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Review Article

Buddhist Elements in Iris Murdoch's Novels and Ethical Philosophy: An Exploration of Some Key Examples

Professor Terry Hyland[1]*

[1]Free University of Ireland, Dublin 7

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***Corresponding author:** Professor Terry Hyland
Free University of Ireland, Dublin 7

Abstract

Although she was never a formal or confessional Buddhist, there is ample evidence that Iris Murdoch was attracted to and heavily influenced by Buddhist theory and practice, and that such influences are evident throughout her novels and philosophical work. The principal aims of this article are to examine the evidence for the Buddhist influences on Murdoch and, further, to explore the Buddhist elements in her novels and philosophy. In particular, the Buddhist concepts of anatta (not-self), karuna (compassion), dukkha (suffering), and sati (mindful attention/awareness) will be explored and analysed as key drivers of the narratives in some of her most famous novels. This analysis will be supplemented and supported by references to Murdoch's ethical and metaphysical writings, to biographies, her recently discovered poetry, and to commentaries on her life and work.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch, Buddhist Ideas, Murdoch's Novels, Metaphysics, Ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a series of related writings, Galen Strawson (2009, 2018) has pointed to the intriguing idea concerning the difference between narrative and non-narrative conceptions of personhood alongside making recommendations about the social, individual and ethical advantages of living a non-narrative existence. It is acknowledged by Strawson that 'self-experience' seems to be a brute fact of human existence but that – although we can make perfect sense of notions such as my 'inmost self' or the 'secret self of inner experience' – he concludes that 'selves don't exist in the ordinary sense...but are useful fictions or abstractions that help us to organize our experience when we think about our lives' (2009, p.246). Arguing for the ethical advantages of non-narrative living, Strawson (2018) emphasises the joys and advantages of transient and non-narrative forms of life said to be typified by people such as Montaigne, Stendhal, Coleridge, Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch (pp.49-50). This seems counter-intuitive given Murdoch's lifelong tendency towards story-telling. There was, however, a radical non-narrative aspect to Murdoch's life, particularly in her writings, both fictional and philosophical, on the role of the self in human affairs, particularly her views on 'unselfing' as a crucial process in moral education (Laverty, 2007). The quote from her recently discovered and published poems cited at the beginning gives us a glimpse of this therapeutic and metaphysical quest in which love and its vicissitudes play a central role.

Unselfing and the process of detaching from the ego through attentive learning are key aspects of Buddhist theory and practice, and there is considerable evidence that Murdoch was attracted by such ideas throughout her life and work (Okada, 1999). Iris Murdoch's husband, John Bayley, notes in his memoirs that his wife was fond of Buddhist ideas and people (1999), and Peter Conradi (2001) reports in his biography of Murdoch that she was fascinated by both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in which she found ways of transcending 'resentful states of being' to discover an 'amazement at the world' (p.544). Conradi also notes that she had conversations with Krishnamurti and with Japanese Zen Buddhists on the Bayleys' several visits to Kyoto, in addition to meditation instruction which she sought from the Buddhist Society in London (ibid.p.545). Even though Murdoch sometimes claimed that she did not set out to write philosophical novels (Levenson 2001), her twenty-six novels are self-evidently replete with philosophical ideas, typically concerned with moral and metaphysical matters. Buddhist concepts are present in *The Nice and the Good, Bruno's Dream* and *The Green Knight* according to

Conradi's reading of these novels (2001, p.546) and, in his introduction to the Vintage edition of *The Sea, The Sea*, Burnside (1999) notes the overarching structural influences of Tantric Buddhist themes. In relation to the cultivation of the attention required for unselfing, *Henry and Cato* provides paradigm illustrations of its importance. As Sodre (2001) notes in her introduction to the Vintage edition of the novel:

Attention is a central concept in Murdoch's philosophical thinking – a word she uses in Simone Weil's sense of the active movement away from the self and towards reality. At the centre of her moral conception of Good is that capacity to be focused on the other (pp.xiii-xiv).

2. Buddhist Concepts in Iris Murdoch's Novels

It would be useful to explore some of the key Buddhist concepts noted above as they appear in the novels.

2.1 Anatta (Non-Self)

Non-self, sometimes expressed as not-self, is one of the three marks of existence (along with impermanence and suffering) in the dharma (the Buddhist canon of teachings) and is much misunderstood in Western culture which tends to celebrate the self and the individual ego. It is not meant to suggest that we have no personal identity but, rather, that the idea of an unchanging self which is constructed through life experience is largely illusory and has no fixed or permanent status. (Hyland, 2011, Batchelor, 1998, 2015). It is this illusory self that is connected with the attachment and desire which causes and reproduces suffering and, thus, necessitates the unselfing process referred to above.

This denial of a separate self has a long philosophical pedigree. David Hume is best known as an opponent of the notion of a unique 'I' or 'me' and offered the famous observation that 'I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception' (1964 edn., p.239). Chappell (2005) reminds us – in his examination of the 'inescapable self' as it applies to ethics, epistemology and philosophy of mind – that both Heracleitus and the Buddha had reached broadly the same conclusion as Hume as long ago as the 5th century BC. Explaining the Buddhist conception, Olendzki (2010) suggests that:

Teachings of non-self do not mean that the self does not exist, for anything given a name created to express an idea does exist, as such...What the Buddhists are challenging is a series of assumptions made about the self that are not sustainable by empirical observation. One assumption challenged is that the self has some sort of privileged ontological status as a substance an essence, or a spiritual energy that is something other than the manifestations of a person's natural physical and mental processes. Self might be a useful world for referring to a person's body, feelings, perceptions, behavioural traits, and consciousness, but it cannot be construed as something underlying or transcending these manifestations (p.9).

Brazier (2003) explains that, according to the *mano-vijnana* model of Buddhist psychology, 'everything that I perceive is a visitation or object. It is not me' (p.49). This conception is linked to the idea that each of the senses – indeed all of the so-called aggregates of 'form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness' which 'contain everything, in nature and in society' (Hanh 1999, p.176) – are conditioned and outwardly focused, clutching at experience with either desire or aversion. In Western culture, Brazier (2003) explains, 'we are preoccupied with our mental processes and identify with them. We find it difficult to believe that our thoughts are not part of "me". Buddhist approaches...tend to be outward-focused. The focus is not "Who am I?" but "How do I see the world?"'(pp.49-50).

Murdoch makes use of this Buddhist approach in a number of novels. Prominent amongst these is *The Sea, The Sea* (1978/1999) which won the Booker Prize in 1978. In his introduction to the 1999 Vintage edition, John Burnside, outlines a number of elements of Eastern philosophy – Buddhism, the Hindu Bhagavad Gita, and Milarepa, the Tibetan poet-mystic – that influence and inspire the main narrative (Burnside, 1999, pp. ix-xiii). The central character of the novel is Charles Arrowby, an ageing theatrical celebrity who decides to leave his urban life behind by withdrawing from the world to dwell in seclusion in a house by the sea. In a series of encounters with visitors from his past – and subsequent reflections on his life prompted by his solitary existence within the purview of the vast sea and the awe-inspiring vistas of the night sky – Arrow by is confronted with the realization of his own relentless egotism. He acknowledges the suffering this has caused him and this leads him to a deeper understanding of the suffering of others in a way in which compassion and self-compassion function as two sides of the same coin. Throughout the narrative, Murdoch suggests that true compassion arises out of the acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all beings. Arrowby's journey ultimately reflects the Buddhist notion that individual identity is an illusion, as evidenced when he muses: 'If I could see others as I see myself, I could discard this illusion of isolation' (1978/1999, p.142). This subtle yet profound shift illustrates how glimpsing the truth of non-self may serve to foster genuine love and compassion toward others.

In a similar way, the pursuit of selflessness as a key component of enlightenment is foregrounded in Murdoch's early novel, *The Bell* (1958/1962) set in a Christian religious community in which spiritual and sexual yearnings mix in ways in which the community members are forced to confront the consequences of

egotistic longing, The dynamics among the residents of the community surrounding the eponymous and symbolic 'Bell' symbolize a collective journey towards awakening, where personal feelings and aspirations are overshadowed by a shared quest for other-regarding understanding and compassion. Murdoch's well-known Neo-Platonist conception of Goodness (Murdoch,1970/2001) is revealed when the Abbess of the community counsels one of its members by saying that:

Often we do not achieve for others the good that we intend…Good is an overflow. Where we generously and sincerely intend it, we are engaged in a work of creation which may be mysterious even to ourselves…Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect (1958/1962, p.235).

Similar sentiments inspire the central protagonist in *The Good Apprentice* (1985) whose whole life is dedicated to 'trying to be good'.

2.2 Karuna (Compassion)

Along with *metta* (loving kindness) compassion is at the core of Buddhist ethical theory and practice (Gethin, 1998; Hanh, 1999). Christina Feldman (2005) describes this cardinal virtue as follows:

The power of compassion lies in its capacity to dissolve the separation between you and me. It is no longer your suffering or my suffering but just suffering. It is no longer your fear or my fear, but a fear of groundlessness that is universal (p.113).

As such, the true force of compassion is revealed in the capacity to transcend personal suffering in the acknowledgment that it is an integral part of universal suffering, and this is supported by the realization of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all beings (Batchelor, 2015).

The central characters in Murdoch's novels are often revealed to be struggling with self-inflicted pain and suffering (invariably connected with religious guilt or unrequited love) which may be dissolved by attention to the needs and feelings of others rather than the egotistic self. In the *Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1976), for instance, we are introduced to Montague Small a man utterly absorbed in self-indulgent grief following his wife, Sophie's, early death. After intensive brooding on Sophie's last months, he reflects:

How dreadful Sophie had been at the end, clawing at him savagely to share her terror and despair. He thought, she screamed horrors at me to help herself endure. She could not so have loaded any other human being. I should have been a cue for compassion, even for pride. He ought to have accepted that suffering from her with profound gratitude as a proof of her love. Instead, when she spitefully attacked him, he shouted back (p.31).

Such retrospective realizations and epiphanies are characteristic of the novels and can be discerned in, for another example, *The Green Knight* (1994) in which one of the central players, Bellamy, has been taking regular instructions from a priest, Father Damien, with a view changing his civilian life for one of religious contemplation. As he reflects:

The idea of giving up the world, which had given him for a time so much life-energy, appeared now as a sort of fake suicide…The fatal falseness-of-heart was what, Father Damien, on further acquaintance, had now seen in him. The holy man thought that service might be a cure, might at any rate arouse his penitent's interest in the suffering of others, and lead him into some real, more genuine, open field (p.116).

Intense religious longing, torment, and speculation are, of course, features of so many Murdoch novels – *Henry and Cato* (1965/2002) and *The Time of the Angels* (1968) in particular – and, arguably, reflect the novelist's own struggle with religiosity. Certainly, the tension between orthodox Christianity, Eastern spirituality and her metaphysical readings in philosophy is revealed in much of the writing. As Beran & Marchal (2022) have observed of Murdoch's perspective:

her approach is motivated by insights tracing affinities between Buddhism and Husserl's and Sartre's analyses of consciousness, as well as Platonic ideas of unselfing and self-purification (p.181).

The Japanese writer, Sumie Okada (1999) who interviewed Murdoch in 1989, provides further insights into the novelist's beliefs in this contested sphere. She argues that:

Murdoch does not believe in the existence of a personal god - she considers that Christ was not God, but can be a mystical icon. Christianity has been burdened by literalistic dogmas, such as belief in the resurrection. She regards herself as a Christian (Protestant) Buddhist, as she has been strongly interested in Zen Buddhism, which is different from Hindu Buddhism. She believes that beyond ordinary appearances there is something higher, a spiritual reality, which is the essence of religion (p.151).

Certainly, this eclectic mixture of ideas and beliefs are present in much of Murdoch's writing – both fictional and philosophical – and is revealed in the inner turmoil and life experiences of many of her characters.

In commenting on Murdoch's poetry, Sarah Hall writes:

While there is a very broad spectrum of expression, experience and interaction within Murdoch's poetry, one central and fundamental energy, one

character, keeps showing up. Love. Love is embodied. The poet frequently meets and communicates, and even grapples with Love, who goes about the pages in semi-corporeal, semi-deified form, charging the poet, helping the poet, hindering the poet (Murdoch, 2025, p.xiv).

In her poem 'Love Visits his Traps', (2025, p.86) for instance, we read the words:

Love going round his traps to see what
Gain
The night had brought, discovered me
Once more
Ensnared in the same place, and with
A roar
Grounding his shot-gun, laughed,
'What, you again?'

Similarly, in 'I See Love in Bad Company' (ibid., pp.89-90) we find the words:

At the street corner I perceived a
Crowd
Of young and slender dandies who
Provoked
The passers-by. I hurried past the place,
Anxious for home – but in the lamplight saw
Amid that grouped impertinent
Guffaw
Of leering ruffians, a familiar face.
Surely the one that whistles after me
None other is than Love, who did me
Harm,
Though he was my friend once. Without surprise
I see him now in evil company.
A wicked face – but oh those eyes
Could charm –
Heart, sudden heart, don't beat me to my knees

As the editors of Murdoch's letters, Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (2015), observed, the novelist's lifelong encounters with both men and women, reveal ethical struggles which parallel the complex lives of the characters she created. They comment:

Effusive and emotionally weighted language in Murdoch's correspondence can be misleading. Indeed her language frequently blurs the boundaries between platonic and sexual liaisons…But such language…does not necessarily imply sexual intimacy and/or a desire for total commitment to one person. She was progressive, both in her advocacy of complete emotional and sexual freedom in relationships and in her sense of gender as something fluid rather than fixed (Kindle edn., loc.208).

However, as the writers also note, Murdoch thought that ultimately love should be 'enabling and not restricting…part of a healing process' (ibid., loc.222), and it is this perspective – connected with the Buddhist notion of salvation through compassion and other-regarding goodness – that is foregrounded in the lives of the central characters in *The Black Prince*, *The Sea, The Sea, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, The Green Knight,* and many other novels.

2.3 Dukkha (Suffering)

The fact that we are born into a world characterized by suffering is the first noble truth of the Buddhist canon (Bodhi, 2000). Thich Nhat Hanh – the renowned Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and campaigner for peace and justices – describes the four noble truths as 'the cream of the Buddha's teaching' (1999, p.9). He goes on to explain that:

The First Noble Truth is suffering (dukkha in Sanskrit, the language used in early Buddhist texts)…We all suffer to some extent. We have some malaise in our body and our mind…The Second Noble Truth is the origin, roots, nature, creation and arising (samudaya) of suffering. After we touch our suffering, we need to look deeply into it to see how it came to be…The Third Noble Truth is the cessation (nirodha) of creating suffering by refraining from doing the things that make us suffer…The Fourth Noble Truth is the path (marga) that leads to refraining from doing the things that cause us to suffer (ibid.,pp,10-11).

Brazier (2003) explains that the 'teaching of the Four Noble Truths is a cornerstone of Buddhist understanding' which 'offers an analysis of the basic human process of responding to life's afflictions and a framework for understanding and working with the pain in our own lives and in the world' (p.8).

As already mentioned, many of the characters in Murdoch's novels represent paradigm examples of this struggle to overcome some form of pain, anguish and suffering in response to the vicissitudes of life. The grief of Montague Small following his wife's death – alluded to in the previous section in relation to *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1976) – is terrible and all-consuming (and, as we learn at the end of the novel, partly due to the fact that he has assisted her death) fully aligned with the relentless pessimism of the philosopher Schopenhauer who Murdoch cites favourably in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (2003) in relation to his recommendations for compassionate action as a way of escaping the blind striving will which is at the root of all suffering. Thinking of his wife's final days, Small reflects:

They were quarrelling when she died. He would never forgive himself. After all the filth of suffering one might have felt that death was a clean agent: the vile rubble of consciousness cleared way forever…But he had made even this austere consolation impossible for himself…Sickening terrors, which he had long wished to spurn away, fed by catastrophe now prowled again. There were moments when he could not see how he could go on living with his mind (p.31).

Small does, however, eventually learn to overcome such blackness and hopelessness in imagining that:

A complete change of world might even help him should he ever want to write again. He needed ordinary simple things in his life, to clothe himself in some humble serviceable role. Moments of vision suggested that to be forced to help people might be healing (pp 201-2).

This epiphany is reminiscent of Schopenhauer's notion, referred to by Murdoch, of salvation through universal compassion in the face of human suffering. As she comments:

Schopenhauer often returns to examples of selfless care and kindness, not only among humans but between humans and animals. This endearing, and among philosophers rare, emphasis must connect with, but need not depend upon, his Hindu and Buddhist perception of the whole cosmos as bound together and worthy of respect in all its parts (2003, p.65).

Like the romantic poets, Wordsworth and Keats, communion with the natural world is another way of responding to the world, and many of her novels allude to the human capacity for aesthetic appreciation in this respect. Murdoch's poetry is replete with such notions. Surely she had read Ted Hughes' famous poem, 'Snowdrop' (1982, p.58) which includes the words:

She too pursues her ends,
Brutal as the stars of this month,
Her pale head as heavy as metal.

before she composed her own poem, 'Snowdrops' (2005, p.99) which begins with the lines:

Earliest forms upstarting purely from
Begdraggled earth of winter's disarray
Your little pale as marble snowdrops
Come
White flowers, children of a white day.
Muffled and muted is the word you
Bring.
Unconscious dreamers of uncertain
Spring.

In tandem with close attention to love and the beauty of nature, Murdoch's preferred way out of *dukkha* can be seen to be fully in line with the Buddhist notions of kindness, compassion and an acknowledgement of the inter-dependence of all beings. As the priest, Fr. Damien, writes to his friend, Bellamy – who has absorbed himself in Christian mystical ideas in his attempt to transcend grief and suffering – in *The Green Knight* (1993):

I beg you to reflect humbly on your situation, making a serious endeavour to distance yourself from the self-gratification you mistake for adoration of God. The greedy, cunning self has many ways of deceiving…Think about your happiness and how you can be happy in helping others (p.221).

The warning here to beware of the 'greedy, cunning self' is reminiscent of both Schopenhauer's notion of the power of the will to imprison us in relentless striving, and also the Buddhist injunction to 'abandon pleasure and pain' in pursuit of the 'purification of mindfulness by equanimity' (Bodhi, p.1304). In a similar fashion, the protagonist, Morgan, asks of Rupert in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970/2001): 'Tell me what I need, Rupert. Do I need an ordeal, punishment or something? What will make me stop feeling like a piece of filthy screwed up newspaper? To which Rupert responds: 'Be calm. Calm of mind is so terribly important. Be quiet and let yourself sink. Sink into the depths of your own spirit and lose your fretful ego there' (pp.85-6). This is an overt plea to engage in mindfulness practice of the kind highlighted in the next section.

2.4 Sati (Mindful Attention/Awareness)

According to Buddhist mindfulness practice, the way out of cycles of suffering such as the ones endured by Murdoch's characters illustrated above is the development of an 'understanding of how distress is created and re-created in our minds so these processes can be seen and transformed' (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019, p.115). The training of attention – through contemplative strategies or by means of aesthetic and craft pursuits – has been referred to already in a range of different contexts. Such training – similar to contemporary apprenticeship models of learning (Hyland, 2011, 2014) – will be a pre-requisite for transforming suffering and cultivating moral vision. A key aspect of such training – and the crucial complementary partner of attention – is 'intentionality in how attention and awareness are deployed' (Feldman & Kuyken 2019, p.14). Such intention – a necessary stabilising and protective aspect of unselfing – is rooted in the 'ethical dimension of mindfulness' which ensures that attention and awareness are 'deployed and trained in the service of understanding, lessening suffering, enhancing joy, increasing compassion, and providing greater opportunities to lead a mindful life' (ibid., p.15).

Many of Murdoch's recently published poems resonate with what may be described as the stabilising presence of attention to nature and the encounters of everyday life. In 'Love Smiles upon Us' (2025, p.95), written for her husband, John Bayley, for instance, she writes:

Out with my dear on February nights
We found the cloven frost-embittered
Earth,
Bedraggled with old leaves, had given
Birth
To small bright golden stemless
Aconites…

Such close attention to love and nature are seen to be core elements of the unselfing process – which for Murdoch is 'by definition morally desirable' (Olsson,2018, p.174) – and is firmly rooted in that 'moral

vision' (Bakhurst, 2018) which incorporates the 'disciplined overcoming of the self...the clarification of vision and the domination of the selfish impulse' (Murdoch, 1998, pp.378, 382). The protective shelter of this moral vision – which, for Murdoch is inseparable from her well-known thesis about the ethical life which draws on Platonic ideas to transcend both virtue and duty ethics in the overarching conception of 'generalised goodness' (Murdoch, 2003, p.482) – is crucial given the nature of the human condition driven by the craving of the blind, striving will described by Schopenhauer. The relentless and recalcitrant sense of self is the principal source of what Schopenhauer (1995 edn) called the 'suffering of the world' caused ultimately by the 'blind striving will'. As the arch philosopher of pessimism explains:

The great vehemence of the will is of itself and immediately a constant source of suffering. In the first place, because all volition arises from yearning for something one does not possess; that is, from suffering...Secondly, because, through the causal connection of things, most of our desires must remain unfulfilled, and the will is more often thwarted than satisfied; therefore much intense volition always entails much intense suffering (ibid., p.225).

Schopenhauer's relentless pessimism and misanthropy about the human condition is, however, relieved by optimistic glimpses of a number of potential escape routes from this designated evil. Overcoming evil in the sense of gaining release from the thrall of the will may be achieved in three main ways: through philosophical reflection and understanding, through artistic/aesthetic appreciation, and through Eastern forms of wisdom and contemplation (Gardiner 1967; Hyland 1985). Murdoch's conceptions of education, aesthetic appreciation and the training of attention are very close to Schopenhauer's prescriptions.

The principal vehicle for such training within Buddhist traditions is *sati* or mindfulness meditation which is central to the practice (the emphasis here is on mindfulness rooted in Buddhist ethical foundations as opposed to the commodified 'McMindfulness' versions recently popularised for commercial purposes, see Hyland, 2017). In his book on Buddhist moral philosophy, Christopher Gowans explains *sati* by quoting from the classic text on meditation the *Satipatthana Sutta* in which the instruction is to 'abide contemplating the body as body, argent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world' (2015, p.200). In relation to the contemporary therapeutic mindfulness tradition, Donald Siegel (2007) reviewed a wide range of literature on the topic and identified five key factors (p.12):

- Non-reactivity to inner experience – thoughts and feelings are perceived without any urgent need to react
- Observing/noticing/attending to sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings – remaining present with these even when they are unpleasant or painful
- Acting with awareness, not on automatic pilot – a determination to concentrate and minimise extraneous distraction
- Describing/labelling of thoughts and feelings with words – verbally articulating beliefs, opinions and expectations
- Non-judgmental of experience in terms of resisting the urge to criticize our thoughts and feelings as, perhaps, irrational or inappropriate.

The qualities of curiosity, openness and acceptance that occur throughout accounts of the pre-requisites of mindful practice are also relevant to learning and development in educational contexts, and it is just those aspects that tend to be highlighted by Murdoch in both the novels and the philosophical writing.

In *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* we are told that Monty, having failed to master the standard lotus meditation position, 'had at least settled for kneeling, sitting back on his heels' a posture 'he could maintain for long periods, becoming rapidly unconscious of his body' (1976,p.122). Similar practices are alluded to in *The Time of the Angels* (1968), *The Bell* (1958/1962), *The Good Apprentice* (1985) and *Henry and Cato* (1968/2002) though – as Ignes Sodre (2002, p.xiii) noted in her introduction to the latter novel – Murdoch's eclectic mixture of Christian mysticism and Eastern philosophy tends to resolve itself into an emphasis on the concept of attention and its role in both learning and spiritual practice. This theme is discussed in more detail in the next section.

3. Iris Murdoch: Fiction, Philosophy and Transformation

The vulnerability of the human condition which leads to the reification of the self as a defence against the vicissitudes of life presents a major obstacle to the alleviation of suffering and the cultivation of moral principles and behaviour designed to benefit others. Such self-defensive tendencies are so stubborn and deep-rooted that systematic strategies for overcoming them are foregrounded in both Western and Eastern ethical and spiritual traditions. Schopenhauer (1995 edn.) and Murdoch favour artistic and intellectual engagement, and both these writers draw inspiration from Buddhist traditions (Hyland, 1985, 2020). Such strategies – which the Buddhist psychologist, Olendzki (2010) describes as a 'science of liberation' (p.27) – require specific forms of training in order to cultivate wholesome and other-regarding values. Batchelor (2015) insists that this project is essentially pragmatic since the 'point is to gain practical knowledge that leads to changes in behaviour that affect the quality of your life...In letting go of self-centred reactivity, a person gradually comes to dwell

pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity' (p.430). The development of this knowledge and the cultivation of such cardinal virtues are routinely referred to as 'trainings' in Buddhist writings (Hahn, 1999; Bodhi ,2000) and, as such, not unlike Aristotle's (1981 edn) recommendations for developing the virtues since:

Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly, we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones (pp.91-2).

In the wide-ranging perspectives revealed in her novels, philosophical writing and comments on educational matters, Murdoch's views become crystallized within a framework defined by learning to be good, as with Aristotle, through certain kinds of attention and habitual practice. As noted in a recent symposium of the topic at the London Institute of Education:

Much in Iris Murdoch's writings relates to education, particularly moral education. Moral improvement is shown to come about through daily education in virtues, achieved through stepping outside oneself and shifting one's perspective. The moral agent thus breaks with the selfish attitudes and fantasies that obscure reality. An education in attentiveness takes place recurrently in her novels, which can be seen as novels of *Bildung* (UCL, 2025, p.1).

Bildung is a German word for the self-cultivation and development of mind through education and enculturation, and this concept is, indeed, prominent in all Murdoch's work. In the novels, as noted earlier, it is explicit in the strivings either for a more virtuous life or to overcome grief and suffering in her main protagonists, and in the philosophical work the influence of Aristotle, Schopenhauer and, specifically in relation to attention, the life and work of Simone Weil (Coles, 1987) can be fully discerned.

In their discussion of religion and philosophy in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1976), the academic Edgar advises the young student, David, to attend to 'ordinary tasks since these are usually immediate and simple and one's own truths lives in these tasks'. He goes on to recommend to David:

Not to deceive oneself, not to protect one's pride with false ideas, never to be pretentious or bogus, always to try to be lucid and quiet. There's a kind of pure speech of the mind which one must try to attain. To attain it is to be in the truth, one's own truth, which needn't mean any big apparatus of belief. And when one is there one will be truthful and kind and able to see other people and what they need (p.351).

This sort of disciplined and rigorous approach to learning is rooted in Murdoch's special emphasis on the importance of attention in educational development, a theme which reflects the influence of Weil. As Coles (1987) quotes Weil's comment that:

We can acquire the virtue of humility by taking careful note of our errors, wrong steps as students, and that is a far more precious treasure than all academic progress…When we force ourselves to fix the gaze, not only of our eyes but of our souls, upon a school exercise in which we have failed through sheer stupidity, a sense of our mediocrity is borne upon us with irresistible evidence. No knowledge is more to be desired (p.142).

In a similar way, Mark Totner (2022) suggests that in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970/2001) Murdoch tells us 'that (at least in part of her book) she "borrows" Weil's concept of attention', and that:

As it turns out, the variety of attention that Weil advises us to use to tackle problems like insight problems is in many respects the same variety of attention that Murdoch thinks we should use to attentively think about the people around us in a way that is more truthful, loving, and just (p.2).

In *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956) attention plays a crucial role in the development of the schoolgirl, Annette, her brother, Nicholas, and the various characters they encounter as they mature and experience the world. The 'flight' in question can be seen in a sense as the flight from childhood to adulthood, and the dynamics of attention – learning to see things differently – reveal themselves in the key protaganists' willingness to listen and engage with each others' perspectives on life. As Annette is advised by her old schoolmistress, Miss Walpole, on a later visit to her old school: 'Remember that the secret of all learning is patience and that curiosity is not the same thing as a thirst for knowledge' (p.13). In a similar way, the quest for salvation or awakening which characterizes so many of Murdoch's characters – paradigm examples would be Edward in *The Good Apprentice* (1985), Bradley in *The Black Prince* (1973) and Jake in *Under the Net* (1954) – is realised through seeing the world anew by directing attention in a particular way which shifts the perspective from self-regarding to other-regarding values. Thus, for Murdoch all learning and education is a form of moral education. As she comments in relation to the work of Weil:

Simone Weil says that will does not lead us to moral improvement, but should be connected only with the idea of strict obligations. Moral change comes from an *attention* to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of, primarily of course other people, but also of things. Such a view accords with oriental wisdom (and with Schopenhauer) to the effect that we ought to have no will.

This would be the 'life of knowledge', to use the Schopenhauerian phrase which was in Wittgenstein's head when he wrote the 1914-16 Notebooks (2003, p.52, original italics).

4. Coda: Murdoch, Literature, and Moral Education

It was mentioned in the introduction that Iris Murdoch was identified by Strawson as a stereotypically transient person, in spite of her lifelong tendency towards story-telling. As indicated, Laverty (2007) and other commentators have noted a radically mutable, non-narrative characteristic in her novels and philosophical writing. Recent work in philosophy of education (Olsson 2018; Bakhurst 2018) has foregrounded Murdoch's work to illustrate how a process of 'unselfing' may assist in the process of moral transformation and the development of other-regarding values and dispositions. Murdoch (2003) was insistent that learning and, indeed, much purposeful intellectually activity was essentially moral in character in the sense that 'learning is moral progress because it is an asceticism, it diminishes our egotism and enlarges our conception of truth' (p.179). Olsson argues that the notion of 'unselfing' is central to Murdoch's particular conception of education and moral transformation. There is an overriding requirement for a 'decreased egocentricity and for a greater sensitivity towards other beings and objects in the world' with the aim of cultivating a 'morally oriented manner of relating to others in the world' (2018, p. 165).

Unselfing is viewed as both a goal and as a process 'wherein one learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself' (Murdoch, 2003, p.17). Olsson suggests that central to this process is the concept of attention which is described by Murdoch (1998) as a 'just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (p.327). It is here that the links between education, morality and unselfing are brought into prominence. As Murdoch writes in her well-known thesis which emphasises the sovereignty of good over other concepts:

If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me...The honesty and humility required of the student – not to pretend what one does not know – is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory (1998, p.373).

But it is not just the qualities developed through such an attitude to learning but the very process of attending to something beyond and independent of our own egos and concerns which makes learning of such significance. As Olsson argues, the attention that Murdoch recommends invites us to move beyond our obsessions as 'narrating creatures' by becoming 'wrapped up in something' which involves the 'experience of spontaneity, immediacy, being touched and moved'. Such a process may be 'induced by a careful attention, freed of requirements, and by the concrete experience of the world' (2018, p.173). Murdoch (2003) agrees with both Kant and Schopenhauer that the pursuit of aesthetic knowledge and experience is a moral enterprise which may help to overcome the egotistic impulse by 'inducing, at least a temporary, state of selflessness' (p.179). As she goes on to observe:

Any artist, or thinker, or craftsman knows of crucial moments when an aggregate of reflection and skill must now be pressed a little harder so as to achieve some significantly better result...Ideas break the narrow, self-obsessed limits of the mind. The enjoyment and study of good art is enlarging and enlightening in this way. We may add to this that as mathematics 'stands for' any high intellectual discipline, we may, without breaking faith with Plato, suggest that the carpenter 'stands for' any careful attentive self-forgetting work or craft, including housework, and all kinds of nameless 'unskilled' fixings or cleanings or arrangings which may be done well or badly (ibid., pp.179-180).

The references here to careful attention, work and craft are fully in line with the Buddhist underpinnings of Murdoch's ideas in both her novels and philosophical work. Many of her characters aspire to realize the ideal of 'right livelihood' which is a key element of the eightfold path leading to wisdom and awakening. Applying the precepts of mindfulness specifically to working life Hanh advises us to:

keep your attention focused on the work, be alert and ready to handle ably and intelligently any situation which may arise – this is mindfulness. There is no reason why mindfulness should be different from focusing all one's attention on one's work, to be alert and to be using one's best judgment (Hanh,1991, p.14).

Silvia Panizza (2023) has commented that Murdoch's fondness for Buddhist ideas was sufficient to cause her to identify herself as a 'Buddhist Christian', and noted that it was the simplicity of the Zen tradition that was particularly appealing to her. Within this tradition the concept of 'emptiness' has a special resonance, and this notion is alluded to by Murdoch in a number of her writings. As she remarks in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals:*

In many cases something good can be learnt from the experience of emptiness and non-being. Should it not be taken as a spiritual icon or subject for meditation?... Ultimately we are nothing. A reminder of our mortality, a recognition of contingency, must at least make us humble. Are we not then closer to the deep mystery of being human? When we find our ordinary pursuits trivial and senseless, are we not right to do so? The experience of emptiness may be a shock soon forgotten, or a lifelong reminder, a moral inspiration, even a liberation, a kind of joy…Anyone can be

destroyed. There is no one there. Loss of personality is loss of ego. Buddhism teaches the unreality of the world of appearance, including the apparent person (2003, p.501).

Such sentiments and characteristics can be applied to so many of Iris Murdoch's richly sculpted protagonists, and their salvation is invariably achieved by following some variant of the Buddhist path to wisdom and enlightenment outlined in her novels and ethical philosophy.

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