

Post-Critical, Post-Liberal?

Toward a Post-Critical, Platonist Pedagogy of Virtue Ethics

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To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline. A great artist is, in respect of his work, a good man, and, in the true sense, a free man. 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.' The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real. (Murdoch 1971, 64-66)

In “Post-Critical Platonism: Preliminary Meditations on Ethics and Aesthetics in Iris Murdoch and Michael Polanyi” (Turkis, forthcoming 2019) I begin to work out how Murdoch’s Platonist account of aesthetics and the moral life might be helpfully merged with Polanyi’s ethically-inspired epistemology. I also indicate my belief that the post-critical fruits of such a union might serve as the foundation for a pedagogy of virtue ethics that would dovetail nicely with many concerns of literary studies. The central goal of this paper is to begin to flesh out in greater detail such a pedagogy.

In addition, I would like to consider these educational aims in the context of debates over the trajectory of liberalism writ large, using Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018) as a representative text. Deneen’s work is focused on a wide-ranging, radical critique of the faulty anthropology he sees as the foundation of liberalism. He ends the book by calling for the development of humane post-liberal possibilities. While Polanyi and Murdoch write from within the liberal tradition, both offer powerful critiques of certain of its tendencies (its voluntarist conception of freedom, its depersonalized epistemology, etc.). I therefore think it fair to designate them as interested in *reforming* liberalism rather than *replacing* it entirely. Nevertheless, all three thinkers, be they reformers or replacers, concur in important ways. For

example, the depersonalization of epistemology so important to Polanyi is part-and-parcel of the sort of liberal, Kantian anthropology targeted by Deneen.

Another point of convergence that cuts close to the pedagogical heart of this paper is the emphasis all three give to the importance of humanities education as foundational to their projects of reform or replacement.¹ Given that this is so, our exploration of the ways in which a pedagogy of virtue ethics, based on a phenomenologically-savvy, post-critical Platonism, might be developed and deployed will also serve as a potential contribution to the formation of a “distinctive countercultural communit[y...] distinct from the deracinated and depersonalized form of life” (Deneen 2018, 197) currently dominant in Western liberal democracies, a goal that both Murdoch and Polanyi would likely approve.

Before moving on, I’d like to briefly recap those elements of Murdoch’s work (explored in more depth [HERE](#)) that, along with Polanyian epistemology, will drive the pedagogical suggestions I’ll be exploring. In short, she affirms “a non-hypothetical first principle which is the form or idea of the Good” (1971, 94) and assumes “the internal relation of value, truth, [and] cognition,” such that “virtue...involves a desire for and achievement of truth instead of falsehood” (1993, 39). “‘Getting things right,’ as in meticulous grammar or mathematics, is [thus] truth-seeking as virtue. Learning anything properly demands (virtuous) attention” (Ibid.). The notion of attention is thus extremely important for Murdoch, since “the only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all clearly² and respond to it justly which is inseparable from virtue” (1971, 87). Achievement of this sort of *phronesis* would be to operate in the mode

¹ Polanyi, for instance, sees “mechanistic methods of inquiry” that “divorc[e] our academic pursuits from...moral issues” as laying “...the groundwork for nihilism” (1975, 23). About Murdoch’s views on education, more anon.

² I do not see Murdoch’s emphasis on seeing clearly as being in conflict with Polanyi’s emphasis on the tacit dimension of knowing since I take her to be referring here to a successful integration of subsidiary clues pointing to a comprehensive entity which is moral in nature. I see such clear-sightedness therefore as an evaluative term (close in meaning to *phronesis*) which might be applied within Polanyi’s category of *achievement*.

of what she calls *imagination* rather than self-absorbed and –aggrandizing *fantasy*. She often uses the term *unselfing* to refer to virtuous attention by which “the good life becomes increasingly selfless through an increased awareness of, [and] sensibility to, the world beyond the self,” (1993, 53) though this does not, in her view, diminish the central importance of the self as a person. Finally, she follows Plato in seeing Beauty as our most likely gateway to the Good. Yet, unlike Plato, she argues that art, broadly speaking, can participate in the Beautiful and therefore sees it as “the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*” (1971, 87-88 italics original).

Combining Murdoch’s insights with Polanyian epistemology results in something like the following analysis: We ought to move toward the sovereign concept of the Good – a move tantamount to a continuous, if halting, sequence of small moral discoveries, motivated by heuristic and moral passions. The lines converging in a definite though ultimately indefinable direction are the subsidiary, sometimes tacitly experienced clues followed in the discovery process, a process which must allow for us to be *changed* by means of contact with an external reality, in this case moral. Since Murdoch sees Beauty in its various manifestations as constituting one of these lines converging indefinably in the Good (much as Polanyi sees intellectual beauty as a guide toward scientific discovery), the unselfing possible by means of proper attention to art and nature serves as a double initiation into the moral life: it is simultaneously an exercise of virtue in itself and a training ground in which to cultivate further moral attention and discovery.

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The need for renewed efforts to cultivate such moral attention is pressing, and sustained, well-grounded moral attention is quite clearly countercultural. Indeed, whatever one makes of the current state of liberal democracy, it is difficult to deny the “relative collapse of integrity, honesty, and decency... [a] spiritual blackout of grand proportions” (West 2016). In the meantime, thinkers as diverse as libertarian-Marxist Yannis Varoufakis (2016) and neo-conservative Robert Kagan (2017) agree that we are navigating a postmodern version of the 1930s, a period not remembered for its stability, moral or otherwise.

In the popular press, Michael Gerson, former speech-writer for George W. Bush, argues that “whatever Trump’s policy legacy ends up being, his presidency has been a disaster in the realm of norms. It has coarsened our culture, given permission for bullying, complicated the moral formation of children, undermined standards of public integrity, and encouraged cynicism about the political enterprise” (2018). Meanwhile, figures from a range of more sophisticated and radical philosophical positions on both the right and the left hone in on similar conclusions about the current world system, though they – more persuasively to my mind – tend to classify Trump and his ilk as symptoms of the deeper, systemic failings endemic to liberalism, rather than causes. Thus Marxist superstar Slavoj Žižek:

The paradox is that liberalism itself is not strong enough to save its own core values from the fundamentalist onslaught. Its problem is that it cannot stand on its own: there is something missing in the liberal edifice. Liberalism is, in its very notion, “parasitic” *relying as it does on a presupposed network of communal values that it undermines in the course of its own development.* Fundamentalism is a reaction – a false, mystificatory

³ Those who wish to get straight to the pedagogical matters may choose to go straight on to the following section.

reaction of course – against a real flaw inherent within liberalism, and this is why fundamentalism is, over and again, generated by liberalism. Left to itself, liberalism will slowly [crumble]... (2009, 75-77 italics mine)

Meanwhile, the radically orthodox Anglican John Milbank argues:

The liberal preference for negative freedom is the direct consequence of ruling questions of truth or goodness out of the court of public discussion, because liberals claim that in diverse societies with rival values the pursuit of such... shared ends is necessarily intolerant and oppressive. *Yet, liberalism's substitution of individual rights and the social contract for the common good ends up creating the very effects that liberals wrongly equate with positive liberty – ideological tyranny, the closing-down of argument, and the ironing-out of plurality. Thus, liberal politics engenders the kind of illiberalism that it ascribes to all non-liberal positions. Without shared ends, individuals are encouraged to maximise their own subjective choice in conditions of growing market anarchy policed by an authoritarian state, as Karl Polanyi diagnosed... Connected with this is the progressive loss of a 'moral economy' of mutual obligations and the atomization of society that had hitherto embedded the political and the economic.* (2015 italics mine)

And the ever-piquant John Gray:

...Liberalism is ill-equipped to address the dilemmas of the postmodern period ...partly because it was a response to circumstances of diversity in world-views that arose in the early modern period with the Reformation and Wars of Religion and partly because it was a version of the animating project of...the Enlightenment [...which] is now a dead letter. (1995, 85)

More recently Gray has drawn attention to “the metamorphosis of liberalism in which a philosophy of tolerance has morphed into a persecutory orthodoxy,” (2018 *Unherd*), pointing out that

Unfolding disasters such as the American opioid epidemic and attendant fall in life expectancy have their roots in the corporate predation and ravaging of communities that occurred under the regime over which liberals of one kind or another presided. But [liberals] can comprehend the disorder of the present only on the [assumption] that they had no part in creating it. They continue to believe their hegemony was a reflection of their superior rationality. The current hiatus can only be a passing spasm of unreason and the prelude to a state of normalcy...in which they are once again in charge. (Gray 2018 *New Statesman*)

In contrast, many liberals, such as David Brooks (a right-liberal), maintain that our “difficulties stem not from anything inherent in liberalism but from the fact that we have neglected the moral order and the vision of human dignity embedded within liberalism itself” (Brooks 2018). Voices from the liberal left would agree. Take, for instance, Robert Reich, who laments that “we no longer even discuss what we owe one another as members of the same society” (2018, 5).

Deneen would largely concur with the points made above by Žižek, Milbank, and Gray while strenuously disagreeing with Brooks over whether the moral vision he (Brooks) embraces is or can be embedded in liberalism itself, even as he affirms Brooks and Reich’s common concern over the moral collapse of the contemporary moment. One way of summing up the point on which full-throated critics of liberalism and liberal reformers agree would be to say that our current system is not tapping into an animating moral vision which points towards a realizable

conception of the common good, a conception that might allow for rich, multifaceted human flourishing.

For now, we will need to table such meta-narrative disputes. After all, the ethical and pedagogical trajectory of this paper should be amenable to post-critical participants on both sides of the liberal/post-liberal line. I do, however, want to raise the question of the relationship of post-critical positions to liberal and/or post-liberal positions as one that deserves significant attention in the future.

I also wish to emphasize Deneen's argument that modes of education play a pivotal role in the moral degradation of the liberal West – again, a point on which liberal reformers like Polanyi and Murdoch or Brooks and Reich would likely agree. Deneen points out that under our current arrangements, “most institutions have gotten out of the business of seeking to educate the exercise of freedom through cultivation of character and virtue; emphasis is instead placed upon the likelihood of punishment after one body has harmed another body” (2018, 85) and argues that “if a renaissance is to come, it must be from a reconstituted education in the liberal arts” (127) which might contribute to “smaller, local forms of resistance: practices more than theories, [and] the building of resilient new cultures against the anticulture of liberalism” (19-20).

Pedagogy, Please

Matthew Crawford, a thinker who shares many of Deneen's concerns (including, I suspect, the desire for a reconstituted liberal arts education), has pointed out that “there is a kind of moral education tacit within material culture” (2015 “Diversity...”). He argues that the primary lesson of *our* material culture is that of a disembodied voluntarism leading to a sort of moral paralysis (arising from an all-encompassing reverence for the sovereign choice of the

other) or to a moral free-for-all (out of the exaltation of voluntarist choice-for-choice's-sake as the only possible good) (2015 *Beyond...*).

The idea I would like to pursue here is to think through the details of how we might push back against this tacit moral education by explicitly cultivating in students the sort of virtuous attention that Murdoch recommends. This might be done by embedding in the English curriculum an approach to literary (and/or artistic) culture that makes explicit, wherever possible, the moral dimension of such an education. I think English a good place to deploy a popular, post-critical curriculum of ethics due to its near-omnipresence in student schedules throughout American colleges, universities, and high schools.⁴

My suggestions for post-critical interventions in this section are made assuming that literary works of classic or more recent vintage will remain on course syllabi. The new curricular elements ought, however, to shift the way in which these literary texts are read and discussed.

Such a post-critical pedagogy will need to inculcate attentiveness at a variety of levels, beginning with a more detailed awareness of one's own first-person phenomenal experience as a subject and extending and connecting such enhanced cognizance to rigorous, disciplinarily-focused attention to literature and art. In connecting these two spheres of attention, it ought to provide students with structures and vocabulary that help them to identify and describe in detail the literature they are attending to as well as their own experience of the work – that is to say the effect wrought on their own phenomenal experience by the work as well as their own *process of indwelling the work*. All of these aims should be modeled, practiced, and explicitly theorized.

The guiding trope throughout the course will be the ascent from Plato's cave, so I think it wise to open by reading the cave myth together. The discussion at this point does not need to be

⁴ See also Turkis 2017.

exhaustive, but it should give students the opportunity to begin placing themselves in the allegory as well as to consider Plato's form of the Good and the nature of concepts more generally. This will set the stage for students' introduction to a sort of rough-and-ready, practical phenomenology.

The Student as Phenomenologist

In a trivial sense every student enters the classroom with nothing that does not either form a constituent part of, or that has not come to her by means of her own first-person phenomenal self (i.e. via perception, imagination, etc.). Most students, however, are unlikely to have given this fact much thought, so the first job will be to identify this state of affairs and to give students access to language that allows it to be discussed more clearly (concepts and terms such as the self, *qualia*, etc., as well as the subjective-objective dichotomy, the most common version of which will be called into question by this course of study, will be useful here).

A good place to begin our foray into phenomenology would be with C.S. Lewis's short, accessible essay "Meditation in a Toolshed"⁵ (1970). In this essay, he recounts being surprised by a bright sunbeam streaming in through a crack in the roof of a dark toolshed. In describing the occasion he notes that "looking along the beam [i.e. *enjoyment*]" (an act which rendered the toolshed itself invisible, yet opened up a view of "green leaves moving on... a tree outside and beyond that, ninety-odd million miles away, the sun,") and "looking at the beam [i.e. *contemplation*]"⁶ (at which moment he notes the beauty of the beam itself – it's relative

⁵ While Lewis does not top the list of phenomenologists, this essay is a wonderful tool to open up this approach to students. It is accessible, jargon-free, and mercifully short. Students tend to enjoy it and many see immediate applications of its concepts to their own lives.

⁶ "Meditation in a Toolshed" does not explicitly use the terms *enjoyment* and *contemplation*, a conceptual division that Lewis discovered in Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time, and Deity*. I recommend introducing these terms explicitly during the discussion of "Meditation..." and then drawing upon them throughout the course of study.

brightness in the dark shed, the dancing motes within it, etc.) “are very different experiences” (Lewis 1970, 212).

Lewis’s terms give us and our students a common language for describing two types of lived experience – a first-person, direct and immersive experience of a phenomenon, and an experience of being a third-person observer, examining the phenomenon from the side, so to speak. In so doing, they allow us to attend to and name two different aspects of our phenomenal experience, enhancing our ability to be attentive to our own stream of consciousness as a self. Students may at first begin to classify *looking along* as subjective and *looking at* as objective, yet upon more careful consideration of the text, Lewis draws their attention to the fact that while contemplating something, we do not somehow escape our own experiential perspective, thus complicating the traditional dichotomy and drawing their attention toward the personal, conscious element of all experience and knowledge.

We can quickly move to leverage these newfound concepts in the context of small group discussions and informal writing assignments by asking students to respond to questions and encounters that push them to attend more carefully to their own unified phenomenal experience. For example, I have had success with the following activity, which I call “Toolshed Phenomenology.” I burn incense in class and ask students, channeling Lewis’s “Meditation...,” to first *look along* the experience by sitting quietly for a few minutes taking in the scent before writing down descriptions of the scent itself and any associations it conjures up. After we compare notes with one another, we *look at* the scent, describing the phenomenon from the side, as it were – chemical compounds, combustion, etc. I then introduce the term *qualia* and, briefly,

Frank Jackson's Knowledge Argument⁷ as a way of further emphasizing the distinction between the view along (what it is *like*) and the view from the side (with the reductive tendencies that are often tied to this view). Time allowing, further questions for informal writing or for discussion might be posed: What does the conjuring up of associations in general help us to learn about the unified quality of our experiences as selves? Considering topics such as where and how the associations are conjured will be a natural part of such discussions, but probably ought to remain open questions for the time being, potentially leading down the line to readings on various conceptions of the self. Again, the point here is to bring to our students' attention their own status as selves who are phenomenally aware and who can make many aspects of that status a focal point of their attention. If we think of our students as prisoners in the cave, what we are doing at this point is helping them to be more attentive to themselves as they experience the cave as well as to their experience of the cave as such.

The second job, then, will be to affirm this phenomenal experience. This can be a tricky needle to thread, for we are not interested in a broad affirmation of every aspect of the self, conceived as a Kantian or Lockean will, but rather in affirming the unified conscious experience of the self as a metaphysical grounding point – as the prerequisite for any sort of knowledge at all, ethical or otherwise. I suspect that this will be handled best by means of class discussions and

⁷ "Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like 'red', 'blue', and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces *via* the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal chords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence 'The sky is blue'.... What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she *learn* anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then is it inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had *all* the physical information. *Ergo* there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false." (Jackson 1982)

further appropriate reading (perhaps some texts excerpted from Polanyi on the fiduciary nature of knowledge – say, all or some of “Faith and Reason”).

One way to initiate such an affirmation would be to have students discuss what they mean by the words subjective and objective, with particular attention paid to the question of how we might objectively justify some claim or another. In the course of this discussion, the teacher would use Socratic questioning to direct attention to the fact that *there is no way to justify the objectivity of anything at all that does not tacitly assume the existence and operation of such unified selves that are able, at least under some circumstances and some of the time, to get things right on the basis of their phenomenological experience*. While this may seem blindingly obvious to many of us, it will be an insight that has not occurred and will likely not occur to most people, given that much popular (and popularized expert) culture militates against it. This is precisely why we ought to use Socratic means to make it a foundational, framing axiom for our program, affirming thereby that “the ordinary way is the way” (Murdoch 1993, 509).

Having established this axiom (though doubtless not to everyone’s satisfaction) students ought to have the opportunity to further develop their attentive awareness in more depth. One possibility here would be to incorporate some simple mindfulness breathing and meditation activities into the class (in schools with religious affiliations, this could be expanded to include or replaced with meditative practices from within the affiliated tradition – meditative Kabbalah, centering prayer, Sufi meditation, etc. – or, of course, the Buddhist practices on which much mindfulness technique is based). The purpose of teaching and assigning such practices is summed up well by Katherine Larkin-Wong as she reflects on the experience of having been taught such techniques in law school. She comments that it “focused [her] attention on how [her] mind works” and led (and here I allow her own first-person account to shine through)

...to a sustained effort to pay attention, in each moment of my life, with curiosity and equanimity. When meditating mindfully, I endeavor to pay attention to my breath and the thoughts that arise without judgment and with sustained curiosity about where my mind is going. When living mindfully I try to stay attuned to how I am experiencing life: how someone else's comment makes my stomach turn, how the sun feels on my face, how writing this article is both a gratifying acknowledgement of how mindfulness has advanced my legal education and a frustrating attempt at trying to put an experience into words. (2012, 665)

Such attentiveness, the ability to examine and attend to various facets of one's phenomenal experience, is a prerequisite of being able to evaluate those experiential facets in the light of some set of standards which come to us (as Polanyi and Murdoch would agree) from beyond the confines of the self.

Sam D. Watson's *Mindings Collage* (see his article in *Tradition and Discovery* 42.4 for a full explanation) is another excellent, concrete, and disciplinarily appropriate way of guiding students towards such greater attentiveness to themselves as phenomenally conscious beings with a unified perspective. This ongoing writing assignment's purpose is to help prevent us from being "captivated, abstracted from ourselves in a detached, timeless, Cartesian solitude," by "prompting us to have our thinking emerge in and through our spontaneous speaking and writing, actions which are confidently rooted within our mindbody concretely placed in our world, our culture, and our time, and emerging through our ongoing dialogical exchange with others" (Watson 2016, 55-56).

Again, these and other similarly oriented assignments and activities are intended to initiate students into a sort of everyperson's phenomenology, making them aware of and giving

them access to language that describes this fundamental, personal element of human existence. This sort of pedagogy can't fairly claim to complete the work of "selfing" students, though I think if done right it might lay some important groundwork for such selfing by making them more insightfully attentive to experience *qua* experience, thus initiating them into the Husserlian dictum that, "if... certain riddles are principally immanent in natural science, then their solution in accordance with their premises and results obviously are principally transcendent to it" (Husserl 2002, 259). All this ought hopefully to make students less likely to fall prey to various popular scientific attacks on human selfhood or to "a mistaken conception of objectivity" (Polanyi 1962, 16). Having thus sketched out a plan for working toward such selfing, the next step will be to help students unself.

Unselfing by Reading and Attending.

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care. (Murdoch 1971, 84)

Thus Murdoch begins her delightful and instructive exploration of the experience of beauty in nature and art as a means of Platonic unselfing – a direct but partial enactment of the moral life which does double duty as training for fuller participation in the Good. The hope at this point in our pedagogical pilgrimage is that students, conceived of in terms of Plato's myth,

are beginning to exercise more precise, focused, and communicable attention on various aspects of themselves and of their experience of the cave as such.

This is where we begin to tap into students' previous experiences of beauty – intimations of what lies beyond the cave and the self – and to provide additional, structured opportunities to encounter beauty in disciplinarily specific ways (i.e. through literature and art). To recap Murdoch's argument, such encounters will foster "a recognition of hierarchy and authority... degrees of merit... heights and distances," all of which point toward the conclusion that there are some things that are "...pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness" to which we must "surrender" (1971, 87-88).

This, then, is where it might begin to experientially dawn on students that, while our phenomenal, first-person experience is the means by which all experiences are made available to us, not all elements of our phenomenal experience are created equal – a realization that might well constitute the beginning of the journey out of the cave. This will ideally be the point at which students begin to become aware that "freedom...is not an inconsequential chucking of one's weight about, it is the disciplined overcoming of self. Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues" (Murdoch 1971, 95).

But how to do this in the classroom, by means of engaging with literature? There is wide scope here for a variety of approaches, and I think it especially important that individual instructors shape and mold the curriculum to suit their strengths as models of the type of ethical engagement we are aiming at. And while I believe that currently dominant theoretical paradigms within literary criticism can contribute important insights to this process (and therefore, whenever this is the case, should be allowed to play a role), in general, these critical approaches

are not sufficient for our purposes in their currently practiced forms since their ethics tend to be metaphysically dessicated. As such, they are examples of what Robert Scholes calls *hypocriticism* (1998), cousins of moral inversion and therefore very often (despite themselves) a part of the problematic liberal cultural apparatus that we are seeking here to reform or overturn. Additionally, most current approaches to literary criticism often display what I think Murdoch would describe as a *lack of attention* to the work itself in the sense that the theoretical frameworks involved are not themselves focused so much on works of literature *qua* literature as on using them to work through some other concern (i.e. that determined by the theoretical framework itself). This is often enough all well and good, but it is not what we are after here.

What is needed is rather an approach to art and literature that provides a theoretical and terminological framework that is attentional in nature and focused on the works themselves and on their phenomenological reception by the reader. Such an approach would, I believe, open up more opportunities for students to experience the initiation into the Good by means of the Beautiful that Murdoch argues for in *The Sovereignty of Good*.

One invaluable source in this regard is C.S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* (1992), in which he seeks to develop a theory of literary criticism that addresses his own literary interests, which he felt were ignored by the dominant trends at the time (and which, it seems to me, continue to be ignored). In that work he establishes himself as a kindred spirit to Murdoch in passages such as the following:

The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this. Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary

annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox; ‘he that loseth his life shall save it.’
(1992, 138)

Woven throughout *An Experiment in Criticism* are applications of Lewis’s terms *enjoyment* (or “looking along”) *contemplation* (“looking at”). As we move into our study of literary texts and our experiences of them, we will tap into the foundation laid by our discussions of “Meditation in a Toolshed” by applying the concepts learned there to our literary practice.

The first of Lewis’s terms, *enjoyment* (or *looking along*), focuses our attention on the direct experience of our immersion in the work itself. Our ability to attend to and describe this phenomenon will be refined and developed by introducing students to what Lewis refers to as the *flavor* or *atmosphere* of the piece. For Lewis, art and literature are

impregnated...by something which I can only vaguely describe as [a] flavour or ‘feel’
...It is this omnipresent flavor or feel that makes bad inventions so mawkish and suffocating, and good ones so tonic. The good ones allow us temporarily to share a sort of passionate sanity...this comes to us...as the ‘spirit’ (using that word in a quasi-chemical sense) of a work of art, a play. (1992, 82)

This artistic layer “works upon us by its peculiar flavor or quality, rather as a smell or a chord does” (1992, 44-45), sometimes taking us out of ourselves for a moment, as did the kestrel in Murdoch’s example, and sometimes generating a more sustained experience of unselfing. This atmospheric element is a sort artistic gestalt, created by the complex interaction of myriad subsidiary details residing in both the work and the recipient, and it can serve as both an object of phenomenological analysis (i.e. by describing it accurately) and as a phenomenological clue pointing towards the fact that we ourselves are so constituted that we can be thus unselfed. Our

goal, then, is to develop in our students awareness of and attentiveness to both of these facets of literary and artistic experience.

In terms of classroom practice, we might consider having them read some potent descriptions of the flavor of a literary work with which they are familiar before identifying, writing down and discussing their own descriptions of the flavor they experience while enjoying some other literary or artistic work.⁸ This process ought to guide one toward paying sustained, focal attention to one's own phenomenological experience as informed and influenced by an outside source – the work itself, as well as to attentive interaction (by means of discussion with other readers) with other, varying descriptions of the flavor of the piece. While subjectivity will certainly play a significant role in the variety of these descriptions, such conversations about competing descriptions of the atmosphere of the same work will often (more often than not?) lead students toward some partial points of descriptival agreement which will serve to point toward the external nature of the work itself. Such conversations can be taken advantage of to emphasize the complexity and nuance of our epistemological reality as they show pretty clearly the ways in which affirming the exteriority of the work does not detract from the responsible personal commitment inherent in the artistic interaction.

Marked off against enjoyment, *contemplation* (or *looking at*) focuses our attention on the work of art *qua* work of art, and opens up other opportunities for the refinement of attentiveness that we, following Murdoch, are seeking to inculcate in our students as virtuous. These additional opportunities for the exercise of sharply honed attention will be developed by the introduction of *logos* and *poema*. As Lewis explains it,

⁸ For a taste of what such description might look like, consider Lewis's introductory comment on the atmosphere of *Hamlet*: "...the appearance of the spectre means a breaking down of the walls of the world and germination of thoughts that cannot really be thought: chaos is come again" (1961, 98).

A work of literary art can be considered in two lights. It both *means* and *is*. It is both *Logos* (something said) and *Poieima* (something made). As *Logos* it tells a story, or expresses an emotion, or exhorts or pleads or describes or rebukes or excites laughter. As *Poieima*, by its aural beauties and also by the balance and contrast and the unified multiplicity of its successive parts, it is an *objet d'art*, a thing shaped so as to give great satisfaction. (1992, 132 italics original)

Students should be exposed to models of analysis which use this framework. Previously, in their work with flavor, they had been *looking along* the literary work. Now they are *looking at* it, with an eye to how the *logos* and the *poieima* are to a great extent bound up in and responsible for the production of their own phenomenological experience of enjoyment we have already examined under the heading of atmosphere. Under this heading we might profitably incorporate traditional literary terms and techniques that are woven together to establish the *logos* and create the *poieima*.

To see how all this might come together as a method for the refinement of students' ability to attend carefully and fairly to a work of art or literature, consider the ways in which competent use of Lewis's interpretive categories would allow one to give a cogent account of how one's viewing of, say, a film, produced a particular atmospheric experience, which is largely (though still partially, due to the personal indwelling that is necessary for any experience to occur at all) determined by the work itself. The way the work acts upon us can in turn be described in terms of *logos* and *poieima*.

But once these elements are made focal points of our attention, we can then subject our overall experience of the film to an explicit moral critique (assuming we have other reserves of moral vocabulary to draw on – and this will be the focus of the next section). We might

determine, for instance, that the movie's atmosphere, while very attractive to us in some ways, is in some other sense ethically corrosive, perhaps reinforcing our tendency toward the salacious and voyeuristic. If this happens to be the case, then our application of Lewis's along with more traditional literary terms may help us to locate the technical sources of such bewitchment. Indeed, we may then give such a work high praise for its technical achievement, even as we decry the morally corrosive effects of certain aspects of the logos, etc. These are just a few possibilities, of course. There are many other possible permutations.

It ought also to be noted, however, that there is no need to subject every work to such an explicit moral analysis. For Murdoch, to make a "progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly" (1971, 23) is itself to exercise freedom and to enter into the life of virtue. Works that are good in multiple senses will take us further down this desirable road, yet a proper evaluation of mediocre or even badly done works is itself of value.

To sum up, "there are [...] poems which seem to give [us] a new and nameless sensation, or even a new sense, to enrich [us] with experience which nothing in [our] previous li[ves] had prepared [us] for" (Lewis 1939, 125-126). Our goal in incorporating Lewis's terminological framework is to extend the rough-and-ready phenomenology our students are applying to the realm of literary and artistic experience, giving them access to tools that will allow them to be more attentive, precise observers of their own interactions with such works in the belief that getting such observations right is the right thing to do, a moral act *in se*, and an opportunity to reflect on the unselfing and enlargement of being that sometimes occurs when we encounter beauty. Furthermore, attentive reflection on such unselfing may lead us to be better able to more accurately delineate the contours of the self, and therefore to be in a better position both to acknowledge the existence and nature of real moral norms flowing from the Good that come to

us from beyond the pale of our own phenomenological ambits (since we have concretely encountered beauty, another such norm flowing toward us from the Good), and to recognize more incisively how and where such norms might be brought to bear on ourselves.

There is, however, a gap in need of bridging between concrete acts of reading which may (or may not) lead to unselfing (along with the subsequent analysis of those acts in Lewisian terms) and fuller participation in the moral life which is paralleled by an epistemological gap between those experiences and the Good itself (as embodied in broader, non-aesthetic ethical concerns). It is therefore to bridge-building by means of introducing some of the explicit arguments and terminologies developed in relevant philosophical and humanistic discussions and debates on ethics, the self, and freedom that we turn to now.

Theoretical Texts and Approaches

As we begin this final stage of our discussion we ought to keep in mind that we are attempting to embed in the English curriculum instruction in virtue ethics that is both implicit and explicit. In the previous two sections on pedagogy we have dealt primarily with the implicit, experiential, phenomenological elements of this enterprise; now we will turn to the more explicitly ethical side of this program. There is, no doubt, a nearly infinite variety of textual possibilities for this area of the course of study we are marking out and so I will limit myself to some provisional stabs in what I take to be the appropriate directions. I certainly hope my betters will step in to suggest more, other, and better texts.

As I mentioned earlier on, Plato's myth of the cave seems to me foundational, not only as an important philosophical touchstone, but also as an organizing metaphor for students' experiences in the class. It ought to be read and discussed early on and referenced throughout. In addition, it seems to me good that, following Murdoch's lead, we introduce students to some

other excerpts from Plato's corpus that deal with virtue and the Good. Perhaps *Republic* 508 and on, along with some selections from *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Philebus*, etc. The explanation of participation in the latter half of the *Phaedo* could also be of benefit. Discussions of these texts could move from helping students understand at a basic level the arguments being made (perhaps by using comprehension questions) to a discussion of the often difficult task of harmonizing the comments and conclusions regarding the Good made in the various dialogues. This might be approached, from a Polanyian perspective, as various and (depending on one's understanding of the totality of Plato's corpus) progressive attempts at discovering the unity of the Good, or as the record of insights gleaned by focusing our attention on various subsidiary details that tacitly integrate to give us access to the idea of the Good. Both of these characterizations help to see how Plato's multiple approaches to the Good are a concrete example of "what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us" (Murdoch 1971, 37). One point of such discussions is to make this imperceptible building up perceptible and also to guide students toward the realization that, as Murdoch says, "If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at" (1971, 40).

I think it will be useful to introduce some excerpts from Murdoch's work, specifically some or all of *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts*. Students in such a course certainly ought to read and discuss Murdoch's own descriptions of unselfing (such as the kestrel excerpt quoted above), but there are many other profitable selections that can be made. Consider, for example, what Murdoch says here:

One might at this point pause and consider the picture of human personality, or the soul, which has been emerging. It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of

the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is, the realism of compassion. What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called ‘will’ or ‘willing’ belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love. In the case of art and nature such attention is immediately rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty. In the case of morality, although there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place. Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action [...yet] explicit and immediate ‘willing’ can play some part, especially as an inhibiting factor...what should be aimed at is goodness, and not freedom or right action, although right action, and freedom in the sense of humility, are the natural products of attention to the Good” (1971, 66-67, 70 italics original).

After reading this passage students might discuss first whether they understand just what Murdoch means when she claims that “freedom is...the experience of accurate vision which...occasions action,” before they consider whether they agree with her, perhaps by attempting to think of examples, real or hypothetical, in which this definition of freedom rings true.

Students might also peruse the following passage:

If we reflect upon the nature of the virtues we are constantly led to consider their relation to each other. The idea of an ‘order’ of virtues suggests itself, although it might of course be difficult to state this in any systematic form. For instance, if we reflect upon courage and ask why we think it to be a virtue, what kind of courage is the highest, what

distinguishes courage from rashness, ferocity, self-assertion, and so on, we are bound, in our explanation, to use the names of other virtues. The best kind of courage (that which would make a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp) is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving....This may not in fact be exactly the right description, but it is the right sort of description. Whether there is a single supreme principle in the united world of the virtues, and whether the name of that principle is love, is something which I shall discuss below. All I suggest here is that reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity. (Murdoch 1971, 57)

This selection might give rise to a discussion activity in which the participants follow the reflective moves Murdoch herself makes by selecting a virtue, asking why it is that they consider it to be a virtue, and then by describing it in a fashion modeled on Murdoch's description of courage. In so doing, they would be "oscillat[ing between...] detailing and integrating," following what Polanyi calls "the royal road for deepening our understanding of any comprehensive entity" (1961, 239-240). They would also be practicing what phenomenologists call the eidetic reduction.

Discussion of such passages can help to clarify the terms of ethical debate and to see how attentiveness to oneself (in the form of meditation practices, mindfulness, the mindings collage, etc.) and to beauty in works of art and literature (clarified through the application of Lewis's literary vocabulary) can be steps taken toward leading a more ethical life. They also lead us into other, related philosophical debates (the nature of freedom, the Kantian conception of the will, competing ethical theories) that ought to be broached with students.

Taking as its point-of-departure an analysis of Disney cartoons, Matthew Crawford's "Virtual Reality as Moral Ideal" (2015) is a fun and accessible discussion of the influence of

Kant's conception of the will (rejected by Murdoch above) on our current cultural and ethical situation (this essay is adapted from a chapter in *The World Beyond Your Head*). It can serve, alongside some of the Murdoch quotes as the basis for discussion and debate on the liberal conception of the individual, atomized will making unanalyzable choices in a field of negative liberty, a topic that might open the way to reading about different views on what constitutes freedom – positive and negative (here, in addition to the obvious choice of Irving Berlin, Polanyi's observations on positive and negative freedom in *Meaning* might be useful), as well as ancient understandings that see individual freedom as being achieved by means of virtuous self-governance.

And although this program operates on the assumptions of virtue ethics, the critical terms of all three major theories in current ethical debates should make their appearances. After all, the central aim here is to make ethics and morality themselves a central part of classroom practice, both tacitly and focally. Plato and Murdoch, perhaps buttressed by some portions of *Nicomachean Ethics* are fair representatives of virtue ethics. Kant on the categorical imperative and John Stuart Mill on utilitarianism might serve as entry points into deontological and consequentialist positions, respectively. Whichever representative texts are selected, students should be given the opportunity to become familiar with the general contours of ethics as formally debated by philosophers, even as they continue to enact a post-critical and phenomenologically-oriented Murdochian program of literary virtue ethics elsewhere in the curriculum.

Conclusion

My goal in this paper has been to envision a sort of practical moral education that dances within and around the study of literature in the English classroom and that coheres with the post-

critical project laid out by Michael Polanyi. The thread that unites its constituent parts is attentiveness. As an ethics of attention, its natural opening is attention to and reflection on the phenomenal experience of the self, explicit awareness of which opens the way toward a richer experience of unselfing through the beauty inherent in art and literature, which is taken as an intimation of the Good. Attention in the context of these aesthetic experiences is refined and enriched by the introduction of some of C.S. Lewis's literary vocabulary. In addition to these activities, this approach attempts to initiate students into relevant theoretical and philosophical debates. All the while its aim is to make them more attentive to themselves (including their own limitations), their experience of the literary texts they read, the texts themselves, and, all the while, the universally human "*task* [of coming] to see the world as it is" (Murdoch 1971, 91 *italics original*). All this is done in the hope that

...if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. This does not imply that we are not free, certainly not. But it implies that the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial" (Murdoch 1971, 37).

The idea is to make good use of that crucial time between explicit moral choices, and any degree of success in such a project, however halting and small, will be a step towards an answer to Patrick Deneen's call for "better practices" that contribute to the "comprehensive formation and

education of individuals and citizens in the art and virtue of self-rule” (2018, 197, 37), a move likely to appeal not only to those interested in developing humane post-liberal possibilities, but also to those liberals, right and left, who feel that current forms of liberalism are going radically, morally astray. And while the prospects for widespread adoption and success may seem remote, I’ve always preferred to fight on the side of the gods, rather than the giants.

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