# A "Godless" Road to Redemption?
## The Moral Visions of Arthur Schopenhauer and Iris Murdoch

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*§ 1. The Problem and its Context: Introductory Remarks[1]*

How might we discern the true relationship between the description and explanation of the world and the enhancement of existence (what we might call a "path of salvation") in the writings of these two thinkers, separated by approximately a century, who were apt to "swim against the tide" of the predominating academic voices of their day? In particular, given that Murdoch rejects those theories of ethics which dismiss all talk of the transcendent, how does she, as Peter Byrne has asked, justify a transition from a phenomenology of morals to metaphysical discourse which involves reference to the transcendent as real?[2] Despite a still greater willingness to speak *of* the transcendent (whilst maintaining, as a transcendental idealist that we could not "know" that transcendent as such), how does Schopenhauer make such a transition as well?

Such questions prove particularly interesting, because *neither* thinker relies upon any notion of God or – it would appear – any other explicitly religious conception of ultimate reality. Indeed, both offer a critique of religious belief which involves rejecting the form of theism which they associate with Christianity. And yet both have much to say concerning religion that is positive, also, including Christianity. The initial answer to this "Godless road to redemption" conundrum,[3]

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1  I shall use the following standard abbreviations for the main works of Schopenhauer which are here relevant: FR – *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (*Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde*). La Salle, IL: Open Court 1974; WR (I&II) – *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*). New York: Dover 1969; BM – *On the Basis of Morality* (*Über die Grundlage der Moral*) Oxford: Berghahn 1995; MSR (I–IV) – *Manuscript Remains* (*Der Handschriftliche Nachlass*). Oxford, Berghahn 1995; FW – *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will* (*Über die Freiheit des menschlichen Willens*). Cambridge: CUP 1999; P (I&II) – *Parerga and Paralipomena* (*Parerga und Paralipomena*). Oxford: Clarendon 1974; WN – *On the Will in Nature* (*Über den Willen in der Natur*). Oxford: Berghahn 1992. I have employed Eric Payne's standard translations from the above editions throughout.

2  Byrne, Peter: *The Moral interpretation of Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press 1998, 103.

3  Or we might say the conundrum of moving between the description and enhancement of reality/existence, which could be further qualified *because* both philosophers appear to make such

seems to be that both thinkers *believe* that their espousal of a two-way account of the relation between knowledge of reality and morality (both elements being part of the schema of a godless "doctrine of salvation") does not, in the end, appear contradictory but is rather a consistent position to adopt.

Schopenhauer's *Basis of Morality* proceeds analytically (and *a posteriori*) from descriptions of moral behaviour towards a metaphysics of morals (mirroring Kant's *Grundlegung*), but his ethical writings in *The World as Will and Representation* proceed *synthetically* (and *a priori*) from his metaphysical position outlined in its earlier parts. Murdoch fluctuates even more often between such methods of enquiry. But the crucial equation for both thinkers is that the virtuous person possesses a "deeper" knowledge of reality *and* that such knowledge inspires virtuous conduct. Schopenhauer was convinced that there *must* be a moral significance to the world and not simply a physical one. He believed such a form of materialism is what various faiths have personified as the "Antichrist".[4] It would appear that such a contention would accord with Murdoch's belief that "there appears to be an internal relation between truth and goodness and knowledge."[5] Indeed, Schopenhauer went so far as to state that, *all* philosophical systems, aside from "strictly material" ones, "agree, whatever their other differences, on one point; the most important thing, indeed the only essential thing of the whole of existence, that on which everything depends, the real significance, the point (*sit venia verbo*) of it, lies in the morality of human conduct".[6] Although it may well surprise some readers of numerous philosophical textbooks to learn that Schopenhauer believed that moral truths help reveal the essence of the world, that this was his consistently expressed position is beyond question.[7]

As for readers of Murdoch, one finds morality a constant theme in most of her writings – even, perhaps especially, throughout her many novels. Like Schopenhauer, in both an intellectual sense, as well in terms of her own personal life, she realized that engaging with moral quandaries, i. e., the struggles to discern what might constitute good or evil in given contexts, was a complicated and often "messy" business. Nonetheless both thinkers were utterly convinced that such is a necessary and unavoidable undertaking.

This paper will raise certain parallel difficulties in the ethical-soteriological writings of these two thinkers. In particular, how each believes our attempts to describe and explain the world and human existence are linked to and shape our

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links without a conception of God or at least without recourse to conventional religious metaphysics, which have less trouble relating the two.

4   P II, 201. Obviously, his terminology here is somewhat awry as the term "antichrist", only makes sense in the context of Christianity, as such.

5   Murdoch, Iris: *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin 1992, 511.

6   WN, 3, cf., also, 139–140.

7   P II, ch. VIII, § 108.

attempts to improve and enhance that existence – both in individual and communitarian terms. In both we see the respective moral visions working towards a sense of what constitutes "salvation".[8] Of course, all such questions embrace a much wider field of enquiry, but I choose to narrow down the focus by concentrating upon these two philosophers who share many principles in relation to the question in hand, but whose methods and exposition of their theories differs significantly enough to warrant comparative analysis. I wish to see how, in Murdoch and Schopenhauer the "leap" is made from a descriptive to a moral interpretation of existence, and in particular of human life, without due recourse to an *acknowledged* and *articulated* ground of being or ultimate reality which might fully validate their metaphysical understandings of morality and doctrines of salvation.

A number of further considerations follow from such an undertaking. How is the moral gap between our moral aspirations and actual moral capabilities breached?[9] How valid is the metaphysical journey these thinkers pursue? What are the full implications of the links they make between description, aesthetics and ethics? Can descriptive metaphysics (including, but expanding upon the term's meaning in a Strawsonian sense) function as or give rise to revisionary metaphysics as seems to be implied in some of the writings of Schopenhauer and Murdoch? In the space allowed, it will not be possible to explore all of these questions in a detailed fashion – though I hope to at least try and address *some* of the major conundrums which the problem as stated here presents. Some words from Friedrich Nietzsche will help point towards themes that this paper will be concerned with, although the conclusions reached here will be very different, in comparison with the overall thrust of Nietzsche's moral philosophy.

> Because philosophers have frequently philosophized within a religious tradition, or at least under the inherited power of the celebrated "metaphysical need", they have achieved hypotheses which have in fact been very similar to Jewish or Christian or Indian religious dogmas, similar, that is to say, in the way children are usually similar to their mothers, except that in this case the fathers were not aware of this fact of motherhood […]. Every philosophy that exhibits a gleaming religious comet-tail in the darkness of its ultimate conclusions thereby casts suspicion on everything in it that is presented as science: all of that, too, is presumably likewise religion, even if it is dressed up as science.[10]

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8 Although Schopenhauer's and Murdoch's writings seem to suggest that the true relationship is circular (cf., e. g., Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 511), the usual limits of space dictate that, here, we shall proceed in the direction which leads from description to virtue, morality and enhancement. But this is a method of procedure and not a conclusive judgement upon the relationship itself.

9 On the notion of "moral gap", cf. Mannion, Gerard: *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality – The Humble Path to Ethics*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2003, 140–141 and also Hare, John E.: *The Moral Gap.* Oxford: Clarendon 1996.

10 Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Human All Too Human* I. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: CUP 1996, no. 110, p. 62.

*Five* particular and fundamental questions thus arise: firstly, can Schopenhauer's system be understood as fully coherent if he has no developed concept of ultimate reality or the "good" which tallies with his metaphysics of morals, and, secondly, given his "humility" or reticence to speak of that ultimate reality, should one describe his ethics not as a "humble path" (as he does himself), but rather as a "view from nowhere?" Furthermore, as such questions can also be put to Murdoch, does her own (admittedly – at times – seemingly meandering), attempt to construct a metaphysics of morals fare any better than Schopenhauer's and what insights can be gained from a comparative analysis of the two on such points? Drawing these questions together is a final question, concerning whether the moral visions offered by these two thinkers might best be labelled as ethical foundations or rather moral "theologies" without God?

In the English-speaking world, Schopenhauer is less famed for his ethics and doctrine of salvation than he is for his now somewhat notorious (and equally much misunderstood) doctrine of the "will" – that striving force which he employs as an explanatory hypothesis to account for the natural world and the state of everything which exists in it. Hence the pessimistic assessments of various facets of existence which followed from this doctrine of the will have equally came to be assumed as representative of the philosopher's worldview on the whole. Even a number of those who probe a little deeper into Schopenhauer's actual works usually emerge singing the praises of his aesthetics alone, and in particular his theories on art and music, as evidence that some positive elements are to be found in that worldview. And yet Schopenhauer, himself, believed that his ethical-soteriological thought was the most important part of his whole system. It is beyond the scope of a single article to outline this ethical-soteriological in great detail though I have sought to do so more thoroughly elsewhere.[11]

## § 2. The Path of Progression in Schopenhauer's Metaphysical Questions and Moral System

So we turn first to Schopenhauer, whom I believe to be a seminal thinker in relation to the dawn of postmodernity. He is obviously the philosopher who grappled with these issues first and whose work, furthermore, exerted a considerable influence upon how Murdoch proceeded in response to the same challenges. So here we begin with some introductory reflections upon the *modus operandi* of Schopenhauer before proceeding to explore ways in which the two thinkers parallel one another.

Schopenhauer's system initially deals with fundamental questions of epistemology – most importantly the nature of representation itself – his magnum

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11  Again, see Mannion, Gerard: *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*; see also Mannion, Gerard: Mitleid, Metaphysics and Morality – Interpreting Schopenhauer's Ethics. In: *Jb.* 83 (2002), 87–117.

opus beginning with the stark declaration "Everything that in any way belongs and can belong to the world is inevitably associated with […] being-conditioned by the subject, and it exists only for the subject. The world is representation".[12] He then proceeds to outline a form of *descriptive* metaphysics and, in his essay *On the Basis of Morality*, develops a descriptive *ethics*. However, it should be noted that the essay, itself, has its initial method of procedure somewhat dictated by the fact that it initially represents an attempt to answer the questions set by the Royal Danish Society of Scientific Studies concerning where an *objective* foundation for morals might be found (e. g. such as in consciousness or elsewhere). But Schopenhauer is so convinced that the answer to such a question is bound up with more general questions in metaphysics (and hence, we might say, that descriptive and revisionary metaphysics are inseparable), that he sees fit to offer more than the Society requested in his own answer (thereby both confusing and upsetting the judges who refuse him the prize, even though his was the only entry!) As Schopenhauer explains:

> For just as every religion on earth by prescribing morality does not leave it at that, but gives it support in a body of dogmas whose chief purpose is, precisely, to support, so in philosophy the ethical foundation, whatever it be, must itself have its point of support and prop in some system of metaphysics, that is, in the given explanation of the world and existence generally. For the ultimate and true explanation of the nature of the totality of things must necessarily be closely connected with that concerning the ethical significance of human conduct.[13]

Here we see particular parallels with Murdoch's stated aims behind her Gifford lectures, namely, to argue that metaphysics can serve as a *guide* to morals, but more of this later. It should be noted that Schopenhauer specifically rejects what he terms as "the" theological form of ethics – essentially the Divine Command model, "For ordinary men morality is founded on theology as the expressed will of God",[14] but he likewise challenges what he perceives to be philosophical "sophistry" which has tried to skirt around challenges to the theological foundation of morality.[15] He suggests that most ancient theories of morality were ethics of *eudaemonism* and most modern ones ethics of *salvation*. Thus he argues that while the ancients tried to show that virtue and happiness are the same thing, the moderns sought to demonstrate that the latter would naturally follow as the consequence of the former. But in order to do so "they needed the assistance either of a world different from any that could be possibly known, or of sophisms".[16]

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12  WR, 3.
13  BM, 40–41.
14  BM, 43.
15  Cf., e. g., BM, 44 and § 2.
16  BM, 48.

He devotes much space to rejecting what he regarded as one of the more successful modern ethical theories, that of Kant, for he believes not only is Kant's approach really "disguised" theological morals but it is also ultimately a eudaemonistic form of ethics, being reliant upon hoped-for rewards or fear of punishment all the same.[17] Among the ancients only Plato, appears to be different (and here we have an early key to Murdoch's ethical affinity with Schopenhauer's works): "[…] Plato alone forms an exception, for his ethics is not eudaemonistic, but instead mystical".[18] However, bear in mind that here Schopenhauer is criticising his fellow-philosophers, and not thus categorising all religious forms of ethics in this manner. I suggest that this proves significant, given the direction in which his own ethical theory will develop.

But what proves of especial interest in relation to the theme of this paper, is that Schopenhauer's ethical system then moves on, quite deliberately, towards a metaphysics of morals. That is to say, it proceeds beyond the purely descriptive and even into speculation about that which is beyond the phenomenal. Schopenhauer then further "transgresses" the rules of the transcendental idealist method which he inherits from Kant and moves into a *revisionary* and eventually, I suggest, *soteriological* mode of enquiry. All of this, by his own admission, is informed by and building upon his earlier descriptive metaphysics and ethics.[19] In other words, Schopenhauer's philosophical writings concerning reality and ethical behaviour all serve towards the purpose of helping him form the soteriological "doctrines" that he states represent the pinnacle of his overall philosophical system itself.

However, a particular issue emerges with regard to his method of procedure here. Given certain aspects of his descriptive metaphysics and ethics, it does appear that Schopenhauer makes a somewhat unqualified "leap" from the descriptive elements of his thought to the moral-soteriological elements without sufficiently clarifying nor justifying the grounds upon which and methodological procedures through which he is entitled to make such a leap.[20]

The problematic here deepens because, despite Schopenhauer's clearly stated reluctance and agnostic refusal to engage in descriptive speculation concerning

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17  Cf., BM, Part II.

18  BM, 49. Here we also see a glimpse of Schopenhauer's influence upon Wittgenstein, with the latter's writing on ethics also proving influential upon Murdoch herself, thereby consolidating the influence of Schopenhauer further still.

19  The empirical ethical approach is, of course, more utilised in the second and third editions of *The World as Will and Representation*, than the first, following the completion of *On the Basis of Morality* in 1839.

20  Again, c.f. Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality* and Mannion, "Mitleid, Metaphysics and Morality".

the noumenal,[21] it would appear that the moral-soteriological aspects of his thought actually presupposes much concerning the noumenal realm of ultimate reality itself. Despite Schopenhauer's insistence that the state which he describes as the attainment of salvation – the "peace that is higher than all reason", along with the realm of the noumenal, itself, are both beyond literal description, he nonetheless then goes on to say a great deal about the path to that salvation in relation to the world he *does* describe. Furthermore he believes that his *descriptive* account of ethics, that is to say his explanation of the differing moral and anti-moral incentives and forms of behaviour, somehow furnishes us with some greater insight into the "true" nature of ultimate reality and of our very being itself. His doctrine of salvation therefore *follows* from this.[22]

For Schopenhauer, the prime motivating factor in human beings is *egoism* – i. e. we are primarily, and for the vast majority of the time driven by the pursuit of our own desires/well-being and self gain.[23] Occasionally, humans are driven by malice where we are motivated by the "woe" of another even though it brings us no personal gain. Given that we can never be fully satisfied, Schopenhauer (acknowledging parallels with various faiths in coming to such conclusions, most notably Buddhism and certain ascetic forms of Christianity) believes that our only hope of salvation is to be free from this "driving", insatiable will which underlies existence. Hence his aesthetic theory points to those experiences such as of art, literature, drama and, above all, music as being capable of raising us "out of" the thralls of this will-driven existence and stilling our craving. But such a finding of peace is only a *temporary* transcendence. To move towards true salvation, we must attempt to defeat the hold of such ceaseless craving upon us or, in Schopenhauer's terms, to "*deny* the will" as fully as possible. "Nirvana" or bliss will only be achieved when we have finally defeated the will in our own selves and come to a fuller appreciation of reality, realising the "nothingness" of this striving, selfish world. The path of virtue, holiness and asceticism is the means by which we can achieve such a "denial of the will".

What, then of ethics in this soteriological scheme? For Schopenhauer, the only guarantee that an act is morally virtuous is the absence of *all* egositic motivation entirely. Indeed, it involves an expression of true justice or, better still philanthropy, loving-kindness, *agape* and the realisation that the boundaries

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21 In this he is firstly remaining, he believes, faithful to Kant's transcendental idealism and secondly to his own work on the limitation of knowledge and, in particular, explanation in FR.

22 Such considerations are not unrelated to the debates concerning fact and value, ought and is, although they warrant a separate treatment because of the notion of "salvation" introduced and the nature that such takes in Schopenhauer, as well as Murdoch.

23 As in Kant, for Schopenhauer this egoism goes beyond the healthy aspect of self-concern. I discuss Schopenhauer's analysis of egoism in some detail in *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, ch. 6, 189–220. Mannion, Gerard: Kant and the Defeat of Egoism: Schopenhauerian Concerns and Some Reappraisals and Rejoinders. In: *Kant-Studien* 99/2 (2008), 220–228.

between self and other are really only phenomenological illusions. It involves a coming to appreciate the weal and woe of another as if they were our own – but realising that while they are not our own yet we still feel the pain or joy of another *as if it were our own*. In other words, the expression of *compassion* (*Mitleid*) is the *sole* basis of morality. The compassionate act shows that egosim and selfish willing have been overcome and the agent has intimated something of the truth of reality "Hence knowledge of the whole, of the inner nature of the thing-in-itself [[…]] becomes the *quieter* of all and every willing".[24] The compassionate person realises the ultimate (transcendent) unity of all beings.

So virtue and holiness and, within this scheme, morality guided by compassion, constitute the road to salvation which culminates in that transcendent "peace that is higher than all reason"[25] – we break free from the ceaseless willing. This path, which many "saints" have traversed is not the only way. If we are not quite made of the stuff of saints, the same realisations about the nature of existence and ultimate reality can come to us through the harsh lessons of pain and suffering. Hence a "second way" of salvation is possible. Indeed, Schopenhauer feels it may be the way in which most humans become "purified" from the erroneous life of will-driven (i. e. dictated by egoistic/selfish desire) existence.[26] Somewhat anticipating Nietzsche's critique of morality (after he had rebelled against Schopenhauer in certain ways, having originally been profoundly influenced by him – indeed many of Nietzsche's key formative ideas are really rehashed Schopenhauer in one form or another), he states that "the good man is in no way to be regarded as an originally weaker phenomenon of will than the bad, but it is knowledge that masters in him the blind craving of will".[27] Having thus outlined these important areas of Schopenhauer's philosophy relevant to our concerns, let us now turn to consider Murdoch's contributions, particularly in the light of the direction in which both her own and Schopenhauer's moral vision develop from their metaphysical starting points.

### § 3. Murdoch and Schopenhauer's "Shared Metaphysical Journey"

Iris Murdoch's ethical writings follow a not dissimilar path to those of Schopenhauer. They proceed from her analysis of moral philosophy and moral discourse in general, towards a moral realism which draws heavily upon a descriptive account of the actual human experience of morals, values and, in particular, of "the good". But she then moves on to attempt to construct some form of "soteriology" backed up by a form of "theology" which strives to provide a grounding

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24  WR I, 379.
25  WR I, 411
26  WR II, 636.
27  WR I, 371.

for her understanding of morality. As with Schopenhauer, it first appears that Murdoch's path to salvation is one that develops without recourse to any explicit conception of a god, transcendent deity or of ultimate reality of any obvious religious form.

Murdoch strives for a metaphysics of morals which relies upon metaphysics as our interpretative "guide" to understanding the nature and processes of human evaluation and hence virtue, itself. Her early essay "On Perfection" leads to more detailed reflection upon the relations between the notions of "God" and "good" and to her seminal essay on the "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts".[28] In her later work, these earlier and subsequent reflections lead naturally to an attempt to rework the ontological argument for the existence of God into a justification of her own version of moral realism and understanding of the good.

In her famous Gifford lectures, Iris Murdoch poses a challenging question: "Are there […] some ways in which, if we reflect about moral value, we cannot properly avoid picturing the world?"[29] So, in their different ways, both Schopenhauer and Murdoch alike sought to answer this question in the affirmative and to explicate in a vivid fashion those ways in which ethics is related to our knowledge of reality. On the one hand, our moral reflection enables us to make better sense of the world. But both philosophers seem to suggest, also, that a fuller understanding of the world and existence leads, somehow, to a more virtuous life. Murdoch pronounces that "true vision occasions right conduct" – that our relation to what is real brings us closer to what is good and thus things such as compassion and love follow from this.[30]

Both thinkers are also acknowledged masters of the art of description – both write so elegantly, littering their philosophy with images, stories and further allegories – seeking to help their reader to understand fully what it is they seek to describe and/or convey.

A further parallel can be identified in the fact that both Murdoch and Schopenhauer seek to fully integrate their aesthetical theory into their metaphysical undertakings on these matters, so that a further connection is seen between our "grasping" after meaning, knowledge and value and that which brings us to somehow "transcend" our normal "rootedness" in day to day "facts" and description: art, beauty and the sublime further cloud the methodological picture

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28  Collectively gathered together in Murdoch, Iris: *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: RKP 1970.

29  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 55.

30  Cf. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 66. And vice versa – cf. 37: "I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of "see" which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort". Stanley Hauerwas claims to have "made a career out of" this statement. Hauerwas, Stanley: Murdochian Muddles – Can We Get Through Them If God Does Not Exist? In: *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*. Ed. by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker. London: University of Chicago Press 1996, 190.

and become part of the "pilgrimage" to that mysterious aspect of being "beyond" description. And yet our aesthetical sense seeks to somehow "describe" or capture or represent precisely that which we find impossible to describe and explain in the ordinary fashion by putting it into words. Schopenhauer went further, still, seeing music as the highest form of philosophy in that it says without words that which *cannot* be said in words.[31] Imagination, itself, for Murdoch, is our pursuit of the truth and both philosophers linked that quest with our varied degrees of appreciation of the experience of transcendence[32] which brings us to a fuller understanding of that unified yet somehow indescribable "concept" understood as unconditioned reality (Schopenhauer) or the good (Murdoch).

A further similarity with Schopenhauer's philosophy is the *manner* in which Murdoch claims to eschew the "traditional" notion of a transcendent yet personal god, typified by their interpretation of classical Christian theism. Yet, as we shall see, both philosophers remain passionately committed to a moral interpretation of existence and the existence of an objective morality.

And yet considerations of what is most ultimately real, which might be termed in various ways the ground of being or the noumenal, alongside considerations of morality and virtue, indeed – as one in "the west" might say – questions of God and/or of "good" are never very far from the minds of these two thinkers who shared a common Platonic inheritance and also monism as a guiding principle. Both end up talking a great deal about "the mystical" in relation to morality and its transcendent basis or "grounding". Furthermore, as I hope to illustrate in the following section, a form of the *via negativa* is warmly embraced by both.

It is here, in particular, that a leap appears to have been made by Murdoch as much as Schopenhauer, bypassing the means by which, for example, many Christian ethicists would attempt to defend the notion of morality or a moral order and hence a doctrine of salvation – i. e. with recourse to a doctrine of ultimate reality which Christians call and claim to know as God.

It is necessary, I believe, to explore the methodological implications of such a moral leap further, given that it relates to a series of debates within many disciplines, particularly theology, philosophy and science. Religious belief systems and explanatory hypotheses are often criticised, including by Schopenhauer himself, for making such an unfounded leap. But first let us seek to discern and explore some further parallels and differences between these two supposedly "irreligious" or at least "non-religious" thinkers.

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31  WR I, 263–264; II, 406 and ch. XXXIX, *passim*.
32  Cf., e. g., BM, 41. The earlier Murdoch attempted to write about ethics as if she were in a world where one now had to do so *without* recourse to metaphysics (at least of a transcendent form), but the later Murdoch significantly changed her perspective and therefore method of approach in this respect, as I shall discuss below.

Schopenhauer's writings can be said to have influenced not just Murdoch but also Wittgenstein in a number of ways. In those same Gifford Lectures, Murdoch grapples with Wittgenstein's statement that our "running up against the limits of language is *ethics* […] In ethics we are always making the attempt to say something that cannot be said, something that does not and never will touch the essence of the matter […]".[33] Such a statement (itself partly shaped by Schopenhauer) is seen by Murdoch to mean that ethics "is at the border of experience".[34] Wittgenstein's preferred solution to the dilemma at the time was to refrain from attempting to describe those "things which cannot be put into words", such as ethics, which he termed "the mystical".[35]

A major problem here appears to be with the limits of description and explanation. As Karl Rahner tells us, even Wittgenstein's famous dictum that we must remain silent concerning that of which we cannot speak transgresses its own rule.[36] Furthermore, in line with the perennial disputes between those predisposed to a religious explanation of existence and those opposed to such, as well as the numerous debates concerning "fact and value", "ought and is", it would appear that ethics (and, consequently, meaning, purpose and fulfilment or, if one prefers, human well-being and "salvation") is something very much bound up with such problems concerning the limits of description.

Murdoch makes clear that she prefers the approach of Schopenhauer stating, herself, that while Wittgenstein opts for silence, Schopenhauer (despite, I would add, *claiming* to opt for a qualified silence), offers "a shadowy picture of a spiritual pilgrimage".[37] It is my contention that Murdoch, herself, also offers us such a "shadowy picture" of a (metaphysical) "pilgrimage" or journey. But here we need to consider whether such a journey is not inevitable in our attempts to make sense of the world and to understand the connections, if any, between our descriptive ventures and evaluations – our moral frameworks, principles, dispositions and eventual understanding of meaning and fulfilment or "salvation". Hence we are here concerned with the fundamental link between our understanding of how things are and our intimations of how things ought, should or might be.

## § 4. Bridging the Moral Gap? Value, Monism and Intuiting the "Good"

Despite what many a philosophy textbook may have us believe, in actual fact it is actually very *difficult* to pin down Schopenhauer's conception of ultimate reality

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33  Quoted in Waismann, Friedrich: *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*. Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1979, 68; cf. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 29.
34  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 30.
35  Wittgenstein, Ludwig: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. by C. K. Ogden. Henley-on-Thames: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981 (original trans. 1922), 6.522.
36  Rahner, Karl: *Foundations of Christian Faith*. London: Burns & Oates 1997, 51.
37  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 33.

from a consideration of his writings alone. And therefore the same follows, for the purposes of this paper, in relation to that which guarantees the coherence of his ethical system. As we have observed, this is partly because of his transcendental idealism – he admits we *cannot* speak with any degree of confidence concerning what ultimate reality is really like – in-itself. But the difficulty is also due to fluctuations in the tone and language of Schopenhauer's philosophy (thus offering different interpretations depending upon what aspects his language tends to emphasise).[38]

Nonetheless, it is equally fair to say that, for Schopenhauer, some understanding, intuition, feeling or – in some sense – "knowledge" of the "essence of the world", which his reasoning tells him cannot be explained in terms of plurality, (hence we may speak of it as "the whole"), is what leads to moral virtue, and on to the denial of the will and so salvation, itself.[39] He allows that this equates to some sense of a "highest good".[40] The ultimate unity/oneness of all beings is the profound insight which morality brings to the virtuous person.[41]

With regard to Iris Murdoch, one finds in her ethical writings a great deal of discourse concerning our (intuitive) conceptions of unity, of wholes and our understanding of the "good". Indeed, Murdoch mentions the human tendency even to gather notions of value(s) into a unified concept, understood as a "whole." This, of course, has particular relevance for theology and religion in general for, as Murdoch states, "The most familiar (western) concept which gathers all value together into itself and then redistributes it is the concept of

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38  Again, cf. Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, esp. ch. 7, 223–250 and cf., also chs. 6, 189–220 and 8, 251–281.

39  Cf., for example, Schopenhauer's doctrine of the "better consciousness" which remained with him, in some form or other, throughout most of his career. (I have described this notion (*besseres Bewußtsein*) as Schopenhauer's term for the eternal truths humanity seeks, i. e., our grasping after the transcendent: "This consciousness lies beyond all experience and thus beyond all reason, both theoretical and practical [instinct]", MS I, no. 35. Cf., also, MSR I, 23 ff.; no. 186, 111–112; no. 189, 113–114; no. 234, 147–149). See, also, "On the Metaphysical Explanation of the Primary Ethical Phenomenon", Part IV of his *On the Basis of Morality*, e. g., 206ff., esp. 207: "[…] but if *time* and *space* are foreign to the thing-in-itself, to the true essence of the world, so too must *plurality* be. Consequently, that which shows itself in the countless phenomena of this world of the senses can be only a *phenomenological appearance*". See, also, WR II, 642: "The *en kai pan*, [One and all] in other words, that the inner essence in all things is absolutely one and the same, has by my time already been grasped and understood […]. But *what* this one is, and how it manages to exhibit itself as the many, is a problem whose solution is first found in my philosophy." (!) A recent collection of relevance here is *Better Consciousness: Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Value*. Ed. by Alex Neill and Christopher Janaway. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2009 (which not surprisingly, I respectfully suggest, might have been more accurately subtitled "Schopenhauer's Doctrine of Salvation").

40  Albeit only allowing the use of such a term in a figurative sense, WR I, 362. As we will see, he wishes to distance himself from conceptions of the "good" in general.

41  Cf. BM 206–213.

God […]".[42] So Murdoch sees ideas concerning God and conceptions of "the good" as humanity striving for an understanding of "the whole". In fact Murdoch attempts to steer a path to ethics (with an acknowledged debt to Simone Weil, but also, I would add, a debt, albeit unacknowledged in many respects, to Schopenhauer in this area)[43] which is in one sense critically metaphysical and yet also "religious" in another sense. She wishes to avoid perceived pitfalls of both British empiricist ethics and of the formal types of existentialist ethics. This is where Murdoch's own reflections on unity and "the whole" become particularly evident, "Perhaps it is a matter of temperament whether or not one is convinced that all is one. (My own temperament inclines to monism)".[44]

So Murdoch is an important figure to examine not simply because she stands in a similar ethical school of thought to that in which Schopenhauer could best be placed (and their similarities are not limited to their both being considered as offering a form of "virtue ethics"), but also because of further similarities in relation to her treatment of the relations between morality, religion and mysticism and her focus upon the ideas – as difficult to define as they may be – of unity and the "good." Again, we can see that Schopenhauer – with the exception of his refusing to focus explicitly upon any idea of the "good",[45] dealt with the same questions in a not dissimilar manner. Hence much of Murdoch's moral reflections might help further elucidate certain tensions and difficulties encountered in Schopenhauerian ethics. For example, it can be said that Schopenhauer seeks to be both an empiricist and yet relies upon transcendental metaphysics. While Murdoch, as Heather Widdows has discussed, views the good as being "both transcendent and immanent", although Widdows suggests that the "good" in Murdoch is not designed to entail any "supernatural" connotations.[46]

If we contextualise Murdoch's moral philosophising a little more here, this might help to explain further why she roamed into religious areas of moral discourse so deeply. Murdoch felt that moral philosophy in the 1960s, was (and, in many cases, remained) both unambitious and unduly optimistic when compared with some of the "vanishing" images from Christian theology which portray goodness as something that is actually difficult to obtain and portray sin as a universal condition.[47] Again we find an analogous approach in Schopenhauer, in his rejection of eudaemonistic morality and likewise in his commendation of the realistic portrayal of the world that one can find in certain types of Christian-

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42  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 57.

43  Indeed, Weil made a concerted effort to study Schopenhauer closely.

44  Murdoch, Iris: On "God" and "Good". In: *The Sovereignty of Good,* 50.

45  WR § 65.

46  Widdows, Heather: Iris Murdoch's "good" – A Critical Analysis of its Nature and Relevance. In: *New Blackfriars* 82 issue 960 (Feb. 2000), 58–60. Cf. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 405; *The Sovereignty of Good, 93.*

47  Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 47 and, also 50–51.

ity.[48] In Murdoch's opinion moral philosophy should really be concerned with exploring the nature of the egoistic tendency so prevalent in humanity and with the task of how to overcome this. She readily admits that those moral philosophies which have attempted this have, in doing so, "shared some aims with religion".[49] We again hear echoes of Schopenhauer, in Murdoch's assertion that moral philosophy cannot be something that is neutral in character – it must adopt a stance.[50]

Murdoch's assessment of the problems facing contemporary moral theorists again underlines the fact that some understanding of goodness is therefore required in order to construct a coherent moral theory. But she further observes that a key difficulty which emerges here is that modern Western philosophy has actually allowed such notions as rightness, along with "sincerity" to supplant the concept of goodness, itself.[51]

The problem of the overt egoism of the human character is one which various religions and philosophies have sought to deal with.[52] Murdoch, herself believes that modernity has embraced an inflated, yet empty conception of the human will and that is a major problem for ethics.[53] But human nature must have something deeper than the "scientific self" which Murdoch believes has supplanted the philosophical self – or what I might say could be termed religious or spiritual self (cf. the idea of the soul). Schopenhauer's ethical method searched for what it was in the human being which was other than egoism and an ambitious over-confidence in the independence of its own rationality which results from such egoism.[54] Here Schopenhauer obviously crosses over into what concerns religion, although he approached his task in a manner which was different in many ways to the manner in which theologians would approach it.

But echoing, retrieving and utilising "religious" moral language in an equal fashion, we see that Murdoch seeks to paint a portrait of egoism as a sort of energy that drives human beings on and which needs to be "purified and redirected."[55] To the reader of Schopenhauer, this all sounds most familiar. As ob-

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48  Cf., for example, WR II, Chapter XLVIII: "On the Doctrine of the Denial of the Will-to-Live."

49  Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51.

50  Ibid., 52.

51  Ibid., 53.

52  As Schopenhauer readily acknowledged and learned from, here see Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, chapter 6 and Mannion, "Kant and the Defeat of Egoism".

53  Murdoch, On "God" and "Good", 76.

54  Cf. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 425, where Murdoch discusses the Ontological proof in relation to the flawed elements of human nature.

55  Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 54.

served above, Schopenhauer's ethics offers a detailed examination of egoism as the most widespread motivating factor behind "antimoral" actions.[56]

Murdoch also openly recognises that the attempt to reorientate that force which makes humanity so wayward is one of the most fundamental concerns of religion. Yet her attempts to embrace and appropriate the talk of the "death of God" (in the forms prevalent in the decades when she writing) leads to a number of difficulties and questions of consistency in relation to her appropriation of the moral aspects of religious worldviews, themselves. Perhaps offering some acknowledgment of this, Murdoch suggests a way in which the notion of God might remain of great value,

> God was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics.[57]

Indeed Murdoch, elsewhere, seems to undermine even her own such attempt to retain the concept of God, as we shall see and (if the assessment of those such as Heather Widdows proves correct) she runs into such difficulties because she treats God as a contingent object. Murdoch's relation with "God" fluctuates in a particularly significant fashion.

## § 5. The "Humble Path" by which the Journey Proceeds

I believe that the method of "the humble path to ethics" which Schopenhauer employs,[58] might here offer a useful means by which we might better understand and evaluate the metaphysical "journey" between description, explanation and enhancement made by both thinkers.[59] Aspects of this method have already been

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56 Cf., e. g., BM, § 14. And, again, c.f., Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, ch. 6 and Mannion, "Kant and Defeat of Egoism".

57 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 55 (author's italics).

58 Here building upon aspects of the interpretation of Schopenhauer's method given in my earlier study.

59 I have defined this "humble path" as a paradoxical method which seeks some "awareness" of the transcendent yet in tandem with an insistence that metaphysics itself remains "immanent". It entails an attempt to understand existence by confronting existence under the limits of possible understanding within that existence. This, in turn, involves examining the most immediate form of existence, i.e., the inner perception of the human awareness of itself. We then have a stretching of the limits of experience and knowledge still further, to their absolute boundary-line. Schopenhauer believed, as did in an analogous fashion, one might say, the philosophical theologian, Karl Rahner, that here being-itself in some fashion "communicates" "higher truths" to the knowing subject who seeks to understand the mystery of being and to live a fuller existence in the light of this. Fundamentally, mystery is where both leave their reader in conceptual terms (hence Schopenhauer has to break his own "rules", regarding the *PSR*). This is a key insight which Schopenhauer shares with modern theology. The "vertical dimension" of metaphysical enquiry remains a "this-worldly" dimension.

encountered above. Essentially, the "humble path" for Schopenhauer involves a due acknowledgement of the *limits* of our knowledge in relation to certain questions and aspects of life and a proceeding in a tentative fashion to discern whatever we can in relation to the pressing questions and concerns surrounding existence, meaning and fulfilment (empirical and *a priori* in methodological harmony, and yet tension). In my opinion, Schopenhauer inherited this humility in method both from Kant and from various religious writings. However, despite this admirable merging of epistemological and ethical concerns,[60] Schopenhauer did not always remain true to the "humility" of his method, at times (again, as indicated above) stating more of that which he said we cannot "know" in any full sense.

We find that many characteristics of Schopenhauer's method are also prevalent in Murdoch, not simply in terms of his direct influence, but also developed in her own particular way. So, for example, humility, itself, is also identified by Murdoch as a vital virtue in making this "pilgrimage" towards "salvation" with metaphysics as our guide to morals (for example, towards end of the published Gifford lectures she speaks a great deal about humility, although it is a theme in her earlier essays and indeed her novels as well).[61]

Many of the elements of the "humble path" method, relate to what might be called an "apophatic" approach (as we shall also explore, below), adopted by both thinkers. This relates to a method witnessed in many religious explanatory hypotheses – the *via negativa* – which, combined with an appreciation of the full limits of human language and descriptive capacities, has consistently proved an enlightening way of addressing the natural curiosity humans have about their existence and destiny. Many great theologians tell us that theology – discourse about "God" – is concerned with a profoundly difficult undertaking – seeking to explain something "beyond" our ordinary epistemological, sensory-experiential and linguistic capacities. Hence, they admit that, in relation to certain questions, in order to understand and make sense of that mystery which causes us to be, we must proceed by analogy and metaphor and even by the *via negativa* – we seek to come to a greater understanding of that which something "is" by proceeding to state that which it is *not*.[62]

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60  It is more obvious that both thinkers might also be interpreted as offering versions of "virtue ethics", but I would also suggest that both are equally early pioneers of what has come to be known as "virtue epistemology".

61  Cf., for example, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 95, and also 69, 87, 101. One example of another recent study of Murdoch's treatment of this virtue is Tony Milligan, "Murdochian Humility", *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), 217–228.

62  For example, contrary to so many textbooks who perceive him to be an arch rationalist, Thomas Aquinas was much more concerned to explain the *limitations* of what we could say about God ("theology") than with trying to make grandiose claims for natural human reason.

There is an "agnostic" strain that runs from various religions, and is even found in philosophers such as Kant, through Schopenhauer to Murdoch. It would therefore appear that such an approach is important to enable us to construct our explanatory hypotheses, to make sense of our world and of how we might gain meaning, purpose and fulfilment within it.

### § 6. Pessimistic Realism, Moral Optimism

If the method of the "humble path" is one area in which their convergence in relation to discourse about the "transcendent" or ultimate reality is witnessed in an especially significant fashion, then there is also one particular area in which their *descriptive* metaphysics also converges in a fashion which has an equally significant impact upon their moral visions. But it is also an area which further probes the consistency of those visions.

One of the stumbling blocks in relation to Schopenhauer's thought is that his system contains so vividly expressed dissatisfaction with the world and yet works towards a justification for a steadfastly enduring belief in a doctrine of salvation. But this, in itself, I believe, is not actually a combination of incompatible worldviews. Indeed, it is only a problem if one adheres to the textbook judgment of Schopenhauer as an *absolute* pessimist and militant atheist, which I do not. One cannot be an *absolute* pessimist – i. e. to the degree that there is no grounds for hope or salvation whatsoever, if one also formulates, develops and *holds to* a doctrine of salvation which presupposes otherwise. A belief that "salvation" is attainable does not preclude offering a most poignant, vivid and often disturbing pessimistic *descriptive* assessment of the world and its ills. Indeed, many of the world's religious traditions offer something similar. Schopenhauer merely does likewise. Indeed, he acknowledges that one finds such a combination in numerous religious forms. For example, he commends those Buddhist traditions which begin first by naming the cardinal *vices* – with the cardinal *virtues* then arising as the opposite, that is to say, the negation of these.[63] Schopenhauer explains his methodological procedure thus "[…] my plan required me first to take into consideration this somber side of human nature. In this way, of course, my path differs from that of all other moralists, and is like that of Dante, which first leads to the inferno".[64]

Indeed, we therefore see that Schopenhauer's pessimistic realism is extended to the realm of ethics itself, but is equally balanced by a more hopeful conclusion to his moral theory. Here, he again displays a touch of sad moral irony (something we likewise find later in Murdoch, including throughout her novels),

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63  P II, 204.
64  BM, 136

which perhaps today might function as a warning to "shallow" versions of that form of moral theory known as virtue ethics when he states that:

> The current and peculiarly Protestant view that the *purpose*[65] of life lies solely and immediately in moral virtues, and hence in the practice of justice and philanthropy, betrays its inadequacy by the fact that so deplorably little real and pure morality is to be found among men. I do not wish to speak of lofty virtue, noble-mindedness, generosity, and self-sacrifice, which are hardly ever met with except in plays and novels, but only of those virtues that are everyone's duty.[66]

Schopenhauer believes we should not fool ourselves when the evidence suggests that most people do not attain to even the virtues of honesty and philanthropy. Often they present acts as such, but selfish motives lurk behind them.

It is simply the case, then, that Schopenhauer simply believes there is no point in denying the ugly facets of existence. As one obvious example of this, simply consider, he suggests, the fact that humans are the only animals which cause pain to others merely for the sake of it.[67] Nonetheless, this does not mean that his philosophy allows no room for hope and in fact he actually objected to those contemporaries who described his philosophy as pessimistic, preferring instead to describe it as a more honest, direct and truthful form of describing existence. It should be noted how Murdoch, herself, lends support to such views affirming how "Love and hope […] manage to break in", with reference to Schopenhauer's worldview.[68] And this all helps to demonstrate still further links with religious worldviews.

Schopenhauer also draws parallels between the doctrines of Buddhism and the very notions of virtues and salvation, themselves. In referring explicitly to his description of this world, he continues in a vivid fashion (which might offer notable parallels with our own "postmodern" age of the "new barbarians"), but nonetheless a passage that does *not* end in a hopeless, pessimistic and absolute nihilism:

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65 My italics – Schopenhauer shows justice and philanthropy as the virtues which *follow* from a compassionate motivation and realisation of the higher truths of reality – i. e., they do not *make* one better but *show* that one is morally superior to the selfish egoist. It would be futile practising acts of justice and philanthropy in order to *become* a "better person" for then the motivating factor would most likely be egoistic, selfish. Of course one might deplore one's own current prevailing motivations and wish to become a better person for the good of one's family, community, the world etc. Schopenhauer would not likely be convinced by such arguments. Any presence or suspected presence of egoism, for him, robs an act of *any moral worth*.

66 WR II, 639.

67 Ibid., 211.

68 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 73. Cf., also, 75: "Schopenhauer does not share the ferocity of Nietzsche or the (ultimate) pessimism of Heidegger".

> This *Samsara* and everything therein denounces it; yet, more than anything else, the human world where moral depravity and baseness, intellectual incapacity and stupidity, prevail to a fearful extent. Nevertheless, there appear in it, although very sporadically yet always astonishing us afresh, phenomena of honesty, kindness and even nobility, as also of great intellect, the thinking mind, and even genius. These never go out entirely; but glitter at us like isolated points that shine out of the great mass of darkness. We must take them as a pledge that in this *Samsara* there lies hidden a good and redeeming principle which can break through and inspire and release the whole.[69]

The obvious question that occurs here concerns whether or not this can really be the man who became known as the "philosopher of pessimism" speaking. So Schopenhauer's approach appears less of a fluctuation and more complementary once the reasoning behind his moral theory is explored more fully.

This points towards further similarities with Murdoch, who went through her own "Buddhist phase" and enjoyed an ongoing flirtation with aspects of that faith's traditions. We also see further aspects of Schopenhauer's thought echoed in Murdoch's "moral faith", i. e. her commitment to the importance of morality in making sense of and giving meaning to existence. This is further borne out through the importance she attaches to instances of virtue and goodness as witnessed in the world. While some, such as Don Cupitt, believe that Murdoch in fact ended up being more pessimistic about the world, I would rather suggest that, in drawing such parallels with Schopenhauer, we can actually see that her realism is equally applied descriptively as well as in a moral and revisionary fashion: the world is not perfect. Both thinkers describe it as it is, in stark terms. Where the real surprise lies is in the strength of their moral convictions and belief that salvation is possible in the face of this vale of tears.

So, as with Schopenhauer, we can also appreciate Murdoch's own intentions better in considering her reasoning behind her moral theory. In summary, then, she suggests that the notion of the good, itself, involves a form of "realism" requiring an honest appraisal of the world, humanity and self, leading to suppression of the negative (unduly egoistic) aspects of the latter and hence *a fortiori* to virtuous behaviour.[70] As she states "The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness".[71]

In unison with Schopenhauer, Murdoch focuses upon a realistic *Weltanschauung* – so it would make more sense to talk of the harmony of a metaphysical understanding of ultimate reality with an honest realism as to the nature of

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69  WR II, 218.
70  E. g., cf. Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 93, with the task formulated on 54.
71  Ibid., 93. Further Buddhist leanings here?

the world as we participate in and shape it.[72] Murdoch pronounces that: "[…] true vision occasions right conduct"[73] and so it follows that our relation to what is real brings us closer to what is good and thus compassion and love follow from this.[74] Schopenhauer himself states that:

> […] all true and pure affection is sympathy or compassion, and all love that is not sympathy is selfishness […]. Selfishness is *eros*, sympathy or compassion is *agape* […]. Incidentally, it may be observed also that sympathy and pure love are expressed in Italian by the same word, *pietà*.[75]

For Schopenhauer, the "Principle of Individuation" is a metaphysical illusion and compassion is one of the most fundamental demonstrations that one has some insight into the essential unity of all being, beyond the phenomenal divisions between all that exists.

### § 7. Ethics and Mysticism

Murdoch believes ethical insight should avoid the corrupting influence of "quasi-theological" discourse and so must remain as a "metaphysical position" rather than a "metaphysical form."[76] But she also asserts that:

> Morality has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience.[77]

Murdoch is anxious to stress that the decline in the influence of religious doctrines and practices does not *rule out* any sense of the mystical, that is, any de-

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72  Schopenhauer offers accounts of his ethical-soteriological thought which are both *analytic* and *a posteriori* (BM) and *synthetic* and *a priori* (WR), whilst also offering a metaphysics of morals to draw the results of such ventures together in the final part of BM (despite claiming that there he still adheres to the *analytic* method alone: "I have to proceed not from the ground to the consequents, but from the consequents to the ground", BM, 202 – although he hints on the next page that such an approach must be supplemented in order to saying anything meaningful about a metaphysics of morals.

73  Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 66.

74  Ibid.

75  WR I, 376. Note, however that Murdoch and Schopenhauer are not always kindred spirits with regard to morals. Schopenhauer's statement here on love and compassion is spoken against Kant's emphasis upon duty and rejection of sympathy/compassion as simply emotions which cannot lead to true morality. Murdoch, on the other hand, whilst agreeing with Schopenhauer on their importance for ethics, also chides him for making no place for duty in his moral system. See her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 65.

76  Murdoch, *On "God" and "Good"*, 73.

77  Ibid., 74. Again, one may here raise questions with regards to Murdoch's consistency, for she breaches such strict qualifications herself, again.

cline in belief concerning the more conventional theistic interpretations does not affect what is referred to by the term mystical.[78] It is equally evident how Schopenhauer also wants to retain discourse upon the mystical without much of the theological "baggage" which he views as either mythological or erroneous metaphysics.[79] In line with his "humble" method he allows that there are things we cannot know and it is thus that the "*Via Negativa*" is to be preferred. Indeed, like Murdoch (and, one might say, even Kant), Schopenhauer even sees morality as something that is *essentially* "mysterious" – by which he means bound up with the "nature" of ultimate reality – and so truly virtuous and disinterested acts are mysterious actions. Thus morality is "[…] practical mysticism insofar as it ultimately springs from the same knowledge that constitutes the essence of all mysticism proper".[80] Indeed, we ultimately see Schopenhauer proclaim that the phenomenon of compassion (*Mitleid*), and its attendant realisation of our metaphysical unity with the other, constitutes *das große Mysterium der Ethik*:

> […] it is the great mystery of ethics; it is the primary and original phenomenon of ethics, the boundary mark beyond which only metaphysical speculation can venture to step. In that event we see abolished the partition which, by the light of nature (as the old theologians call the faculty of reason), absolutely separates one being from another; the non-ego has to a certain extent become the ego.[81]

The added significance of this statement is that it further illustrates that Schopenhauer, like Murdoch, views morality as holding true whether it is espoused from within conventional religion or not. What is the concern of ethics remains, at heart, the same.

I take all this to convey that the meaning and explanation of ethics refers to something which cannot totally be explained via an empirical approach. It was on on this very point that Wittgenstein was later to follow Schopenhauer[82] and, as noted, Murdoch draws upon the ethical reflections of both writers in her own struggle to articulate what she means and to try and present a coherent central argument in her Gifford Lectures. The transcendent is brought into play, even if only in a negative sense.

When discussing his doctrine of the denial of the will-to-live and the path of the ascetic saint, Schopenhauer provides countless examples from a multitude of religious and philosophical sources. They allow him to state that it is "immate-

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78  See Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 73.

79  As best exemplified by the character Philalethes in Schopenhauer's dialogue "On Religion", P II, 325. Cf., also, e. g., WR II, 164ff., 590; WN, 139ff.

80  BM, 212.

81  BM, 144. Cf., also, 212.

82  "In ethics people are forever trying to find a way of saying something which, in the nature of things, is not and can never be expressed", cited in Waisman, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, 69. Here he was, however, explicitly referring to his debt to Kierkegaard.

rial" whether this doctrine "proceeds from a theistic or from an atheistic relig-
ion".[83] It is further worth noting here that the Marxist philosopher, Bernard
Bykhovsky labelled, Schopenhauer's philosophy a "Godless religion"[84] and Mur-
doch, herself, believes that *The World as Will and Representation* should be seen
as a "religious book", the central concern of which is ethical.[85]

Admittedly, one must also take into consideration the words from Schopen-
hauer concerning the need for independence from "mythical" religious explana-
tions and transcendent hypostases of the truth of ethics: "The task before us is
philosophical and we must therefore entirely disregard all solutions to the prob-
lem that are conditioned by religions".[86] But one might pose the suggestion that
here, so the evidence we have been considering would suggest, Schopenhauer is
simply "clinging" onto the claim that he offers an immanent form of metaphysi-
cal explanation – when in fact, and we have seen numerous examples of this, that
he really fluctuates between metaphysical speculation that is both immanent and
transcendent alike.

Indeed, given such statements as that above, it might be surprising to see just
how often Schopenhauer actually turns to the religious, mystical and transcen-
dental areas of discourse in order to provide supporting material for his own
"doctrines". It is not simply that he claims his own philosophy expresses the
"truth" untainted by mythology and error – although he frequently does do so.
He actually makes positive statements with regards to religious ethics as well.
For example, Schopenhauer claims that the doctrine of the denial of the will-to-
live can be seen in various forms throughout the history of Christianity, even
going so far as to state that the mystical Dominican, Meister Eckhart, gave the
doctrine "the most perfect explanation" of all.[87]

This serves as a further example, and there are many others drawn from vari-
ous different world faiths throughout Schopenhauer's works, of how he claims a
superior position for his own theories and yet then takes the "supporting mate-
rial," i. e., the evidence to demonstrate the validity of his arguments, from the
religions which he seeks to prove as being inferior to philosophy and often erro-
neous in doctrine. Schopenhauer is blatantly selective in what he chooses to
"borrow" from religion and what he chooses to criticise. He freely draws upon
writings which are from religious mystics, yet focuses more upon what is in

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83  WR I, 385.

84  The title of Chapter XI of Bykhovsky, Bernard: *Schopenhauer and the Ground of Existence*.
    Amsterdam: B. R. Gruner 1984.

85  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 72.

86  BM, 138. Of course, Schopenhauer violated his own rule here on numerous occasions and could
    not have done otherwise, given the nature of his own system, its core principles and the difficult
    tasks he set himself in philosophy.

87  WR I, 387.

accord with his own theories, *largely* overlooking the religious context and relevance of such writings.

However, much as it may be that Schopenhauer, as he claimed, first thought of the doctrine of the will and his other main theories as a young man, there is still the question concerning how much he finds religious doctrines and writings *in accord* with his own views, or how much his extensive reading both from these religions and from philosophers whose own views were greatly shaped by such religions, has actually given rise to and helped develop his own theories.

Moira Nicholls has suggested that such religious ideas, particularly those which could be described as "mystical" in orientation, were to have an *increasing* effect upon the *later* Schopenhauer – especially the influence of what she calls "Eastern" religions.[88] My own viewpoint is that such religious traditions and ideas were a *constant* influence upon Schopenhauer, albeit admittedly to varying degrees at various stages of his life.

Murdoch, herself, actually and approvingly (as a kindred spirit) views Schopenhauer as espousing an ultimately mystical worldview and vision of ethics which leads towards a doctrine of salvation (though, she also notes that his thought here is not without some tensions and possible contradictions).[89] Indeed, Murdoch's approval can be judged to be all the greater because she believes that Schopenhauer's form of "mysticism" appears to offer the promise of that sort of "godless theology" and metaphysics of morals without supernaturalism which Murdoch herself seeks to shape. She believes it is necessary to reject a doctrine of God in order to shape that moral vision. But she is guilty of falling into the trap, somewhat, of over-generalising in her discussions here, something much frowned upon in studies of "mystical" theologies in recent times. But she does at least recognise that all forms of mysticism are not, as Underhill now infamously would have us believe, simply varieties of the very same thing.[90] In fact she simply appears largely to echo the view of mysticism which we find in Schopenhauer:

> Mystics differ in style and doctrinal context, yet seem to have much in common. Here one is inclined to say (I am inclined to say) that the fundamental nature of

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88  Nicholls, Moira: The Influence of Eastern Thought on Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing in Itself. In: Janaway, Christopher: *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*. Cambridge: CUP 1999. Cf., also, her Schopenhauer, Young and The Will in *Jb.* 72 (1991), 143–157. My own challenge to aspects of her argument comes in *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, ch. 7, 223–250 (and partially in ch. 8, 251–281).

89  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 69ff.

90  "Mysticism" is a much misused term and often one which is used to conflate very differing schools of thought, but many of these share enough in common to allow some usage of the term to be meaningful. In any case, the way in which it is used by both Schopenhauer and Murdoch accords with this generalizing tendency and thus it may be used here and understood as such a collective term.

religion is mystical. This is a, or the, feature of it which has ensured, and (I hope) will ensure its continuity.[91]

This already somewhat calls into doubt her assertion concerning the disappearance of the religion as a "middle term". The fluctuations of our thinkers are further illustrated by the extent to which, on differing occasions, both thinkers acknowledge their interaction with religious ideas and systems. So, for example, we see Murdoch, acknowledging the *extent* of her religious "borrowings", even going so far as to suggest that ethics today requires "an analogy of the concept of the sacrament".[92] It is true to say that Schopenhauer, on the whole, is more inclined to open up the debate of the relation of his philosophy to religion more readily. But neither thinker goes very far in explicitly articulating the nature or full extent of the *debt* which their ethical writings owe to such religious traditions. And here we come to the crux of the matter.

All our above considerations allow us to introduce and explain one very simple, yet most important argument: that neither Schopenhauer's nor Murdoch's ethical theories can stand independent of what is commonly understood as religious ideas. In character both ethical theories closely parallel those of many religions. And while this is something Schopenhauer even freely admits, this being a further example of his tendency, on occasion, to be more frank on such matters, in substance and logic his basis of morality needs something other than his central doctrine of the will to ensure that his argument proves effective and coherent. In short, this further supports our contention that the notion of a blind, irrational will could not be what lies as the foundation or guarantee of a moral theory which is based upon compassion, justice and philanthropy.

So do all such parallels suggest simply that Schopenhauer, like Murdoch, was attempting (as were, she believes, Plato and Kant) to "[…] think the spiritual without the supernatural"?[93] In an age post-secularisation, although still, for some such as Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*,[94] for others, including myself, a postmodern age where plurality takes on virtuous characteristics in so many instances, we would need to explore how coherent such a statement might remain. It further suggests theological naivety on the part of Murdoch – what, after all, would "supernaturalism" refer to outside of popular and fundamentalist forms of religious belief?

Indeed, our considerations show that Schopenhauer could not and does not proceed as if he were isolated from religion and discourse concerning the realm of the transcendent.[95] And Murdoch, despite her identification of some of

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91  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 71.
92  Murdoch, On "God" and "Good", 69.
93  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 64.
94  Taylor, Charles: *A Secular Age*. Harvard: Harvard University Press 2007.
95  Again, note how Murdoch employs the ontological argument *as* a transcendent argument.

these pertinent tensions in Schopenhauer's philosophy, suffers from many of them herself. Some notion of the good, something at least analogous to what is usually understood by a term such as God, becomes the unspoken guarantee that Schopenhauer's ethics will not founder on the heartless rocks of the doctrine of the will. In a different context, Murdoch states that: "Good, not will is transcendent".[96] There she is speaking of the human will. But if we were to apply this statement to Schopenhauer it could lend further support to the argument that, taking his ethical system and doctrine of salvation to their logical conclusions, what remains ultimately transcendent is not the blind, irrational "will," but something best understood, if that is possible, in some sense as being "good."

If we consider the differences between Murdoch's earlier ethical writings, as exemplified by the essays collected in *The Sovereignty of God* (firmly entrenched in many of the ephemeral philosophical debates of its time) and her later, more substantial grappling with the metaphysics of ethics in her Gifford Lectures, one might suggest that the more she grappled with ethics and the complexities of human existence, the closer she came to a "religious" interpretation of morality – and so the *more* she must use the language and reasoning one usually finds in the transcendent metaphysics which her earlier writings seemed to suggest, in some places, were no longer possible. Again, Schopenhauer's writings follow a similar path in that his earlier "departure" from any reliance upon an overt religious explanatory hypothesis nonetheless does not extend to his ceasing to study carefully and utilise the ideas from several religious traditions. Indeed, he ends up offering something which is analogously similar to such religious explanatory and guiding metaphysical systems.

The "middle term", as Murdoch describes religion, has not disappeared, despite ongoing evolution and transformations. And her own adoption of the discourse of "mysticism" does not actually rely upon the disappearance of this middle term, i. e., religion, at all, despite her attempt to hide it. Rather it is facilitated through a direct dependence upon the middle terms and its rich resources.[97]

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96 Murdoch, *On "God" and "Good"*, 69 (author's italics).

97 Towards the end of my own earlier study on Schopenhauer, I suggested that he might best be described as a "philosopher in search of a theology". In her response to the thought of the philosophical theologian, Paul Tillich, we can see how the same is true of Murdoch, by her own admission, "Paul Tillich describes theology as a response to the "totality of man's creative self-interpretation in a particular period". We need a theology that can continue without God. Why not call such a reflection a form of moral philosophy? All right, so long as it treats of those matters of "ultimate concern", our experience of what is holy". Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 511–512.

*§ 8. Doing "Religious" Ethics Without God?*

One encounters other instances of a lack of theological "depth" in various parts of Murdoch's writings here and at times, even in Schopenhauer. In the final analysis, Murdoch's main problem with religion seems to be with the term "God" itself and aspects of what she (often erroneously) deems it to entail or represent in Christian theism.[98] At times, there is a sense of naivety, bereft of serious theological engagement, and even more naïve sense of theological realism in a number of her later musings on the notion of God. One of the more detailed examples of her own adoption of such a flawed perspective can be found in the following:

> "God" is the name of a supernatural person. It makes a difference whether we believe in such a person, as it makes a difference whether Christ rose from the dead. These differences do not generally, or do not yet, affect whether or not people are virtuous; though wholesale loss of religious belief is likely to remove with it some of the substance of moral thought and action, which was provided for instance by prayer and church-going. Perhaps (I believe) Christianity can continue without a "personal" God or a risen Christ, without beliefs in supernatural places and happenings, such as heaven and life after death, but retaining the mystical figure of Christ occupying a place analogous to that of Buddha: a Christ who can console and save, but who is to be found as a living force within each human soul and not in some supernatural elsewhere. Such a continuity would preserve and renew the Christian tradition as it has always hitherto, been preserved and renewed. It has always changed itself into something that can be generally believed. Perhaps this cannot be brought about soon enough, that is before Christian belief and practice virtually disappear. To accomplish this leap it might also be necessary for philosophers to become theologians and theologians to become philosophers, and this is not very likely to happen either.[99]

There is clearly an absence of real theological and even philosophical rigour here. The notion of "person" is used in a fashion that would make little sense to formal Christian doctrines concerning God, particularly in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. But aside from this, in this passage Murdoch also appears to take away the role for religion in ethics which she has earlier and will later (in the same work) steadfastly defend.[100]

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98  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, ch. 13. See Widdows, Heather: Iris Murdoch's "good" – A Critical Analysis of its Nature and Relevance. Widdows has since developed her analysis into a book length study: *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2005.

99  Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 419.

100  Widdows has also and rightly pointed towards the limitations of Murdoch's understanding of the Christian doctrine of God and certain parameters of theological discourse with respect to saying anything about "God" and that which the term is deemed to represent. Heather Widdows, "Iris Murdoch's "good" – A Critical Analysis of its Nature and Relevance, cf., 67–68. Stanley Hauerwas has raised a related point: "I am not sure, however, [Murdoch] is denying the

Furthermore, Murdoch's appropriation of aspects of the non-realist theological thought of Don Cupitt actually sits very uneasily with her own moral realism and account of the good.[101] "Let us ask of the risen Christ not whether he rose but whether he can save", she says, drawing on Cupitt.[102] But Murdoch does not appear to realise in any full sense the implications of trying to ground morality upon aspects borrowed from a non-realist account of religion. Her statement about philosophers becoming theologians, however, is interesting for a number of reasons. It might even seem most odd coming from a writer whose work occupies the very heart of those "borderlands" between philosophy, theology and ethics. And yet Murdoch must have seen the irony in this statement – that the very work in which she wrote those words appears to show an earnest attempt by a literary philosopher to try and *do theology*.[103] Elsewhere, I have sought to describe the manner in which Schopenhauer struggled to find a credible "theology", as well.[104] Although an interesting difference between the two is the fact that, unlike Murdoch, Schopenhauer claims he largely left the word God alone, even once claiming he did not really know *what* the term referred to.[105]

Yet it must be acknowledged that both also seek to try and protect morality from "bad" religious elements. Thus Schopenhauer resists a theistic justification for morality because he believes it reduces ethics to egoism – we seek a reward or fear punishment – "how could I talk of unselfishness where I am enticed by reward or deterred by threatened punishment"[106] and Murdoch likewise fears our "misuse" or abuse of "God" when we wheel out the notion to support our moral frameworks. However, although such abuses can take place, there is obviously a

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God we Christians know as trinity since she seems to think that God's existence and transcendence, what she identifies as supernaturalism, is more basic than God being trinity. That she does so is the result of distortions in Christian practice and thought". Hauerwas, Murdochian Muddles, 190–208, 191.

101 Cf., e. g., Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 419, 452–453, 455–456.

102 Ibid., 453.

103 Murdoch's attempt to redefine the ontological argument (despite her opinions concerning "God" cited above), is really only an extension and development of her earlier arguments concerning the notion of perfection and the sovereignty of good. Cf., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, chapters 13 and 14. This is supported by Widdows who suggests that in this attempt "Her fundamental point is that the good is an unavoidable part of experience". *Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, 85 (notwithstanding Widdows's somewhat separate treatment of the various facets of Murdoch's ethics). Murdoch leads herself into further areas of inconsistency by her assertion that in which she suggests it must affirm the non-existence of God for an existing god would be of less value than a non-existent one.

104 Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, especially ch. 8. On Schopenhauer's own fluctuating perspectives on religion in general and in relation to theological concepts in particular, see chapters 2, 39–64; 3, 65–90; 7–8.

105 Again, cf. Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, chs. 2 and 3 where I discuss his critique of religion and theology at greater length.

106 BM, 137 and *passim*, cf., also PP II, 219.

great deal more to the interrelation between religion and morality than such criticisms imply.[107] The "mythical" and even symbolic elements of religion are also often understood in a naïve sense by Murdoch, and occasionally by Schopenhauer. Although the latter was more appreciative of the necessity and truth-bearing value of mythical mediums of religious expression and commitment.

In conclusion, both thinkers fall short in offering a fully consistent foundation for ethics despite the fact that both are even more dissatisfied with materialistic and purely rational and logical explanations for morality. Both also find fault with the overarching principles behind religious foundations for morality, despite drawing heavily upon such religious moral systems. None of the foregoing is to say that an understanding of and commitment to morality that is not based upon theistic (or alternative religious) grounds is impossible. But these two philosophers have depended so much upon religion for resources and inspiration for their ethical deliberations. The "middle term" from Murdoch's equation disappears from neither philosophy and seldom remains hidden in their moral writings. Religious ideas, including at least some approximation of what is referred to by the term "God", linger on as elements of both moral visions.

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107   Revisit Murdoch's possible criticism of *via negativa* in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.*