

Post-Critical Platonism:

Preliminary Meditations on Ethics and Aesthetics in Iris Murdoch and Michael Polanyi

Martin E. Turkis II

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

If I am learning...Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. *Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.* The honesty and humility required of the student – not to pretend to know what one does not know – is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory...*studying is normally an exercise of virtue as well as of talent and shows us a fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world.* (1971, 89 italics mine)

The parallels with Polanyi's analysis of the heuristic passion that leads to discoveries are quite clear:

To see a good problem is to see something hidden and yet accessible...a possible gap in our knowledge. To undertake a problem is to commit one-self to the belief that you can

fill in this gap and make thereby a new contact with reality. *Such a commitment must be passionate; a problem which does not worry us, that does not excite us, is not a problem; it does not exist.* Evidence is cast up only by a surmise filled with its *own particular hope and fervently bent on fulfilling this hope.* Without such passionate commitment no supporting evidence will emerge, nor failure to find such evidence be felt; no conclusions will be drawn and tested - no quest will take place. (1969, 194 italics mine)

My aim here is to explore philosophical resonances and affinities between Polanyi's ethically motivated epistemology and Murdoch's Platonism, with its focus on attentiveness. In the process I will argue briefly that Murdoch's Platonist virtue ethics can help to fill in an ontological gap in Polanyi's ethical thought and so provide a more trustworthy bulwark against moral nihilism than Polanyi's argument that "crasser interests" are (somehow) transformed "into moral principles" (1975, 213). In the future I hope to use this discussion as a springboard into an exploration of how Polanyi and Murdoch's insights might be combined into a concrete, coherent, and widely communicable post-critical approach to teaching ethics by means of the unselfing that Murdoch argues can take place through literary engagement and other aesthetic experiences. While my conclusion will make some preliminary stabs in the direction of this pedagogical project, my main concern here is to begin to explore and flesh out what I see as a potentially fruitful interplay between Murdoch and Polanyi in areas of ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology.

In one sense, the existence of mutually-reinforcing contributions from and between Murdoch and Polanyi is unsurprising. After all, their shared belief in the urgent need for "a deep-seated philosophical reform...that would radically alter prevailing conceptions...of the nature of knowledge and of creative achievements, the human agent who creates [...and] the entire fabric

of...culture” (Greene 1969, ix) led both of them to participate in the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity in the 1960s. Yet while some scholars have cited both thinkers in various contexts,¹ none (to my knowledge) has focused specifically on the ways in which their work is directly complimentary.

And so, in the passages above we see in Murdoch and Polanyi a shared concern with the importance of making contact with what Matthew Crawford would call “the reality beyond [one’s] head,” (2015) whether that reality be a new language, *Moby Dick*, some knotty problem of quantum physics, or the proper range of response to an ethical dilemma. Such contact with reality will necessarily involve, so these passages indicate, sustained attention to a constellation of subsidiary details not yet fully crystallized into a coherently integrated whole. And this attention, far from being mechanistic in nature, is motivated by *love* or *passion*. So much will no doubt be readily apparent to those well-versed in Polanyian epistemology, and such reverberations will make certain other similarities less than surprising. To wit, to Polanyi’s well-known aphorism, “we know more than we can say,” Murdoch adds that “where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*” (1971, 31 italics original).

But more unites these two than their shared interest in the structure of the skilled attention that constitutes much of knowledge. For while Polanyi is principally thought of as an epistemologist, the concerns over the erosion of various sorts of liberty that drew him from science to philosophy are ultimately moral in nature, as he indicates when he argues that

...freedom of thought...must disappear wherever *reason and morality are deprived of their status as a force in their own right*. When a judge ...can no longer appeal to law and justice; when neither a witness, nor the newspapers, nor even a scientist...can speak the

¹ Innis (2004), Waugh (2012) and Crawford (2015) are some examples.

truth as he knows it; *when in public life there is no moral principle commanding respect; when the revelations of religion and of art are denied any substance*; then there are no grounds left on which any individual may justly make a stand against the rulers of the day. (1975, 19 italics mine)

Furthermore, Polanyi's concerns include the fact that within Lockean liberalism, it is taken for granted that "...we must not impose beliefs that are not demonstrable" (1975, 9). Yet when applied to ethics, this means that

...unless ethical principles can be demonstrated with certainty, we should refrain from imposing them and should tolerate their total denial. But...ethical principles cannot, in a strict sense, be demonstrated...It would follow therefore that a system of mendacity, lawlessness, and cruelty is to be accepted...But a society in which unscrupulous propaganda, violence, and terror prevail offers no scope for tolerance. Here the inconsistency of a liberalism based on philosophic doubt becomes apparent: freedom of thought is destroyed by the extension of doubt to...traditional ideals, which include[e] the basis for freedom of thought. (1975, 9-10)

Such concerns lead to his desire to "amend our ideal of science by accrediting skills and connoisseurship as valid, indispensable, and definitive forms of knowledge" in order to "open the way to a far-reaching relaxation of the tension between science and the nonscientific concerns of man" (1975, 33).

Polanyi, then, makes his defense of the ethical life by reconstructing the epistemological foundations that would allow for the possibility of ethical knowledge. One of his most pressing concerns is the disintegration of ethical behavior (moral inversion) which results from the loss of meaning flowing from modernity's scientism. Polanyi's epistemology is aimed at attacking and

supplanting this scientism in order to restore the full scope of human meaning (including morality and ethics) as rationally intelligible to modern and post-modern humanity: “To produce, in a manner akin to art, a new moving vision of the world, imaginatively richer in the scope of its integration of disparate parts than those we have heretofore been offered by our scientific myth-makers” (1975, 107). Meanwhile, Murdoch’s proposals for a theory and practice of virtue ethics, focusing on the first-person phenomenal experience of morality, its metaphysics, and its ethical content, aim at a similar moral goal:

The ordinary person does not...believe that he creates value by choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. We are not usually in doubt about the direction in which Good lies...we recognize the real existence of evil: cynicism, cruelty, indifference to suffering. However the concept of Good still remains obscure and mysterious. We see the world in the light of the Good but what is the Good itself? (1971, 97-98)

How, then, to access the Good? Murdoch follows Plato, who

...assumes the internal relation of value, truth, cognition. Virtue...involves a desire for and achievement of truth instead of falsehood, reality instead of appearance. Goodness involves truth-seeking knowledge and *ipso facto* a discipline of desire. *‘Getting things right,’ as in meticulous grammar or mathematics, is truth-seeking as virtue. Learning anything properly demands (virtuous) attention. Here the idea of truth plays a crucial role...and reality emerges as the object of truthful vision, and virtuous action as the product of such vision* (1993, 39 italics mine).

Murdoch wishes to flesh out the unity of the Good, a unity that is not perfectly articulable, but which we may nevertheless approach by means of our own phenomenal, eidetic experience. In

Polanyian terms she here specifies some subsidiary details that serve as clues in a to/from sense leading to the discovery of the tacitly integrated gestalt, affirming thereby that "...to dedicate one's life to theoretic interests presupposes the virtue of *phronesis*" (Gadamer 1993, 111). She also aims to make recommendations as to how we might enact a practice of virtue ethics and approach the Good under our current cultural conditions by means of the unselfing (a term borrowed from Buddhist practice) achieved through proper attention to art and nature (1971), as well as the development and practice of demythologized religion (1993).

Her project thus fits into Polanyi's desire for cultural shifts designed to alleviate and overcome the instabilities inherent in modernity and liberalism. Given that for both the success of any such cultural shift will be bound up with its metaphysical foundations, I think a glance at the metaphysics suggested by Murdoch's ethics and Polanyi's epistemology is in order.

Metaphysics and Phenomena

As we saw earlier, both philosophers emphasize the importance of passionate and personal attention to external reality as key to discovery. They also affirm that the structure of more obviously tangible acts of skilled knowing can act as patterns, guides, and clues to the structure of more abstract acts of skilled knowledge such as those found in ethical life. As we will see later, Murdoch develops this shared terrain by emphasizing the role of our attraction to beauty in art as an intermediary between physical tangibility and abstract ethical reasoning which serves as an important element in the pursuit of a moral life. In addressing these common concerns, both thinkers take as their points-of-departure acts of skilled knowing that nearly all readers will recognize as parts of their own first-person, conscious experience (bicycle-riding, describing the face of a loved one, the momentary transport out of one's problems upon the experience of beauty, etc.) which they then analyze *without the intent to debunk but rather to*

affirm. In this sense, “the ordinary way is the way” (Murdoch 1993, 509). This concurrence on issues of attention to surrounding phenomena loosely amount to a sort of experiential or phenomenological evidence for realist, non-materialist metaphysics. Thus Polanyi recommends a “passionate recognition of a metaphysical reality, irreducible to material elements...,” (1975, 24) while Murdoch affirms that “there exists a moral reality, a real though infinitely distant standard” (1971, 31). Both thus radically affirm the evidential standing of everyday phenomenal experience for metaphysical judgments.

Polanyi and Murdoch’s approach to ontology *vis a vis* ordinary experience is in important respects similar to the eidetic reduction in the phenomenological tradition. By way of example, consider that Murdoch’s explorations of the good tend to unfold eidetically, paring away intuitively in order to get at the essence of some phenomena, as seen here:

...if we reflect upon courage and ask why we think it to be a virtue, what kind of courage is the highest, what distinguishes courage from rashness [...etc] we are bound...to use the names of other virtues. The best kind of courage (that which would make a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp) is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving...This may not...be exactly the right description, but it is the right sort of description. (Murdoch 1971, 57)

Similarly, Polanyi’s approach to developing his post-critical epistemology takes actual, embodied, acts of knowing and analyzes them eidetically in order to arrive at a more adequate description of the essence of knowledge. As Husserl points out, “eidetic seeing holds no more difficulties or ‘mystical’ secrets than does perception” (2002, 272). This gentle chiding of the mystical falls neatly in with the general current of Enlightenment disenchantment, but the tables can quite easily be turned: If the phenomenal is already the metaphysical, then the

correspondence of eidetic seeing with simple perception can be read as pointing to the primordially mystical nature of perception, which places us squarely in the Platonic/Aristotelian stance of wonder before the fitted-ness of world and mind as beginning of true philosophy.

Such Hellenic wonder is, alas, not our general cultural backdrop, not least in the world of education, where many of us ply our trades. What we see are rather “mechanistic methods of inquiry” which have “divorced our academic pursuits from...moral issues and made them merely ‘academic,’” leading many to “suspect our own moral motives, and [silence] our...best impulses,” potentially driving us toward “destructive forms of moral expression” by laying “...the groundwork for nihilism” (Polanyi 1975, 23).

One form of such destructive moral expression is overt violence, but another is a sort of apathetic moral impotence that creates a vacuum into which step individuals and institutions that control us to varying extents. Or, to invoke John Milbank’s rather salty formulation, “in a world where theoretically we don’t have a hierarchy, what we [really] have is a hierarchy of total shits” (2012). As we enter 2018 many would agree that the spirit of this quip has been made flesh. The shit has hit the fan.

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

An Ontological Gap?

This last comment about looking at paintings taps back into an important insight examined earlier, namely, that to carefully attend to something beyond oneself is itself an ethical act. While the epistemological structure of this sort of attention is well-described by Polanyi, Murdoch's insistence that such small acts of attention are themselves moral draws our attention to an important ontological difference between the two thinkers which is worth considering, for it may lead us to be able to fill in some less developed areas of Polanyi's thought. His grand project is ethically motivated; yet, his focus is not typically on the proper content and explicit ontological grounding of ethical conduct *per se*, taking these more or less for granted pending the solution of the epistemological problem. Thus Murdoch's Platonism might fill an important gap for the Polanyian thinker by providing a thicker description of moral ontology.

In order to illustrate what I am driving at here, let us consider Polanyi on political organization:

A political community must...depend upon...institutions to keep its political factions from destroying one another...in their efforts to achieve...power...These institutions are largely fortuitous, since they could hardly be designed by any interest groups, unless by groups of interests *each one* of which was so unsure of being able to run things in its own interest that it must strive for a set of institutions that could not be captured, *in toto*, by any one existing faction.

Should such a set of institutions develop, we would then have a very good example of a higher-level moral sphere existing on the basis of a lower-level sphere of profit, power, and parochialism of interest. [Thus...] certain boundary conditions, supplied mainly by a

set of institutions, would result in crasser interests being transformed, in operation, into moral principles, such as ‘justice.’ (1975, 212-213 italics original)

The problem here is that this mechanism is an analogue to Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand, insofar as it is a heretical form of the concept of divine providence, wrenched out of that concept’s proper metaphysical setting. It seems, that is, unlikely that the moral inversion Polanyi wishes to avoid in the future will be held at bay for long by “justice” which amount to “crasser interests” mysteriously transformed as opposed to Justice or the Good, which ontologically antedate the crass interests and thus, once epistemologically accessed by human persons, can sit in judgement over them. For this reason, I see Polanyi’s incisive epistemology and reasonable affirmation of realist, non-materialist ontology as being in need of a dose of Murdoch’s Platonism, which would hold that for crass interests to co-exist with, say, conditions of justice, they must be moderated, directed, and controlled by the cultivation of virtue every step of the way.

Polanyi sees the way to balance positive and negative conceptions of freedom as organizing society in a loose, mutually reinforcing but also mutually limiting network of “republics.” These small communities – the scientific community, the legal community, etc. each of which, in the pursuit of its own special sphere of inquiry, will provide elements of the constantly unfolding and ever-changing social “plan.” Polanyi openly acknowledges that this depends upon the rooting of the social fabric in a tradition which holds that this is the way things ought to be. He thus hopes to avoid the nihilistic excesses on the negative, utilitarian side, and the possibility of totalitarianism on the other. The question, however, is whether such small republics can be maintained for long when they have arisen within a purely voluntarist field of negative freedom informed nearly exclusively by utilitarian values?

For, then as now, there are plenty of distinguished participants in all of these specialized communities who, though exceptional participants in the technicalities of their chosen communities, are simultaneously utter rascallions in point of morals, or, (somewhat less troubling – but still troubling enough) will punt on any difficult questions of ultimate value.

Murdoch argues that the disciplined participation in the creation or reception of art, in the life of the scholar, in the learning of Russian, etc., are not merely analogous to nor even *transformed into* the life of virtue, but are rather to participate directly in the primordially available life of virtue. Yet, (and here lies the rub!) while these pursuits (or, as Polanyi might put it, republics) do indeed participate directly in the life of virtue, they do so *only partially*. This accounts for the fact that non-disciplinary skullduggery can happily co-exist with the virtuous minding of disciplinary Ps & Qs, but identifies this as *a moral failing*, thus avoiding the problematic inference that skullduggery *is the necessary precondition* of virtue. One doesn't want to tempt the nihilist too much, after all.

Art and Morality: Looking at Paintings and Literature

Let us allow Murdoch herself, then, to develop her view that skilled, disciplinary practice marked by passionate attentiveness, is a form of participation in the life of virtue in the context of aesthetics. She argues that

Art...is not...a side-issue, it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*...An understanding of any art involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority...evident degrees of merit...heights and distances; even Shakespeare is not perfect. Good art, unlike bad art...is something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness. We surrender ourselves to its *authority* with a love which is unpossessive and unselfish. (1971, 87-88 italics original)

This outer authority can be exercised by good art in Murdoch's view because she, like Plato and Polanyi,

...assumes the internal relation of value, truth, cognition. Virtue...involves a desire for...truth instead of falsehood, reality instead of appearance. Goodness involves truth-seeking knowledge and *ipso facto* a discipline of desire. 'Getting things right,' as in meticulous grammar or mathematics, is truth-seeking as virtue. Learning anything properly demands (virtuous) attention. (1993, 39)

Thus,

When we use...art as a clue, we may be able to learn more about the central area of morality [...by examining] what are essentially the same concepts more simply on display elsewhere...concepts as justice, accuracy, truthfulness, realism, humility, courage as the ability to sustain clear vision, love as attachment or even passion without sentiment or self. (1971, 89)

Attentiveness to art is therefore an "exercise of *detachment*" since

What is learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature [...*vis a vis*] the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life... great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being...appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. (1971, 65)

Murdoch often refers to this ongoing attempt to go beyond the confines of the self, to escape from Plato's mythic cave, and to make contact with reality as *unselfing*, and she takes it as axiomatic (in contrast to Lockean and Kantian liberals) that "the good life becomes increasingly selfless through an increased awareness of, [and] sensibility to, the world beyond

the self” (1993, 53). Such unselfing, tantamount to fuller participation in the good life, takes place significantly (though not exclusively, and only partially) through our experience of beauty. Polanyi, I think, would likely agree, holding that “intellectual beauty... is a token of its contact with reality” (1962, 145). “But what, precisely, is beauty?” inquire the post-structuralist and other sceptics. Murdoch’s reply is that beauty is not precise in the critical sense at all, but is rather “the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and change of consciousness” (1971, 84). This is one example of how Murdoch affirms that the “‘essences’ grasped in eidetic seeing can be fixed in definitive concepts...and thereby provide possibilities for definitive and, in their way, objectively and absolutely valid statements” (Husserl 2002. 272). The fact that such statements will not be able to articulate the concepts without remainder is of little concern to her since she, like Polanyi, does not see such critical articulation as a prerequisite for knowledge. Her approach can fairly be considered post-critical in that it takes seriously the personal and phenomenal root of knowledge of beauty and, by extension, of the Good, despite being unable to exhaustively articulate them.

I take this account to be fundamentally correct, and while I acknowledge that for many the assumption of “the internal relation of value, truth, [and] cognition” (Murdoch 1993, 39) is itself highly problematic (let alone attentiveness to art as an ethical act or Murdoch’s definition of beauty, etc.). I do not plan to argue these points here; Murdoch has herself done a more admirable job of that than I could hope to.

Nevertheless, I am beginning to stake out a free-flowing amalgamation of Murdoch’s Platonism and Polanyi’s post-critical epistemology that dips freely into the phenomenological bag of tricks with an eye toward practical application *vis a vis* “a reconstituted education in the

liberal arts” (Deneen 2018, 127) which would focus explicitly on the experience of aesthetic phenomena as a point-of-entry into virtue. Let’s call this post-critical Platonism; it must needs remain, for the moment, a rather thin conception – an issue to be addressed at some time in the future, to be sure. And yet its prospects for thickening up seem to me good, given the robustness of the streams of thought flowing into it.

As it stands, however, I think such a post-critical Platonism will serve as the philosophical launching pad for some sketches of possible pedagogical moves which take as their starting point the insights into ethics and aesthetics summed up earlier on, the *modus operandi* being Murdoch’s admonition that students ought to be taught to look at paintings, or to things like them, and get them right. What would such an approach entail? The following are some preliminary gestures in what I hope is the right direction.

First, such a popular, post-critical ethical and aesthetic pedagogy would aim to explicitly cultivate in students the sort of virtuous attention that Murdoch, along with Polanyi, practices and analyzes. While many schoolchildren may not spend as much time as Murdoch would have liked looking at pictures and getting them right, nearly all students in the Anglo-American world spend a fair amount of academic time looking at another type of art – literary texts. This means that, institutionally speaking, the cultivation of virtuous attention might be most easily communicated and widely disseminated by embedding in the English curriculum a post-critical approach to literary culture that makes explicit, wherever possible, the moral dimension of attentiveness and getting things right.²

The post-critical pedagogue working in such a vein would seek to inculcate attentiveness at a variety of levels, beginning with a more detailed awareness of students’ own first person phenomenal experience as subjects (perhaps by introducing simple meditative and

² See also Turkis 2017.

phenomenological practices) and extending and connecting such enhanced cognizance to rigorous, disciplinarily-focused attention to literature and art. In connecting these two spheres of attention, she ought to provide students with structures and vocabulary that help them to identify and describe in detail the literature they are attending to as well as their own experience of the work – that is to say the effect wrought on their own phenomenal experience by the art as well as their process of literary indwelling (here I anticipate the usefulness of C.S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* as well as Polanyi's epistemology). The idea would be to help students *self* themselves through the phenomenological and meditative work so that they can be appropriately *unselfed*. Finally, the moral dimension of such attentiveness would need to be addressed explicitly (by reading and discussing philosophical ethics with an emphasis on virtue ethics).

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

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