CHAPTER 5

SELFLESSNESS

I

I have in mind moral attitudes which emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations 'taped', the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique.

They stand on a firmer ground, the selfless ones, while the rest of the huge, teeming cast of characters flounder in the dark, in a morass of illusion, falsity and lies. Lest the picture appear a glimpse of Dante's hell, it may be added that at no point is Murdoch an avenging angel, dourly handing out punishments and retributions. "Vice is general and virtue is particular", says the dying Guy in Nuns and Soldiers. Iris Murdoch clearly sees falsity and egoism as a condition of life. In The Sovereignty of Good she says, '...so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind. In the moral life the
enemy is the fat relentless ego."

Life, in the Murdoch novels, is predominantly the moral quagmire. Selflessness is the path out and as such (since it is related to the quagmire), it needs to be examined as a separate chapter in the present study. To come out of the general condition of vice is given to the very, selfless, few. Barely a handful of her characters are blessed with the clear vision, the humility and the undramatic goodness which go with true selflessness. Nevertheless, Murdoch sees some aspect of the good — a distinctive sliver of a particular virtue — in most of her characters. Dipple rightly observes:

Iris Murdoch's generosity in thinking about her characters means that they all — except for a few real demons — are given some hold on good, some access to truth. Often this comprises only a very small corner of a capacious personality ... Because almost all of Murdoch's characters share, at least momentarily, in this tendency towards the luminous, the question of how a 'good' character is handled in her book becomes very important. Her allegiance to the rigours of reality means that the novels are populated by the generally imperfect, egotistic and even demonic characters of our contemporary
Apart from the 'few real demons' and the few really good characters who are wholly selfless, most of Murdoch's characters are granted some virtue, or at least a momentary flash of insight into truth. Even George McCaffrey, whose vain, falsifying consciousness prevents even a glimmer of the real, is given an unselfish act of heroism. He is instrumental in saving Zed, his nephew's pet dog, from drowning in the cold sea.

Thus how the good figure is handled is of great importance in any novel of Murdoch, since this differentiates him from the host of other characters. It is clear that the figures of good are treated differently from the other characters. An absence of irony, an investment of a certain inner quietude and certainty distinguishes them. They are distinguished too by a lack of moral struggle: that is why Anne Cavidge with her feverish uncertainties seems so much less of a good character. The good in Iris Murdoch's novels know that the good they practise is for nothing. They are characterised by a knowledge of the pointlessness of virtue in the mortal world as well as the paradoxical certainty that nothing is more important than being good. The two seemingly opposed notions of goodness are
Elizabeth Dipple with her complex arrangement of chapters, differentiates between two sorts of good characters. In her chapter titled 'Reality and Realism' she includes Theo in *The Nice and the Good*, Bledyard in *The Sandcastle*, Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Brendan Craddock in *Henry and Cato*. The next chapter discusses the characters of 'unconscious good' — Huge Belfounder in *Under the Net* and Ann Peronett in *An Unofficial Rose*. Later on in the book she includes in the general list of good characters, Danby in *Bruno's Dream*, Arthur Fisch in *A Word Child*, the Count and Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers*. Suguna Ramanathan in *Figures of Good* concentrates on the good characters in the last seven novels of Iris Murdoch, beginning with *Henry and Cato*. In these novels she sees the good figures, though not directly a part of the main flux of events, forming a significant 'centre' of their own. From Brendan Craddock in *Henry and Cato* to Jenkin Riderhood in *The Book and the Brotherhood* she sees a gradual stripping away of religious conventions, intellectual conceptualising, and even charm, till the good figures 'reaches a stage of unselfconsciousness and simplicity that would be hard to surpass.'
This chapter attempts to examine the good figures of *The Good Apprentice* and *The Book and the Brotherhood*. Stuart Cuno and Jenkin Riderhood, the good characters, are seen in a totally secular world, without the trappings of conventional religion. In *The Good Apprentice*, for the first time in the Murdoch oeuvre, the good figure talks about Goodness, of being able to be good and to do good. The articulated intention of the good character in this novel is seen put into execution by the good figure of the next novel, *The Book and the Brotherhood*. The second part of this chapter will try to analyse these two figures of good and see how selflessness works in a world given to a pandering to the self.

II

In *The Good Apprentice* it is Edward Baltram who forms the centre for much of the action in the novel. Edward's guilt, obsessive feelings and tortured consciousness are caused by his having given a sandwich filled with drugs to his friend as a joke. Mark Willesden, the friend, unaware of the trick played on him, consumes the sandwich. In the midst of a 'trip' he walks out of an upper-storey window and falls to his death. Edward is consumed by raging feelings of obsessive guilt and self-hatred; he is unable and even
unwilling to come out of the mire of self-torture. His half-brother, Stuart Cuno, though not directly involved in much of the unfolding drama of Edward's adventures at 'Seegard', or of the sordid erotic adventures between Midge and Henry Cuno, is of central significance as an unsoiled spectator filled with love and compassion and a desire to help. He is the irreducible standard by which the reader measures the other characters. Not surprisingly, he is the good apprentice of the title of the novel.

The most striking features about Stuart Cuno are his youth and stolid neutrality. Gone is the charm of Brendan Craddock, the 'interestingness' of James Arrowby or Anne Cavidge and the venerability of William Eastcote. The good figure in The Good Apprentice is apparently a raw, callow, untried youth in a non-religious secular framework, with only idealism going for him.

Apparently so. For Stuart Cuno, full of youthful vitality and belief in the power of goodness, though untried, has yet a deep centre of unselfconscious strength — his own good thoughts. This 'still centre' ensures his good actions: he could never have fed a drugged sandwich to anybody. There are two distinct strains of thought, image and action in the novel: one works for Edward Baltram, also a youth but a tortured one. The other strain of thought, metaphor and action
Stuart's advice to Edward is simple and free of any examination or analysis which would only produce a more feverish obsession with guilt:

"All this repetitive misery is bad, it's not truth. I'm not suggesting you just try and jump out of it all. You can't. It's not like a riddle with a magic solution. You've got to think about what happened, but try to think about it in a bit of clear light. The burning has to go on, but hold onto something else too, find something good, somewhere, anywhere, keep it close to you. . . ." (GA, 45)

Stuart's suggestion to Edward, towards the close of the novel, to go and see Midge has a positive effect on poor Edward's tortured soul. Seeing somebody else's problems in a clear perspective has the result of clearing away some of the cobwebs from the furniture of his own mind. The sense of having helped Midge too has its own salutary effect, so that Edward, towards the end of the novel, despite losing Brownie, is a man who has emerged, though battle-scarred, with some measure of success from the war with his own consciousness.
Stuart's 'good' sense is apparent in the one long, drawn-out conversation between himself and Thomas McCaskerville, the psychiatrist. The subtle moral difference between the two men is also evident. Though Thomas McCaskerville is an intelligent, perceptive and kind man, he is too interested in the mechanical workings of human minds; the question 'how does it tick?' is very important to him. His fascination with people's minds and the understanding that empowers him, ensures in him a kind of influential power that Stuart would never want to possess. The fascination with human psychology, moreover, blinds Thomas to his own wife's unhappiness, though he dearly loves her. Stuart, in the course of their conversation, calmly occupies his own space and refuses to become the psychiatrist's, ever so kindly meant, 'dupe'. His 'apprenticeship' to goodness is seen to be monumentally simple:

"Everyone seems to want to make a mystery or drama out of it, but it's desperately simple really, just not to enter the machine." (GA, 139)

The machine here means presumably the whole cycle of attachments and ensuing corruptions that living entails.
Goodness for Stuart is not a theoretical idea which one may subscribe to:

"It's got to be everything, my whole being, my whole life, not something part-time, not something optional – just to try to be good, to be for others and not for oneself. To be nothing, to have nothing, to be a servant – and for that to be one's whole occupation."

(GA, 140)

In such an apprenticeship, God does not enter. For Stuart God is an anti-religious idea. Even the figure of Christ, for him, has to be thought of in a secular background – without the magic of the Resurrection. He says to Thomas:

"I have to think of him in a certain way, not resurrected, as it were mistaken, disappointed – well, who knows what he thought. He has to mean pure affliction, utter loss, innocent suffering, pointless suffering, the deep and awful and irremediable things that happen to people." (GA, 147)

He connects this (as indeed it connects in all Murdoch
novels) to the Holocaust, to movingly described plaits of hair in the Auschwitz Museum, making the life of Christ another awful historical phenomenon which yet projects the idea of perfection of being good and doing good in any situation, even under the most extreme duress.

Stuart, who is aptly described in canine terms: with ‘doggy’ fur-like hair and ‘animal-like’ yellow amber eyes, has begun to fascinate Thomas, the psychiatrist. To his expressed hope that they might talk again, Stuart firmly replies:

"Oh, I don't think we'll ever talk like this again, it wouldn't do. Things can get spoilt by being talked about. (GA, 147)

The calmness and inner certainty so evident in Stuart's talk with Thomas is also seen in the way he answers the whole contingent of the modern world in the persons of his father, Harry Cuno, the doctor, Ursula Brightwalton, Midge and others at the dinner in the McCaskerville house. The best lines are not given to Stuart, as they never are to Murdoch's good figures. But the simplicity and truth of what Stuart says cannot fail to strike. Answering in reply to observations made by the assembled company of friends that machines are cleverer than man, Stuart says:
Who is to judge the wisdom of a machine, another machine? Human minds are possessed by individual persons, they are soaked in values, even perception is evaluation." (GA, 28)

He admits that he is afraid of losing the ordinary human perception of right and wrong, by losing language which is an expression of value. 'Lost bad spirit' is what he is afraid of. "Love has to un-be itself to be itself", he tells Thomas McCaskerville. The possessiveness, vanity and self-centredness of erotic love have all to be cleared away and refined for love to really be itself. The eros has to be purified to attain its real significance.

Stuart's ability to 'see' clearly is nowhere more evident than when he tells Midge (who has unaccountably fallen in love with him after falling out of love with his father, Harry Cuno) to go back to her husband and son for that is where her true place and perhaps, happiness lies. He rightly perceives that her love for him, Stuart, is just an illusion.

Stuart Cuno for all his youth and characteristic idealism, is no dreamer or image-maker of the good. He has his feet planted solidly on the earth. He can at once see clearly and not judge censoriously; he can perceive the chaotic workings of the worldly machine,
earns for the good and yet remain marvellously at home in the world allotted to him. The others perceive his difference, physically manifested in a sort of 'white' neutrality associated with him. But Stuart himself remains quietly at home: the very example of the Elder Brother of the Prodigal Son, with no fuss or drama. Even the slight spiritual uncertainty that he has is quickly overcome with his 'sighting' of the mouse in the tracks of an underground subway. The realisation that the mouse 'lived there' and was not trapped, releases a flood of calm, peaceful joy ('honeydew', as he terms it) which is his almost customary state of being.

The only place where Stuart is not at home is, as rightly pointed out by Suguna Ramanathan, in 'Seegard'. Jesse Baltram, erstwhile artist, sick and ailing, virtually a prisoner, staggers into the sordid scene of Harry and Midge's deception, lies and subsequent 'discovery', sees Stuart, and pointing his stick at him says in a 'ringing' voice:

"There's a dead man, you've got a corpse there, it's sitting at the table, I can see it ... That man's dead, take him away, I curse him. Take that white thing away, it's dead. The white thing, take it away from here." (GA, 292)
It is difficult to fathom the meaning of this rather dramatic episode. But it is perceived that Seegard and its lifestyle are described in mythical terms by the author. It is evoked in an aura of almost theatrical mysteriousness. The fact that Edward is twice beckoned to the place by his father — once alive and once dead — in a seance; Edward's hallucination of the dead Jesse under water; May Baltram and her two daughters with the 'quaintness' of their personal habits, ways of living — all this points to some sort of an amoral, magical power, that is entirely antithetical to Goodness. If the creative power of the second-rate artist is unchecked imagination, which is 'lost bad spirit' in Stuart's words, then this creative power stands in direct opposition to Goodness, which is spirit checked and refined at a hundred levels. Not surprisingly, Stuart, the good figure of the novel, has no place at Seegard, the home of unchecked imagination.

Stuart is the articulate 'good apprentice'. As such, he is vocal and draws attention to himself. He also wishes to merge into the background and be quiet, almost invisible. Jenkin Riderhood's invisibility is complete. No charm, no interesting moral struggle, no religious framework, not even the distinguishing 'whiteness' of Stuart Cuno's aspiration towards the Good. Jenkin is everyman. What Stuart wishes to do in The Good Apprentice, Jenkin is seen doing in The Book
and the Brotherhood. These two good figures share common characteristics, the only difference being, Stuart is yet to embark on his task, whereas, Jenkin, as befitting his age and experience of life is already at mid-sea; the former's idealism has mellowed into the latter's happy cheerfulness with everyday things.

One cannot fail to note Jenkin's care and joy over small details. On two occasions, Jenkin is seen moving a tumbler, containing some leaves and twigs, from the kitchen to the drawing-room and back again. (This reminds the reader of the potted plant that Stuart tells Edward to 'hold' on to as an example of something clean and good). The simplicity and orderliness of Jenkin's life are touching; they also reveal the austerity of that thing which is being sought.

The points of similarity between the two figures of good have to be sketched. Both consciously avoid muddle, Stuart by not choosing to enter into the 'machine' as he terms it, and Jenkin, because he hates the states of mind which go with muddles:

The simplicity of his life which seemed to spectators an asceticism, to others naive and childish, or a pose, was for him part of his absolute; but was also, as he was well aware, a programme for happiness. Jenkin disliked
muddles, cupidity, lying, exercises of power, the masses of ordinary sinning, because they involved states of mind which he found uncomfortable, such as envy, resentment, remorse or hate. (BB, 132)

Neither believes in God, though Jenkin has had parents who were religious. But Jenkin, like Stuart, believes in doing acts of kindness and help:

Yet he retained, perhaps after all from the examples so dear to him in childhood, a kind of absolutism, not about any special human task or pilgrimage, but just about jobs to be done among strangers. (BB, 132)

At the time of the narration of the main events of the novel, Jenkin is restless. He wishes to go to South America or to India, and sees the wish as a task, as a duty that must be done. He is convinced that: 'Nothing mattered much except easing pain, except individuals and their histories.' (BB, 133)

The restlessness and the wish of Jenkin to be out on the 'frontiers of human suffering', does not seem to be a consciously thoughtout or formulated proposition. It is more an intuitively apprehended feeling that as long as there is human suffering, the good man, or any responsible adult, is morally not entitled to sit back
or shrug off responsibility for all the terrible things happening on the planet. Jenkin understands that he is doing his little bit in the world, and perhaps, fulfilling responsibilities that befit his talents:

It was not that Jenkin felt in general that he should set forth somewhere to serve the human race. He knew that by teaching languages and a bit of history to all sorts of boys he was performing an important service and probably doing what he was best at. (BB, 132)

He nevertheless cherishes this restlessness. A little later Gerard 'proposes' to him. Jenkin laughs; he is also touched. The reader does not know the outcome of that 'proposal' — whether Jenkin would accept Gerard's 'invitation' or not. But the pointers are towards Jenkin leaving his comfortable and habitual environs and Gerard too to make his way to places where help is needed. That Jenkin is 'accidentally' killed in the middle of the events is another aspect of the story.

While Stuart's is a more consciously worked out programme for Goodness, Jenkin's is a more intuitive and less deliberate apprehension of Goodness. In him unconscious virtue and simplicity reach the highest peak.

Both are perceived to be 'full of being'. Thomas

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McCaskerville says to Stuart (italics mine):

"You are extraordinarily full of yourself ... No, solid, articulated, full of being. I just wonder you seem to have two aims, one to be innocent and self-subsistent, and the other to help people. I wonder whether these will not seriously conflict." (GA, 146)

Gerard, who sees himself as a lonely climber of high mountain terrains, perceives Jenkin, who thinks of himself as walking along straight roads 'along with other chaps', as being more 'dense' and 'full of being':

Gerard had always recognised his friend as being, in some radical, even metaphysical sense, more solid than himself, more dense, more real, more contingently existent, more full of being. ... It was also paradoxical that Jenkin seemed to lack any strong sense of individuality and was generally unable to 'give an account of himself'. Whereas Gerard, who was so much more intellectually collected and coherent, felt sparse, extended, abstract by contrast. (BB, 118)

Levquist, their tutor at Oxford, remarks about Jenkin,
"... As for 'getting anywhere', ridiculous phrase, he's teaching, isn't he? Riderhood doesn't need to get anywhere, he walks the path, he exists where he is." (BB, 22)

The sense of 'fullness of being' that both Stuart and Jenkin are perceived to possess, is connected to the still centre which Murdoch's figures of good, with the exception of Anne Cavidge, have.

The still point also suggests the solitude which both Stuart and Jenkin like and welcome. For Stuart, the solitude develops into a 'separated stillness' which is also a kind of prayer and meditation. Jenkin, who has not married because it would mean that he could not be alone at night, apprehends solitude as a natural state of being. He is glad to be alone after Gerard leaves him, though he also likes having Gerard with him. He likes travelling alone. At the Guy Fawkes celebration, Jenkin who has taken a childlike delight in the fireworks is glad to be left alone at night in the garden:

He breathed deeply, feeling the cold penetrate down into the warm channels and recesses of his body, and felt that never dimmed and never disappointing satisfaction of, after being with other people, being alone. He lifted
his head like an animal who might, upon some empty hillside, let out some lonely inarticulate cry, not a sad cry, though not without a sad tone or echo, but just a deep irrepressible cry of being. (BB, 195)

Jenkin's innocence has been foreshadowed in Stuart's innocence, in what the others term his 'overgrown adolescence'. Stuart's concern for Meredith, the young son of Midge and Thomas McCaskerville, the fixing up of jogging routines or visits to the British Museum, his anger over the pornographic muck that is being watched on the television by the young boy — all suggest a conscious intention to preserve innocence and not let it be corrupted.

This raises the question of chastity. Why should chastity be a requirement of the good man? It has been seen in the second chapter how erotic love creates illusions of grandeur, falsifies reality and occludes the moral conscience of the person in love. Its rapidly heightening ecstasy plunges as rapidly into total despair. The self-centredness inherent in erotic love hampers clear perception and it stops the person concerned from giving the required attention to outside reality. And hence the importance of chastity to the moral life of a good man. Stuart has consciously taken the 'vow of chastity'; Jenkin, though not without
experience in sexual matters, is remarkably a-sexual in
the atmosphere which surrounds him, as Suguna Ramanathan
notes in her book. Stuart wants to avoid the mess of
erotic relationships, he wants to go in at the 'deep
end' of love, not the 'shallow end' of erotic love where
it is predominantly possessive and self-centred in
nature. Jenkin is seen at the deep end: at the non-
possessive, detached and yet humane and caring level.
That seems to be his natural element.

Love, goodness, truth, chastity are virtues which
are discernible in the good figure in Murdoch's novels.
What place does justice have in relation to these
virtues? In the earlier novel of Iris Murdoch, Nuns and
Soldiers, Guy Openshaw says he would like to be judged
after death. Talking about justice, he makes an
interesting remark, "Justice is such an odd thing, it
cuts across the other virtues, it's like brown, it's not
in the spectrum. ..." (NS, 67) This remark looks forward
to Gerard's remark to Jenkin in The Book and the
Brotherhood, "I believe in goodness, you believe in
justice." (BB, 247)

Why does Guy relate justice to the colour brown?
Is it because justice (like brown which is not an
individual part of the colour spectrum and is yet made
up of all the primary colours) inheres intrinsically in
other virtues (love, goodness, truth, chastity which
were noted earlier) of the moral spectrum? Justice is unobtrusively a part of the other virtues. It is there and is yet invisible. Is a sensitivity to what is just and fair a primary aspect of the ability to see clearly and attend with love? If one can see clearly, it follows that one can see things in their context and be just. Jenkin Riderhood does exactly this. He sees clearly and attends justly. Is it Jenkin's association with justice, with the colour brown, that makes him practically invisible to the eye? Whereas the other characters in the novel, Gerard, Crimond, Gulliver, Jean, Rose, are all described in vivid physical detail, Jenkin is hardly ever described with his physical attributes, apart from some mention of his unremarkable stocky figure. He is seen to merge into the background, like the colour brown — the colour of the earth.

Stuart on the other hand knows:

... how awkward and conspicuous he was, how he embarrassed people, exasperated them, unnerved them, frightened them. He lacked charm. He was often aware when he entered a room how much he disturbed the atmosphere and broke the tempo. This made it important to find a place where he need have no persona, and awkwardness would become something unimportant, taken for granted. (GA, 53)
Stuart desires invisibility:

He needed simplicity and order, a quiet monotonous private life. He wanted to be able to be a place of peace and space to others, he wanted to be invisible, he wanted to heal people, he wanted to heal the world, and to get into a situation where this would be something simple and automatic, something expected and everyday. (GA, 53)

Stuart decides to learn. After mulling over the possibility of becoming a probation officer in a prison, Stuart, finally, as the book closes, is said to have taken up a job as a school teacher, teaching very young children. He rightly anticipates that by taking on a simple routine and a monotonous cage of daily duties, he might learn to become invisible. The good figure that we see in Jenkin Riderhood (a school teacher, it may be noted) in The Book and the Brotherhood, is perhaps a middle-aged Stuart who has learnt the hard task of being worthy of a brown invisibility.

Finally, something needs to be said about Jenkin’s relationship with his friends and the world at large. Is his selflessness a ‘private’ goodness or is it something more? Stuart’s cry to Thomas McCaskerville in
The Good Apprentice, 'not for oneself, but for others' (GA, 140) is seen lived out by Jenkin Riderhood in The Book and the Brotherhood.

It has been seen that Crimond, the strong, idealistic, power figure of the novel, is also concerned, like Jenkin, about the poor and the underprivileged. But whereas his political philosophy sees nothing amiss in a revolution or two, and a smash-up of the whole, existing system of democracy, Jenkin intuits a 'large lie' in such a philosophy. Very typically, he does not try to ferret out or analyse the lie, but goes about doing his own duty of taking responsibility as a concerned citizen of the world. He almost decides to go to the 'frontiers of suffering' to do, like his parents, some jobs of help among strangers before death intervenes.

Jenkin Riderhood's death is accidental. The look of surprise on his dead face is profoundly touching and accurately conveys the impression of chance governing human existence. He also dies for Crimond, whose life he saves. He also dies for Duncan who would otherwise have been embroiled in a messy criminal case. This last service that he performs for his friends is entirely in keeping with his selfless nature.

If the good figure is seen against the three major moral problems that constitute the Murdochian quagmire,
that is, the problems of erotic love, religious impulse and power, it is seen that the good person instinctively avoids these pitfalls. His relationships with people are, on the whole, asexual, or at least, they are relationships in which sexuality is kept controlled; his recognition of the other as real and separate precludes manipulation; and finally, since the movement of his spiritual development is towards growth, his religious aspirations, if any, are generally refined to a demythologised aspiration towards the Good. The task of selflessness, again, examining it from another angle, is seen not only as the purification of the spirit for one's own 'salvation', but also necessarily as participating in the task of purification is the need to serve the world. To exist solely for others, to help people in a quiet, non-assertive way; above all to be unconscious of this virtue is seen to be the mark of selflessness. To strive to be good and yet remain unconscious of the good in oneself seems to be paradoxical. Thomas McCaskerville says as much to Stuart. But perhaps the solution lies in not thinking about one's goodness, to be unreflective about the good act and to think instead of the person in need of help, without dramatising the emotional situation. Perhaps this is the narrow path of the razor's edge that can be trodden only by the invisibly selfless one.
This part of the chapter will try to raise some pertinent issues related to the concept of selflessness. The first issue that needs to be examined is the effect, or influence, of the good figure on the people around him. It may again be noted at this point that the good figure though centrally important to the moral significance of a Murdoch novel, is never of central importance to the main drama of the story. He figures on the periphery. And yet the other characters make in him, generally, a home for peace and shelter.

The influence of the good figure, if any, on the people around him, has to be balanced against the invisibility aspect studied in the preceding part of the chapter. It should be noted that invisibility does not preclude quiet, unobtrusive and beneficent influence, which is exactly what most figures of good are seen to have in the Murdoch oeuvre, with the exception of Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, and Stuart Cuno in *The Good Apprentice*.

One could begin with Tallis Browne, since he is the earliest figure of good. Tallis Browne, the Christ figure of the novel, is seen against a background of dirt and mess and muddle of which his kitchen is but an outward manifestation. The others recoil from the
unorganised mess of his existence, but nevertheless run to him whenever help is needed. Besides he is seen to be the one who can act rightly and with great good sense in a crisis: he is the one to slap the white youth terrorising a negro and he is the one who tries to set things right in the end between Hilda and Rupert. Incidentally, Julius King too turns to him after his manipulations have gone out of his control (this aspect has been discussed in the preceding chapter).

A telling statement is made on Tallis's influence, when Hilda at first thinks to herself, 'wherever Tallis is there's always a muddle!' Then she corrects herself and thinks, 'wherever there is a muddle, there Tallis is', (FHD, 178) Thus, though Tallis is always there, a source of moral strength, yet his influence is not always recognised by the other characters.

Arthur Fisch, the next good figure (but perhaps too slight) is seen as a calming and sobering influence on Hilary Burde, the power figure of the novel *A Word Child*.

Brendan Craddock, the good figure of *Henry and Cato* is always seen with Cato in the whole of the novel; he is never seen either alone or with any other character. But the wisdom and calm of his clear goodness cannot be doubted.

James Arrowby in *The Sea, the Sea*, is immediately
liked by Charles' friends when the former comes to visit him at the house by the sea, though Charles himself cannot perceive the goodness because of his clouded vision.

The impression of beneficent healing that William Eastcote (the hardly noticeable good figure of *The Philosopher's Pupil*) effects is acknowledged by most characters after his death.

Stuart Cuno in *The Good Apprentice*, on the other hand, generally unnerves people — he also sets going waves of change for the better in Midge and Mrs. Willesden. This quality of disturbing people can be explained by Stuart's *articulated* aspiration towards the good. He is the only good figure who *talks* about the Good. It may be that such articulation serves as an uneasy reminder to the others of their own selfishness. It nudges them in their comfortable mental niches and disturbingly speaks to them of something *good*. Such articulation also provokes, perhaps, the very English response of embarrassment in the face of talk about being good.

In Jenkin Riderhood, Murdoch reaches the farthest point of unconscious good in her exploration of Goodness. In Jenkin's case, the other characters of the novel move from a non-recognition to recognition of his influence. Gerard Hernshaw slowly realises the worth of
his friend and acknowledges that, 'talk with Jenkin always sent waves of force through Gerard's mind, usually beneficent and pleasant ones'. (BB, 135) After Jenkin's death, the quiet force of his presence, now lost, comes back to haunt most of the characters.

The other issue which could be raised in connection with the exercise of unconscious virtue is the relationship between powerlessness and selflessness. This question was raised in course of the discussion of Marcus Vallar in the chapter on power. In the context of Christ's crucifixion and the Holocaust (keeping in mind Marcus Vallar's mode of death in The Message to the Planet), voluntary powerlessness seems to be identified with the good and the selfless. But when to the concept of selflessness is added the extra dimension of action, of doing good deeds in the Christian sense of the term, then perhaps the selfless person is not entirely the powerless person. There is a qualitative difference in the significance of powerlessness when connected to active goodness: it is not passivity, but a conscious willed choice. To act for others demands making choices, taking decisions, taking the initiative; all this is -- though unobtrusive -- still the exercise of some kind of a will. It has to be underlined how subtle is the difference between exercise of the will for manipulation and insidious self-interest on the one hand, and the exercise of a deliberate choice in the
interests of others. The former promotes the self, the latter thwarts the self.

A last but very important issue where the imperfect world is concerned is related to this question of the exercise of will in the endeavour of selflessness. It has been seen at the beginning of this chapter that Murdoch accords some glimmer of the good to most of her characters, barring a few real demons. But though she sees some good, it is also true that her belief in the moral improvement of humans is limited. John Haffenden, interviewing Murdoch, comments on her very limited view of the human capacity for improvement, to which she replies:

I think anybody would have it if they looked around. Perhaps one can improve a little bit, but egoism is so fearfully strong and so natural. One is demanding something which goes contrary to nature if one thinks of attaining goodness, or even of improving oneself markedly. Do you know anyone who has improved themselves much?

Can one will to improve oneself? And what form will such willing take? And what is the outlook of such an exercise of the will? It may be seen that Murdoch in novel after novel explores two fundamental moral
questions: How may an individual improve himself? And can he improve himself? The moral quagmire of life that she apprehends sucks down the wary and the unwary alike and few indeed are the good figures who manage to step on the difficult-to-reach, firm ground.

Does Murdoch see a way out for her peopled world? In *The Sovereignty of Good* she says:

Moral change and moral achievement are slow; we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by .... If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at.

Attention to outside reality is then the only way to defeat the relentless working of the fat human ego.

Scott-Dunbar in his wellworked out article on art, morals and religion in Iris Murdoch compresses her moral philosophy and her views on art into a few pages of succinct argument. If the human psyche is a mechanical entity, 'an obscure system of energy' with a 'complex jumble of desires', the only way to slip out of its clutches is to 'attend' elsewhere.
The exercise of pure attention is more easily accessible to us in the contemplation of art and nature, which we cannot change, and hence have no desire to do so. It is far less accessible to us in the presence of another; his reality is veiled from us because of the incessant activity of the ego. It is this activity which has to be stilled if the other is to be seen. Attention to the real implies self-oblivion and forgetfulness of self. Attention is unnatural to us; what is natural to us is to fill up emotional voids by creating illusions about ourselves and others. Human beings are creatures of illusions and the illusions we manufacture feed the ego. Attention, in contrast implies waiting and humility. The work of art, the natural scene, show not only that the real lies outside us; they also resist any attempt to use them to feed the ego or console...

Scott-Dunbar uses the character of Dora from *The Bell* to reinforce the point that Murdoch seeks to make in the course of her fiction: how great works of art, especially paintings, take the attention away from self to the reality outside. One could also note a similar working in the character of Tim Reede, the impecunious
painter in *Nuns and Soldiers*. Tim's greatest fear is that the great paintings will cease to have meaning some day. Henry in *Henry and Cato* is also endowed with this faculty, however temporary and fleeting in his case, to fix his attention on great art. In fact, it is seen that the characters with more than a modicum of good in them are the ones most appreciative of art: Dora, Tim, Harriet in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*. (It is a curious fact that Murdoch's perverted male narrators, Charles Arrowby and Bradley Pearson, are alive to Shakespeare's excellence, but unable to see that its moral significance relates back to their own worlds. This, of course does not point to any arbitrary conclusion on Murdoch's part that literature does not have a morally healing influence. The lack of moral awareness in these characters is perhaps the result of imperfect attention. Their egos do not permit a more loving attention.) There are also, in Murdoch, potential characters of 'unconscious good' as Dipple would categorise them: characters like Crystal in *A Word Child*, Danby in *Bruno's Dream*.

What then is the answer? One is either born with the faculty, or ability, to attend to beauty and art, or one is not. George McCaffrey, for instance. No power on earth can save him from himself. His 'willing' to do so would effect precious little. Is everything then predetermined? The human will is able to do very
little: one has either the 'good' tendencies of Crystal or the 'bad' tendencies of Hilary — which is precisely the point that Murdoch seeks to make against the contemporary British philosophers. But the point that is trying to establish itself here is that, even the effort of turning attention away from the self to Art or Nature, which Murdoch advocates for moral improvement, implies an exercise of will, which may not be possible for all sorts of human beings. It could, at best, be only a momentary change of vision. Murdoch would say even this has a salutary effect on the psyche. But the question is, for how long?

Any permanent improvement in the moral nature of men seems to be out of the question. The stringent moral realist that she is, Iris Murdoch refuses all spurious consolations, and hence the peculiar clarifying and yet mystifying quality of her works. She sees the human situation as essentially contradictory in nature. While the need for all human beings to see and do the good is an absolute imperative, there co-exists the near-impossibility of willing moral improvement. Though her moral realism negates the habitual and customary 'learning from mistakes' development that most fictional characters possess (it is no coincidence that Murdoch lets two identical crises overtake one character in her novels: Hilary Burde, Michael Meade, Jean, Duncan and Crimond, etc), she yet places the utmost value on
Goodness and Selflessness. To her anti-consolatory moral realism is wedded the bracing belief in 'the sovereignty of good'.