

# Is life a useless passion?

– Iris Murdoch's critique and re-conception of Sartre's concept of freedom

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## Abstract

In this paper I will give an account of Iris Murdoch's critical reading of Sartre's notion of freedom and its relation to the idea of value in human existence, in order to subsequently analyse and discuss Murdoch's own alternative. I draw on the structure of Maria Antonaccio's (2000) previous comparison of the two thinkers, however adding more substantial analyses of the relevant passages from Sartre's 1943 work *Being and Nothingness* (BN) and the texts by Murdoch relevant for this context. In contrast to most interpreters of Murdoch, I read her approach more explicitly as phenomenological in style. This is due to her focus on consciousness as the primary locus of philosophical inquiry, which implies both the characteristic phenomenological concern for the first-person perspective and the transcendental interest in a unifying precondition for the possibility of subjective experience as such (Zahavi 2003; Drummond 2002; Gardner 2015).

## Murdoch on Sartre's conception of freedom

As I see it, the core of Murdoch's thought is her through-going interest in the source and locus of moral value in human existence, and this is thus also apparent in her critical engagement with Sartre. This means that her main concern in her analysis of Sartre's conceptions of consciousness and freedom is to point out how these influence his idea of value. I will thus begin by giving an outline of the connection between these three concepts in his thought: consciousness, freedom and value. As Antonaccio (2000: 63) has emphasised, Murdoch distinguishes between two central dualisms in

Sartre's description of consciousness in *BN*. The first one is between consciousness (the for-itself; *être-pour-soi*) and the objects of consciousness (the in-itself; *être-en-soi*) (BN: 17). The second dualism is between consciousness and its ideal of 'completeness' to which it aspires (being-in-itself-for-itself; *être-en-soi-pour-soi*) (Ibid.: 578-96). Murdoch describes it thus:

Consciousness is negation, nothingness; it makes itself by negating the given, the brute thingy world, on one side – and it makes itself also by aspiring, on the other side, toward an ideal completeness. So consciousness is both *rupture* (the break with the given) and *project* (aspiration to totality); both these characteristics Sartre equates with freedom and the latter he connects with value. Freedom, considered as negation and project, is the main character of human consciousness (Murdoch 1997: 137).

I will give an account of both of these dualisms and the connected conceptions of freedom and value, in order to subsequently make Murdoch's phenomenological alternative to them intelligible. Through the analysis I intend to show that the tension between the two dualisms makes up the basis for Sartre's depressing conclusion that in the end the human being is nothing but a *passion inutile* (useless passion) (BN: 636). This paradox is what Murdoch's position can be seen as an alternative to.

I begin by elaborating Murdoch's point that Sartre conceives of the relation between intentional subjectivity (for-itself) and external reality of objects (in-itself) in terms of a fundamental *break*, that is as *rupture*, which creates a persistent tension between freedom and value. In *BN*, Sartre explains how the for-itself occurs in the world as negation of the in-itself. The in-itself is defined as a massive, inert and entirely positively present world of objects, whereas the for-itself occurs in the world as the absolute opposition to it, that is, as an empty and dynamic structure that relates things and itself to one another through negation. This means that

subjectivity as such must be revealed through the concrete relation to the object of consciousness: “[a]bsolute subjectivity can be established only in the face of something revealed; immanence can be defined only within the apprehension of a transcendent” (Ibid.: 17). The result of this is that, for Sartre, immediate intentionality occurs as a double negation that happens simultaneously; first, the for-itself negates the objects in their relation to one another, and secondly, the for-itself also relates *itself* negatively to the objects it is conscious of. Negation in the first sense is the relatively straightforward idea that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. This means that it is directed towards something and thus negates all other things as not being the object towards which it is directed. This is for instance illustrated with the example of Pierre who is missing in a certain café, and now all other appearances in the café are negated in relation to Pierre as not being Pierre, who thus makes up the particular object of consciousness in relation to which everything else is ‘negatively’ present (Ibid.: 33-35). Regarding the second sense of negation, consciousness itself is at the same time pre-reflectively aware of itself as being “oriented towards a being which is not itself” (BN: 17). The for-itself is thus always already aware of itself as not being identical to any transcendent reality that it is directed towards, and it is thus aware of itself as a lack of the very being that it is directed towards. In this way, consciousness occurs in the world as void, as the “being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being” (BN: 71). This is what Sartre conceives of as the ‘radical freedom’ of intentional subjectivity, and what Murdoch defines as the *rupture* from the world of objects. Consciousness is radically free because of its lack of the stable being of the objects towards which it is related. We thus always go wrong when we seek to define ourselves as a stable ‘someone’ with certain traits that make up the structure of the ‘I’, because the ontological structure of consciousness is freedom: “In vain shall I seek to catch hold of them [essences]; I escape them

by my very existence. I am condemned forever to exist beyond my essence [...] I am condemned to be free” (BN: 461-62). In this way, Sartre insists, through his analysis of immediate experience, that *freedom* is the transcendental and thus unifying precondition for subjective experience.

Murdoch detects three modes of awareness of this freedom that all exemplify how freedom is fundamentally ‘rupture’. These are the pre-reflective mode, the reflective, and being for others<sup>27</sup>. The pre-reflective awareness of oneself as not being identical to the object that one is directed towards was already showed above. This is, on Sartre’s view, how we are most of the time attuned to external reality and what he calls ‘bad faith’, which I shall return to below (BN: 71). However, at times consciousness is in fact aware of itself as radically different from the external reality of objects. Sartre’s novel *La Nausée* provides illuminating examples of this reflective realisation of the nature of one’s being a ‘nothingness’ among all the inert objects of the world. Roquentin, the hero of the novel, experiences this as a nauseating discovery of the complete arbitrariness and chancy nature of all the objects in the world, which, on a closer look, escape our continuous attempt to structure and order them through theories, generalisations and stable concepts. He looks at a seat in a tramway and is sickened by the way it suddenly stands out in its brute materiality, and at another point he is disturbed in a similar way when contemplating a seagull (Sartre 2000). As Murdoch writes, Roquentin “feels doubts about induction (why not a centipede for a tongue?) and about classification (the seagull), distress at the peculiarity of things and the abstractness of names (the tramway seat, the tree root). He sees reality as fallen, and existence as an imperfection” (Murdoch 1989: 42-3). What especially distresses Roquentin in this experience of the “brute nameless thereness of material existence” is that he suddenly “feels himself as an empty nothing which has been crowded

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<sup>27</sup> I leave being-for-others to one side, as it does not add any significant content in this context. See e.g., BN: 276-85.

out of the opaque world of objects” (Murdoch 1997: 135). Also the concepts we apply to our social lives suddenly appear to Roquentin as retrospectively ‘made-up’ lines that we draw to make sense of the meaningless mess of moment-to-moment human interaction. He simply sees the norms of sociality as senseless and amuses himself by watching others believing in the solid reality of a ‘social order’. On Sundays he walks to the Rue Tournebride in the town Bouville to watch the highbrowed bourgeoisie enact their social status after the Sunday Mass in this “meeting-place of fashionable and distinguished people” (Sartre 2000: 66). Roquentin is thus the picture of a consciousness that has suddenly become completely transparent to itself as radically free and thus fundamentally *excluded* from the world of objects.

This is closely connected to Sartre’s idea of ‘bad faith’ (*mauvaise foi*), which is essentially a state of self-deception and thus an in-authentic mode of self-being. Despite its freedom to withdraw and reject any given order of value, consciousness nevertheless has a tendency to deny its own freedom, by seeing meaning and value as actual features of objects and even seeing itself as a psychological ‘thing’ that can be observed as a stable ‘someone’ with certain (social) qualities (recall the bourgeoisie of Bouville). In *BN*, Sartre describes how the for-itself “[...] instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself [...]” and thus negates its own freedom by turning it into an object (in-itself) (*BN*: 71). This does however not mean that the for-itself suddenly identifies itself with ‘dead things’, such as a stone or a pencil. Rather, the structure of bad faith is ambiguous in the sense that ‘I affirm here that I am my transcendence in the mode of being a thing’ (*BN*: 80, 83). This is what Roquentin observes by looking at the bourgeoisie on Sundays, and it is what we see in the example from *BN* with the waiter, who tries to realise the very essence of the concept ‘waiter’, but at the same time cannot escape his own freedom that excludes him from the world of objects, incarnated values and social roles – he is playing ‘at being a waiter’, but

inevitably appears as a comic figure playing some sort of self-deceiving ‘game’ (*BN*: 82).

By the end of *BN*, Sartre reflects upon whether authentic freedom, understood as the perpetual rebellion against anything that threatens to objectify consciousness, should be held as *the* moral value *per se*, but postpones a possible answer to a promised work in ‘ethics’, which, unfortunately, never appeared (*BN*: 647). The reason for this is, I contend, connected to the second dualism (freedom as *project*) that conflicts with the idea of authentic freedom in terms of ‘rupture’ as *the* fundamental value for the human being.

### **Freedom as project**

Thus, I now turn to the second dualism between freedom and the ideal of total completeness. This is what Murdoch defined in terms of freedom as *project* and denotes the character of consciousness as transcendence through the pursuit of value (Murdoch 1989: 93). In this section I show the deep paradoxical tension between the two dualisms that ultimately makes the human being a ‘useless passion’. This is so because freedom as transcendence in the pursuit of value is in conflict with freedom as rupture, since the aim of self-stabilization inevitably leads us into bad faith by negating the active and non-substantial nothingness of consciousness. On this background, we are then able to understand Murdoch’s alternative position (Antonaccio 2000: 97).

As was already hinted at in the above, the for-itself is both excluded from the world of objects, but it is also a continuous *projection* of meaning and value that it seeks to enact and identify itself with (the role of the waiter; the ideal of being distinguished and fashionable). This is because the being of the for-itself does not merely denote its being excluded from the objects of consciousness. It further means that the for-itself *lacks* the being of the in-itself so that “the for-itself arises as the nihilation of the in-itself and this

nihilation is defined as the *project toward the in-itself*" (BN, 586, my emphasis). This is so, Sartre explains, because to the for-itself "being means to make known to oneself what one is by means of a possibility appearing as a value" (ibid.). This means, I contend, that the for-itself is merely possible-being as opposed to the actual being of the in-itself, and this possibility of stable being is what it values. The tricky thing is thus that because the for-itself fundamentally is a *lack of being*, "possibility belongs to the for-itself as that which it lacks" which means that "value haunts the for-itself as the totality of being which is lacking" (ibid.). In this way, Sartre suggests that the human being is fundamentally haunted by the dream of the stable being of the in-itself that it is itself lacking. Through an existentialist take on Freud's psychoanalysis by the end of *BN*, Sartre explains how the search for such stable ground can be conceived of as the 'original project' that underlies all human projects and pursuits of value. However, if consciousness is total freedom, it immediately seems suspicious to conceive of it as always already determined by an 'original project'. In order to avoid the accusation of establishing a deterministic 'purpose' of human existence Sartre grounds the idea of an original project in his previous *ontological* analysis of the non-substantial nothingness of human subjectivity: "Fundamentally man is *the desire to be*, and the existence of this desire is not to be established by an empirical induction; it is the result of an *a priori* description of the being of the for-itself, since desire is a lack and since the for-itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being" (BN: 586). It is thus evident from the *ontology* of consciousness as a *lack* of being that we aspire toward a totality of stable being. This explains why we constantly seek to give our lives stability, form and meaning, for instance by identifying ourselves with what we take to be stable norms and social practises as we saw in the example with the bourgeoisie. However, as Roquentin notices with dread, all projects that the for-itself projects toward the in-itself merely reflect the contingent nature of the in-itself and the nothingness of the for-

itself, and by identifying itself with the value ascribed to contingent matter, the for-itself inevitably falls into bad faith. Thus, Sartre contends, the in-itself that the for-itself originally desires cannot be “the pure contingent and absurd in-itself, comparable at every point to that which it encounters and which it nihilates” (BN: 587). This is so because such nihilation is “in fact like a revolt of the in-itself, which nihilates itself against its contingency” (ibid.). The reason for this is, I contend, that in the attempt of the for-itself to ground its own being on the in-itself, the in-itself ‘withdraws’ as stable ground, because the in-itself only receives its (false) nature as a ‘ground’ through the negative activity of the for-itself. In this way, the for-itself “being the negation of the in-itself, could not desire the pure and simple return to the in-itself” (ibid.) What the for-itself originally desires is instead an in-itself “which would be to itself its own foundation; that is, which would be to its facticity in the same relation as the for-itself to its motivations” (ibid.). Just as freedom is the origin of its own motivations, we yearn for a non-contingent stability, which is equally grounded on itself and which does not violate the unbound freedom and complete transparency of the for-itself:

In other words the for-itself projects *being as for it-self*, a being which is what it is. It is as being as being what it is not, and which is not what it is, that the for-itself projects being what it is. It is a consciousness that wishes to have the impermeability and infinite density of the in-itself. It is as the nihilation of the in-itself and a perpetual evasion of contingency and of facticity that it wishes to be its own foundation. (BN: 587)

Thus, the for-itself wants to get rid of contingency all together in order to establish itself as *ens causa sui*, that is, the impossible plan to escape the world and be God: “God, value and supreme end of transcendence, presents the permanent limit in terms of which man makes known to himself what he is” (ibid.).

With this in mind, we can now sum up the tension between the two dualisms and the consequences this has for the connection between freedom and value. The tension in Sartre's position is that the two types of freedom continuously threatens to negate one another. On the one hand, freedom is rupture, and all identification with anything in the world is essentially bad faith – freedom is the perpetual revolt against existing values (*BN*: 47). On the other hand, freedom is project, which means that stable being is the ultimate value that it lacks in virtue of its own nothingness. The original project of attaining the state of *être-en-soi-pour-soi* is however impossible: we cannot transcend the world altogether, and no value that we project can ultimately satisfy, since, as Murdoch writes, all our projects 'tends to fall dead into the region of the reified' (Murdoch 1997: 58). The incarnation of value in our contingent projects is thus forever impossible, because of the impossibility of attaining any permanent coincidence between freedom and value – they remain in an insoluble tension that makes human endeavour as such a 'useless passion' (*BN*: 636).

### **The truth-seeking consciousness**

I now turn to Murdoch's implicit answer to the tension between consciousness (freedom) and value that we saw as the result of the tension between the two dualisms in Sartre. As we shall see, her answer consists in her change of the ontological structure of consciousness from Sartre's idea of 'radical freedom' to the idea of consciousness as a moral structure always already responsive to the world via the idea of the Good (Antonaccio 2012: 41).

First of all, Murdoch suggests that in order to understand one of the important reasons— perhaps *the* most important reason—why Sartre insisted on the freedom of consciousness as *total* and thus established it as *the* ontological structure of consciousness, one must understand the pressing dilemma between determinism and freedom in which Sartre

believed to find himself (Antonaccio 2000: 113). This is for instance to be seen in his extended criticism of the determinism he ascribed to modern scientifically based psychology, particularly Freud's psychoanalysis, which his existential psychoanalysis is a critical answer to. In this regard, Sartre is anxious to give a philosophical counter argument to any theory that threatens the irreducibility of the individual, which he does by claiming the total freedom of consciousness. Murdoch (1989: 103) credits Sartre for his illuminating depictions of immediate experiences of freedom, but she insists that Sartre ultimately exaggerates the scope of the freedom of consciousness and mistakenly turns it into the precondition for intentional subjectivity due to an equally exaggerated fear of determinism (Murdoch 2014: 73). To avoid this thread, Sartre saw no other way out than to claim the total freedom of subjectivity: "Sartre wishes at all costs to withdraw his man to a point at which he is independent of what seems to him the inhuman determinism of the modern world [...] even if it means depicting him as an empty shell" (Murdoch 1989: 112). However, Murdoch does not accept Sartre's 'false dilemma' between determinism and total freedom (Murdoch 2014: 73) and asks: "Can we not give a more balanced and illuminating account of the matter? I suggest we can, if we simply introduce into the picture the idea of *attention*, or looking [...]" (Ibid.: 35).

Before returning to Murdoch's idea of attention, it is important to understand how Sartre's fear of determinism results in the mistaken construction of a 'logical gap' between the neutral, dead and inert 'factic' world of the in-itself on the one hand, and the totally free value-imposing for-itself on the other (Murdoch 1992: 36). In this way, consciousness (freedom) is seen as the *inventor* of its own values though its negation of the 'factic' world of objects and reified values, the moral consequence of which Murdoch describes thus: "If the will is to be totally free the world it moves in must be devoid of normative characteristics, so that morality can reside

entirely in the pointer of pure choice” (Murdoch 2014: 40)—recall the dreadful consequences this had for Roquentin.

With this in mind, Murdoch is now anxious to show that Roquentin’s experience cannot serve as an adequate illustration of the human predicament *per se*. Instead, she suggests that consciousness cannot be constituted by the freedom to break from an essentially false world of inert values; rather, our freedom to re-orient ourselves and redefine the reality we meet is conditioned by the always already *moral* precondition of our vision and knowledge of the world (Antonaccio 2000: 96). In contrast to Sartre, consciousness should thus rather be understood as a truth-seeking activity fundamentally guided by *vision* rather than *choice*. The way we come to look at the ‘factic’ world is always already given a moral colour with respect to degrees of the *truthfulness* of our continuous interpretive discrimination between true and false, better and worse. Our immediate encounter with the world is thus

[...] a constructive activity of imagination and attention [that] ‘introduces’ value into the world which we confront. We have already partly willed our world when we come to look at it; and we must admit moral responsibility for this ‘fabricated’ world, however difficult it may be to control the process of fabrication” (Murdoch 1997: 201).

Sartre would of course agree that intentional subjectivity is always in the creative process of interpreting and creating the world it inhabits. However, in Murdoch this creation is not a product of a negating freedom that creates value *ex nihilo*, but of the activity of a morally preconditioned consciousness inherently responsive to *truthfulness* (the Good) that makes up the transcendental precondition for consciousness and its freedom (Antonaccio 2000: 95). This means that freedom, on Murdoch’s view, is changed from being *the* ontological determination of consciousness as a fundamental break from the world into being a *function* of the always already truth-

seeking consciousness; thus, freedom becomes correlative to the pursuit of knowledge of an already morally constituted reality, rather than a break from a false and meaningless one (Antonaccio 2000: 97).

Murdoch's different conception of the ontology of consciousness is perhaps most clearly formulated in her 'ontological proof', which is a re-reading of St. Anselm's classical 'Ontological Proof of God's Existence' (Murdoch 1992: 391). The aim of her re-reading is to show how this proof is better understood as a proof of the ontology of human consciousness, because: "[...] if there is any kind of sense or unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it" (Murdoch 2014: 77). This resembles Sartre's phenomenological aim of explaining the unifying aspect of experience from within experience itself, however with the crucial difference that Murdoch changes the unifying aspect of the activity of consciousness from 'freedom' to 'truth-seeking' via Plato's idea of the Good: "Consciousness *au fond* and *ab initio* must contain an element of truth-seeking through which it is also evaluated" (Murdoch 1992: 241), and further "[t]his is the sense in which morality (value) is transcendental, concerned with the conditions of experience" (Ibid.: 268). Murdoch thus aims at re-formulating the ontological proof of God into a proof of the Platonic idea of the Good in order to show how the Good should be read as the transcendental and moral unifier of human consciousness. I now turn to the original proof, which consists of two equally important elements. The first part of the proof is Anselm's idea of God as "the most real Being, than which nothing greater [or more perfect] can be conceived"<sup>28</sup> (Ibid.: 393). Inherent in this formulation lies the assumption that if such a Being can be conceived of in the understanding (consciousness), it must also

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<sup>28</sup> Although Murdoch's translation differs a little, I assume she refers to the second paragraph in the *Proslogium* where it says "[...] we believe that you are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived" (Anselm 1926).

exist in reality. This led to the well-known objection stated by the contemporary monk Gaunilo, and later by Kant, that existence is not a predicate one can add to a mental concept one happens to have (Ibid.: 394). In Anselm's reply to this objection he makes two essential points, Murdoch suggests. The first is empirical and refers to our experience of morality as involving degrees of perfection. He argues that from our experience of what is less good we can have an understanding of what is perfectly good, which is equal to the idea of God as the most perfect Being of which nothing greater can be conceived (Ibid.: 394). The second point has a transcendental character and responds more directly to Kant's and Gaunilo's objections that a thought concept (a thought essence) does not necessarily exist in reality. In this regard, Anselm makes a decisive distinction between the concept of God and all other concepts (e.g. an idea of a perfect island). He does so by asserting that God, unlike all other concepts, represents a non-contingent and non-particular being whose non-existence it would be impossible to conceive of—God, being the greatest and most perfect being, must thus entail his necessary existence (Ibid.: 394). Due to the limited scope of this inquiry, I cannot engage thoroughly with the Kantian critique of the proof in connection with his modal metaphysics or discuss the logical strength of Anselm's reply. In this context, I am solely concerned with Murdoch's emphasis on the two central points of Anselm's proof—firstly, the idea that God can be known through our *moral* experience of degrees of perfection, and secondly the idea that God is a *necessary* reality (Murdoch 1992: 395).

Murdoch now argues that the same can be said about Plato's concept of the Good. Regarding the first point, Murdoch is anxious to show how our experience of degrees of moral goodness—in terms of degrees of perfection—points in the direction of the reality of the Good. In contrast to Sartre's emphasis on the total freedom of consciousness as the Archimedean point for any experience whatsoever, Murdoch explains her view on the

matter by drawing attention to the fact that we immediately (pre-reflectively) experience degrees of goodness as inevitably connected to the virtue of *truthfulness*. We immediately grasp the goodness of the ability (virtue) to attend carefully and properly in order to gain a truthful understanding of a reality other than ourselves. It is of course important that the virtue of coming to see reality ‘truthfully’ cannot be understood in any morally neutral or ‘scientific’ sense of the term. It is inevitably a normative and private endeavour, which makes it more appropriate, Murdoch suggests, to compare the idea of ‘truthful vision’ with what is usually ascribed to the vision of great art. The great artist is able to scrutinize and attend to the inexhaustible reality of the irreducible individuality of the world, but in order to be able to unify such careful attention into a truthful picture, his attention must be guided by a selfless, just, and loving respect for the object of his attention: “The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice” (Murdoch 2014: 85). This is, Murdoch suggests, also the basic message in Plato’s parable of the cave in the Republic, where the human soul (consciousness) is pictured as a pilgrimage from illusion to reality, which is at the same time a pilgrimage towards goodness in terms of knowledge of the real. As we see in the picture of the ascending prisoner of the cave, Murdoch suggests that in all cognitive activity we intuitively discriminate between higher and lower degrees of true and false, better and worse:

A deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect [...] We come to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously we were prepared to ‘let by’ [...] The idea of perfection works thus within a field of study, producing an increasing sense of direction. (Ibid.: 60)

This argument about the nature of the truth-seeking consciousness is now a support for Murdoch's transcendental argument of the Good as the transcendental precondition for subjective experience. Regarding this aspect, Murdoch initially stresses the importance of Anselm's previous assertion that Go(o)d is a necessary, non-contingent and non-particular Being (Murdoch 1992: 395). In order for this assertion to be intelligible in the context of an analysis of the ontology of human consciousness, Murdoch understands it in the sense that Go(o)d cannot be thought of as an object among other objects but must nevertheless be understood as a necessary reality. As David Tracy has remarked, this conception of Go(o)d makes it natural for Murdoch to read the Proof in a Platonic and thus non-theistic sense as the Good 'beyond being'—this is also what we see in Levinas, but on very different grounds (Murdoch 1992: 399; Tracy 1996: 56). God can thus be transformed into a necessary conception of omnipresent and perfect goodness beyond being, which we conceive of through our experience of the goodness connected to truthful vision. In Plato, Murdoch argues, the Good is beyond any personal God and is instead mythically pictured as the sun in the parable of the sun in the Republic. The sun is what enables us to see in the first place, but we are blinded when we try to look directly at it (Murdoch 1992: 399). Murdoch is anxious to stress that this picture must of course be read as a mythical picture, which is supposed to show how the idea of the Good is the separate and absolutely transcendent precondition for our ability to see the world in the first place (Ibid.: 399). This is the sense in which the Good is a transcendental aspect located within human consciousness (Antonaccio 2012: 111). We always already see the world in the light of the Good, i.e. with constant reference to it, and this is what makes the concept of Good a necessary and unifying aspect of human existence. Reality is *ipso facto* a moral reality: "Others who feel that perhaps the Proof proves something, but not any sort of God, might return to Plato and claim some uniquely necessary status for moral value as something

(uniquely) impossible to be thought away from human experience [...]” (Murdoch 1992: 396). On Murdoch’s view, we cannot think away our experience of an inherent moral orientation if we reflect upon the structure of human experience—we see the goodness of excellence in art, love, and work in life, and we cannot help connecting this with a sense of truth.

On this view, the idea of freedom now has a completely different role than we saw in Sartre, because it no longer makes up the ontological structure of consciousness. Murdoch thus suggests that freedom cannot be seen as isolated from the continuous evaluative nature of consciousness but should rather be seen as a function of it. Murdoch thus rejects Sartre’s view of freedom as the ability to perform a sudden ‘leap’ out of the world of contingent objects and says instead: “Freedom is not the sudden jumping of the isolated will [...] it is the function of the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly” (Murdoch 2014: 32). In this way, freedom is, according to Murdoch, inseparable from the idea of knowledge, because it is the function of our evaluative attention, which can be a more or less “[p]atient and just discernment of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline” (Ibid.: 37).

This conception of freedom now allows for a different understanding of the tendency to fall into an inauthentic and inconsiderate life predicted by current conventions (‘bad faith’). In Murdoch, this tendency is not the result of the cover up of one’s own freedom that must be countered by an authentic leap out of the world as we saw in the case of Roquentin. Rather the ‘egoistic and self-protective’ mind is a more or less self-obsessed cover up of what is other than oneself, which one then fails to see and act properly on (Ibid.: 77). Bad faith is thus countered by an affirmation, not of self, but of ‘reality’ through the purification of one’s attention to particular, individual reality, upon which one can only act properly, if one can see it. This implies that authenticity is to be understood in contrast to the self-

assertion of Roquentin, namely as *selfless* attention: “In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature, we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly. We use our imagination not to escape the world, but to join it” (Ibid.: 88).

### **The Idea of Perfection**

Having shown how freedom is not a rupture from the world, but rather a means to integrate the self authentically into the world, I now turn to the second sense of freedom in Sartre that Murdoch drew attention to; freedom as project. In Sartre, we have seen how freedom as project is the original project of transcending the contingent world altogether in order to attain the permanent stabilization of freedom, i.e. the *être-en-soi-pour-soi*. Freedom in this sense is thus the attempt to incarnate value in the various projects of consciousness, however with the implicit paradoxical aim of unifying consciousness with itself ‘outside’ contingent reality (Antonaccio 2000: 96).

As we shall see, Murdoch has a similar idea of consciousness as a self-transcending activity that strives towards an ideal endpoint. However, since Murdoch has a different conception of the ontology of consciousness, this also changes her conception of an ‘original project’ towards which consciousness strives. This means this in Murdoch the Good is – apart from being the precondition for the (moral) activity of consciousness in its relation to external reality – also the original ‘magnetic pull’ that draws consciousness towards its centre (Ibid.: 97).

To illustrate this point, I turn to Murdoch’s well-known (and very commonsensical) example of how the evaluative process of attention contains an inherent ‘idea of perfection’ in terms of an ‘endless task’ of perfecting one’s knowledge of the individual reality that one is confronted with. The example concerns the relationship between a mother-in-law (M) and her daughter-in-law (D), and it goes as follows: a mother (M) has mixed

feelings about her daughter-in-law (D), whom she regards as good-hearted, but also simple, brusque, tiresomely juvenile etc. M cannot help feeling that her son has married beneath him. However, and this is an important point, M does not in any way show her dissatisfaction with D. M behaves beautifully to D and does not let anybody know about her true feelings. Time passes, and Murdoch now suggests the ideal developments of M's view on D: "[...] the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her" (Murdoch 2014, 17). M critically reflects on her own judgment of D, and she tries to attend to her without prejudice, snobbishness or jealousy. Now M's view on D gradually changes, and M starts seeing D in a new light: not noisy but gay, not undignified but spontaneous, etc. It is important that the M of Murdoch's example is moved by the intention to see D more truthfully as she is, and not by an intention to console herself. What we discover is that in trying honestly to see D, M has an 'endless' moral task of trying to see the world as it is without the falsifying veil of selfish intentions, and to see D perfectly will never be completely attained. The activity of the truth-seeking mind is thus in a continuous movement towards or away from a more truthful picture of reality, and this is thus the sense in which the Good is a 'magnetic pull' from a perfect 'beyond' towards which consciousness is (pre-reflectively) always already oriented as a distant destination:

The proper and serious use of the term [Good] refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know [...] and which carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence. How do we know that the very great are not perfect? We see differences, we sense directions, and we know that the Good is still somewhere beyond (Murdoch 2014: 91).

Thus, we cannot perceive perfection in our 'fallen' world – we are always drawn further beyond by the magnetic Good that cannot be seen, for it is

not there as a real 'entity' beyond, but remains an "edifying or hermeneutic 'as if'" (Murdoch 1992: 402). This means that the idea of the Good does not conflict with our equally primordial experience of the world as aimless, contingent, and as such pointless. It is thus important for Murdoch to state that on the one hand 'the Whole is false' and 'our world is irreducibly contingent' (Ibid.: 370). In this way, our immediate sense of moral unity and our simultaneous experience of contingency exist side by side: "Good lives, as it were on both sides of the barrier and we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement" (Murdoch 2014: 90).

We can now see how this second aspect of the Good is the perfectionist an ultimately unattainable standard against which consciousness measures itself, which corresponds to Sartre's idea of an unattainable end that consciousness is always already directed towards. The crucial difference in Murdoch is, however, that although perfection is unattainable, it does not make the pursuit of value self-contradictory, since it does not conflict with the first dualism, where freedom was seen as a natural function of the truth-seeking mind.

### **Concluding remarks**

We have seen how Sartre's position results in a perpetual tension between the freedom of consciousness on the one hand, and the incarnation and pursuit of value in the projects of consciousness on the other. However, with Murdoch's alternative it is possible to give a constructive answer to Sartre's disturbing conclusion that life is a useless passion – life might be contingent and as such 'aimless', but this does not make the pursuit of value meaningless, false and useless: "All is vanity. The only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all clearly and respond to it justly which is inseparable from virtue" (Ibid.: 85).

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