

Murdoch on ethical formation in a changing world

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Abstract (250)

In the past few years, we have seen emerging new work that focalizes the role of historical change and its moral implications in Iris Murdoch's philosophy. This paper strengthens this reading of her work and investigates the implications of this aspect of Murdoch's thinking for education in general and for moral education in particular. It resituates the Platonic imagery of the individual's ascent towards the true and the good in a frame where our conceptions of the true and the good are in a process of historical reconfiguration.

Keywords

Iris Murdoch, education, historicity, moral change, conceptual change

Two dimensions of change in Murdoch's moral philosophy

It is hardly surprising that Murdoch's work has caught the interest of philosophers of education and Murdochians have found it natural to give a central place to questions of learning and formation (see e.g. Bakhurst 2021, Jamieson 2020, Olsson 2018, Lavery 2007). Her whole oeuvre is, in contrast to much of the work of her contemporaries, built around the idea of morality as matter of development and learning, and she considers this moral learning as complexly intertwined with other forms of learning: of coming to see the world, and the people and things in it, in a richer, more perceptive, more complex manner.

The "platonic" image of the individual striving to emerge from the cave to perceive truth and goodness has in the early reception of Murdoch's work been identified as the beating heart of her moral philosophy, pumping blood into the outmost reaches of her multilimbed intellectual endeavor (Antonaccio 2000, Widdows 2005). The components of this ethics of striving and learning are familiar to anyone even superficially acquainted with her moral philosophical work. From the early essays on we have her insistence, against her contemporaries in moral philosophy, that ethics is as much about vision as about choice, about perceptiveness and understanding as about the will. After rediscovering Plato through Simone Weil in the 50's these themes come to expression through her reading of the Cave,

which she considers an “extremely rich metaphor” (1997, p. 379) for the purposes of moral philosophy.

Weil’s notions of *attention* and *unselfing*, become for Murdoch key terms for talking about a good state of moral consciousness; an issue that has, in her view, been neglected in secular moral thought. In *unselfing*, as Murdoch presents it, one attends to the world in a mode of waiting (the French *attendre*: to wait) and allows the world and the people in it to come forth, not pressing one’s will or personality on it and them. This is a practice of putting self-centered, willful impulses to rest, in order to overcome the fantasies and projections that cloud our true appreciation of the world and the people in it. The emergence from the cave is for her, as for Weil, an apt image of this. In contrast to Weil, however, whose use of the language and imagery of *unselfing* is distinctively religious (Larson 2009, Hämäläinen 2019), Murdoch traces what she sees as a human universal, our constitutive relationship to “the good”, or to moral goodness. *Unselfing*, in this sense, is no mean feat, but it can in Murdoch’s view be learned through practice, and such practices should be cherished as a part of our moral tradition and made available for all, also, and perhaps especially, in secular settings where such work on attention may have been left behind in tandem with practices of worship. She observes that the waning of prayer has left people with a lack of means to practice this side of moral life. But the loss is not irreparable: “The loss of prayer, through the loss of belief in God, is a great loss. However, a *general* answer is a practice of meditation: a withdrawal, through some disciplined quietness, into the great chamber of the soul. Just sitting quiet will help. Teach it to children.” (1992, p. 73) When thinking about moral strivings, experiences of ordinary learning offer exemplary points of comparison. Learning a complex skill, such as new language, works for her as an example of a form of *askesis* that lift its practitioner out of their self-centered concerns, and thus can be an apt image of and also tool for moral development. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 373)

There is tremendous philosophical energy and fondness in these aspects of Murdoch’s work, and she would most likely have delighted in finding these emphases in the reception of her work, given that they stand in such contrast to much of what she found lamentable in the philosophical concerns of her contemporaries. Nevertheless, they give a somewhat limited idea of her thinking on learning and moral formation because they paint the picture of an essentially ahistorical being, whose main or even sole temporality is that of her own life, seen as a quest for transformative and deepened understanding of truths that are universal and thus essentially there from the start. This is just one side of how the transformations of moral understandings appear in Murdoch’s work. There is also, alongside

it, a continuous commentary on the malleability and change of the social and historical conditions under which people live their lives, pursue their understandings of the good and reshape both their individual and more widely shared conceptions while they go along. Something of this duality is captured in the catchy formulation at the beginning of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: “the ‘everyday outlook’ or ‘natural standpoint’ undergoes historical change. How much it changes many voices tell us now. How little it changes can be learnt from reading Homer.” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 2) It is very easy to read this passage with an emphasis on “how little”, pointing to our capacity to engage the ethical experience of people of the past, and thus to the negligibility of societal change and transhistorical differences in the realm of ethics. But Murdoch herself is vigilant about the changes that many voices tell us about, and she has interesting things to say about them.

Tracing the history sensitive Murdoch

One concentration of such sayings is the chapter 12 of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* titled “Morals and Politics”, where she discusses her notion of “axioms”: the key term for her late – original though somewhat cursory – thinking about ethics in the political realm. Here she observes that

(t)he triumph of good causes partly depends on people, at some point, becoming ashamed of saying certain things. (For instance of making anti-Semitic remarks or talking about women in certain ways.) The machinery of the decent state is continually serviced by an atmosphere of moral good will and high ideals which is essential to its survival. This thoroughly mixed-up continually changing atmosphere is kept fresh by innumerable lively moralists, not least artists (especially writers) and their clients.

(1992, p. 358)

This remark resonates with Richard Rorty’s (1997, pp. 80-83) observation that liberal thought has managed to make certain forms of verbal cruelty to vulnerable groups less common and less accepted in the public sphere. It also resonates with the current debates where right wing commentators seek to secure their right to use derogatory expressions in the public sphere with reference to the freedom of speech. Murdoch sees the presence of “moralists” – that is, artists and intellectuals with a keen and imaginative moral sense and normative appetites – as an essential aspect of civilized society, taking care of its capacity for ethical self-renewal and collective learning.

The above remark relates both to conceptual change and the kinds change in conceptions of common decency that also reflect alterations in power relations. It might be tempting to gloss such alterations of moral concepts and conceptions as instances of “moral progress” along the lines of universal principles or of a universal good. But Murdoch is keenly aware of the complexity of societal changes that alter people’s moral frameworks and points of orientation, and their irreducibility to prior conceptions or generalizing accounts: “Vast complex unplanned changes reveal new vistas and prompt new moral judgments; and of course some of the machinery of this change can be (variously explained), even controlled. But there is no prior or fundamental metaphysical or scientific system which radically explains it all or provides its general justifications.” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 367) Historical, social, conceptual changes make genuinely new ethical possibilities available to us. It is better to try to understand them, in their complexities, rather than playing the traditional philosophical games of overarching explanations or justifications. “Metaphysics” or philosophical theory should not be used to offer bogus explanatory general justifications that paint over the complexities of lived changing moral understandings.

Acknowledging change has implications for how we relate ethically to people past and present: “We ‘forgive’ people in the remoter past because we can (we think) see more clearly the limitations of their situation, whereas we cannot see our own limitations so clearly, and, being still alive and free, do not readily accept the idea of being conditioned.” (Murdoch, 1992, 389) We do not “readily accept the idea”, the implication being that we are conditioned none-the-less. Conditioned means not only limited by the precepts of our time but also enabled by its affordances: time, surrounding society, generally shared conceptions, make ethical possibilities available and salient to us. We are in important respects children of our times and places.

The above remarks are prompted by Murdoch’s attention to ethics in the public sphere, which is in her view by necessity governed by a different register of moral thought than the more intimate personal strivings evoked by the cave metaphor, unselfing, and so on. In liberal democracy its predominant feature are slogan-like “axioms” “(life liberty and the pursuit of happiness)” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 493) that constitute collective ideals while also marking the boundaries of what people can acceptably do to each other. These axioms are historically contingent and changing. Yet, they are so not in contrast to, but in conversation with the rest of our values, moral conceptions, and concepts.

In the chapter on morals and politics from which the above remarks are derived, Murdoch is also centrally concerned with the singularity of persons and how different people,

as moral individuals, experience and realize the affordances of their political and ethical present in different ways. But the singularity of our quests and strivings cannot be understood in isolation from what surrounds them. Individual consciousness is socio-historically situated: available concepts, practices, roles, notions of personhood, and duty profiles change. It is perhaps a sign of the times, living in the midst of ‘linguistic philosophy’, that Murdoch often engages these issues by highlighting precisely *concepts* rather than those other building blocks of a social and historical situation. But what she wants to draw our attention to here is the whole complex, multifaceted world where a multitude of moral concepts have their places and roles, a task often in her view neglected by her linguistically oriented peers: “the main task is the task on which moral philosophy is in fact engaged – the analysis of contemporary moral concepts, through moral language. I have suggested that this task has been too narrowly conceived. We have not considered the great *variety* of the concepts that make up a morality.” (“Metaphysics and Ethics” [1957], 1997, p. 73)

A critique of what she thinks is a misguided search for unity is already present in her essay “Vision and Choice in Morality”: “Philosophers have been misled, not only by a rationalistic desire for unity, but also by certain simplified and generalized moral attitudes current in our society, into seeking a single philosophical definition of morality.” (1997[1956], p. 97) She continues that

(i)f, however, we go back again to the data we see that there are fundamentally different moral pictures which different individuals use at different times or which the same individual may use at different times. Why should philosophy be less various, where the differences in what it attempts to analyse are so important? Wittgenstein says that ‘What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*’ For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form. (ibid.)

This juxtaposition of variety and false philosophical unity is familiar to any reader of Murdoch, but the reference to “forms of life” needs to be given appropriate weight. It is not as if human singularity somehow grants each of us our very own moral form of life. We are rather – as singular, irreducibly different individuals with significant interior lives – raised in and formed by shared forms of life that steer our attention, and afford us with the concepts, rules, images and metaphors by which we orient ourselves in a world of other people. To make it more complicated, these forms of life undergo change: modernity has been a great

devourer of previous moral certainties and brought the freedom of persons to the forefront of our moral consciousness.

What happens then to the transcendent good? We remember here that Murdoch's Good is essentially undefined in terms of concrete ideals or values. This is not just because human individuals are fallible in relation to the true value of named and defined aims or goals, but because the surroundings in which we strive to goodness change, making different things plausible candidates for goodness. The Christ figures and selfless "aunts" scattered throughout Murdoch's philosophy and fiction, and presented as ideals of ethical attentiveness and selflessness, are placeholders: we need to understand how they may instantiate certain transcending ideals, but need not accept them as ideal for our own purposes. Lovibond has criticized Murdoch's work for idealizing selflessness in manners that subvert feminist causes. While the details of this critique warrant caution (see e.g. Hämäläinen 2015b) I also think Murdoch would have agreed that a continuous critical evaluation of ideas and images of goodness (such as Lovibond is involved in) is a central aspect of the task of "moralists" in holding our shared ideals up to scrutiny.

We need not only to understand ourselves as individuals striving to the "good". We need to see ourselves as striving toward the "good" while knowing that the communal standards by which we seek to identify it, and judge ourselves and each other, are also undergoing change. Our personal quest for moral transformation is embedded in the social transformation of shared moral conceptions, standards, judgments, meanings and ways of making sense. The terms by which we were taught to recognize and name the good alter in several areas during a lifetime, bringing new considerations to the table and making old standards outmoded. Gender roles, sexual orientations, ways of depicting and talking about those who are not "us", our responsibilities in relation to the environment are just the perhaps most obvious and salient ones for anyone leading a broadly western middle-class life today. To be faithful to what is vibrant and productive in Murdoch's work, we need to look at this double process of people changing and developing in a world of issues, values and matters of concern that are also changing.

The state of current scholarship

When the temporality of ethics is addressed in scholarship on Murdoch it often boils down to the temporality of the learning, developing individual, deflecting from the historical situatedness of such individuals. In two papers written for a symposium on the 50th anniversary of Murdoch's short but influential book *The Sovereignty of Good*, Rachel

Weismann and Claire MacCumhaill both use the expression “the historical individual” but mean in practice thereby the singular individual whose life has a temporal dimension of development and learning. As Weismann notes:

The historical individual, or rather the absence of the historical individual, in modern philosophy is at the centre of the three lectures collected in *The Sovereignty of Good* and at the centre of Murdoch's moral philosophy taken as a whole. Murdoch is driven by the insight, and the anxiety, that the conceptual resources available to moral philosophy are catastrophically diminished by a picture of the human individual as an isolated principle of will... (Weismann, 2020, p. 224)

MacCumhaill, in a similar spirit, draws attention to the alterations that the moral concepts of “historical individuals” undergo over a lifetime.

Concepts shift and alter—‘we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty’ (p. 29). Words may mislead here; ‘words are often stable while concepts alter’ (p. 29). Concepts deepen. They acquire structure over time, their interrelations shift and ramify but always in ways that are personal. This is because concepts that historical individuals have – and express in thought and action – only acquire structure in the context of the progressing life of a person. (MacCumhaill, 2020, p. 235)

Thus, she continues, “the full extent of what courage is for me and means to me will depend on the historical individual I am and the life I have led.” (Ibid.) The latter formulation is wide open to the challenge that conceptual change is not merely a matter of the particular life I lead, but a matter of the social and, in a broader sense historical life I am immersed in. But MacCumhaill’s account recoils from any systematic attention to this, and revisits instead Murdoch’s relation to Wittgenstein and the question of a private language, a discussion tilted toward the complexities of the inner rather than the outer, societal conditions of meaning. She quotes Murdoch’s emphasis on ‘an individual living in time’, but stays with questions pertaining to the individual temporality of a life, rather than the collective temporalities of the conditions (linguistic, institutional, social) that make individual lives possible and endow them with shareable human meanings. And thus the “historical individual” ends up being not so very historical at all.

This is business as usual: attention to the historically sensitive aspects of Murdoch has been relatively scarce in the scholarship on her work and is mainly found in philosophers who have some personal investment in questions of historicity and change in the realm of ethics or language. Charles Taylor's essay "Murdoch and Moral Philosophy" (Taylor 1996) is deeply resonant with this dimension of Murdoch's work (with which he is in great sympathy), but it is discussed as one part of a critique of several aspects of 20th century analytic moral philosophy, and is easily lost out of sight by readers thus inclined.

In one of my own early papers on Murdoch I note that "(w)here twentieth century analytic philosophy was essentially ahistorical and universalist, Murdoch wanted to make room for an understanding of the temporality and historicity of our conceptions and frameworks" (Hämäläinen, 2014, 198), failing to understand, at the time, how thoroughly this point should have been argued to make sense for most readers of Murdoch's philosophy less than a decade ago.

In Gary Browning's account of Murdoch, however, the attention to historicity takes a central role. A talk he gave on the theme of this book at the Iris Murdoch Society conference at Chichester in 2018, titled "The History Woman", stood in stark contrast to the general reception of Murdoch as interested mainly in the universal and transcendent.¹ The theme of Murdoch's historical sensitivity is omnipresent in his book: "Throughout her works, she engages with the historicity of the present and reflects upon the past from which it has emerged. ... the past is not outside the present but is internally connected to it. We are what we have become, and this process of becoming is dialectical. The past lives on in the present perspective, which has emerged from reflection on the past." (Browning, 2018, p. 3)

This centrality of "the historicity of the present for her thinking in all of its guises" is, as Browning remarks, neglected in the reception of her work. (Ibid. 4) He observes that it is, however, a central feature that unites Murdoch's philosophy and fiction: she strongly resists the notion that her novels would be expressions of philosophical ideas, but her characters are historically placed creatures, who "negotiate the world" and "respond to the challenges of modern times" (ibid. 8). He further emphasizes that her approach to metaphysics is embedded in consciousness of the changed conditions for metaphysical thought in modernity: the centrality of critical reason and experiential knowledge, the waning of the dogmatic truths of religion. As he notes "Metaphysics has to operate in the wake of the processes of demythologization that have marked the modern world." (Ibid, p. 30) "Questions

¹ See Browning 2018.

arise out of experience, and experience is necessarily present and hence historical. The questions that are posed in the modern world are different from the those that have gone before.” (p. 6) Thus, according to Browning, Murdoch believes that “(i)f metaphysics is to serve as a guide to morality, it must deal with the current historical situation.” (p. 7)

All of these concerns, highlighted by Browning, point towards the historicity of experience and the historicity of the ethical or evaluative problems and problematizations that people are faced with. This direction of attention brings Murdoch perhaps surprisingly close to the thought of Michel Foucault, who, in contrast to Murdoch, also insists that the humanistic “individual” vigorously defended by Murdoch is a historical construct, bound to make itself irrelevant through new problematizations and shifts in our ways of living and making sense.² The key contrast between them (beyond the question of the humanist individual) is perhaps the way in which Foucault is insistently descriptive and analytic in his attention to change, while Murdoch on top of strong descriptive and analytic attention wants to rethink and thereby salvage aspects of our moral heritage that she finds valuable and enriching for people facing the challenges of modern life.

Yet interestingly, this theme of historicity, though one truly neglected in the scholarship on Murdoch’s philosophy, is not flagged at the level of chapter headings of Browning’s book, which instead highlight themes that are more familiar from earlier writings on her work (Murdoch and lived experience, Murdoch and Metaphysics, etc.). So the big news in the context of exegesis is placed in the shadow of themes that are perhaps more apt to give an accessible introduction to Murdoch’s thought.

Niklas Forsberg (2013, 2018) makes a more specific contribution in this direction by elucidating Murdoch’s account of *conceptual change* and its implications for morality. He draws on the same materials in Murdoch’s work as MacCumhaill does above, to highlight the importance of attending to conceptual change: “To make the linguistic method a fruitful one, one has to find a way to bring conceptual changes (and similarities) and conceptual re-negotiations into view.” (Forsberg, 2018, p. 122) He quotes Murdoch on the topic, highlighting, how her ideal variety of “the linguistic method” differs from that of her contemporaries by taking the historicity of language seriously, not just at the level of evolving individuals, but at the level of changing historical conditions.

² This critical stance to the “humanist self” is developed by Foucault throughout his work: one accessible instantiation of it is found in his bilingual conversation with Noam Chomsky at the University of Eindhoven in 1971, later translated and published as “Human Nature: Justice Versus Power” (Foucault 1977).

(T)he notion that moral differences are conceptual (in the sense of being differences of vision) and must be studied as such is unpopular in so far as it makes impossible the reduction of ethics to logic, since it suggests that morality must, to some extent at any rate, be studied historically. This does not of course imply abandoning the linguistic method, it rather implies taking it seriously. (Murdoch 1997: 84, quoted by Forsberg 2018, p. 124)

In a review of the collection of essays (Browning 2018b) on Murdoch in which Forsberg's paper is published, David Fine notes that he "felt the collection might make its most lasting impact in terms of a word absent from its title. That word just might be history." (Fine 2019, 81) While finding traces of the turn to history in the collection as a whole, he singles out Forsberg's piece on conceptual change as the main carriers of the interest in this topic, flanked by Browning's piece, which systematically places Murdoch's life-long though neglected engagement with politics in a historical perspective.

These are very welcome openings towards a theme that perhaps should never have been left in the margin. Rather than accounting for an additional area to Murdoch's moral philosophy, it is crucial for *how to understand* her core theme of moral life as a work of self-transcendence and learning.

The persistence of the universalist key

Having read Murdoch as the "history woman", and an apt companion to such "history men" as Foucault and Taylor, I have puzzled over the absence of this historical sensitivity from the scholarship (along with a parallel absence of historicity from the reception of Wittgenstein). How then, did the 21st century reception of Murdoch lose sight of her thorough attention to the historicity of our concepts and of our very present. How did her vigilant consciousness of the historicity of moral experience get pushed to the background? If one is sensitized to Murdoch's attention to historicity it becomes increasingly hard not to read it as an integral aspect of her whole moral philosophy. But, as I observed before, those who pay attention to this strand tend to have some kind of personal intellectual investments in questions of historicity. As Murdoch observes in a journal that "in philosophy, one goes where the honey is" (Browning, 2018, p. 5).³ But the honey for different philosophers, as well as for different

³ The formulation recurs in Murdoch's manuscript on Heidegger (Browning p. 5, n. 10).

contexts and times of philosophy, can be any one of a large variety of quite different substances.

It would perhaps be fair to say that the honey for Murdoch was not, after all, in the questions of historicity. While her thought is thoroughly influenced by a keen historicity, that was never the big news for her, nor was that where she saw herself as making a needed and original contribution. We keep in mind what she said about “the natural standpoint”: “How much it changes many voices tell us now.” (Iris Murdoch, 1992, p. 2) She does not frame it as her task to tell how much it changes, because other people seem to be doing that already. Against this supposedly taken for granted panorama of change in shared understandings, she wants to bring forth other themes: not in contrast to historicity and societal change, but with historicity as a necessary, unquestioned background.

There are elements in what did catch her particular attention that (especially in the reception of her work) are so thoroughly associated with ahistorical or universalist modes of thought that their essentially historical framing in Murdoch’s work has gone unnoticed: the defense of individuals and individual understandings, the attention to spiritual ascent as a part of moral life, the importance (pace secularization) of a moral and spiritual imaginary of transcendence. The influence from Weil suggests a stern spiritual truth seeking which has appealed to some. Her attention to Plato rather than e.g. Aristotle draws in the direction of universal and transcendent oneness rather than historical and contextual modulations. Furthermore, the “relativism” associated with radical historical change of moral concepts and problematizations seems to stand in tension if not outright conflict with her appreciation of an idea of simple and obvious, absolute values. She notes that “ordinary people, whether religious or not, mainly still believe that certain values are ‘absolute’ and in this sense unique” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 412) – a view that in her perspective clearly speaks in their favor and tracks something important that philosophers may be led to miss.

But Murdoch is, if anything, very aware of the historical contingency of repertoires of thick moral concepts and the different historically malleable worlds that make them possible. Sometimes, for example, we do not easily see how much has altered because words stay the same while concepts change (Murdoch, 1997, p. 322). These kinds of issues, pointing to shifting aspects of our moral concepts, valuations, frameworks can be avoided by sticking with the parts of Murdoch that point toward the Good as unchanging. For those leaning toward universalism, but weary of the analytic moral philosopher’s top-down theorizing – predominantly negligent of individuality, particularity, and spiritual strivings – the latter aspects of Murdoch’s work have seemingly provided the perfect match. For those

interested in the historicity of morality, thinkers such as Williams, Taylor and MacIntyre have offered more readily available stuff to think with than Murdoch.

Investigating the combination of an evolving individual consciousness AND a historically changing moral world is philosophically more demanding than picking either or. People approaching Murdoch with a clean slate should not be faulted for getting caught up in the former: her strongest images relate to personal transcendence; thinking about individual change is what seems to inspire her most. Her remarks on historical change often appear more casual, as if merely observing something obvious. Perhaps this reflects her analysis of what needs to be stressed. Writing in the “heyday of relativism” and in intellectual circles attentive to historical change and the novel conditions brought on “us” by modernity, she puzzled over the lack of historical self-consciousness of her philosophical peers but did perhaps not see attention to historicity as such as on the list of endangered species or even as a source of particularly troubling philosophical issues. Thus, most of the passages where one finds her talking about the historicity of moral concepts, challenges, conceptions, she moves between these, and the more familiar attentions to human singularity, personal moral quests, individual visions. It is however time that we rethink these priorities in order to do justice to Murdoch’s ethics as a potential guide to a moral present which is, if anything, characterized by renegotiations of the moral concepts, norms, frameworks, allegiances, and roles by which we orient ourselves in a shared world.

Pedagogical lessons for striving to the good in a changing world

Attention to the above-described dimension of historical sensitivity in Murdoch is apt to raise some worries in philosophers who have appropriated her for purposes of education and moral formation. What happens to her strong and attractive vision of truth and goodness if truths and goods are relative to the historical and cultural surroundings that people live in? Taking her historical interest seriously poses a challenge to redescribe moral learning, moral education and the ethical dimension of learning more generally.

There is an easy, fast and relatively superficial way forward, which is to consider social and conceptual change as ephemeral in comparison to the moral truths that are, ultimately, transcendent, universal and unchanging. This fast and easy route could be combined with an idea of societal moral changes as instances of progress or regress in relation to such transcendent universal goods. This approach resonates with contemporary philosophical interest in moral progress (Herman 2019, Kitcher 2011, Moody-Adams 1999). The current conversations on progress seem to have grown out of a reawakened sensitivity to

the relatively rapid changes in certain of our widely shared moral precepts in the past half decade or so, combined with the moral philosophers' disciplinary investment in arguing theoretically for normative conclusions. But Murdoch does not fit too well with this discussion on moral progress, much because she never was in the business of seeking to prove certain things or values good by means of systematic argument. That is, she would have had very little invested in the possibility to prove, by systematic theoretical argument, that a given change in conceptions is a case of progress. She would typically just state that something is for the good and casually summon a few reasons for claiming so, if any.

Reading her in terms of these theorists of moral progress would also not be responsive enough to the seriousness with which Murdoch herself considers change. By her lights, we are often asking different questions, by means of different concepts, than those who came before. Her engagement with existentialism, for example, springs from the sense that it is or seeks to be an ethics for its times, a post-war modulation of the modern concern with freedom. Much is recognizable in human lives over time, for we remain the same kind of creatures, but settling by theoretical means the relations between the changing and the perennial is not interesting for her.

What does interest her, is how to live in a world where the old and the new, the universal and the particular, the perennial and the parochial interlace: where things of value may be lost, and potentialities in the new may be forfeited. She laments the loss, in modern secular moral thought, of the rich moral vocabularies of the Christian tradition. She also laments a parallel thinness of the conception of the human subject in anglophone philosophy, French existentialism, and the predominant novelistic ideals of her contemporaries. The 19th century novels were in her view much better precisely because they exhibited real, well-rounded people in complex meaningful social worlds. What she demands here, what she thinks we cannot quite do without, is precisely the kind of thick moral concepts, conceptions and understandings that – however seemingly universal – sooner or later tend to reveal their belonging to a distinctive, historically contingent, form of life.

We learn language in contexts where our vocabulary is increased and (ideally) refined in the everyday processes of living and learning. We learn moral concepts. Not only 'true' and 'good', but the *vast numbers of secondary* more specialized moral terms, are for us instruments of discrimination and mentors of desire. I mean words like 'generous', 'gentle', 'reckless', 'envious', 'honest', and so on and so on. (Murdoch, 1992, p. 385)

Such words and concepts anchor us in a complex moral world where certain judgments go with certain things: they furnish our moral habitation with things we may or may not need, that others may need, that may be used on us, for better or worse. We may be helped here to think of the earnest, truth-seeking ethical learner and moral thinker through Otto Neurath's picture of repairing a ship at sea, mending or exchanging its parts one by one as needs occur. (Neurath, 1973, p. 199) Murdoch does not think we need to seek a timeless edifice beyond the present vessel. She is rather concerned with the methods of continuous reconstruction; that there are good, perhaps irreplaceable materials that we should beware not to throw overboard: rich vocabularies for the virtues and the inner workings of ethical life, practices of spiritual/moral refreshment, etc. The reconstruction needs to be conducted with good understanding of the resources at hand, and vigilance about what people may want or need for their various purposes of ethical sense-making, critique and development in a changing world.

One of Murdoch's most central but also most worn examples, illustrating the significant inner moral action of an individual, is the case of the mother-in-law M, who over the course of many years is learning to reconsider the character of her daughter in law, the assessment of which was initially clouded by both jealousy and prejudice. (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 312-318) This example was meant to illustrate how genuine moral happenings might be fully "inner", belonging to the changing scenery of a person's consciousness rather than her overt behavior (which in the example we are made to think was always amiable). I here draw on a slightly different aspect of it: the societal ramifications of such changes of moral understanding, which are pushed to the background in Murdoch's example, but are none-the-less there in M's bourgeois and conservative early judgment of the younger woman, who recognizably represents both a different social class and a new generation. (Holland 2012)

To illustrate the work of Murdochian attention in a changing social and moral world, I will replace the mother-in-law learning to reconsider her daughter-in-law with an image of a grandmother learning to rethink her views on contemporary topics of ethical concern through conversations with her granddaughter. This grandmother has always been a feminist, a progressive of her generation and a bit of a bohemian; educated and scientifically minded, she nevertheless has some crystals on her windowsill and sports a bit of feng shui in her interior decoration. Her favorite visual artist is an acclaimed local painter of her own generation, whose deliciously colored canvases present occasional Gauguin-style nudes in lush greenery. Pictures of her own daughters on the piano show seemingly timeless bourgeois

young girls in quality jumpers and shiny hair down over their shoulders. Now these girls are in their late forties, and along comes this granddaughter, suddenly all grown up.

On a superficial glance, she is just the regular tomboy, with short spiky hair and second-hand clothes deliberately chosen to make her look like a carpenter at work: a familiar enough type and will grow out of it, as the grandmother would assume. But her views are also different: she thinks it is important that everybody can self-identify their gender (but surely feminism requires that we know who are women!, exclaims the grandmother); she thinks the painting facing her grandmothers dining room table is just very problematic (oh, so-and-so is a very accomplished artist, highly acclaimed internationally, and don't you just love the color, we went to school together you know and she was always the most conscious!); very patiently she seeks to explain why certain quite ordinary words are disrespectful and why safe spaces are important. (When I was young, we'd learn not to mind such attention/language.) She writes a delightful gender-neutral prose. (Good for you that you don't speak Russian! (In the grandmother's mind a witty reference to the ways in which gender is embedded in the grammar of Slavic languages.)).

But they have always been the best of friends, the two other grandchildren being boys and living farther away. How has this girl grown into all these ideas between car rides to ballet classes and cups of coco by the grandmother's kitchen table? And not only will the grandmother become *au courant* with the thinking of young progressives: she will come to see how the trappings of second wave feminism, bourgeois bohemianism, confident old school social liberal opinions look from the perspective of this younger person, and what might indeed be wrong with *at least some* of them, especially when imported in unaltered condition to the present.

Her daughter smirks: I'm glad to see your so nice with Jamie; with us you were all about having our hair in order but also good marks, so we get a good career *before* we get a good husband. That's nonsense dear, the older woman says, well knowing that it may be quite true: that she has raised her daughters in the 80's as she herself was raised in the 50's and 60's, and that this may not always have served them well. She does not remember their youthful views about the world, probably because, for good enough reasons, they did not tell her.

So there is a personal development for this woman, easily understood in terms of Murdochian attention: toward a better appreciation of otherness; to a self-reflective openness. At the same time, it is about attuning herself to a world that is changing; where familiar values are overturned, reconsidered, or followed through their inner logic to the limits

of recognition. Some aspects of it may remain foreign to her: gay people should have the same rights of course, but why this plethora of novel non-binary sexual identities? There might be things she disapproves of. She is thrilled by the climate strikers arresting traffic for days, but finds the novel sensitivity to (what she thinks of as) minor offences in social relations taxing and time consuming. But she is in her conversations with her granddaughter reconnecting with a changing world, finding her feet with its alterations. She learns to see how many of the concerns and debates of these young people are continuous with the things she herself would have fought for or over when young, had she not been so conservatively brought up and so busy getting married. She sees how her vision of certain groups of people and political causes have been products of prejudice and parochialism. Old age allows her to relax and lean back, see that she has been judgmental of many things that now reveal their distinctive value to her. Love also plays a role: her love for this girl with whom she has conversed since she first learned to speak. (To be fair, the granddaughter also gains perspective on her own views, becoming less youthfully absolute on some issues, but that is a different story.)

There is a dual movement here: the personal development of this woman, parallel to that of M, but also the change of the world of ethical matters of concern. Her moral development is not just the realization of potentials that were always there (loving attention), but also the critical and considerate attunement to new moral conditions, new constellations of thick moral concepts, and new culturally embedded ways of making moral sense. There is little systematic attention in Murdoch's work to this dual movement of moral change: the change of individuals and the change of frameworks. That is, there is little systematic attention to the interplay of these movements in her work. But given her investment and interest in the historicity of moral understandings, the societal change of concepts etc. cannot be brushed aside. To do her justice we may here need to go beyond what we find in her philosophical writings, and think through the implications that her sense of historicity has for her understanding of the Good.

In a certain respect, this is a matter of fundamental metaphors – an issue of particular importance to Murdoch's own conception of philosophy. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 363, Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 165) It makes a great difference if we picture mobile striving individuals in a mobile changing world, rather than such individuals striving to given, timeless, overarching goods. The Murdochian Good is undefined and unsubstantiated precisely because it describes a dynamic of striving rather than the individual's relation to some specific good. Many philosophers consider the changes of the timely world ephemeral

and want to fixate a universal good that prevails amongst them. But Murdoch is not one of these philosophers.

Living in a time where moral and evaluative reconsiderations and renegotiations make their presence felt in any educational setting, a keen awareness of the moving and contested parts of our shared moral vocabularies and world views is a great asset for any educator. In order to make Murdoch's philosophy useful for educational thought and practice under such conditions, it is of great importance that we fully appreciate her historical interest as an integral part of her moral philosophy.⁴

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