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Murdoch and K. E. Løgstrup

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Abstract

This chapter considers the relation between Murdoch's position and that of the Danish philosopher and theologian K. E. Løgstrup. While neither knew of each other's work, there are interesting points of comparison, both positively, but also negatively. On the positive side, for example, they have similar views on love and its obstacles, the significance of art, the need for social norms, and the barrenness of much analytic philosophy. But on the negative side, they have an important disagreement on the question of whether we can 'make ourselves morally better', as Murdoch puts it. On this issue, Løgstrup is much more pessimistic than Murdoch, which would lead him to be sceptical regarding her claims regarding the effectiveness of her 'techniques of unselfing', for reasons that are discussed and evaluated.

Unlike other critical encounters discussed in this volume, any encounter between Murdoch and the Danish philosopher and theologian K. E. Løgstrup (1905–1981) can only be a staged or virtual one, as there is no evidence of any actual interaction between them at all. This is not particularly surprising: Løgstrup's awareness of Anglophone philosophy was relatively limited, and often came through secondary sources, while his work was slow to be translated and so was little known in the English-speaking world until recently[1]—which could also be said in some respects of Murdoch herself, at least as a philosopher. It is thus to be expected that each should miss the significance of each other's writings.[2]

Nonetheless, while putting the two thinkers together can therefore only be a virtual exercise, of asking what each *might* or *would* have said of the other *if* they had known of each other's work, it is still well worth conducting. For, I will suggest, there are deep and important commonalities between their thinking, while at the same time there are some interesting differences, which raise significant but often neglected philosophical issues. Just as disagreement among intellectual allies is often more enlightening than differences between enemies who merely talk past each other, so here the common ground between Murdoch and Løgstrup can help make their divergences more illuminating.

I will begin by sketching out that common ground, partly by briefly putting their thought in some intellectual context. I will then consider a significant apparent difference between them, which concerns how love for others is possible, and the role that Murdoch gives in this process to the use of 'techniques' of overcoming the self. We will see how the debate between Murdoch and Løgstrup on this question takes us back into issues that were at the heart of Luther's so-called 'Reformation breakthrough' and its consequent challenge to earlier Aristotelian models of the virtues, issues which surface again in the dispute between Murdoch and Løgstrup that I will be staging in this chapter. This leads to a Løgstrupian challenge to Murdoch's hopes of offering an answer to the question she takes to be fundamental, namely: 'How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better?' (OGG 342) But before discussing this difference between them, first let me articulate their common ground.

Murdoch and Løgstrup: shared background

While in many ways a singular figure, Murdoch has also recently been placed in the context of three other major women philosophers of her generation—namely Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Mary Midgley—with whom she interacted closely at Oxford in the 1940s.[3]

The forces shaping the ideas of Murdoch and the others in this group were not just confined to their Oxford context, however, and similar forces can be identified shaping the work of the slightly older Løgstrup in Denmark. For, Løgstrup too was impacted by the experiences of the Second World War, which influenced his thinking on key issues such as the crucial importance of trust in our lives, our vulnerability to others, and the wickedness of human beings. As with Murdoch and her circle, this also led him to have a certain impatience with the British analytic ethics of time, and to a shared rejection of the fact/value distinction and the non-cognitivism that had been built upon it by Ayer and others, for failing to take seriously the pressing ethical challenges of the human condition. A further affinity between Løgstrup and Murdoch (which applies more to her than to the others in the Oxford group) is the influence on both of so-called 'continental' philosophy, where they shared significant interests in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre.

This mix of influences also has a rather parallel effect on the methodologies of both philosophers. While each displays an irritation with analytic philosophy in some of its forms, both nonetheless have a respect for aspects of the 'linguistic turn' (though in Løgstrup this comes

more through Hans Lipps rather than through the better-known figures of Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin), while combining this with an approach that has affinities with phenomenology, but a phenomenology that also makes room for metaphysics. In adopting these approaches, both thinkers also distanced themselves from an exaggerated respect for 'the scientific world picture', which they saw as leading to a displacement of the centrality of ethics and ethical phenomena, arguing that these deserve to be taken to be as much part of 'the real' as do the objects of science, rather than reduced away or eliminated along with the related notions (such as selfhood and responsibility) on which ethics relies. At the same time, both thinkers are alert to the concern that metaphysical and realist claims can be used to generate a kind of dogmatism and authoritarianism in ethics, so that such claims must be advanced with suitable caution and humility.

Finally, the work of Murdoch and Løgstrup demonstrates a depth of engagement with both the arts (particularly literature) and with religion that results in certain fundamental affinities. In Murdoch's case, of course, the first is true not only as a philosopher, but also as a distinguished writer. But Løgstrup too had a serious interest in literature and poetry, insisting that philosophers have more to learn from examples taken from literary works than from their own artificial constructions. As regards the significance of religion, Løgstrup was an ordained pastor in the Lutheran Danish church and held a chair in the theology department at Aarhus, and while he aimed to offer an account of ethics in 'purely human terms' (Løgstrup 2020: 3), he also clearly took the religious worldview with great seriousness. It can also be said that Murdoch did the same, though as with Løgstrup, there was a recognition that much in this worldview has to be re-thought. Where they differ, however, is in the form their engagement with religion was to take: for Murdoch, the influence of the Platonic tradition and of Buddhism, and also of Simone Weil, was fundamental, whereas for Løgstrup it is his Lutheran heritage that is key. As we shall see, this difference is arguably an important factor in properly appreciating the divergences between them, notwithstanding the shared intellectual context and allegiances outlined above.

Murdoch and Løgstrup: common ground

Before moving on to consider the divergence between Murdoch and Løgstrup, in this section I want to outline what I take to be their common ground, built on the shared background sketched above.

At the heart of the work of both writers is the significance of *love* and its relation to ethics: how a proper relation to others requires love, which engages with the particular and not just the universal; how that love can exclude choice and challenge certain conceptions of the will; how difficult this love is for us to achieve, yet how natural it can also be; how love can constitute a good not only for the person loved, but also for the person who loves; how love takes us beyond relations like duty and obligation, and also various kinds of social relations and norms; but how the fragility of love still requires us to include such obligations and norms within ethics, which thus has more than one level; and the relation between love and our creation and experience of art. Let me now briefly explore these themes in relation to both thinkers.

Murdoch's position can most simply be explained by unpacking this central and justly famous passage:

> Art and morals are, with certain provisos which I shall mention in a moment, one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man.
>
> (S&G 215)[4]

Her key ideas here may be outlined as follows: if we are to respond as we should to another person, we must do so through love, as it is only through love that we can engage with them for who they really are, in their individuality,[5] which then rules out a morality based exclusively on general rules and principles. For, love requires a particular form of *attention* (cf. AD 293), which takes us beyond its two 'enemies', namely 'social convention and neurosis': the former makes our responses to others purely conventional, while in the latter, 'we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world' that makes others 'into dream objects of our own' (S&G 216).[6] However, achieving this kind of loving attention is 'extremely difficult' for us—but why? Because what Murdoch famously calls 'the fat relentless ego' (OGG 342) finds it hard to accept that there may be others beyond us who we therefore may not be able to encompass in our plans, projects, or imaginative projections, but who remain irreducibly 'other', complex, and inexhaustible. There

is thus a kind of humility in love, and a taking away of our sovereignty, which as self-obsessed and controlling creatures we find hard—though when it happens, we are precisely released from our neurotic selves, from our fantasies, pictures and schemas, and set free.[7] This release can also come through art, as it too forces us out of ourselves, into paying attention to what is beyond us (cf. SBR 284).[8] In another way, however, we can be said to have our freedom taken away, not only because we must now acknowledge the other, but also because once we do, our capacity for choice is thereby reduced:[9] for once we truly see what is called for by love of the other, reasons to act otherwise are silenced.

However, in a way that then moves from her ethics into aspects of her political or social philosophy, Murdoch recognises that precisely because the ego is so fat and so relentless, our encounters with others do not always take the form of love, and this is certainly not to be relied upon. Instead, duty and obligation may have to replace love as a second-best motive,[10] while at a social level we will need to find ways of enforcing moral treatment of others when love fails.[11] This leads Murdoch to propose a fourfold structure to ethical life broadly construed, which she calls 'four modes of ethical being': eros, axioms, duties, and the void.[12] The interrelation between them might be sketched as follows: while it is an ideal, eros is unstable for us as selfish beings, and so requires supplementation by duty; but as social beings we require more than an individual morality and so require axioms; but both individual, moral and political goods can be threatened by the void, and to overcome this we need a kind of return to eros. Murdoch thus constructs an internally differentiated ethical, social and political philosophy, which has the ideal of love at its centre.

Turning now to Løgstrup, a similar claim about the centrality of love can be made here too. His major work of 1956, *The Ethical Demand*, begins by reflecting on the commandment to 'love thy neighbour', and develops an account of what such love is and requires in the form of his account of the 'ethical demand', which is said to be silent, radical, one-sided and unfulfillable. The demand is *silent* because it does not just involve doing what the other person asks of you, and cannot just be read off social norms or rules, but requires you to reflect on what is best for the other person and take responsibility for the actions that follow; it is *radical* because the other person has no right to make the demand, while it requires you to act selflessly and perhaps against your interests, though it should not be thought of as 'limitless'; it is *one-sided* because you cannot demand something in return for the care you give to the other as a recompense or

'payback', meaning it is non-reciprocal in this sense; and it is *unfulfillable* because in so far as you feel that care for the other is a *demand* or *obligation*, you have already failed in the love for the other that such care truly involves, for to act out of love is not to act out of any such duty or obligation.

Like Murdoch, therefore, Løgstrup insists that love of the neighbour requires attention to them as a particular individual, which requires what he calls 'insight, imagination, and understanding' (Løgstrup 2020: 21), rather than the following of general principles or the attempt to comply with moral rules. While the ethical demand is itself a kind of principle, in stating that 'the other's life should be cared for in a way that best serves the other' (Løgstrup 2020: 48), nonetheless in following it, one is required to focus on the particular situation of the other person, rather than being led away from that person to more abstract considerations, such as the general good, or the conformity of one's maxim to a principle of universalisability. In focussing on the individual in this way, we will be compelled to give up any prior 'picture' or image we may have of them (Løgstrup 2020: 13)—though the inexhaustible complexity and 'otherness' of any individual means that we can never pretend to know them entirely, and the 'outward directedness' of love in fact requires this 'element of strangeness in the relationship' (Løgstrup 2020: 113). In achieving this kind of loving attention, other reasons to act will fall away, so in the case of love there is no sense of duty, because there is no countervailing pull to do otherwise that needs to be overcome, and thus we are not bound or constrained in the manner of an obligation (*ob*− (to) + *ligare* (to bind)). It also follows that there is no moment of choice, which like Murdoch, Løgstrup believes is exaggerated by existentialism as well as by the fact/value distinction, which assumes one first sees the facts and then decides what evaluation to give them; but there is nonetheless a different kind of freedom to be found in acting from love, namely a freedom from duty and hence constraint.

Also like Murdoch, however, Løgstrup sees great obstacles standing in the way of our achieving this loving attention to others, where the primary obstacle is our self-concern, which may seem so inescapable that in asking us to set aside this self-concern in loving our neighbour, the demand is asking us for what is impossible. This might then raise the worry that the demand does not apply to us at all, as 'ought implies can'. Løgstrup argues, however, that to try to escape the demand in this way would be a kind of self-deception, as it would mean rejecting any responsibility for our selfishness, which we cannot do without giving up our agency altogether—

but then if we are responsible for making the demand unrealisable in the first place, we still stand under the demand. Moreover, like Murdoch, Løgstrup sees in this selfishness a kind of imprisonment, as we stand locked in a circling obsession with our own needs and anxieties, and cut off from any true relation to others and the world beyond us, in a way that is ultimately harmful, life-denying and unfree—where again like Murdoch, Løgstrup views this as a situation that can also be remedied through art.

Finally, Løgstrup's broader account of the relation between love of the neighbour and wider social and political life gives his ethics a fourfold structure that can be compared to Murdoch's focus on 'four modes of ethical being'. As we have already seen, Løgstrup has an account of love at the individual level which closely resembles Murdoch's account of eros. He also has the ethical demand, which becomes a *demand* when love becomes a matter of *duty* instead, which can provide a kind of secondary motivation when love fails. Moreover, at a social or political level, we cannot *count* on people responding to others in love, for as we have seen love is a fragile relationship; we therefore need to put in place other kinds of social norms (resembling Murdoch's axioms), which can be enforced through punishment and reward, which will thereby incentivise people when love fails, thereby saving us from the 'quite specific forms of violence' (Løgstrup 2020: 48) to which we might otherwise be subjected. Finally, Løgstrup recognises something like Murdoch's 'void' in his talk of 'nihilism', which can arise when the goodness of life is no longer apparent to us, for example through our experiences of suffering and death—but where this sense of goodness can be restored to us through love from others, who can thereby bring us back to a feeling for the meaningfulness and value of life.[13] Thus, there is a certain broad similarity between Murdoch's four modes of eros, duty, axioms and the void, and Løgstrup fourfold elements of love, duty, social norms, and nihilism. In this way, like Murdoch, Løgstrup's ethics has a complex structure which does not try for a kind of artificial unity, but nonetheless demonstrates an important interconnection between some of these elements (which he sometimes characterises as a relation of 'refraction'),[14] all built around love as the most fundamental ideal.

Løgstrup vs Murdoch on techniques of unselfing

In the previous sections, we have seen how much common ground is shared between Murdoch and Løgstrup, and how far their key ideas may be said to complement one another. This in itself

is hopefully of interest, as ways then may be found to show how each can be used to fill out the views of the other.

However, there is also interest to be found in a different and less irenic approach, which highlights what seems to be a key *divergence* between the two thinkers, arising out of some deep commitments in their views that have not yet been fully discussed—though as we shall see, the nature and extent of this divergence, and whether it too could be overcome, is a matter for further debate.

In order to bring this divergence out, we should begin with an important part of Murdoch's position, which is developed particularly in *The Sovereignty of Good*, where she insists on the importance for moral philosophy of the following questions: 'What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better? These are questions the philosopher should try to answer' (OGG 342).[15] Murdoch suggests that these issues have not been taken seriously by 'British philosophy since Moore' partly because British philosophers have taken a meta-ethical and linguistic route which means they think they should remain 'neutral' on such questions; and partly because the 'Anglo-Saxon tradition' is marked by 'unambitious optimism' (OGG 340) which takes us to be largely good, and which in any case does not ask that much of us in the first place[16]—while in its own way (and albeit 'contrary to some appearances'), Murdoch suggests that existentialism is much the same. In this respect, Murdoch remarks, they both contrast with 'the vanishing images of Christian theology which represented goodness as almost impossibly difficult, and sin as almost insuperable and certainly as a universal condition' (OGG 341).[17]

However, Murdoch notes, we do not only have to turn to Christianity to find this sense of our own sinfulness, as we can find secular analogue in the work of Freud, who 'takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature':

> He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings.
>
> (OGG 341)[18]

While recognising a difference between Freud's work qua psychologist and her work qua moral philosopher, Murdoch clearly thinks that Freud is a useful antidote to the 'unambitious optimism' of much moral philosophy, in part because he can take us back to earlier approaches which had a darker view and saw that '[i]n the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego'—where then those approaches equally understood the pressing need to find a way of combating this enemy if the moral life is to be achieved: 'Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat. In this respect moral philosophy has shared some aims with religion' (OGG 342).[19]

It is then in this context that Murdoch presses on us the questions raised above, of what it is to be a good person, and what if anything we can do to make us so—to which she offers in response her reflections on the various 'techniques'[20] that might make this possible. In a way that will be explored further below, the techniques she considers are: prayer, encounters with beauty in nature, artistic creation and experience, and the study of mathematics and languages.[21] In this way, she hopes to be able to offer to the questing 'moral pilgrim' (OGG 343)[22] some ways in which they can make themselves morally better, and learn about the virtues that this will require.

Now, in raising these issues, Murdoch is inadvertently raising a question that is of great interest also to Løgstrup. For, Løgstrup too accepts the more pessimistic and yet demanding picture that can be found in traditional Christianity, and makes it central to his conception of ethics. Thus, on the one hand he is uncompromising about the wickedness of human beings,[23] and on the other hand he stresses that ethics is about more than following social norms or even doing one's duty, but requires us to love the neighbour, as we have seen. The difficulty then is how this is even possible, given the tension between such love on the one hand, and our self-concern and self-absorption on the other.

However, despite this further shared ground, where Løgstrup seems to fundamentally differ from Murdoch, is in not answering the question 'how can we make ourselves morally better?' by trying to identify techniques or strategies of the sort identified by Murdoch. And the reason for this appears to be that he is committed to the view that no such techniques can work, as there is no way we *can* make ourselves morally better, and so instil virtues in ourselves in that sense. Thus, in Løgstrup's view, if it is the case that we love the neighbour, this is not through any efforts on our part, but occurs purely passively, simply through our encounter with the neighbour, who thereby enables us to be freed from the imprisonment in ourselves, an

imprisonment that would only be made more confining if we sought to escape it through our own initiatives, of the sort Murdoch seems to appeal to with her 'techniques'. It is at this point, then, that the paths taken by Murdoch and by Løgstrup seem to diverge radically.

Behind this divergence is a difference in their respective influences which we have not yet discussed: namely, that while Murdoch is drawn to the Greek tradition, to forms of Christianity more closely associated with Catholicism (such as Weil's), and to Buddhism, Løgstrup is resolutely Lutheran, and so accepts Luther's clear disjunction between 'justification by grace' and 'justification by works', which rules out any role for the agent themselves achieving justification through their own efforts. In secularising this basic picture, Løgstrup therefore excludes any such agency, and thus with it any Murdochian conception of what we might do for ourselves in making ourselves better—as for Løgstrup, this can only be something *done to us*, in the manner of Lutheran grace.[24] Just as Luther saw this grace as a matter of God's entirely gratuitous *giving*, and thus something we could not in any way earn from our efforts, Løgstrup treated any love that we might feel for the neighbour in the same way, as a gift to us from the nature of the encounter and thus the structure of life itself (which can include encounters with nature and through the arts), and not something we can claim for ourselves, or to our own credit in any way. To think otherwise, he argued, is to make this love a matter of our own merits, and thus something for which we can demand something in return, thereby making love a matter of reciprocity, when in fact it is one-sided: we cannot demand something back for our care for the other, as this capacity for care is itself something we have been given. If we think otherwise, we will feed the kind of pride and self-righteousness that precisely makes love for the other person impossible. Thus, in his later work, Løgstrup was to talk of love as one of the 'sovereign expressions of life', alongside others such as trust, compassion and hope, which take us over and which therefore come prior to the will.[25]

Now, given this picture of Løgstrup's, I think it is reasonable to imagine that he would have his concerns about Murdoch's account, and her appeal to what might be called her 'techniques of unselfing'.[26] I first want to identify three such concerns, and then go on to consider how Murdoch might reply to them.

A first concern might be that the very idea of such a technique is self-defeating, where the worry can be put as follows: the aim of the technique is to overcome the self; but either the technique is employed consciously by the self in which case the self will not be overcome, or the technique is

not employed consciously by the self in which case it is not really a technique, as this must be something we *do*. The problem can be illustrated by Murdoch's well-known example of seeing a kestrel, which is meant to exemplify the role that the contemplation of beauty in nature can have in overcoming our self-concern:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.
>
> (SGG 369)

Thus described, Løgstrup need find nothing to object to in what Murdoch has said so far, as this precisely fits his passive conception of how the self can be taken out of itself through an encounter of this kind. But what would concern him, I think, is what Murdoch says next: 'And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care' (SGG 369). Here, Murdoch assumes, our attention is not simply re-focussed through the appearance of the kestrel, but it can also be something we can do for ourselves 'deliberately', in order to overcome our self-concern precisely through this activity of re-focussing our attention, where for Murdoch this 'unselfing' is crucial to achieving goodness. Thus, while she is pessimistic that we can redirect our *will* to make ourselves good, much as Løgstrup is, she nonetheless seems more optimistic that we can do something to redirect our *attention*, from which a good will can then follow.[27]

I think Løgstrup's first worry about this picture could be put as follows: as soon as anyone tries to adopt such a strategy with the aim of improving their attentiveness, they then must immediately fail to be attentive, as they must be aware of themselves and their own goals in adopting the technique, which will ensure the technique fails, as it now directs them inwards rather than outwards. In this sense, directing oneself towards the good by re-directing one's attention is no easier than re-directing one's will. Thus, to take Murdoch's example: if I set out to spend more time looking out on the beauty of nature as a way to escape myself, and so seek to use this as a technique to free myself from brooding on my various humiliations, it is still *myself* that I remain concerned about, thus ensuring that the technique will fail.[28] The first worry, then,

is that if the technique is something we consciously carry out in order to rid ourselves of self-concern, it cannot work as it can only then keep our attention focussed on the self, rather than away from it.

Turning now to a second worry from Løgstrup, I think it could be put as follows: as we have seen, in contrast to the 'unambitious optimism' of contemporary British moral philosophy and of existentialism, Murdoch presents herself as taking seriously our sinfulness, in a way that she recognises was fundamental to the religious tradition. However, Løgstrup might argue, she still falls short of fully grappling with our sinfulness, as her techniques of unselfing still assume a self who is willing to take up those techniques in order to overcome its self-concern and make itself morally better: but how is that possible, if the self is really sinful? How and why would a truly sinful self take up such a technique in the first place? By contrast, Løgstrup does not need to assume any such prior goodness in leading the self to adopt a technique, as on his account the agent is *made good* and its sinfulness is overcome or displaced—and thus, he might claim, his conception of human sinfulness can be much more thoroughgoing and consistent than Murdoch's, which is therefore shown to be guilty of some 'unambitious optimism' of its own, typical of anyone who has not really taken Luther (or perhaps behind him Augustine) seriously.

Third and finally, Løgstrup may object that Murdoch's account is problematic because if it were true that the agent can adopt a technique that works in making them more attentive to the good and hence a morally better person, this in itself will fuel just the kind of pride that Løgstrup takes to be fatal to such moral goodness, for two reasons: first, he shares the Lutheran view that pride makes love of the neighbour impossible, as one cannot feel love for someone to whom one feels superior; and second, attributing goodness to one's own efforts, even if partially, will enable one to claim something in return for such goodness, hence threatening the non-reciprocal nature of love.

Of course, as I made clear at the outset, if these are taken to be Løgstrup's objections to Murdoch, this can only be claimed in a virtual sense, as in reality Løgstrup knew nothing of her work, and so no such objections were actually made: but given Løgstrup's views outlined above, they seem a reasonable surmise concerning what he might have said in response to Murdoch. Finally, then, I want to consider what she might then say in reply.

Regarding the first problem, of the self-defeating nature of such techniques if they turn us back on ourselves, Murdoch herself was aware of the issue, remarking that 'It is an attachment to what

lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power' (OGG 355).[29] Nonetheless, she seems to have thought, some techniques just are such, that in taking them up, they thereby draw the agent away from themselves, and so may be said (in a literal sense) to be 'self-effacing'. Prayer, for example, is something one does, but in doing, loses oneself—and the same may be true of creating art, or Murdoch's example of learning a language. Simone Weil has an interesting comment in her *Gravity and Grace* along similar lines:

> The privileged rôle of the intelligence in real love comes from the fact that it is inherent in the nature of intelligence to become obliterated through the very fact that it is exercised. I can make efforts to discover truths, but when I have them before me they exist and I do not count.
>
> (Weil 2002: 129)

Thus, in Murdoch's example of the kestrel, she could argue, I can *both* deliberately give my attention to nature, *and* precisely as a result of doing so, my self will still be eclipsed, given the 'power' or attractive force of natural beauty, that draws us to it and away from ourselves. Such phenomena, Murdoch might argue, involve a particular combination of both active and passive elements, as Weil also suggests: I actively set out to discover the truth, but in so doing, lose my sense of myself and hence of my own agency over what it is I am discovering, and how that discovery comes about.[30]

Turning now to the second worry, Løgstrup might claim here that even if what is said above is possible, it is hard to see why a truly sinful self would engage in such techniques in the first place, or how it could do so successfully. For while a good self that *wishes* to efface itself may adopt such techniques, and enable them to work, why would a selfish self, fully immersed in its own inner fantasies, do either? To see the problem, consider Murdoch's famous example of M and D: the mother does succeed in becoming more attentive to the daughter-in-law, but she is portrayed as already being 'an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her' (IP 313).[31] Fair enough, Løgstrup might say—but what has happened here to the 'fat relentless ego', to Murdoch's agreement with religious and Freudian pessimism on this score, and of her claim that 'if we consider contemporary candidates for goodness, if we know of any, we are likely to find them obscure, or else on closer inspection full of frailty. Goodness appears to be both rare and

hard to picture' (OGG 342)? Even if Murdoch's techniques could work in theory, as deployed by those rare people who are already fundamentally good, how can they work for *us*, if we are as bad as Murdoch says we are?

Now, of course, an option here for Murdoch would be to dial back her pessimism somewhat, and to correspondingly accuse Løgstrup of exaggerating our wickedness—as Erasmus does against Luther, for example.[32] But one issue is that this may then cause problems for the consistency of her views, as it will now be harder for her to attack others for 'unambitious optimism'; and second it may also reduce the basic interest of her position: for it is less exciting to be told how people who already possess a 'good self' (even one that is 'very small indeed' (OGG 355)) can make themselves better, than to be told how those who are not good at all can nonetheless become good—and Løgstrup's position seems now more suited than Murdoch's to tell us something on this score.[33]

Perhaps, however, this last point is somewhat unfair to Murdoch. For, as mentioned above, it seems important to her discussion that she wants to contrast her model of becoming good with other models, particularly those suggested by accounts that focus more on the *will* or *choice*, whereas (along with Weil) she wants to emphasise instead the importance of *attention* and *vision*.[34] Thus, what she takes Freud's account of 'the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy' (OGG 341) to suggest is that a being of this sort cannot be expected to escape that 'egocentric system' by just choosing the good and so make itself moral that way; instead, it must learn to *attend* to the good, whereby the moment of choice is removed. There is thus some point to her enquiry after all, as replacing one model with the other, where her attention model leaves more room for recognising the problematic nature of the will,[35] even if it is not as thoroughgoing in its conception of our wickedness as Løgstrup's, which, in turn, might be said to be too hyperbolic.

Lastly, turning to the third objection: if making ourselves good or better is a matter of some technique we can adopt, won't this block Løgstrup's claim that the capacity for love and hence goodness is something we are given, and as a result won't it also fuel a pride in our own abilities that will stand in the way of love? Thus, just as Luther thought that any concession to our own agency in securing grace would open the door to Pelagianism and hence an exaggerated and self-satisfied sense of our own abilities in relation to justification, might not Løgstrup say the same here in relation to love?

In response, Murdoch might again adopt the strategy used by Erasmus and others against Luther, and claim that while we can do something towards our own justification, this is certainly not sufficient or enough to warrant pride, or to take away our sense of grace as a gift. Likewise, Murdoch might argue, while there are indeed techniques of unselfing which we can adopt, if they work it is not really down to us, so that most of the credit must go elsewhere—namely to the Good which is able to draw us to it in such a way as to overcome the self.

However, just as Luther expressed himself dissatisfied with a compromise position like Erasmus', furiously denouncing it as semi-Pelagianism that in a way is even worse than the real thing because it feigns a humility it does not really feel,[36] so Løgstrup might say the same of Murdoch: even if our efforts have played only a small part, this is enough to feed the self's sense of its own value, and so ruin the whole picture.

Now, as before, one response might be to say this reply exaggerates the nature of our wickedness, and that we can attribute some responsibility for the good to ourselves without getting carried away with pride and self-righteousness—but then as before, Løgstrup may feel (as Luther did in relation to Erasmus) that Murdoch's sense of our sinfulness is less acute than it should be, and is presented by her as being. Another response might therefore take a different direction, by again focussing on the kind of techniques Murdoch has in mind. For, it could be argued, while these techniques are clearly not techniques of direct control (as when I shut a door), they are not even techniques of *indirect* control (as when I shoot a bullet fully expecting it to kill someone), but instead are techniques of what might be called *aspirational control*: that is, one sets them in motion, in the hope but not the expectation that they will succeed, fully realising that if they do, this will be down not to you but to what lies beyond you.[37] For example, in setting out to paint a picture, while I am doing something in painting it, and hope that what I manage to create has some artistic value, I do not *expect* this to happen as the anticipated results of my actions, such that I will be seriously puzzled if things don't turn out that way (as when a bullet I have fired does not actually kill its intended victim). Rather, I just *hope* my enterprise will succeed, and thus put my trust and faith in forces beyond myself, in such a way that if they do succeed, I will feel humbled by it rather than puffed up; and if I do more than hope, my efforts are likely to be botched. If this seems right, something similar could be said by Murdoch regarding the moral case as well—in a way that Løgstrup could perhaps accept, as consistent

with the general outlook on ourselves, the world, and the difficulties in achieving the good that he and Murdoch both share.

In conclusion, and notwithstanding these points of potential disagreement, it is perhaps worth ending by emphasising the more fundamental *agreement* between Løgstrup and Murdoch when it comes to the central question: how can we make ourselves morally better? For, even if they may diverge on the extent to which this can be due to our own efforts, they significantly *converge* on the other part of the answer: namely, the problem arises out of the absorption of the self within itself, and if that absorption is to be broken, this requires the world which the self encounters to be a certain way. For, in order for the self to be shaken out of its own in-turning energies and self-consoling fantasies and instead directed outwards, the world must present itself as 'other' to the self, as in some sense inexhaustible, transcendent, not at one's disposal, real, valuable, constraining.[38] This is what it is to encounter the daughter-in-law, the kestrel, the Russian language, a Cézanne painting (to give a list from Murdoch), or the injured Jewish traveller, the trusting conversation partner, the natural world, or a poem (to give a similar list from Løgstrup). Without the world being this way, and without us coming to see that this is the way the world is, both would agree that we must forever remain behind the 'veil of selfish consciousness' (SGC 376–377) or 'imprisoned'[39] within ourselves—and thus it is in this fundamental unencompassable otherness (though not alienness) that the grace of existence is to be found.[40]

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[1] For a bibliography of works in English on Løgstrup, see https://ethicaldemand.wordpress.com/resources-and-link/

[2] Unsurprisingly, there is therefore little discussion of the relation between the two thinkers, beyond the occasional mention. I have discussed it briefly in Stern (2019), mainly on pp. 325–329; cf. also Stevns (2018).

[3] See Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman (2022) and Lipscomb (2022).

[4] For other significant references, see SBR 284, IP 299, OGG 337, and SGC 384.

[5] Cf. IP 323: '[T]he central concept of morality is "the individual" thought of as knowable by love'.

[6] Cf. also LP 14 and OGG 347–348.

[7] Cf. OGG 348: 'We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need… [T]he direction of attention should properly be outward, away from the self'; see also F&S 417 on 'falling in love…whereby the center of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self, and the dreamy ego is shocked into awareness of an entirely separate reality'.

[8] Cf. Murdoch (2004: 196), and also MGM 59.

[9] Cf. IP 331: 'If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at'. For further discussion of Murdoch's views on freedom and its relation to choice see Stern (2022).

[10] MGM 302–303, 383, 483.

[11] Cf. MGM 336 and 368, where Murdoch endorses Hume's observation that for the purposes of politics, '*every man must be supposed a knave*' (Hume 1994: 5).

[12] See Chapters 17 and 18 of MGM.

[13] Løgstrup (2020: §6.4), and Løgstrup (2007: 18–22).

[14] Cf. Løgstrup (2020: 91, 97).

[15] Cf. also F&S 457: 'A portrayal of moral reflection and moral change (degeneration, improvement) is the most important part of any system of ethics'.

[16] Cf. OGG 350, where Murdoch insists that we should not water down the pursuit of perfection, commenting ironically: 'What of the command "Be ye therefore perfect?" Would it not be more sensible to say "Be ye therefore slightly improved?"'. Cf. also AD 294: 'Our inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile, dramatic and, in spite of Hitler, optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work'.

[17] Cf. OGG 338, 344, MGM 103.

[18] Cf. also SGC 364.

[19] Cf. also OGG 352, where she speaks of the 'techniques' by which we might come to face reality, rather than dwell in fantasy and illusion.

[20] In using this term, Murdoch is consciously making a link to Plato's conception of *technai*: see OGG 353 and SGC 373, and also MGM 24–25.

[21] See the following references: prayer (OGG 344, 356, SGC 368), encounters with beauty in nature (OGG 353, SGC 369–370), artistic creation and experience (OGG 352–354, SGC 370–372), and the study of mathematics and languages (SGC 373–374).
[22] Cf. FS 456: 'Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel) and exemplifies in spite of Plato what his philosophy teaches concerning the therapy of the soul'.
[23] Løgstrup (2020: 119–122).
[24] For further discussion, see Rabjerg and Stern (2018).
[25]

> The sovereign expression of life precedes the will; its realization takes the will by surprise. It is one of those offerings in life which, to our good fortune, preempt us, and in whose absence we should be unable to carry on from one day to the next.
>
> (Løgstrup 2007: 68)

[26] While Murdoch herself does not use precisely this phrase, she does use both words—and the phrase has been used of her by others. In MGM, she talks about 'a long deep process of unselfing' (54), comments that 'the disciplined practice of various skills may promote a similar unselfing, or "décreation" to use Simone Weil's vocabulary' (245). For a discussion of Murdoch's position which focusses mainly on her novels rather than her philosophical works, see Gordon (1995).
[27] Antonaccio (2000: 153–154) notes how Murdoch's conception of attention incorporates more agency for the subject than the Augustinian model of grace, which is closer to Løgstrup's picture.
[28] Cf. Løgstrup (2007: 78), where Løgstrup argues that in trying to train one's virtuous disposition, one will be focussed on the motivations with which one acts, rather than on the action itself, whereas the truly good agent is focussed on what is to be done, rather than themselves. This echoes familiar Lutheran worries concerning the Aristotelian model of how the agent can cultivate virtues in themselves through habituation and practice.
[29] Cf. also MGM 9: 'There is an important difference between learning about virtue and practicing it, and the former can indeed be a delusive substitute which effectively prevents the latter'. For further discussion of Murdoch's view on these matters, and whether she should or can allow for some forms of self-directed attention, see Vice (2006), Mole (2006), and Driver (2020).
[30] Cf. the phrase from Weil, where she speaks of 'inactive action' (Weil 2002: 45). A similar idea has been developed recently by Han-Pile in her account of *medio-passivity*: see (2009, 2013, and 2017).
[31] Cf. also OGG 356, my emphasis: 'Good is the focus of attention when *an intent to be virtuous* co-exists (as perhaps it almost always does) with some unclarity of vision'.
[32] Cf. Erasmus (1999: 290): 'Sin introduced impaired vision, not blindness; lameness, not destruction; it inflicted a wound, not death; it brought on weakness, not annihilation'.
[33] This is not to say that Løgstrup's position is itself unproblematic: see Rabjerg and Stern (2018) for further discussion.
[34] Cf. OGG 345 and IP 332.
[35] Cf. Gordon (1995: 7): '[A]lthough Murdoch shows repeatedly that egoism is tenaciously deep-rooted in humankind, an idea enforced by her reading of Freud, she shows, too, that sin and guilt inhere in the corrigible *will*, not in human nature fundamentally and originally'.

[36] Cf. Luther (1972: 107).
[37] See Han-Pile and Stern (2022), in which Han-Pile introduced the idea of aspirational control.
[38] There are obvious affinities also to Levinas here: for further discussion, see Stern (2020: Chapter 9).
[39] Cf. Stern (2020: 311–312).
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