the self, such as God or government. In “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,” Murdoch

addresses the portrait of the man Kant has created in his philosophy: “This man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy. . . . The *raison d’être* of this attractive but misleading creature is . . . the offspring of the age of science” (78). While this philosophy has its merits, Murdoch recognizes the gap that interludes this point of Kant’s exposition: humans are emotional creatures. She recognizes “that moral philosophy needs a new and, to my mind, more realistic, less romantic, terminology if it is to rescue thought about human destiny from a scientifically minded empiricism which is not equipped to deal with the real problems” (“On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” 70). The real problem Murdoch wishes to address is the existence of concepts such as good, evil, the presence of a higher power, and their inevitable interventions in life to produce different perspectives in individuals. In his review article, “Good, Evil and the Virtuous Iris Murdoch Commentary,” David Robjant supports Murdoch in her view of the Kantian loophole. He explains Murdoch’s “virtue is obviously quite foreign to happiness” view and how she asserts an alternative to Kant’s self-centric attitude by sharing that “a key Murdoch topic is ‘the fat relentless ego’ and the means by which it may be quietened sufficiently for us to see the fact of another’s need is in itself a reason for helping them” (623). This concept suggests that Kant’s selfish imperatives that focus on an individual as his own means to an end is not the only way or even an effective way to approach a moral quandary. What Murdoch claims to be necessary is a view independent of one’s self.

The best source for finding an example of Murdoch’s philosophical assertions is her literature. Murdoch’s beliefs are prevalent in her essays as well as her novels. Ann Irvine’s 1993 review in *Library Journal* reports of Murdoch’s novel *The Green Knight*, “Murdoch is skilled at keeping the reader turning the pages while allowing the characters to discuss and experience such weighty issues as guilt and redemption, revenge and transformation, and virtue and moral perfection.” In *The Green Knight*, Murdoch’s opposition to the Kantian moral philosophy can be found in the character Clement Graffe. Clement’s brother, Lucas, attempts to kill him but he is inadvertently saved by the selfless sacrifice of Peter Mir, who takes the blow meant for Clement. For some time after this event, Clement is troubled by the immediate disappearance of his brother and the sudden reappearance of the allegedly dead Mir. Clement is driven to distraction, isolating himself from his friends and his work, until Lucas returns and they are confronted by the would-be victim of their Cain and Abel incident.

While Peter Mir’s selflessness and lack of affiliation with the brothers and their situation exhibits an anti-Kantian propensity to act without reasoning some benefit out of the action, Clement’s reaction further demonstrates the consequences of becoming self-absorbed during a crisis demanding moral firmness. Clement’s self-absorption prevents him from recognizing the malicious intentions of his brother as well as the love of his long-time confidante Louise and her children. As part of Murdoch’s philosophy concerning morality and the concept of good, she preaches the importance of unselfing. Murdoch asserts, “Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object.” This statement outlines Clement’s situation in which he cannot decipher himself, thus he cannot make solid decisions, eventually finds vision, and ultimately realizes it is the people in his life rather than himself that are important. Regarding Lucas, Clement is “continually amazed [at] the way in which he had ‘taken,’ and now continued to ‘take,’ the recent doings of his brother” (150). Clement relates that he has taken care of his adopted brother since they were children as if “it were somehow his duty to look after Lucas” (150). This preoccupation with his own sense of obligation and pride deluded him into accepting his

brother's despotism and abuse. Clement believed that "by existing, [he had] ruined Lucas's life" (151). His feelings of guilt caused him to believe this to be just and good behavior as a brother. The resulting denial manifests as: "Clement did not want to brood upon the 'attempt on his life', after all it had not succeeded, as far as he was concerned nothing had happened, and nothing might have happened" (151). Roukonen explains how the application of Murdoch's unselfing habits would yield situational clarity for Clement: "Moral improvement is improvement of vision: it requires close attention to what lies outside of the selfish mechanism of the human psyche. . . . The most important and most difficult individual realities for our attention are other people" (212). Murdoch artistically emphasizes her point when one considers how much clearer a moral and just vision would be for her character if he could divorce himself from his selfish tendencies.

Kant's philosophy concerning art follows with Murdoch's views of art though the results of it as a mode of education differs. Lawrence W. Hyman's article "Art's Autonomy is Its Morality: A Reply to Casey Haskins on Kant" from the *Journal Of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* quotes Casey Haskins's summary of Kant's assertion of art, "In implying that fine art, on the other hand, is not liable to [be prescribed by the moral law merely as a means to an end], Kant seems to hint that art treats us in a way that metaphorically resembles how persons ought to treat one another: as ends in themselves" (376). In this way, Hyman argues that Kant is able to preserve the autonomy, or freedom, of art while distancing it from morality. Because of the empirical nature of this thinking, art, unlike morality, is disinterested. In morality, the intention is to promote goodness or correctness as a personal means to an end, while art is a means to an end for itself and, though universal, cannot be objective. While Kant declares a similarity in the concepts of beauty and morality and does not deny the importance of art, they are separated by disinterestedness. Beauty as a concept in art is an ideal and is perceived differently by individuals in different situations.

In contrast to this, Murdoch sees commonality for humans in beauty. In "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts" she claims, "Beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct" (83). By putting forth the idea of human instinct, Murdoch creates common ground for people to stand on while observing the beautiful, or in this case, the beautiful and good art. The disinterestedness of art also comes under scrutiny when Murdoch begins to imply that one may observe morality from the implicit virtues imparted via good art. Her essay states, "Art is a human product and virtues as well as talents are required of the artist. The good artist, in relation to his art, is brave, truthful, patient, humble; and even in non-representational art we may receive intuitions of these qualities" (84). In this manner, art acts as a moral compass for the artist and the observer. Good art opens a window to the human condition in a form that is more easily contemplated. The structure and form of the art acts as a mirror and connects observations of the world with compassion because its value and virtue transcend the selfish consciousness.

When one considers art as Murdoch does, it is inevitable that art in regard to the self is examined. Foremost, Murdoch's essay emphasizes, "Both in its genesis and its enjoyment [art] is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession" (83). Because art emerges as a reflection of the world and human condition as a whole, it is impossible to observe and appreciate it in a selfish mode. The magic of art is that it forces contemplation of greater issues. Murdoch's devotion to art as an act of unselfing appears in her essay "On 'God' and 'Good'" as well. In this essay, Murdoch expands upon the universal nature of art as an educating force. She points out, "It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self" (64). By this

assertion, Murdoch places pressure on the artist. She insists, "It is obvious here what the role, for the artist or spectator, is of exactness and good vision: unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention. It is also clear that in moral situations a similar exactness is called for" (64). The role of the artist is only slightly more important than the role of the viewer in this respect. The artist must uphold the standards of virtue necessary to create art that is not fanciful, but instead comprehensively transcendent. To complete the lesson, the observer must be able to separate from selfish interest to understand how the art relates to a universal whole. Despite Kant's disassociation of art and morality, Murdoch explains how art can act as a moralizing agent by displaying truth. She also counters Kant's idea that different individuals cannot benefit in the same way from art when she asserts, "The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing" (64). Here the universality of art acts as a tool for unselfing and realizing the needs of others. Art comes in various forms and agents to the various peoples of the world, such as in nature's beauty, fine architecture, pieces derived from material mediums, or spiritual matters. However, so as not to dilute the lesson, without the separation of the self, art cannot perform its highest function.

The Green Knight presents its audience with an example of an impeded spiritual search for morality and direction via the character Bellamy. Bellamy has given away nearly all of his worldly possessions, including his dog, in order to step "upon the spiritual road of no return" (45). He sees this road as the most pure and holy path he can choose and along the way hopes to find solutions to his many spiritual questions: his troubled emotions of anxiety and depression, and his confusion and guilt concerning his homosexuality. The most obvious common attribute of these inquiries is their self-centric nature. Multiple situations arise in which Bellamy is unable to look outside himself. He recounts his abruptly ended love affair with another boy, Magnus, at Cambridge and then "he [connects] Harvey with Magnus because of what had happened at the bridge, which had been so entirely Bellamy's fault. . . . Oh if only Harvey could get absolutely better!" (45) At the beginning of the novel, the young scholar Harvey takes it upon himself to cross a narrow bridge and injures his leg. Bellamy unexplainably absorbs guilt from the situation and prays, not for Harvey's sake but for the sake of his own conscience, that Harvey will make a return to health. This is but one example of the selfish nature that persists within him despite his supposed devotion to the spiritual road.

The failure to unself is what causes the artful and virtuous lessons of Father Damien's letters to be lost upon Bellamy. Father Damien makes many appeals to Bellamy throughout the novel about his worldly thinking and how it is preventing him from achieving enlightenment. He tells Bellamy in one of his letters, "You are in danger of exalting a sentimental Christ. . . . God's justice is outside our understanding and concerns Him alone. The 'darkness' you referred to earlier is, I fear, but the obscurity of the restless self" (154). Father Damien recognizes the selfish interests that are guiding Bellamy down a grave spiritual path whose magnitude and severity fail to be recognized by Bellamy due to his self-absorption. Damien attempts to explain that the transcendent, or artistic, vision of God is beyond concerns of the human condition, but Bellamy refuses to accept that he cannot turn God inward (much like Kant would) and thus attain total comprehension. The mental distresses of anxiety and depression that plague Bellamy, as Father Damien points out, are the result of the dissatisfaction of not being able to internalize these concepts. While his intentions are misdirected, the dissatisfied self creates mental obstacles that place him even further from the truth he seeks. Murdoch describes his situation in "On 'God' and 'Good'" stating, "'Self-knowledge,' in the sense of a minute understanding of one's own

machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion” (66). With this statement, Murdoch invalidates Bellamy’s search for clarity within himself. It is a pointless exercise that will bring him no higher understanding. Bellamy requires a tool for unselfing, and again, art is ideal. Murdoch expresses, “Art presents the most comprehensible examples of the almost irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy and also of the effort to resist this and the vision of reality which comes with success” (62-63). Art recognizes Bellamy’s need to look at a fantastical reality, but good art can help him overcome this self-seeking tendency and, as Murdoch goes on to say,

To silence and expel the self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands moral discipline. . . . The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it, and not to ‘use it as magic.’ (63)

Reflecting on Bellamy’s unsettled situation and based upon Murdoch’s assertions of how art would be beneficial to reconciling it makes clear that in order to understand and give justice to the spiritual message Bellamy seeks, he must make his interests unselfish and view all in a realistic manner. This will allow better vision and bring him a clarity that is centered on not his person, but the larger whole that he seeks. Thusly, in Murdoch’s novel, she makes another case for the grander purpose and uses of art to mankind from conventional art to spiritual fields.

Iris Murdoch said, “Happiness is a matter of one’s most ordinary and everyday mode of consciousness being busy and lively and unconcerned with self.” Her values concerning the self are extroverted and emphasize improvement via inspection of the world and high forms of art and spirituality. These values can be found in her philosophy as well as her literature. From these works we can conclude that the man who places his reliance upon himself as the ultimate authority and reason, risks always falling short of moral accuracy by distancing himself from the ordinary human condition. When he looks to himself and not humankind as a whole, he loses a greater image of the situation and circumstances. High art is a mode of stepping outside of the egoistic self and into a deeper meaning. Art educates the observer with a comprehensive view of the greatest themes in human existence. One may utilize art as a window into the realm of nature and a compass for moral direction and spiritual guidance. It is important to step outside the self to observe art’s uses because the value and virtue of the art is something greater than anything one can comprehend while trapped inside the confines of the self. Kantian philosophy urges man to appeal to his reason when encountering a moral dilemma, but Kant failed to recognize that the empirical judgment cannot truly perceive the sentimental, moral, or spiritual nature of human life. These shortcomings are confirmed when checked against the easily relatable characters of Murdoch’s fiction. Upon analyzing *The Green Knight*, the reader is indirectly advised by Murdoch’s philosophy under the disguise of true human interest. Characters such as Clement and Bellamy are instruments of the higher art in literature that may be used to enlighten and guide. Murdoch proves time and again that by utilizing art via her literature, the importance of unselfing behaviors in order to comprehend moral direction is better appropriated as a familiar educator and accentuates the most beneficial habits a person can develop.

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