The Journal of Value Inquiry
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-026-10088-7

The Madness of Reality

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Received: 17 January 2025 / Accepted: 17 March 2026

Abstract
What happens when we encounter the real? One of the central and most appealing ideas in Iris Murdoch's ethics is her invitation to return to reality and 'stay' with it. Murdoch the psychologist also knows how extremely difficult it is. But why should encountering the real feel so difficult? Not only difficult; at times—perhaps essentially?—maddening. In Benjamin Labatut's *When We Cease to Understand the World* (2020), some of the sharpest minds of the past century struggle with a loss of sanity the closer they get to its sub-atomic dimension, as if encountering the finest structure of the world loosened their grip on what they used to call reality. In this paper, following Murdoch and Labatut, I identify a sense of resistance that emerges when we come to a close and still encounter with a reality that we find we cannot grasp, interpreted as a felt conflict between the self and the real. Through a series of dichotomies found in Murdoch's philosophy (real and unreal, movement and stillness, ordinary and strange) I explore the possible reasons for this resistance, and suggest that Murdoch's own thought, while calling for a form of intense attention to the real, is better suited at explaining forms of attention where the real is experienced through joy and the possibility of progressive understanding. The difference in affective response, I argue, has moral and metaphysical roots.

1 What Happens When We Encounter the Real?

One of Iris Murdoch's most fascinating and important philosophical ideas is that there is a close connection between moral progress and realism, reenvisaging Plato's link between Good and truth.[1] We should move towards reality, not away from it.

[1] Cf. *Republic* 508d–509b.

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Published online: 30 April 2026

This movement is moral and epistemic at the same time. The idea of 'movement' is important in Murdoch's moral philosophy, which observes how the human mind is in constant motion between better and worse inner states, shallow and deepened understandings, various sorts of desires, objects of attention, qualities of perception, and so on. One movement for Murdoch is chief, because it is the most important and because it underlies others. That is the movement between reality and unreality. Or, to add the moral dimension which is Murdoch's key contribution, between the magnetic good and the seductive, monotonous gravity of the self (to borrow Simone Weil's language).[2]

The goal of this movement is both clear and indeterminate. Murdoch writes that in our consciousness, as a sort of transcendental condition, operates an attraction to the Good, where the Good is both what enables us to apprehend reality and what is found in our more realistic apprehensions of it.[3] At the same time, however, Murdoch holds that both reality and Good are never attainable, always retreating because they are ideals, and it is the nature of an ideal to be impossible to grasp.[4] 'The real', on this view, can neither be fully grasped nor defined, but is a constantly receding target. This idea has two corollaries: first, that the real can be, albeit imperfectly, 'encountered' rather than 'known',[5] because more than perceptual and cognitive capacities are required for its experience, and the fixity of knowledge is unsuitable for it; second, and related, that we cannot know with any certainty that what we are encountering is the real. Yet, some experiences have a specific phenomenological quality that suggests that we are encountering something that exists outside of ourselves and our imaginative capacities.

Murdoch's world, then, is in flux. The constant change and ungraspability that we experience in the world, Murdoch argues, applies to the mind and its moral quality as well. Our lives are like waves. However, there are not only movement and change in our experience; there are also discrete moments and stillness. On the wave-like continuum of consciousness, one can isolate, albeit only roughly, points or moments that we can understand as specific experiences. I say 'moments', but it does not matter how long, in time, these experiences last. What matters is that they are experienced as an occurrence, when something specific happens to us, and our quality of consciousness, to use Murdoch's vocabulary, is altered.[6] For example, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, we find:

The moment when an animal outside our window captures our attention.[7]

[2] These are themes that recur throughout Murdoch's main philosophical works [12] and [14]). On 'gravity', see [17], pp. 1–5.

[3] See e.g. [14], chapters 6 and 13.

[4] See e.g. [12], chapter 2.

[5] [14], p. 212.

[6] Murdoch is mostly interested in the ways in which each moment shapes and is shaped by the larger whole of individual consciousness, contributing especially to making such consciousness purer or opaque. But this connection does not prevent us from focusing on the specific moment in question, and even less from *experiencing* it as a specific moment. (Experiences, we may say, can be pictured as both waves and particles).

[7] [12], p. 82.

The moments when Cézanne was absorbed by the landscape he was painting.[8]

The moment, mentioned by the Zen master, when the hand touches the cup.[9]

The moment when I 'really see the face of my friend, the playing dog, Piero's picture'.[10]

This brings us to a second dichotomy, after reality and unreality: movement and stillness. While reality is never fully grasped and we can always deepen and develop our understanding, we can have experiences of stillness where reality seems to be fully 'there': as close and as clear as it has ever been for us. Even if metaphysically, Murdoch holds, there is no end point, in the cases shown by the examples above, encountering the real feels like we have arrived somewhere. Like reality has unfolded in front of us. These are the experiences of encounter that this paper is concerned with—which feel both real and still.

But in the chapter on structuralism in *Metaphysics*, we find a third dichotomy in which the experience of reality, during these encounters, may divide itself: ordinary and strange. Murdoch writes:

> But our time-adventures return to and are based in presence and encounter … Certainly, reflection may soon feel confronted by a mystery. Heidegger seizes on that word of Sophocles to describe being human: *deinos, unheimlich*, terrible, weird, strange, wonderful. How do we do it? It is at this point that one must move steadily on, attempting to say, in ordinary language and without jargon, things which may seem obvious. Here philosophy has a negative technical task of removing (philosophical) errors, which must be combined with a positive task of finding a simple open mode of discourse concerning ordinary evident (for instance moral) aspects of human life.[11]

Here, Murdoch is performing one part of the 'two way movement' introduced in *The Sovereignty of Good*,[12] articulated in this passage as one from amazement to ordinariness. We should 'move steadily on', overcome the strangeness, and articulate in 'ordinary language' the 'ordinary aspects' of human life. We can experience presence and encounter as unsettling and strange, but also as manageable, everyday events. When I see my friend's frustration more clearly, I can offer the right kind of help. Contemplating the budding plants in spring, I can feel joy in nature and for being part of it.

Ordinariness and strangeness are associated with two affective responses, respectively joy and resistance. While Murdoch tends to focus on ordinariness and joy, I suggest that strangeness and resistance, through considered, are too swiftly put aside. Joy, for Murdoch, is the affective element typically marking successful attention, when something is apprehended as what it is, as there, and as independent of oneself. There is joy in encountering a less adulterated reality for which one feels love and

[8] [14], pp. 246–247.

[9] [14], p. 243.

[10] [14], p. 301.

[11] [14], p. 212.

[12] [12], p. 1.

respect, and there is joy in momentarily being rid of the shackles and filters of the self, a removal to which one is at least implicitly assenting to.

But the pendulum also swings back, and not all apprehensions of reality are simple and joyous. While the experiences I have just described are part of the path that Murdoch indicates towards truth and goodness, they also indicate progress along familiar territory. We correct our misapprehensions, we put aside our jealousy, we look again. These can bring moments of joy, like revelling in the spring air. But, not less likely, these encounters can also reveal something different and very peculiar about our experience of reality. They can reveal resistance.[13]

When we feel utterly close to reality there can be something almost unbearable. Proximity turns to distance, the ordinary becomes strange, and we feel 'shouldered out' (to use the phrase that Cora Diamond selects from Ted Hughes) from the objects we thought we had grasped.[14] It is to save us from this experience that George Eliot's narrator, in one of *Middlemarch's* most famous passages, tells us that we will not look too closely at Dorothea's after-all-ordinary suffering after marrying a boring old man, for 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence'.[15] Squirrels and grass. Something very small, very normal. (Or at least, normal at the time, in that part of the world; I wish squirrels and grass were as ordinary for all of us now).

Encountering the real, 'succeeding' in the task that Murdoch sets us on, can result, in its most extreme forms, in a startling experience where the real can be seen not as welcoming but as resistant. This paper investigates these experiences, which contain a sense of reality being present to us, a sense of stillness, where there is nothing to say or learn and no progress seems to be possible or required; at the same time, they contain not joy but resistance, expressed as confusion, astonishment, and our inability to 'do' anything with the experience. What is this resistance, and what does it tell us about our relation to reality, perhaps even about reality itself?

This paper proceeds in four stages. First, I begin by examining a familiar Murdochian explanation of resistance—namely, the defeat of the ego's self-gratifying tendencies—and argue that it cannot account for the experiences at issue. Second, I turn to Murdoch's remarks on tragedy, developing contingency and death as deeper sources of resistance. In the third stage, I argue that some encounters with reality generate resistance because they mark a limit of understanding rather than a stage of progressive comprehension. To illustrate this extreme phenomenology, I will draw on a recent novel where the best scientific minds of the past century experience the alienness and irreducibility of the real at the peak of their intellectual endeavours. Finally, I bring these strands together to offer a Murdoch-inspired account of resistant encounters with reality, and suggest that Murdoch's emphasis on joyful encounters reflects the distinctive commitments of her metaphysics of the Good.

[13] This dimension is suggested by Murdoch, and not quite absent from her writings; but it's not, I argue, her main concern.

[14] [3].

[15] [4], p. 182.

The experiences addressed in this paper are personal, and may resonate with some readers and not with others. Yet they exist. My interest is to tentatively unpack and explore them. This will, I hope, help paint a fuller picture of the phenomenology of encountering the real, offering another dimension to the one we find more frequently in Murdoch, yet answering her call for moving towards reality.

2 The Ego and Self-Gratification

Attempt number one. We experience resistance because the real does not conform to our self-gratifying desires. This is a classic Murdochian answer and there is much truth to it. Of course we want the world to be in ways that are gratifying for us. Murdoch's further step is to say that it's not only that we *want* the world to be a certain way, but that we already *see* the world as we want it to be—or, more comprehensively, in ways that soothe our ego, which may include mirroring not only our desires, but also our fears, biases, habits, and so on.

This answer, however, won't do for our purposes, for two reasons. On the one hand, if we are steeped in fantasy and we see what we want to see, there is no resistance in confronting the real because there is no such confrontation. On the other, if we manage for a moment to 'pierce the veil' of fantasy and experience reality,[16] we will resist only the reality that goes against the desires of our ego, not any reality. And that does not seem to be the case when we hear the heartbeat of the squirrel.

3 Tragedy: Contingency and Ego-Death

Attempt number two. We experience resistance in relation to those aspects of reality that not only defy our ego, but defy our (for Murdoch, omnipresent) sense of the good. This is the contemplation of affliction or extreme suffering, which Murdoch, in *Metaphysics,* presents through the art form of tragedy.

This answer fails for the second reason above, namely that if that was the case, our resistance to reality would be partial, while we are investigating the experience of reality, any reality, which cuts across the specific qualities of what we are experiencing, and includes small and ordinary things. The same difference applies to Cora Diamond's essay, where she explores experiences that are 'resistant to our thinking'.[17] Diamond takes a number of examples or case-studies. They have to do with death, suffering, but also beauty and goodness. These, too, are limit cases, where the *quality* of the object creates the experience. We can all understand feeling some sort of madness creeping in when we try to contemplate death, astounding beauty, or the extreme suffering of other and ourselves. It is harder to talk about going crazy because we have paid attention to a blade of grass.

But this response is too hasty. Diamond's own examples of beauty also include something as ordinary as 'the architecture of a tree', from a poem by Czesław

[16] [12], p. 93.

[17] [3].

Miłosz.[18] Beautiful objects are an opening, Diamond suggests, showing a resistance that reality can manifest in other cases too. Murdoch's remarks on tragedy, in the same way, are meant to illuminate a more general aspect of life, and not only resistance to what defies our sense of the good.

Metaphysics opens with reflections on unity and chaos: the one-making mind, the order-resistant world. This is a theme that recurs through the rest of the work and which, as I see it, provides one of the main sources of the sense of disquiet that one may read in the book. In the chapter 'Comic and Tragic', Murdoch confronts this problem through art, because art, like philosophy, has the task 'to show what is nearest, what is deeply and obviously true but usually invisible'.[19]

Comedy expresses the facts of chance and contingency: it contains disunity, it is chaotic, it shows the absurdity of life. In that respect, Murdoch writes, comedy is everywhere. Tragedy, on the other hand, is only found in art. In tragedy, the artist is able to combine some sort of form with a real apprehension of suffering and death. This is a nearly impossible task: 'Since it is art it must have borders, it must be some kind of magic, but it must also inhibit magic in its more familiar and consoling uses'; hence, Murdoch writes, 'the tragic art form is rare'.[20] Tragic art confronts the reality from which our being revolts. Allow me ask the seemingly obvious. Why does our being revolt from the reality presented by tragedy?

Murdoch gives us two reasons: contingency and death. These come together in tragedy: on the one hand, death shows the inevitable contingency of animal lives such as ours; on the other, our witnessing of it, when realistic and unconsoled, brings about a sort of ego-death of which real death is the *image*. Murdoch is suggesting that we resist truthful representations of real death not only because we fear it, but because it is the culmination of contingency, which is, in turn, the affirmation of our nothingness—living or dead.[21] That is why, Murdoch tells us, tragedy must contain death. She writes: 'That someone must die in a tragedy is not a mere convention like that which decrees deaths in detective stories. In tragedy the compulsory nature of death is an image of its place in life'.[22] Murdoch sees death and contingency in tragedy as both effecting and representing a loss of what constitutes the ego, namely, attachment or continuity, and completion or form:

> Death threatens the ego's dream of eternal life and happiness and power. Tragedy, like religion, must break the ego, destroying the illusory whole of the unified self… Tragedy, resisting these comforts [of unity], must be in a positive,

[18] [3], p. 13.

[19] [14], p. 90.

[20] [14], p. 105.

[21] In their 'resolute' reading of *Metaphysics*, Megan Laverty and Evgenia Mylonaki [11] present contingency as a key concept in Murdoch, for it is both a threat to the absolute nature of value, and what Murdoch wants to reconcile with value. They read three 'inflections' of contingency: that which could be otherwise, which can be destroyed, and which is ultimately trivial.

[22] [14], p. 117.

> even thoroughly uncomfortable, sense a broken whole; the concluding process of the idle egoistic mind must be checked.[23]

The spectator of tragedy experiences, at one remove, a challenge to one's ego, which 'mere' suffering does not bring. Here the ego operates as the self-protective part of the self, in a non-superficial way. It not only projects fantasies to make the world more amenable to our individual, contingent desires, but it clings to a deeper, more necessary fantasy of continuity and form. The former offers relief and meaning to the self. The latter is supposed to let us grasp reality fully. Death in tragedy unsettles both. Murdoch writes: 'Tragedy concerns the difference between suffering and death'.[24] She is here drawing on Simone Weil's distinction between suffering and affliction, which is for Weil death of the self: 'In the realm of suffering, affliction is a thing apart, specific, irreducible … Affliction is the uprooting of life, a more or less protracted equivalent to death'.[25] Suffering is an event in life, it has a past and a future, a place, perhaps a purpose or a point, perhaps consolation. Affliction and death, on the other hand, are stark, fixated on a single point, and strip the self of everything that makes it what it is.

Confronting affliction, in the way that tragedy pushes us to do, leads to what Murdoch, again following Weil, calls the 'void', to which she devotes the penultimate chapter of *Metaphysics*. The void is, in Murdoch's words, a 'tract of experience' in which 'the idea of death and non-being is made real'.[26] In the void we are alive, but we lose our bearings and we lose ourselves. Murdoch returns to Weil: 'to accept the lack of balance'.[27] But the chapter is very short, and we may leave with the impression that Murdoch was experiencing, or perhaps performing, the movement of return to the fresh air of ordinary consciousness, where even the unselfing that comes from checking selfish desires feels like a relief.[28]

Where are we now? We were looking for encounters with reality. In tragedy, affliction, and void, we have considered encounters with an extreme form of reality, which presents us with contingency, the defeat of the ego as continuity and form, and the contingency and limits of the individual and, indeed, of everything. But, again, these are extreme cases. We want to know what it's like to encounter reality. Tragedy, Murdoch tells us, can show us an image of that encounter. But tragedy is also art. High art, but still art, which means still order, still magic. Instead, we are looking for encounters with any reality. We are looking for something that we can find more directly. What can we keep, if anything, of these reflections when we want to understand why

[23] [14], p. 117.

[24] [14], p. 117.

[25] [16], p. 118.

[26] [14], p. 501.

[27] [14], p. 502.

[28] In the following short chapter, MGM ends by invoking both ordinary concerns and the omnipresence of the absolute. Rather than a split, the unity of ordinary and absolute is a recurrent idea in Murdoch, yet she acknowledges that our experience divides between a sense of the absolute as/through the ordinary, and a more direct and unsettling encounter with it. The shortness of the chapter on Void may suggest that the former is intended as the more fruitful, more manageable, more communicable moral experience for the reader.

something as simple and small as the grass could be overwhelming for us? To present both an image and an example of the answer, I would like to go even smaller.

4 Reality Inside the Atom

In Benjamin Labatut's novel *When We Cease to Understand the World*,[29] originally titled *Un Verdor Terrible*, the greatest scientific minds of the past century come unravelled. The beginnings of quantum mechanics, as Labatut tells the story, are marked by excitement and despair, by awe and terror. The moments of discovery are marked, most of all, by the experience of resistance.[30]

When Karl Schwarzschild, fighting in the trenches during World War I, discovered the 'singularity' in black holes—where too much mass is concentrated in a very small area, as when a giant star collapses, gravity becomes so powerful that space becomes infinitely curved, closing in on itself—his vision of life began to darken, his notes in his diary giving way to black scribbles. 'The horror' was that he had discovered 'a blind spot, fundamentally unknowable'. It was 'unthinkable, unbearable'.[31] If his calculations were correct, '"We would be faced with a fairyland geometry, a hall of mirrors whose horrifying perspectives would be more than the civilized mind could bear, as it abhors and flees from all it cannot comprehend"'.[32]

The ground-breaking discoveries of Prince Louis De Broglie regarding the wave-like nature of matter had a peculiar prologue. Before completing his studies, De Broglie became obsessed with completing his friend Vasek's project of collecting 'art brut', art created by mentally ill people, by drug addicts, and alcoholics. He arranged an unsuccessful exhibition in his own home, displaying what he called 'creative energy in its purest state'.[33] After the failure of the exhibition, he retreated in the rooms adjacent to the exhibition, only to emerge with a PhD thesis, in which he argued that light was not singular but double in nature, both particle and wave. Thus, 'it transcends all the categories with which we have tried to encapsulate the myriad forms of nature'.[34] The eminent physicists in his PhD committee failed to understand it. Labatut writes, 'Those opposed to this revelation argue that accepting such a novel orthodoxy *demands a departure from reason'*. To them De Broglie replied

[29] [7].

[30] I should note, as the author does in the acknowledgements, that this is 'a work of fiction based on real events,' faithful to the science and taking some liberties with the rest. 'The quantity of fiction grows throughout the book; whereas "Prussian Blue" contains only one fictional paragraph, I have taken greater liberties in the subsequent texts, while still trying to remain faithful to the scientific concepts discussed in each of them' [7], p. 189). This is a novel, but fictional does not mean false: I take Labatut to be expressing, through the biographical material and scientific theories, a sense of what it may have been like to make those discoveries.

[31] [7], p. 55.

[32] [7], p. 49.

[33] [7], p. 112.

[34] [7], p. 116.

that it was more shocking than that: 'not just light, but all matter is possessed of such dualism!'.[35]

In 1925 on Heligoland, a rocky island off the Northern coast of Germany, a very young Werner Heisenberg was trying to understand what happened inside the atom. He realised he had to divest himself, like a madman, of all that he knew, even the most basic concepts of physics, to conduct that investigation, starting only with what he could observe, the photon that can be registered when an electron changes its energy level while circling around the nucleus. 'He would rely on no concepts, no images, no models. *Reality itself* would dictate what could (and what could not) be said about it'.[36]

The revelation came after a long illness, during which, Labatut narrates, Heisenberg had visions of the mystic-poet Hafez, who was said to have had his poems dictated directly by god. During the feverish night, Heisenberg heard the verses: 'The more I look, the less I see', and 'in flames love has embraced me / in ashes every image of my mind'.[37] When Heisenberg woke up, he arrived at the answer he was seeking, and shouted: 'Unobservable! Unimaginable! Unthinkable!'.[38]

All these discoveries were met with great resistance, because they were essentially mad: they required one to give up the most fundamental laws of physics as well as all common sense and the human tendency or even necessity to imagine and visualise. Madness, as a departure both from reason and from ordinary concepts and intuitions, seemed to be the only way to approach the reality that emerged in front of them. Labatut writes: 'what Heisenberg had discovered was incompatible with common sense. Matrix mechanics did not describe normal, albeit unimaginably small objects, but an aspect of reality that concepts of classical physics could not even name'.[39] What was disconcerting about Heisenberg, as Labatut describes him, was that he 'seemed to have gouged out both his eyes in order to see further'.[40]

Einstein, on the other hand, excelled at visualisations. He opposed what became known as the 'Copenhagen Interpretation' of quantum mechanics, which Heisenberg and Bohr presented at Solvay in 1927. According to the Interpretation, 'no single frame of reference could encompass the attributes of elementary particles. Quantum objects had no fixed identity, but instead dwelt in a space of possibilities'.[41] 'Not even the state of one miserable particle could be perfectly apprehended. However we scrutinized… there would always be something vague, undetermined, uncertain… '.[42] Randomness was a built in feature of the natural world.

[35] [7], p. 116 (emphasis added).

[36] [7], p. 97 (emphasis added).

[37] We can hear echoes of (what I read as) some of Murdoch's most mystical moments, where she comes closer to the more radical forms of attention and unselfing and cites Rilke's comments on the work of Cézanne: 'The consuming of love in anonymous work.' 'The egoism of the good artist or craftsman is "burnt up" in the product.' [14], p. 247),she says the same about Shakespeare.

[38] [7], p. 104.

[39] [7], p. 109.

[40] [7], p. 110.

[41] [7], p. 159.

[42] [7], p. 162.

In a sentence that became overly famous, Einstein offered his resistance by claiming that God does not play dice. To which Bohr retorted: 'it's not our place to tell him how to run the world'.[43]

5 Signs of the Real

I have said that these scientists' discoveries are both an example and an image of the experience of encountering the real, and of the intensity and resistance of the cases when the encounter seems to be at its closest. They show the limits of the intellect even when stretched to its furthest point through extreme discipline, knowledge, and talent: even then, the utmost exertions of the mind are met with a limit, beyond which there is something unknown and unknowable. Here reality is resistant to the self qua potential knower, entering into conflict with it, and defeats the ego which needs such an idea; a reality that can be seen only by 'gouging out both eyes'. These encounters, at the same time, concern the reality that underlies all ordinary reality—all chairs and tables, even ourselves—the closest possible vision of the world. The world as resistant when seen from 'close-up', literally in the case of these scientists, provides an image of the closeness of the ordinary world of chairs, tables, and squirrels, and how it equally turns to distance when it appears to us in its ungraspable nakedness and otherness.[44]

One may object that contemplating subatomic reality is not at all like contemplating a stone on a mountain path, because mathematics, unlike vision and touch, seems to offer an indirect point of access to the real. But same is true of the poetic word, yet the experience of the real we have through a line of poetry can be even more intense and truthful than the one we have through our eyes or ears. Encounters with reality can be arrived at both suddenly and unprepared (e.g. Murdoch's kestrel) or as the culmination of study and inquiry (as in science), but all contain a necessary immediacy. In this respect, the senses do not necessarily separate us from the experience of the real any less than mathematics or poetry do.

These stories reveal forms of encounter with a resistant reality that are more naked than Murdoch's encounters through art, with its imaginative activity and its beauty. That is why we turned to the scientists. To articulate the resistance we found there, we may instead borrow a term from Lacan—not as a comprehensive psychoanalytic framework, but as a way of naming the phenomenology we are after. Lacan uses the concept of 'the Real' to designate what is encountered as present yet resistant: that which cannot be assimilated into imagination, conceptual understanding, or representational order.[45] In this sense, the Real is not a hidden substratum behind appear-

[43] [7], p. 170.

[44] The image of closeness that characterises encounters with the real maps onto the closeness that the lover of the Good aspires to in Plato, where the Good is portrayed as distant, and noesis is a matter of coming closer to it; but as the myth of the cave, contemplating the light of the Sun (the Good/Real) is painful and confusing (Symposium 210a-212b; Republic 508b–509c).

[45] Lacan differentiates between 'The Real', which is beyond our grasp, and 'reality', which is the ordinary world that we conceptualise, understand, imagine, use, etc. I do not make this distinction, and when I talk about encounters with reality or the real I mean something close to Lacan's former concept.

ances, but the point at which our ordinary ways of making sense of reality give out, even as reality itself remains insistently there. In Lacan's words, the Real is 'the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail'.[46] The Real is beyond our grasp but, unlike the thing-in-itself, is not entirely hidden; as Lesley Chapman writes, 'The Real sits necessarily outside of ordinary, communicable reality. Although, insofar as Lacan speaks of it and its psychoanalytic implications, it falls some way short of absolute ineffability'.[47] What is left is a form of encounter that has no 'object', insofar as an 'object' is imagined or understood (when we encounter the grass, we do not encounter 'the grass'). We can read this encounter, then, as a form of essential resistance, through Lacan's own formulation, whereby the real is 'Ausstossung aus dem Ich'—'expelling from the subject'.[48]

For something like this, as I suggested, Murdoch's 'broken circle' is already too much form. If there is any form of language suitable for the Real, it has to be a language that builds into itself both the openness that challenges understanding (through infinities, sets, paradoxes, etc.) and the distance that problematizes referentiality. Anthony Uhlmann writes that this is mathematics, which

> rather than being seen as providing a precision somehow opposed to the openness and incompleteness that attends literary logic, might also offer another face, one that helps us come to terms with the kind of elusiveness that characterizes concepts such as infinity, the impossible, and via these the Real.[49]

In Labatut, calculations lead to what is unimaginable and inconceivable, yet also what the scientists recognise as real. Here is Schrödinger, considering that his equation could represent not one object, but possible worlds:

> those multiple waves would be the first glimpse of something completely new, each a brief flash of a universe that was born when the electron leapt from one state to the other, branching out to populate the infinite, like the jewels of Indra's net. But such a thing was inconceivable.[50]

And here is Heisenberg, trying to remove all mental representations from his exploration of the structure of the atom:

> The nucleus as a little sun, with electrons orbiting around it like planets; Heisenberg loathed that infantile, simplistic image. In his vision of the atom, those mental representations vanished: the little sun was snuffed out, and the electron stopped spinning like a top and dissolved into a formless mist. All that

[46] [9], p. 164.

[47] [1].

[48] [10], p. 324.

[49] [15], p. 11. (This is why, incidentally, Lacan's focus on the Real in his later writings goes hand in hand with an interest in mathematics),

[50] [7], p. 138.

> remained were numbers. A landscape as sterile as that which separated the two ends of the island.[51]

We can now revisit the two categories suggested earlier by Murdoch's discussion of tragedy. While tragedy is 'about' contingency and (ego-)death, the encounters with the real I am considering are not about something—in fact, one of their markers is that there is no longer an object recognised or spelled out as such—yet they present the subject with contingency and ego-death in a radical way. The scientist's insights contain both a sense of the presence of the real as 'there' and separate from us, and resistance manifest as confusion, as a conflict between the self and the world, a stripping of reason and ordinary consciousness, and as removal from shared human life insofar as that would require access to shared concepts and language—what I am calling, and Labatut is calling, madness.[52]

In this respect, Lacan's notion of the Real helps to articulate a dimension of these encounters that Murdoch's realism gestures toward but does not fully thematize. Read in this limited way, Lacan does not compete with Murdoch's realism, but sharpens our understanding of a limit-point at which reality is encountered as present yet resistant, defeating the ego not only as self-gratifying but as potential knower.

6 The Completion of Understanding

This takes us to a third attempt at answering the original question. In Murdoch, tragedy shows a reality that eludes our grasp because it is contingent, which in one articulation means impermanence and hence pervasive uncertainty, against the natural desire (for Murdoch, the ego's desire) not only for continuity, but for making sense of the world and thus properly inhabit it. In the encounters with the real we are examining, the uncertainty is not only about things, but in things. What shook the physicists in Labatut's narration was not that they discovered a radically new order, but rather that they discovered a lack of order. In those encounters, and in some intense encounters with grass and rocks, reality appears as fundamentally ungraspable, yet present to us in its ungraspability. The real resists us simply by being there.

The most ordinary and smallest things of our world become astonishing in their mere existence. To follow Wittgenstein, it's not *how* things are, but *that* they are.[53] Luca Zanetti calls these experiences 'epiphanies of existence'.[54] Experiencing only the 'that', not the 'how', means that the experiences give us nothing to build on, no knowledge or understanding, in our ordinary life. The moments when we encounter the real, then, are marked by resistance because they are moments in which, on the one hand, existence is foregrounded, and on the other, we experience the real as

[51] [7], p. 98.

[52] I hope it is clear that I do not use 'madness' in a clinical sense, but rather in a sense that is closer to the character of the 'holy fool', who by breaking the rules of thinking can see something else.

[53] But without the inclusion into wholeness that makes those experiences mystical for him. [19], 6.44, 6.45.

[54] However, Zanetti's range of experiences is more inclusive than my current focus, and places Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Murdoch under the umbrella.

something essentially beyond our grasp. There are two elements that come together here. The first, as mentioned, is the foregrounding of the *existence* of something, the rock or the squirrel, as opposed to any *property* we may ascribe to them. The second is the experience that, in the face of this existence, there is nothing for us to do or understand. The moments when we encounter the real are not moments in which we understand the real. We do not imagine it either. We do not order, make sense of it, conceptualise it. We can do nothing with it. There are experiences where understanding reaches completion. I say 'completion' because it is not a facile surrender into irrationality, but a surprised recognition that 'understanding' is exhausted in front of the closeness of reality.

As the stories of the physicists and mathematicians show, there is no lack of intellectual capacity, nor a refusal to exercise reason. There is, rather, the realisation that there is nothing in us that is able to grasp what we are encountering, because it is un-graspable. This is not a limitation, but a feature of reality. While in ordinary consciousness we may confuse this limit as a contingent one, something that we may somehow, someway, overcome, when our encounter with the real is close, fully attentive, and intense, we experience the absolute nature of the distance. Utter closeness and absolute distance.

Labatut narrates that both Einstein and, initially, Niels Bohr, could not take Heisenberg's uncertainty principle as anything other than a limit of the intellect, a limit of current science. They asked, repeatedly, if it was something that perhaps, one day, we will be able to overcome. Heisenberg adamantly denied it. There is an uncertainty in reality, which means that the separation between reality and our minds is not simply an accidental problem. 'If Heisenberg triumphed, a fundamental aspect of the laws that governed the physical world would remain forever obscure, as if chance had somehow nested in the heart of matter'.[55]

Murdoch, if we are to go by a few brief remarks, was not enthralled by 'modern physics',[56] but embraced the idea of chaos and chance at the heart of reality. For Murdoch, too, chance and lack of order in reality defy not only the understanding, but all the ways in which we make sense of the world, including the imagination. According to Labatut, as we saw, quantum mechanics was met with resistance precisely because it was unimaginable, and required to give up how not just common sense but also how traditional physics pictured the world.

There are experiences of encounters with reality that are so close that even images end. This is a feature of ordinary reality, as we have seen, and that is what makes the experiences so remarkable; however, this feature is more typical of spiritual experiences. The latter is where Murdoch, usually fond of (the right kind) of images, finds a more proper space for imageless experience:

> In the spiritual hierarchy of the *Republic, dianoia*, discursive understanding as selfless wisdom, is the highest image-using condition. Noesis is an indescribable mystical state, thinkable perhaps as contemplation of the Form of the Good, a passionate stilled attention, wherein the self is no more …. Christian

[55] [7], p. 110.

[56] [14], pp. 208–209.

theology would speak of the beatific vision. About this Dante tells us that the beholder has neither the knowledge nor the power to speak, since the intellect, nearing its desired object, *deepens* so that memory cannot retrace its steps.

perché appressando sè al suo disire,

nostro intelletto si profunda tanto,

che dietro la memoria non pub ire.

(Paradiso I 7–9)[57]

Not even memory. In Labatut's narration, Schrödinger did not remember how he arrived at his wave theory, on which he worked during a sleepless night in a sanatorium, and even later he struggled to reconstruct it, and even then, at least according to Heisenberg, he did not fully understand it. (Heisenberg thought that Schrödinger's waves were a set of superimposed possibilities, not a real feature of electrons. Schrödinger entertained the idea, but in his sober moments even the creator of the theory could not conceive of it that way.)

The experience of reality as essentially ungraspable. This feature creates a fundamental distance between us and the real. Reality is resistant because, seen up close, it does not have the features that allow us to comprehend it. Yet it is unmistakably *there*. The resistance seems to be at the heart of things. While we can experience this resistance in our encounters with grass and squirrels, the quantum physicists offered an explanation as to why that is the case: not a limitation but a mismatch, a separation, emerging in moments of attention, that we can neither evade nor overcome.

7 Ego-Death Revisited

This interpretation of the resistance that attentive encounters with the real can generate takes us to attempt number four, which does not replace but supplements and develops the second and third, uniting the defeat of the understanding and of the self as a whole. The un-graspability of the real, manifest in nothing but our awareness that it exists, that it is there, implies a form of distance and separation that is hard to sustain by the self, as it constitutes at the same time a denial of the self—which, as Murdoch points out, is composed of the striving for unity on the one hand, and the minimal potential for understanding that is required of us to operate within the world on the other. This element brings us closer to Simone Weil, who unlike Murdoch argued for a total removal of the self in attention: 'To see a landscape as it is when I am not there…'.[58] Weil claims that in full attention we see the world without

[57] [14], p. 319.

[58] [17], p. 42.

us.[59] That is, at least, without anything that makes us us: without action, thought, imagination.

The utter reality of what we encounter—be it an electron, a squirrel, a rock—is available to us through *our own* utter reality, that is, nothing more than the fact that we exist. In the encounter, we are as close as possible, but also utterly separate—we cannot act on the real, we cannot even comprehend it. Nor are we, at that point, identified with our familiar self. This amounts precisely to Murdoch's ego-death, refashioned in stillness and removed from art into formless territory. In the encounter, the real and the observer are fixed in a moment, where both its existence and our own are laid bare. Unadorned by understanding, thought, or action. There is a purity that is unbearable, as Murdoch also remarks about the 'immobility' of the Platonic forms. In an easily neglected passage we read: 'Plato's separate eternal unresponsive Forms are magnetic objects of love, but they are also symbols of death which are only truly grasped as such by a purified Eros'.[60] There is, then, some space for a more radical idea of death of the self in Murdoch, who at times contemplates the possibility of giving up more than she, in the rest of her philosophy, seems willing to. And that is what, I am arguing, her very exhortation to attention can lead to.

8 From Metaphysics to Experience

I have described how the defeat of the self and the distance of reality are present in both Labatut and Murdoch, yet in their nature, and in the experience that arises from them, the two part ways. In one case, it generates resistance. In the other, it more often generates joy. In this section, I want to suggest that the experience of resistance is more primary, while the experience of joy is explained by Murdoch's metaphysical idea of the Good.

First, as we have seen, Murdoch's encounter with the real is primarily an encounter with something that we can, albeit always and necessarily imperfectly, imagine and understand, because her concept of reality is both distant and present—distant as a standard, and present as something that yields itself to our grasp. As Lesley Jamieson writes, for Murdoch 'there is bound to be a gap between our image of the other and their reality, but we should not conclude that there is no substance for us to struggle to understand'.[61] Second, for Murdoch, every encounter with the real occurs in relation to the Good, as that which directs and animates (through *eros*) our desire for reality; the Good is also 'incarnate' in the world in various ways and degrees. These elements enable us to feel joy in the encounter with the rock because we feel that, in some way, the Good is present.[62] It is significant that all apprehensions of reality are perfectible,

[59] 'Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the I disappears—is required of me' (Weil [], p. 118); 'The only way to truth is through one's own annihilation' [18], p. 27). This idea is supported by her metaphysical view of the self as an interference in God's fullness of being.

[60] [14], p. 122.

[61] [6], p. 91.

[62] A similar structure, I believe, is found in Sophie Grace Chappell's idea of epiphanies, which she defines as 'encounters with values' [2], p. 117). This is why I prefer to refrain from calling the encounters I'm concerned with 'epiphanies'.

for the Good is an ideal: the real, then, is that to which we constantly approximate, but never fully attain. As I indicated at the start of the paper through the dichotomy of movement and stillness, although there are experiences of full presence, for Murdoch our apprehension of the world is constantly and inherently in progress, so there is, in principle, always something further to grasp.[63] We can stop attending, be satisfied with what we have seen, for practical purposes, but we know the path can continue. This avoids any radical resistance, because reality, in this picture, is more like a series of gates to be opened than a wall. Movement, joy, and ordinariness intersect.

These two elements—the mobile and partially graspable nature of the real, guided by the Good—defy both the fixity that we find in the resistant encounters, where we feel there is nowhere to go, and the experience of bare existence, devoid even of value, that these encounters bring. The world as seen by the physicists is unknowable because of its nature, the indeterminacy that defies any order and unity our minds may try to employ, defying even the idea of a fixed reality that is accessible—or inaccessible—to an observer. Encountering such reality offers no hope of progress nor a (metaphysical) structure. Reality, in both cases, is revealed as separate from us, and thus potentially an object of love, but in this case the separation is final, and not progressive. We can say: The quantum reality is *never fixed*. The Murdochian reality is *always retreating*.

When we experience the stillness of an encounter that seems to reveal a reality in its full presence, we feel we have nowhere to go. That is the image of resistance—or 'madness', because our mental resources are defeated. This reality seems to be beyond even the Good, because comprehension breaks down, and with it even the basic unifying category of the Good. Even if the real *was* good, it could not be perceived as such. Stillness, resistance, and strangeness mark this encounter. This resistance can *then* become joy or anxiety or perhaps nausea or terror. We can 'do' things with our experience: conceptualise it, frame it, exalt it, use it to ground our worldview. But *in* the experience, there is nothing to be done, and there is no conclusion that the experience of the real itself forces us to draw. That is why we can interpret resistance to be more primary than joy.

Resistance is more primary not only than joy, but than other negative affective responses too, which may also disclose a metaphysics that determines them, and an interpretation that is possible only outside of the experience itself. Take Roquentin's nausea in Sartre's novel of the same name. Murdoch herself worries: 'Why does Sartre find the contingent over-abundance of the world nauseating rather than glorious?'.[64] Her concern is that through this experience, Sartre goes on to conclude that the world is ultimately meaningless and therefore we do not have to respond to its demands. But bare existence neither affirms nor denies a world in which we find things meaningful, understand or fail to understand them, act according to a moral demand, and so on.[65] To experience the 'pointless' existence of something is to frame and conceptualise it. Both nausea and joy seem to latch on to something further—but just a little bit. We can say these responses are *on the way to or out of* the experience

[63] On Murdoch's perfectionism, see [5].

[64] [13], p. 49.

[65] As Zanetti notes, although there is nausea around it, the experience itself for Roquentin is not negative.

of the real. Even Lacan's anxiety, which he takes to be 'the typical symptom of any advent of the real', seems to be premised on the thought that the real *should* include or welcome us.[66]

9 Conclusion

I have argued that while Murdoch's ethics connects attention to reality with joy, moral progress, and deepened understanding, there is a further phenomenology of the attentive encounter that her work does not fully capture: encounters with reality that arrest rather than advance understanding, and that register affectively as resistance rather than fulfilment. The explanation, I have argued, is that these encounters defeat the self in its desire for understanding and continuity, confronting us with the bare existence of ourselves and of the world.

In these encounters, starkly pictured through Labatut's physicists, reality is experienced as ultimately close and at the same time as pushing us away. These are encounters with nothing more (or less) than the reality of something in its particularity. Joy, nausea, and anxiety are, unlike resistance, evaluative responses, where the reality encountered begins to take on a meaning for us. My suggestion has been that there may be a more fundamental and raw phenomenology.

10 Epilogue: A Return to the Ordinary

When we return from this vertiginous journey, how do we go about our business? In Labatut's story, those who stared at the smallest elements of the world did not. But most of us can and do. There is an ordinary kind of realism, as we saw, and that's what Murdoch more often invokes.

Because the demand to encounter the real is itself rather 'mad'. In her discussion of tragedy, Murdoch acknowledges: 'There is in a sense "no reason why" we should attempt to live "out there" in a full consciousness of the horrors of life. If we can we forget them. Perhaps a saint can sustain such a consciousness without defiling it'.[67]

Yet, even in calling for her kind of more ordinary realism, and the attention it requires, Murdoch was also opening the door to a different level of confrontation with reality, one whose difficulty surpasses even the moral sphere. We are unable to confront the real not only because we are lazy or selfish. We are unable to confront the real because in some fundamental sense the real is not made for us.

In this spirit, Murdoch quotes Heidegger's recuperation of the Greek idea that human life is '*deinos*', at the same time terrible and wonderful. Encountering the real is not just an experience of joy and love. I think, at its closest points, it is more likely to be one of resistance, where wonder and terror, if they later on appear, flow

[66] [8], p. 23.

[67] [14], p. 93. I take saints here to represent people who are also 'mad', much like the physicists, insofar as they do not adhere to our shared norms of understanding the world,although they represent an ideal, it may be, like the Good, essentially ungraspable.

into each other without fixed point, like the electrons that shapeshifted under Heisenberg's calculations. In those encounters we experience both the madness of reality, its refusal to adhere to our laws and categories, and our own madness if we are to make room for its radical alterity and our own relative existence.

In the Epilogue of Labatut's novel, we read that a vegetable plague, a 'terrible verdure,' is spreading around the earth, like the proliferation of plants feared by Fritz Haber, who saved countless lives due to his invention of a nitrogen fertilizer and who caused mass deaths due to his invention of chlorine gas used in the war.[68] Like a grotesque rewriting of George Eliot's words, the narrator exhorts us to attend to this verdure: 'Listen to it grow'.[69]

But life, in the novel, has not yet utterly transformed under the terrible greenness. On one of his walks, the unnamed narrator meets 'the night gardener': a former mathematician who now lives alone, at the foot of the mountains in Chile and who tends to plants in the dark when, he claims, the plants are less disturbed because they sleep. Formerly a follower of Alexander Grothendieck, the gardener explains that it is really mathematics that is changing the world so as to make human life incomprehensible. Especially after quantum mechanics, he says, '"even scientists no longer understand the world." So he gardens now'.[70]

Acknowledgements A previous version of this paper was presented at the Iris Murdoch Conference: Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue at Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University in April 2024. I am grateful to the participants for helpful conversations. Thanks especially to Megan Laverty and Luca Zanetti.

Author Contribution I am the sole author of the manuscript, all content is original and has not been submtited elsewhere.

Funding This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project 'Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building' (reg. no.: CZ.02.01.01/00/22_008/0004595).

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

[68] [7], p. 30-33.

[69] [7], p. 175.

[70] [7], p. 187.

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