

Post-Critical Platonism: Preliminary Meditations on Ethics and Aesthetics in Iris Murdoch and Michael Polanyi



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ABSTRACT

This article explores intriguing resonances in the work of Michael Polanyi and Iris Murdoch, touching on ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology, as well as Murdoch's literary output. In so doing, it begins to outline a phenomenological approach to Platonist virtue ethics informed by Murdoch's work and drawing heavily on Polanyi's post-critical epistemology; it also gestures toward how such an approach might be applied in the classroom.

Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of the Good* argues that training and practice of attention in its various disciplinary forms (but especially as oriented toward beauty as found in nature and art) is not only a form of moral training, but also itself constitutes concrete moral action. Intriguingly, her descriptions of "progressive attempt[s] to see a particular object clearly" (Murdoch 1971, 23) are nearly identical to Polanyi's explanations of the heuristics of discovery:

If I am learning...Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of

me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. *Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.* The honesty and humility required of the student...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... [thus] *studying is normally an exercise of virtue as well as of talent and shows us a fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world* (Murdoch 1971, 89; emphasis added).

This description closely parallels Polanyi's analysis of the process of discovery, highlighting beautifully the heuristic passion that sparks our curiosity and drives us "to commit [ourselves] to the belief that [we] can fill in...gap[s in our knowledge] and make...new contact with reality" (*KB*, 194).

My aim here is to explore philosophical resonances and affinities between Polanyi's ethically motivated epistemology and Murdoch's Platonism, with its focus on attentiveness. Taken together, the two approaches affirm that an appreciation of the beauty of reality and the passion it motivates can lead us to scientific as well as moral knowledge. While in the future I hope to use this discussion as a springboard into an exploration of how Polanyi's and Murdoch's insights might be combined into a concrete, coherent, and widely communicable post-critical approach to teaching ethics, my main concern here is to begin to explore what I see as a potentially fruitful interplay between Murdoch and Polanyi in areas of ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology, with an emphasis on Murdoch's literary as well as her philosophical output.

In one sense, the existence of mutually-reinforcing contributions from and between Murdoch and Polanyi is unsurprising. After all, their shared belief in the urgent need for "a deep-seated philosophical reform...that would radically alter prevailing conceptions" about knowledge, human identity and agency, and culture (*KB*, ix) led them to participate in the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity in the 1960s. Yet while some scholars have cited both thinkers (see, e.g., Innis 2004; Waugh 2012; Crawford 2015), I have seen no scholarship on the ways in which their work is directly complementary.

Both thinkers emphasize the importance of making contact with what Matthew Crawford (2015) has called "the reality beyond [one's] head," whether that reality be a language, *Moby Dick*, some knotty problem of quantum physics, or the proper response to an ethical dilemma. Such contact will necessarily involve sustained heuristic attention to the organizing principle of a constellation of details which have not yet been grasped as a coherently integrated whole. This attention, far from being mechanistic in nature, is motivated by *love* or *passion*. So much will no doubt be readily apparent to those well-versed in Polyanian epistemology, and such reverberations will make other

similarities less than surprising. To wit, to Polanyi's well-known aphorism, "we know more than we can say" (*TD*, 4), Murdoch adds that "where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*" (Murdoch 1971, 31; emphasis in original), a remark which affirms not only the tacit dimension of moral knowledge, but also the way attentiveness to questions of virtue and interpersonal relations is critical for the development of *phronesis*.

Yet more unites these two than their interest in the skilled attention that constitutes much of knowledge. For while Polanyi is principally thought of as an epistemologist, the concerns over the erosion of various sorts of liberty that drew him from science to philosophy are ultimately moral in nature; he makes his defense of the ethical life by reconstructing the epistemological foundations that would allow for the possibility of ethical knowledge. One of his most pressing concerns is the moral inversion that results from the loss of the justification of meaning flowing from modernity's scientism. Polanyi's epistemology is aimed at attacking and supplanting this scientism in order to restore the full scope of human meaning (including morality and ethics) as rationally intelligible to modern and post-modern humanity: "To produce, in a manner akin to art, a new moving vision of the world, imaginatively richer in the scope of its integration of disparate parts than those we have heretofore been offered by our scientific myth-makers" (*M*, 107).

Murdoch's proposals for a theory and practice of virtue ethics similarly aim at revitalizing or replacing reductive outlooks by opening up space for serious consideration of virtue and the Good. She, like Plato, "assumes the internal relation of value, truth, cognition. Virtue...involves a desire for and achievement of truth instead of falsehood, reality instead of appearance... '*Getting things right, as in meticulous grammar or mathematics, is truth-seeking as virtue. Learning anything properly demands (virtuous) attention*'" (Murdoch 1993, 39; emphasis added).

She wishes to flesh out the unity of the Good, a unity that is not perfectly articulable, but which we may nevertheless approach by means of our own phenomenal, eidetic experience. She here specifies some subsidiary details that serve as clues in a from/to sense leading to the discovery of the tacitly integrated Gestalt, affirming thereby that "to dedicate one's life to theoretic interests presupposes the virtue of *phronesis*" (Gadamer 1993, 111). She also aims to make recommendations as to how we might enact a practice of virtue ethics and approach the Good under our current cultural conditions by means of the unselfing (a term borrowed from Buddhist practice) achieved through proper attention to art and nature (Murdoch 1971), as well as the development and practice of demythologized religion (Murdoch 1993).

Her project thus fits into Polanyi's desire for cultural shifts designed to alleviate and overcome the instabilities inherent in modernity and liberalism which for both thinkers will require an openness to metaphysics.

Metaphysics and Phenomena

In addition to emphasizing the importance of passionate and personal attention to external reality, both philosophers also affirm that the structure of more obviously tangible acts of skilled knowing can act as patterns and clues to the structure of more abstract acts of skilled knowledge, such as those found in ethical life. As we will see later, Murdoch develops this shared terrain by emphasizing the role of our attraction to beauty in art as an intermediary between physical tangibility and abstract ethical reasoning which serves as an important element in the pursuit of a moral life. In addressing these common concerns, both thinkers take as their points-of-departure acts of skilled knowing that nearly all readers will recognize (bicycle riding, describing the face of a loved one, the momentary transport out of one's problems upon the experience of beauty, etc.) which they then analyze *without the intent to debunk but rather to affirm*. In this sense, "the ordinary way is the way" (Murdoch 1993, 509). This concurrence on issues of attention to surrounding phenomena loosely amount to a sort of experiential or phenomenological evidence for realist, non-materialist metaphysics. Thus, Polanyi recommends a "passionate recognition of a metaphysical reality, irreducible to material elements" (Murdoch 1975, 24) while Murdoch affirms "there exists a moral reality, a real though infinitely distant standard" (Murdoch 1971, 31). Both thus radically affirm the evidential standing of everyday phenomenal experience for metaphysical judgments.

Polanyi's and Murdoch's approaches to ontology *vis-à-vis* ordinary experience is in important respects similar to the eidetic reduction in the phenomenological tradition (e.g., Descartes's famous consideration of wax). By way of example, consider that Murdoch's explorations of the good tend to unfold eidetically, paring away intuitively in order to get at the essence of some phenomenon, as seen in her analysis of courage: "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...we are bound...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...be exactly the right description, but it is the right sort of description" (Murdoch 1971, 57).

Similarly, Polanyi's approach to developing his post-critical epistemology takes actual, embodied, acts of knowing and analyzes them eidetically in order to arrive at a more adequate description of the essence of knowledge. Indeed, this might be taken as an extension of his training as a scientist: he is working to carefully examine what reality has laid before him, whether it be a quartz crystal or our noetic structure. In this sense the principles and techniques of good science and good phenomenology are one and the same.

Husserl points out that “eidetic seeing holds no more difficulties or ‘mystical’ secrets than does perception” (Husserl 2002, 272). This gentle chiding of the mystical falls neatly in with the general current of Enlightenment disenchantment, but the tables can quite easily be turned: if the phenomenal is already the metaphysical due to its existential import for the subject, then the correspondence of eidetic seeing with simple perception can be read as pointing to the primordially mystical nature of perception, placing us squarely within the Platonic/Aristotelian stance of wonder before the fittedness of world and mind as the beginning of true philosophy.

Such Hellenic wonder (with its concomitant appreciation of beauty as a source of moral awareness) is, alas, not our general cultural backdrop, not least in the world of education. What we see are rather “mechanistic methods of inquiry” which have “divorced our academic pursuits from...moral issues and made them merely ‘academic’,” leading many to “suspect our own moral motives, and [silence] our...best impulses,” potentially driving us toward “destructive forms of moral expression” by laying “the groundwork for nihilism” (*M*, 23).

One form of such destructive moral expression is overt violence, but another is a sort of apathetic moral impotence that creates a vacuum into which step individuals and institutions that control us to varying extents. Or, to invoke John Milbank’s rather salty formulation, “in a world where theoretically we don’t have a hierarchy, what we [really] have is a hierarchy of total shits” (2012).

Part of any possible solution (Sisyphean though it may be) will have to address the educational disjunct described above by Polanyi. Murdoch offers a fair few one-offs about how educators might properly take steps to close this moral gap. To wit, “what should be taught in schools: to attend and get things right” (Murdoch 1993, 179). Or, the “considerations which must be fundamentally important in education [are that] a good teacher teaches accuracy and truth. The importance of *getting things right*” (ibid., 399; emphasis in the original). Or again, but stepwise toward a more concrete pedagogy: “Every child should be taught not only how to paint but how to *look at paintings*” (ibid., 329; emphasis in the original).

Art and Morality: Looking at Paintings and Literature

This last comment about looking at paintings taps back into an important insight mentioned earlier, namely, that to attend carefully to something beyond oneself is itself an ethical act and that art, with its potential for beauty, is a deeply moral human concern. Let us allow Murdoch herself, then, to develop her view that skilled, disciplinary practice marked by passionate attentiveness is a form of participation in the life of virtue in the context of aesthetics. She argues that

Art...is not...a side-issue, it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*...

An understanding of any art involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority...evident degrees of merit...heights and distances; even Shakespeare is not perfect. Good art, unlike bad art...is something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness. We surrender ourselves to its *authority* with a love which is unpossessive and unselfish (Murdoch 1971, 87-88; emphasis in the original).

This external authority can be exercised by good art in Murdoch's view because she, like Plato and Polanyi, "assumes the internal relation of value, truth, cognition [and that therefore] learning anything properly demands (virtuous) attention (Murdoch 1993, 39). Thus, "When we use...art as a clue, we may be able to learn more about the central area of morality [by examining] what are essentially the same concepts more simply on display elsewhere" (Murdoch 1971, 89). Attentiveness to art is therefore an "exercise of *detachment*" since "great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being...appropriated into the greedy organism of the self" (Murdoch 1971, 65).

Murdoch often refers to this ongoing attempt to go beyond the confines of the self, to escape from Plato's mythic cave, and to make contact with reality as *unselfing*, and she takes it as axiomatic (in contrast to Lockean and Kantian liberals) that "the good life becomes increasingly selfless through an increased awareness of, [and] sensibility to, the world beyond the self" (Murdoch 1993, 53). Such unselfing, tantamount to fuller participation in the good life, takes place significantly (though not exclusively, and only partially) through our experience of beauty.

Polanyi, I think, would likely agree, holding that "intellectual beauty...is a token of its contact with reality" (Polanyi 1962, 145). "But what, precisely, is beauty?" inquire the post-structuralist and other sceptics. Murdoch's reply is that beauty is not precise in the critical sense at all, but is rather "the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the...experience and change of consciousness" (Murdoch 1971, 84). This is one example of how Murdoch affirms that the "'essences' grasped in eidetic seeing can be fixed in definitive concepts... and thereby provide possibilities for definitive and, in their way, objectively and absolutely valid statements" (Husserl 2002, 272). The fact such statements will not be able to articulate the concepts without remainder is of little concern to her since she, like Polanyi, does not see such critical articulation as a prerequisite for knowledge.

I take this account to be fundamentally correct, and while I acknowledge that for many Murdoch's assumptions may seem highly problematic, I do not plan to argue these points here. Murdoch has herself done a more admirable job of that than I could hope to. Yet given the important role art plays in Murdoch's ethical understanding, it seems appropriate to devote some attention to her own artistic production as a novelist in light of her view that "philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and

truth-revealing activities” (Murdoch 1999, 11) that “construct...forms out of what might otherwise seem a mass of senseless rubble” (ibid., 7).

Murdoch’s Novels and Unselfing

What, then, does literary art’s truth-seeking and form-construction offer that goes beyond philosophy’s more abstract yet transparent clarification and explanation? It helps us to “imagine that which we know” (Murdoch 1999, 170, quoting T.S. Eliot), by which Murdoch means that it rounds out, shades, and concretizes the abstractions in which philosophy deals. In so doing it can shed additional light on many of the issues philosophy touches upon by getting down into the weeds, where devilish and difficult details are often found.

Murdoch’s own dialogue-driven novels are excellent examples of how this can take place. In *The Sea, The Sea*, Charles Arrowby, an aging playwright, retires after a successful career to a cottage on the sea to write his memoirs, “repent of egoism,” and “learn to be good” (Murdoch 2001, 2-3). The language used early on in the novel is evocative of monks and mystics meditatively pursuing virtue. A central theme, then, is unselfing and the pursuit of the Good, but the idealized image of Charles as an urbane Desert Father, fleeing the superficialities of the London scene to perform rites of purification, is soon in tatters. For Hartley, the only woman Charles ever truly loved (and who refused him marriage), lives with her husband in the nearby village. Charles’s desire for goodness becomes a renewed desire to be with his lost love, and a villainous obsession with breaking up her marriage is born.

The Sea, the Sea, then, provides a concrete example of the difficulties of transforming one’s consciousness for the better. It shows how easily counterfeits for love and the Good can be mistaken for the real thing and how far and how quickly things can run seriously awry. Charles’s idealization of his early, sexually-innocent relationship with Hartley quickly becomes a false stand-in for the Good, eclipsing all else. The real, elderly Hartley is vastly different from Charles’s idealized concept. He simplistically rationalizes that this is the result of her unhappy marriage, a characterization which justifies his abhorrent, even criminal, treatment of her: At one point, Charles goes so far as to lure Hartley to his home and hold her against her will in order to provoke a terminal marital crisis.

The novel is thus a truth-revealing cautionary tale to be taken alongside Murdoch’s more explicit ethical arguments. Yes, we do need to unself, but no, it will not be easy (try and see). How might we proceed? Cultivating attentiveness to the realities around us is one important element, but we also need to develop the moral and aesthetic *phronesis* necessary to select proper objects for our attentive powers and to draw appropriate conclusions based on *imagination*, which for Murdoch “reveals...[and] explains” (Murdoch 1999, 18), rather than *fantasy*, which is the “proliferation of blinding

self-centred aims and images” (Murdoch 1971, 66). Consider that Charles’s powers of attention are astonishing—yet they are, for much of the tale, completely misspent, guided by his deluded fantasy of marrying Hartley.

Again, then, how does one develop such practical moral wisdom? For Murdoch the process is long and continuous, for “the moral life...goes on continually.” It is not “switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial” (Murdoch 1971, 37). Is it then too late, after 60 years of egoistic living, for Charles to develop such wisdom? Not completely, for the novel ends with a somewhat wiser, partially chastened Charles leading a quiet life in London. His closing observations, fairer and more charitable to others, do indicate an increased “interest [in] seeing the real” (Murdoch 1971, 66), yet this newfound wisdom comes too late to avoid many terrible choices. Tellingly, though, the language used for some of Charles’s final reflections on this matter is identical to that of Murdoch’s philosophy: he admits to being a “fantasist,” of having tried to replace reality with a “dream text.” He reflects, “Hartley had been right when she said of our love that it was not part of the real world” (Murdoch 2001, 493). Here Charles accepts that real love involves the “imaginative recognition of...[and] respect for...the being of others” (Murdoch 1999, 216).

Charles does make some moral progress, then, but late in life and having done real damage to himself and others. In another of Murdoch’s novels, *The Good Apprentice*, Stuart Cuno, a young man who has declared himself celibate and abandoned a stellar career as a mathematician in order to become and do good, begins much earlier in life to seek moral wisdom. The youth, however, struggles in the discernment of how best to do this, and his early attempts often go awry, angering and antagonizing those he means to benefit. Yet the final pages of the novel find Stuart revealing increasing *phronesis*: he begins to work out how he might more effectively pursue the Good, proposing to devote himself to others by becoming a teacher and headmaster for young children, arguing that “thinking and morality...must be got right at the start...you can teach language and literature and how to use words so as to think. And you can teach moral values...meditation—what used to be called prayer, and give [students] an idea of what goodness is and how to love it” (Murdoch 1986, 520). Stuart’s problem has been that though he is awake and attentive to the Good, he does not know how to love it—thus the ham-fistedness of many of his early attempts to pursue virtue. His refined sense of purpose, however, indicates his imaginative improvement on this front, though potential pitfalls remain.

His father, Harry, for instance, objects to the new plan: “Stuart, you’ve opted for power, after all...you’re a power maniac” (ibid.). While Harry’s quasi-Nietzschean skepticism gives short shrift to the real love of Good embodied in the plan, Stuart himself acknowledges the potential for power-mongering, responding, “Of course the problem

is how to do it...The whole problem is in that. I'll have to learn. And meanwhile, I'm going to do some voluntary work" (ibid.). We thus see Stuart's growing Socratic self-knowledge—awareness of his limits and the humility and critical discernment that allow him to learn, even from critiques constituted by half-truths. He is increasingly exercising his imagination to fruitfully navigate reality, rather than engaging in fantasy.

Taken together, the examples of Charles Arrowby and Stuart Cuno show how Murdoch's novels complement her philosophy by imaginatively embodying philosophical abstractions in fictional form. The foregoing analysis has primarily focused on plot content and character development as non-technical guides to moral reflection (what C.S. Lewis would call the *logos* of the work; see Lewis 2012, 132). This is demonstrative of one aspect of Murdoch's conception of literature as truth-seeking and revealing. Yet there is another important element in her view of literature, namely, its existence as an aesthetic object (or *poeima*, in Lewis's lexicon; ibid.), in which role it has the potential to serve as a point of access to beauty and therefore as a direct aid to unselfing, as does the kestrel in Murdoch's classic example:

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 [or art] in order to clear our minds of selfish care (Murdoch 1971, 84).

Interestingly, the beauty of birds intervene in two separate instances of particularly difficult and emotional interpersonal interactions in *The Good Apprentice*, providing additional points of reference with which to thicken our understanding of how unselfing through beauty in nature or art (taken as *poeima*) might unfold. In the first example, admiration of a kingfisher cavorting over a stream allows Edward and Brownie to begin to converse. The moment is tense, as Edward has unintentionally killed Brownie's brother, Mark, by giving him a hallucinogen as a joke, leading to Mark's deadly, drug-addled leap out a window. Both Edward and Brownie's lives have been ripped apart by this tragedy, and both feel a deep need to speak, but are not sure how to begin amidst such intense feelings of guilt, hatred (of self and other), and incredulity. They meet in a wood and silently watch the beautiful activity of the bird. "There's a kingfisher," remarks Brownie, simply (Murdoch 1986, 226).

The second occurrence interrupts a scene in which Thomas confronts his closest friend, Harry (Stuart's father), who has been sleeping with Thomas's wife. The meeting

is so rancorous that Harry is (wrongly) accusing Thomas of rummaging in his desk for a pistol, when suddenly a “providential...robin” flies into the study through an open window (Murdoch 1986, 429). Both men are immediately distracted by the unexpected appearance of the beautiful, fragile bird, and, in a moment of unprovoked love for the robin, begin to work together to help it escape unharmed. When they succeed, Harry leaves, and the two men do no further emotional harm to one another.

In both cases the birds intervene in difficult situations, serving as external points of reference whose undeniable beauty and reality break the centripetal nature of the focus of the characters. The result is an opportunity for simultaneous unselfing and an experience of unity in the midst of divisive emotional circumstances, thus opening a space in which common cause may be found. This is no simplistic salvation narrative, for the moment of unselfing is not a magical wiping clean of the slate. Real harm remains and must be dealt with. What we see in both cases is rather that beauty’s undeniable intrusion from without has served to break the spell cast by fantasy.

Conclusion

My project here is to begin staking out a phenomenological approach to Platonist virtue ethics informed by Iris Murdoch’s work and drawing heavily on Michael Polanyi’s post-critical epistemology. Such an approach might act as a catalyst for making experiential connections between beauty, passion, and truth across a range of human experience—linking appreciation of beauty with knowledge in the areas of science and morality. This suggests the development of a pedagogy focused explicitly on the experience of aesthetic phenomena as a point of entry into virtue, beginning with the recognition of beauty and moving stepwise towards more robust participation in the moral life. Murdoch’s philosophical insight serves as the ethical springboard, while her literary contributions help us to see how art functions in the development of *phronesis*. Meanwhile, Polanyi provides the epistemological grounding *vis-à-vis* his personalist theory of tacit knowledge. Such a program would therefore be grounded in the sort of post-critical Platonism that Murdoch, interpreted through a Polanyian lens, begins to unveil.

Such a program will also serve as the basis for some sketches of possible pedagogical moves which take as their starting point Murdoch’s admonition that students ought to be taught to look at paintings and get them right. What would such an approach entail? The following are some preliminary gestures in what I hope is the right direction.

First, such a popular, post-critical ethical and aesthetic pedagogy would aim to cultivate explicitly in students the sort of virtuous attention that Murdoch, along with Polanyi, practices and analyzes, both in literature and philosophy. While many school-children may not spend as much time as Murdoch would have liked looking at pictures

and getting them right, nearly all students in the Anglo-American world spend a fair amount of time looking at literary texts. This means that, institutionally speaking, the cultivation of virtuous attention might be most easily communicated and widely disseminated by embedding in the English curriculum a post-critical approach to literary culture that makes explicit, wherever possible, the moral dimension of attentiveness and getting things right.

The post-critical pedagogue working in such a vein would seek to inculcate attentiveness at a variety of levels, beginning with the more detailed, first-person phenomenal awareness students experience as subjects (perhaps by introducing simple meditative and phenomenological practices) and extending and connecting such enhanced cognizance to rigorous, disciplinarily-focused attention to literature and art. In connecting these two spheres of attention, she 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 art as well as their process of literary indwelling (here I anticipate the usefulness of C.S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* as well as Polanyi's epistemology). The idea would be to help students *self* themselves through the phenomenological and meditative work so that they can be appropriately *unselfed*. Finally, the moral dimension of such attentiveness would need to be addressed explicitly (by reading and discussing philosophical ethics with an emphasis on virtue ethics).

For now, these are but threadbare sketches, yet I hope they might serve as a promissory charting-out of a course towards an ontologically satisfying and widely-communicable post-critical humanism, achievable by the merging of Murdoch's phenomenologically attentive Platonism with Polanyi's epistemological insight into the heuristics of discovery.

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