Chapter One
The Aesthetical Ethics and Ethical Aesthetics

Une difficulté est une lumière
Une difficulté insurmontable est un soleil
Paul Valéry

A philosopher-novelist, Iris Murdoch is another figure involved in the two supposedly different domains of philosophy and literature though allegedly for a unique reason. The other philosophers, famous for their employment of literary tropes in their philosophical treaties or even well-known for their double practice of writing philosophy and fiction, have made literature serve philosophy, complying to the age-old taken-for-granted hierarchy of philosophy over literature popularized by Plato. Kierkegaard’s use of diverse literary tropes even his application of many pseudonyms enabled him to express his iconoclastic ideas against his contemporary Christian dogmatism. All Nietzsche’s philosophical works are comprised of literary aphorisms whose very literariness and terseness has imparted a highly ambiguous overtone to his worldview. The literary language appealed to him as the best means to reveal the equivocal nature of truth, the subjectivity and man’s absolute power to go “beyond good and evil.” Jean Paul Sartre’s literary works are the repercussions of his existentialist maxims. They are just the examples of the literary practice he credits in his book *What Is Literature?* for yielding “concrete universals,” the works that bespeak the author’s response to his/her time. For Sartre, only those literary texts that bring change to society via setting up certain doctrines and inspiring self-criticism in the reader are good literature. Despite these literary-practitioner philosophers, Murdoch’s recourse to literature has a dash of deconstruction to it. Throughout her moral philosophy, she paradoxically aspires to contrast Plato’s disparagement of art and to set art and especially the novel on par with or even superior to philosophy.

In her complicated moral philosophy, best expounded in her paper, “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts,” Murdoch redoes the Platonic fusion of beauty, good, and truth to introduce art as the interface where such a union occurs.
Finding fault with philosophical theories especially her contemporary reductionist views of life, she discusses that art can be a better path to wisdom. In her exclusive treatment of the issue in *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, Murdoch proclaims that “[a]rt is far and away the most educational thing we have, far more so than its rivals, philosophy, and theology and science” (*FAS* 86). Her philosophical endorsement of art paradoxically indicates that she still believes in the philosophical investigations though she cannot accept its highly logical nature as the best possible tool for penetrating deeply into truth. Murdoch credits art over philosophy because of its encompassing nature and vast accessibility.

To compensate the inadequate account of human nature and values in her contemporary philosophies, Murdoch brings art to the foreground as the only medium that can delineate the actual existence of man and the real essence of the world. However, this never ends into the banishment of philosophy and philosophers from her worldview. Art and philosophy are, for her, two distinct instructive modes useful for moral improvement and helpful in pursuing the quest for truth; in ostensibly two diverse ways, they aspire to the same end. That is why, in her interviews, she always emphasized the demarcation of the two fields when rejecting an interconnection between her fiction and her philosophical doctrines: “I don’t think philosophy influences my work as a novelist” Murdoch avers in an interview by Bellamy (131). Considering the novel as the epitome of all arts, she implicitly regards it as the opposite of philosophy; in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, she writes: novel “is properly an art of image rather than of analysis; and its revelation is, to borrow Gabriel Marcel’s terminology, of a mystery, rather than a problem” (147).

This belief in the novel as the art form with illustrative nature and mysterious juxtaposition of elements convinces Murdoch to attribute the supreme function of truthful reflection of the complex nexus of man and the world to what she classifies as “good art.” In this regard, she is the first who identifies an ethical potentiality in literature. Murdoch goes beyond the twentieth-century philosophical ventures of structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction which uncover the complex interface of the ethical and the literary; for her, art exceeds ethics in its capacity to encompass the contradictory
nature of life without seeming illogical. Her status, then, diverges from those of modern commentators who, like Eskin, regard a more interdependent relationship between literature and ethics. To negate what he regards as the common view about the ethical effectiveness of literature over moral philosophy, Eskin introduces a discourse-semiotic model founded on a logical-referential ground. Such a framework defines the entwinement of literature and ethics, in terms of “mutual translatability”; that is, their “needing and ‘meaning’ each other without being identical or equivalent” (564).

Murdoch, on the contrary, seems to be on the side of the common maxim from her own idiosyncratic perspective. Stressing the autonomous and self-sufficient nature of philosophy and art, she puts literature forward as a distinct domain with a sovereign potential to instruct people implicitly and more effectively in their moral quest.

To have a clearer view of the nature of and the relationship between Murdoch’s ethics and aesthetics and their idiosyncratic contribution to the twentieth-century scheme of thought, it is essential, first, to adumbrate, with no claim of comprehensiveness that its complexity requires, the intellectual philosophical context from which her ethics arose. So the following sections respectively deal with the analytic philosophy prevalent at Oxford while Murdoch was teaching philosophy there and Sartrean existentialism, a European alternative she turned to in hope of more truthful account of life. To determine the affinities to and divergence from such philosophical influences, the next part focuses on the special characteristics of Murdochian ethics. In doing so, it is decided that Murdoch’s original contribution to Western philosophy is her magnification of “inner life” as an indispensable, decisive element in philosophical investigations. This revival of a long-overlooked aspect of human experience is enough to metamorphose the predominately Kantian ethics into a postmodern phenomenon. In light of these elaborations, the final section sets to bring to the foreground that Murdochian aesthetics is the natural sequel of her ethics since it regards an autonomous nature and a more ethical practicality to art and particularly literature. There, the aim is to elaborate on Murdoch’s conviction that the opacity of the world defies all artistic forms except the novel whose comic potentiality makes it the best artistic paradigm in her aesthetic. Enumerating various features of the novel in her perspective, the chapter ends with a
conclusion that the outcome of her aesthetics is a very unique kind of fiction mainly postmodern in essence, form and content.

1.1 Analytic Philosophy and Linguistic Sovereignty

Dominant in many English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, analytical philosophy is undoubtedly a revolutionary trend in the method and subject of philosophical investigations. Articulated by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell at the turn of the twentieth century, against the intellectual background of the late nineteenth century dominated by the British idealism of F. H. Bradley and Thomas Hill Green, analytical philosophy focuses on those aspects of philosophy which are neither speculative nor metaphysical. A kind of epistemological theory, it questions and rejects the objects and many premises that philosophers have taken for granted till the late nineteenth century. This concern makes it the first meta-philosophical doctrine, obvious in its zeal to homogenize philosophical investigations as a tool for recognizing truth. To do so, they turn their attention to the medium of philosophy, namely, language.

Language is, in fact, the shared concern among a host of thinkers, like Russell, Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Ayer who came to be known as analytical philosophers. The concern over the use and function of language is the only common fundamental idiosyncrasy that unifies their otherwise diverse thoughts into analytic philosophy. Apart from their linguistic turn, it is rather difficult to set their twentieth-century philosophy against British idealism, traditional philosophy, classical phenomenology and its offspring existentialism as well as the “continental” or “postmodern” philosophy, embodied in the thoughts of Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida. The major factor that puts it against all such philosophies is the consensus among its thinkers that “philosophical problems are, at least in parts, linguistic problem” (Honer, Hunt and Okholm 76). None of the contributors to the mentioned doctrines stopped to examine philosophical propositions though some of them such as Derrida and Foucault addressed more exclusively the discursive and linguistic aspects of non-philosophical statements. It all starts with Moore’s defence of the ordinary language against its philosophical violators. Arguing for the verifiability of the ordinary language, Moore who comes to be known as
the founder of analytical philosophy introduces a quite original technique of refuting philosophical statements. In his “linguistic methodology,” he sets any philosophical proposition against ordinary language’s rules which are basically logical, in his view, and simply discards the statements that go against ordinary language.

The centrality of language and logic in Moore’s work is a good indicator for the close affinity between analytical philosophy and logical positivism, a movement founded by Moritz Schlick in an attempt to reject both empiricism and rationalism *per se* as false and inadequate account of man’s cognitive faculty. Obvious in the very term, logical positivism, also named logical empiricism, sort of combines rationalism with empiricism. It stresses that any knowledge of the world is dependent on the observational evidence and man’s rational faculty. That is why, its advocates like Hans Hahn, Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and early Wittgenstein propagated that there are only two types of meaningful statements: empirical propositions and analytical propositions. Empirical propositions are verifiable with reference to experiences in the world. Analytic statements are rectifiable by the definitions of the words comprising them. All the other statements which include metaphysical, ethical and religious are rejected as meaningless. Logical positivist unprecedented magnification of logic, as the ultimate reality emerging from scientific discoveries, enabled Moore to criticise the ruling doctrine of Idealism which do not believe in the independent truth of mathematical and logical statements apart from the human perceiver. A reaction against the science-oriented mechanistic worldview in the nineteenth century, idealism stresses Mind or Spirit or Ideas as the ultimate reality and believes in the organic internal relations not only among bits of reality and each of them and the ultimate reality but between the knower and something being known. Condemning the idealist stance as obscure and far from philosophical clarity, Moore develops his “objective theory of meaning” in which he articulates that only those statements that have objects or any states of affairs for their referent are meaningful.

Although the extreme posits of logical positivism finally brings about the subsidence of its vigour, its offspring, analytic philosophy succeeds to survive. Logical positivism was doomed to extinction as it could not justify the scientific belief in black holes as well as deflect the self-negation vitalized by its neither-empirical-nor-analytical
premises. Instead, Bertrand Russell’s improvement of Moore’s theory of meaning led into the emergence of a vigorous philosophical trend that became widespread in Anglo-American countries within three decades. Russell attacks Moore’s objective theory of meaning for its failure to consider two sets of truthful statements: those referring to things that do not exist and those called negative existential statements. Relying heavily on logical analysis, he develops his theory that since syntactic form of descriptions is misleading, as it does not correlate their logical and/or semantic architecture, a satisfactory analysis of the linguistic and logical properties of a description is essential for clarity of philosophical debates, particularly semantic arguments, epistemology and metaphysics. The emergence of Russell’s “theory of descriptions,” inspires a host of his disciples to expand his views into major branches of the twentieth-century philosophy later tagged-on as linguistic analysis due to the logical-linguistic nature of their methodology.

Considering the clarification of concepts as the special task of philosophy, philosophy of science and ordinary-language philosophy are the two current philosophical trends derived from analytic philosophy. They believe that understanding concepts and symbols is the only way that prevents us from accepting unverifiable metaphysical doctrine. So instead of dealing with values and reality, philosophy should clarify “the concepts that are integrated into a structural pattern of communication” (Honer, Hunt and Okholm 77). In philosophy of science the focus is not on the subject matter and methods of scientific investigations. On the other hand, the philosopher’s only role is to examine the old and new scientific concepts and illuminate their relations so that everybody has a unified vision of scientific procedures. Ordinary-language philosophy, likewise, centres on conceptual level but in ordinary everyday language. Here the method of inquiry is supposed to be the actual objective of philosophy hence its turn to linguistic analysis of everyday language (78). Ordinary-language philosophers set to analyses language conceptually to distinguish between its various uses believing that this illustrative analysis reveals both what the speakers think and how they acquire their knowledge.
In sum, as evident in the two major branches, the concern of analytic philosophers is not the construction of a unified system which illuminates all aspects of the world and human life by identifying the origin of the universe and the status of its bits vis-à-vis each other and the whole. On the contrary, they deal with isolated issues piecemeal and not in broad syntheses. For them logical linguistic analysis is the only authentic, true method of philosophizing so much so that they approach certain philosophical problems as if they were problems of language. It should, nevertheless, be noted that analytic philosophy’s involvement is more with people’s application of words that the words themselves.

Although invigorated analytic philosophy to dominate the twentieth-century ethos, the deep concern with language is what provoked a horde of criticism against it. The centralization of linguistic analysis along with the equation of clarification with knowledge makes analytic philosophy a reductionist worldview that does not offer a new way of understanding humanity and the universe. Analytic philosophy’s inconsideration of whatever untranslatable into logical structure limits its discourse so much that the most serious old questions are discarded as the most senseless. The excessive focus on language games dissociates it, furthermore, from value and belief, the indispensable parts of human life. As Honer, Hunt and Okholm sharply notice, reduced to aloofness, analytic philosophy resembles, in essence, the “criticism of criticism” in literature which cannot enhance a better understanding of the actual art piece (79). This absolute trust in linguistic analysis actually signals an internal contradiction in its discourse. By accepting the necessity of language over things, it goes against its basic anti-metaphysical tenet and develops a metaphysical doctrine in which language exceeds reality as its cause, an underlying presumption that has fuelled much more opposition to analytic philosophy.

1.2 Existentialism: A Neo-Humanism

Contemporary with Analytic philosophy but dominant in European countries is another philosophical and cultural movement that similarly believed in the anti-metaphysical nature of its mission. On a closer inspection, however they turn out to be poles apart. Known as continental philosophy, existentialism began in mid-nineteenth century as a reaction to the metaphysical and more specifically accepted systematic philosophies, such as those developed by Hegel and Kant. All the existentialists from
Kierkegaard onwards have been critical of the universal, sweeping nature of the precedent philosophies that were ignorant of the unique experience of each individual; instead, they opened a new sphere for philosophical investigations by bringing the experience of the individual to the forefront as the sole concern of philosophy. In their eyes, the moral and intellectual traditions of Western culture have been deficient in their portrait of actual human existence due to their unquestionable belief in a universal human nature. The conviction that the subjective individual is the inevitable prerequisite for the acquisition of any knowledge is the iconoclastic, novel ground on which existentialism constructs its oppositional stance against such traditions since it justifies its repudiation of the existence of any objective reality. However, this existentialist disbelief is at odds with analytic philosophy’s disregard of human experience in favor of mythologisation of language as the very essence of reality. In turning the philosophical focus on concrete human experience, existentialism acts as the antithesis of analytic philosophy although it never initially emerged as its antagonism.

Mostly prominent in the consequent years of World War II when the two fundamental metanarratives of emancipation and speculation shattered, existentialism has propagated a man-centred worldview from its start in the nineteenth century. Among the philosophers associated with it, whether atheist or theist, there is a consensus that human beings have a determinative role in their own destiny, the quality of knowledge and the status of reality. Inflicting personal significance to whatever they experience, each individual brings forth a kind of reality that deviates from its traditional sense in being neither rational nor empirical. They all agree that reality can never have something stable and objective about it since any individual colours it with his/her subjectivity. This sanctity of man as the inscriber of value and truth puts forth existentialism as a weltanschauung that, as its name projects, places human existence at the center of philosophical discourse. As Honer, Hunt and Okholm explain, existentialists postulate that owing to the subjective quality of knowing, human beings are incapable of knowing anything, except “the sheer fact of their own existence” (83). In Sartre’s words, for them “existence proceeds essence”—an axiom that challenges all the metaphysical ideologies that aim at an essence, a nature or a form for their objects of investigation.
Existentialists claim that there is no universal, stereotypical essence for all people but every individual personalizes its own essence according to the situation of his/her existence and by determining the values and meaning of the world through his or her consciousness; that is, man is not required to act according to a predefined pattern of essence, on the contrary, people should follow their “authentic existence.” Common to many existentialist thinkers, “authenticity” means finding oneself and living according to that specific “self.” Jean Paul Sartre, the post-war existentialist philosopher, elaborates on “authenticity” by introducing the concept of “facticity” in his *Being and Nothingness* as “in-itself.” Sartre’s point in persisting that facticity for everyone is “set in stone” and just determines individuals’ “situations” is that facticity just denotes those conditions and situations not chosen and affected by human authority; therefore, it cannot have any determinative effect on man’s decisions: the birthplace, congenital defects or one’s past are not responsible for anybody’s undesirable present life.

The real relationship between “facticity” and “authority” in Sartre’s view is a bit complicated. It is to counteract the determinism of the metaphysical philosophers in favour of the uncontrollable part of human existence that Sartre introduces these two concepts. According to him, facticity refers to the initial conditions of our existence which is in the process of becoming: the conditions one encounters when one surges up in the world. Such conditions do not have any value in themselves, insists Sartre, and it is we that freely ascribe value to them. Believing in the freedom of human beings to define their lives, Sartre advocates an “authentic existence” instead of living a life determined by one’s facticity. An “authentic existence” is the consequence of “authentic acts” which are performed in accordance with one’s freedom. As freedom is the common facticity of human existence, people should not disregard their facticity totally; on the contrary, they should consider and accept it to have an authentic existence. Sartre stresses that to project oneself in the future in the process of self-making is not possible unless one accepts his or her past. But it does not mean that the past is, in essence, the sole inscriber of the future in Sartre’s eyes. The real determiner is man who attaches value to it. A man who has lost his legs cannot be a swimmer, but it does not mean he cannot be anything at all. Therefore, the process of choosing is not random as Kierkegaard asserts, but involves, for
Sartre, both one’s facticity and authenticity. That is, it allows one’s actual values to come into play in the face of a fixed background.

The view that human actions are value-laden, in fact the postulation that man never chooses either-or without allowing the option to have certain values, does not counteract the almost prevalent claim among existentialists that the world is governed by “chance” and “absurdity.” “Chance,” or what Sartre calls “contingency,” conceptualizes the idea that, in contrast to “karma” which denotes “bad things don’t happen to good people,” anything can happen to anyone at any point in time. In other words, the world is unfair and amoral regarding what happens to its inhabitants since it is not based on any logical principle. This uncertain nature of everyday life gives substance to the other closely-intertwined existentialist notion: “absurdity.” As nothing happens according to a systematic design, there could be no sense in any incidents and in the world as a whole except for the meaning mankind gives to them. The world’s meaninglessness is best identifiable by tragic events, the incidents that in the existentialist view bring man into direct confrontation with the absurd. Indeed, the majority of literary works by Søren Kierkegaard, Franze Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus portray such confrontation.

The absurdity, uncertainty and randomness of events in the world is actually one of the controversial issues that brought about diversity in existentialism and made it subject to adverse criticism as a contradiction was diagnosed among its thinkers. In their man-centred views, existentialists prescribed various ways to live an authentic existence. Kierkegaard suggests “a jump of faith” as the only possible way to overcome the absurd world; Nietzsche proposes “will to power” as man’s only faculty to transform the absurd world into the ideal world of Übermensch; Sartre, similarly, considers man’s absolute free will as the only force that can confer meaning to the meaningless world; Camus, nevertheless, stresses insistence in the face of absurdity of the world and validates “suicide” his major philosophical concern. Evidently enough, all the aforesaid philosophers shared common posits for responding to the absurd world: nihilism and man’s freedom.
The fundamental concept in the thoughts of all existentialist philosophers, existential freedom is not what it is commonly presumed to be. It is so much intertwined with the notion of responsibility that it is really difficult even misleading to try to define one without the other. This interdependence implies that, in contrast to common understanding which associate the existentialism with the right to do whatever one desires irrespective of any criteria for choice and action, existentialist freedom is necessarily restricted and value-oriented; otherwise, man’s intentions and accomplishments could not be appraised. Existentialists wonder that if desire and the vim of wish were the sole criterion of our actions, how could we be responsible for our deeds? We could not be reprimanded or praised for our prompt, instinctive choices.

Denigrating existentialism as an immoral and anarchic discourse, its opponents further fed the misconception of freedom by highlighting a link between freedom and the absurd: from the existentialist stress on the absurdity of the world, they inferred that man must be free from anything since the world is not governed by any relevant or absolutely good or bad morals and does not act as an external power imposing moral actions on people. Identifying the interconnection between freedom and responsibility, however, existentialists take freedom to be both a value-driven concept and the highest value since it enables individuals to follow a certain value system for their choices and actions. The freedom to choose one’s values and actions makes people always responsible for the values they hold up.

It is such a view of freedom that makes the highest goal of living an authentic life plausible in existentialism. People should employ their freedom—“a permanent structure in the human being” in Sartre’s view—to define their values hence their lives; those who do not rely on their freedom are living a passive, stagnant, nihilistic life. For instance, they may regard choices as meaningless and random, believe in some sort of determinism, or even advocate acting as “one should” rather than “one may,” that is, following norms instead of the dictates of one’s value as the sole model of identity-formation. For Sartre, these people live an “inauthentic life” and are in “bad faith”: a state of deliberate self-deception which turns man into “a being-in-the-midst-of-the-world,” a condition man is reduced to when ignoring freedom, responsibility to escape “anguish.”
Stylized by other existentialists as fear, dread and angst, anguish, for Sartre, is a very rare experience that manifests freedom. It refers to a negative feeling that occurs when the consciousness grasps the contingency and freedom of action; when we see ourselves as source of our values.

To suppress and escape the hollowing experience of angst, people prefer the confinement within everyday experience where they easily relinquish their freedom and acquiesce to be defined in one way or the other through “the gaze” of the other that transforms one into their object. Such a volunteer disregard of one’s freedom plunges people in “bad faith” blinding them to their responsibility. Of course, for Sartre, bad faith has a broader significance; it signifies people’s deliberate ignorance of their true essence and that of the external world. Like Kierkegaard who believes “human reason has boundaries” (7), Sartre undermines the belief in the power of rationality to illuminate the nature of the world as an example of “bad faith” since it is also a self-deceptive attempt of man to ignore the irrationality and randomness, the true essence of the phenomenal world by imposing structure on it. That is why existentialism opposes those other philosophies that revolve around rationality as the sole faculty on which human perception depends. As a matter of fact, it opposes rationalism and positivism for their excessive faith in rationality and their definition of human beings as primarily rational. Postulating that the process of decision-making is driven by value of the options for the chooser rather than any rational mechanism, existentialism rejects rationalism and positivism as false philosophies that fail to outline the true essence of human life due to their reason-oriented misinterpretations of man’s existence. Nevertheless, existentialism could not escape the criticism this disapproval evoked against itself. Its anti-rational principle in validating chance and man’s self-made values as the true rules of the world and decision-making places existentialism among anti-knowledge worldviews: a posture that by disqualifying all ways of knowing rejects the possibility of any knowledge.

Animadverting on such extreme position, critics counterbalanced the existentialist anti-rational view with the evidence of the achievements of reason in human life, the accumulated, communicable knowledge that for centuries has enabled man to master nature, promote living standards and in short enrich human experience. Insisting on human beings’ reliance on reason and intellect for the modern advanced living, they
discredit anti-knowing as “a barrier to human evolution” and regard it a “fatalistic defeatist and unreasonable” axiom destructive enough to shake the very foundation of the man-centred existentialist ideology.

The shock caused by the existentialist disbelief in the power of reason hurried critics to strike out existentialism as a kind of anti-humanism. A comparison of existentialism and humanism, however, affirms their affinities more than their oppositions. A philosophical perspective shaped mainly out of extreme reliance on the power of reason and intelligence to solve human problems and dominate man over nature, humanism emerged during the Renaissance and Enlightenment to promote man to the status saved for God by scholastic thinkers. Certain assumptions in existentialism that secured it the attribution of “secular religion” in which “God is replaced by man” bespeaks of its affiliation to humanism. Almost all humanists, one way or other, repeal the need for any transcendent source of knowledge or value believing that human beings are valuable, meaningful, complex organisms whose freedom and rationality are enough to construct their values and improve their environment.

In a slightly different manner, existentialism sets to elevate man to a divine position. Instead of reason, existentialists contend that it is human beings’ subjective experience of reality that makes them eligible to control their own existence in a God-like manner. By attributing value to their experience of reality and modifying their identity in the individual acts of choosing, people continuously recreate themselves and their reality, and this unique ability makes each of them a god in its own right; Nietzsche’s refuge to the ideal man he calls Übermensch and Sartre’s conviction that man’s project is to become God are obviously two direct evidence to the humanistic trend of existentialism. The resonance of such centralization of man as the controlling agent in the world and the apt subject of philosophical inquiries in all existentialists’ thought leaves no doubt that “existentialism is a humanism,” as Sartre affirms in a book with the same title.

Before turning to Murdoch’s ethics and designating its relationship to this philosophical mainstream, it is noteworthy to identify any possible shared tenets of these two major polemical worldviews of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Analytic philosophy never repeats the existentialist sanctification of
man as God and as the sole focal point of philosophical inquiry. Stressing the validity of logical propositions, none of analytic philosophers cared to deal with human experience the way existentialists do. Inspired by development in modern logic, they employ a self-analyzing approach to redefine the philosophical problems as linguistic problems reducing the function of philosophy to the analysis of logical structures of language and the clarification of concepts without any concern to answer the fundamental questions about life. Poles apart, however, there is certain quality in both that allows them to be subsumed as variants of a general perspective. In spite their uniqueness, analytic philosophy and existentialism deal with human existence. The former sums it up in man’s linguistic articulation, the latter in people’s moments of action. In this sense, both of them ignore the hidden part of human existence, that is, the inner life and its effects on the external levels of man’s experience. It is to mend this deficiency of the prevalent attitude in the twentieth century that Murdoch appears on the horizon of Western philosophy. To achieve this daunting goal, she never discredits them in toto; on the contrary, as shown in the next section, constructs her philosophical monument out of whatever useful material she can retrieve from the intellectual reservoir of the past to complete her own special intellectual design.

1.3. Murdochian Ethics: A Critique of the Twentieth-Century Abstract Philosophies

Like other human disciplines, philosophy has always been subject to change. Surly, its change has never been an evolutionary progress since, unlike science and narrative writing, it has never brought man to more perfect accomplishments. Regardless of some stasis that science encountered in its history, for example, due to cultural and natural disasters of the Middle Ages, and bearing in mind the recurring cyclic pattern Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg discovered in the tradition of narrative, it can be claimed that science and narrative have had respectively a linear and spiral growth in their history. The appearance of advanced technology and the invention of the novel, man’s most complicated narrative form, are evidence for this claim. Although always under the influence of the developmental pattern of both science and narration, no specific pattern is discernible in the history of philosophy. Being an arena of theory and intellectual argument, philosophy has trailed a criss-cross path throughout its history with
every philosopher taking it to new often opposite directions. Murdoch is another philosopher who appearing on the philosophical scene in the twentieth century tires to take philosophy to its truthful path.

Although not evolutionary, philosophy has undoubtedly been developmental in the sense that the same unresolved problems have been addressed differently by various philosophers; talking to Bryan Magee about “Philosophy and Literature,” Murdoch takes it as one of the distinctive characteristics of philosophy: “philosophy lives on philosophy more than art on art.” Her own philosophy is a clear proof of her judgment. She neither conceals her debt to nor restrains her criticism of the previous attitudes out of which her worldview evolved. Murdoch’s philosophical works are strewn with the names of a host of thinkers such as Plato, Kant, Tolstoy and Freud along with many others that both irritate and stimulate her toward a new illustration and permutation of the fundamental concepts in Western scheme of thought. Appearing almost on every page of her philosophical writings, Plato is the most influential on her thought as both a mentor and a counterpoint.

Here, the aim is not to shed light on the historical growth of her thought, but to see it as a whole against Platonism, linguistic analysis and existentialism which lent so much vigour to her tour de force. The excessive trace of these views in her philosophy, however, never robes it of its Murdochian tone and colour. It reveals, on the contrary, her outstanding talent to orchestrate diverse elements with impressive virtuosity into an utterly new whole that while enlisting her among prominent Western thinkers restores philosophy from its bifurcation into two categorical opposites to a single stream. In search of truth, Murdoch is aware that her philosophy must be of paradoxical nature; it should be inclusive and encompassing enough to take into account both the subjective perception of reality and the contingent, absurd aspects of it. Ironically, illuminating the contradictory aspects of reality is not possible unless through imposing form on such disparities. Out of almost the whole philosophical tradition against which Murdoch sets to bring out her own theory to credit the unsystematic nature of life, the aforesaid trio are of special influence and consequence.
Plato’s major concern is to decide the place of mankind vis-à-vis truth. In his theory of Forms and Myth of the Cave, Plato displays that there is an insurmountable distance between man and the ultimate, objective truth. Believing in the pre-existence of the human soul in the ideal state of the Forms, Plato reflects that, living in this terrestrial world which is itself a simulacrum of those ideal Forms by a divine mind, human beings cannot access the Forms with sense perception; what they can achieve is at most a vague and imperfect recollection of those absolute rational Forms that can be duplicated in their creations. In this regard, although he agrees that art receives its authority and meaning from the world, he condemns anything that increases man’s distance from Forms as immoral hence his banishment of the poets from his ideal city-state. The artists produce a thrice-removed simulacrum of the absolute Forms as they imitate man’s vague recollection of the eternal ideas. In the Myth of the Cave in the Symposium and the Phaedrus, Plato stresses that man can come closer to the Ideas through two paths of love and knowledge he refers to as love of wisdom. He suggests that among the inhabitants of the cave of ignorance it is only philosophers who can become aware of the Forms though, as the dazzling light of the sun which actually blinds man if stared incessantly upon implies, they can never fully comprehend them. Thus, Philosophy is assigned the highest discipline to lead man to truth.

Obsessed by the same Platonic concern, Murdoch believes in one absolute objective truth which is never fully comprehensible by man. However, after a great deal of what Anton refers to as “conceptual criss-crossing,” she strongly invalidates the Platonic conclusions (239). Her philosophical aim, as she herself marks in “The Idea of Perfection,” is to avoid one trend in the history of philosophy in favor of the other; that is, to sway away from building “elaborate theories” and resign instead to “the consideration of simple and obvious facts.” Thus, though impressed by Platonism, she is dismayed by its extreme abstract and unworldly nature which renders it aloof from the common life of people; to amend his theory of Forms, she plans to offer a more practical philosophy that considers the real facts of everyday life, an outlook that does “justice to both Socrates and the virtuous peasant” (1, 2). For Plato, who insists that the world of reality is both superior to and separate from the realm of sensible which is just its shadow, the perception of truth is man’s highest spiritual goal. Murdoch is pleased with Plato’s
concept of virtue as the knowledge of reality; yet she disagrees with the subsidiary nature he attributes to everyday life. To bridge the gap and make this-worldly life itself the abode of reality, she takes advantages of the Platonic concepts and reinterprets them in her own more considerate way of the simple facts of life. So much for the ironical impact of Plato on her philosophy; a metaphysical scheme of thought, Platonism provides Murdoch the necessary conceptual framework to find fault with existentialism and linguistic empiricism of her time, the most recent philosophies that resolved the Platonic concern in an extreme un-Platonic way.

1.3.1 Restoration of Innerness to Moral Life

In her interview with Magee, Murdoch declares “clarification” as the fundamental, distinct function of philosophy. It acts as the basic criterion in her evaluation of the philosophical ethos of her time. In fact, the impetus that sets Murdoch on her philosophical inquiries is her dissatisfaction with the dominant image of man. Discussing that analytic philosophy and existentialism are derivatives of Hume’s and Kant’s views in their basic assumptions, she stresses that despite their incongruity in other aspects, the images they represent of human condition and experience are concurrent with that offered by Kant and Hume, an image unable to clarify and explicate what actually is the case in people’s everyday lives. In her aesthetic-philosophical essays such as “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” and “The Idea of Perfection,” even “Against Dryness,” she associates the inadequacy of analytic philosophy and Sartrean existentialism’s view of man to the primacy of the will in the latter and the privilege of the language-oriented discourse in the latter.

Murdoch believes that such dwindled image of truth nourished in the early and middle parts of the twentieth-century leads to nowhere but “a selfishly blotted moral agent and an impoverished moral theory” (Schauber 478). The comparison of this modern image of moral agent with its pre-modern alternative especially the Platonic picture provides her the essential means both to detect the serious deficiencies of modern moral philosophy and to suggest an alternative. The integration of the image of movement in all explanations of moral situations jolts Murdoch into the narrowness of modern ethics which replaces the Platonic concept of virtue as knowledge of reality.
(vision) with the Kantian concept of rational choice (a movement). This substitution makes philosophy so thoroughly irrespective of the ethical experience prior to any choice that the dilemma of modernity for Murdoch becomes, as Levenson puts it, “a dwindling, a narrowing of vision, a reduction in philosophic ambition and moral resources” (561). In “The Idea of Perfection,” she criticises the way that love, a crucial concept in people’s lives prioritized in Platonic ethics, remains untouched and the nature of its inevitable relationship with “will” and “freedom” has been ignored in the modern philosophical investigations. She, thus, determines to inject this concept to the current image of man which credits “will” as the sole active faculty at the moments of moral choice.

This ability to see and reconstruct holistically the image of the individual in various branches of modern philosophy is indicative of an awe-striking intellectual merit in Murdoch. She identifies Kant and Hume as the major great influences in both the Anglo-Saxon and the French wings of the modern depository of knowledge. All over her philosophical career, she argues that man’s image in both Humian and Kantian sides supports each other and the whole post-Humian and post-Kantian traditions have hold that image up in their “joining of a materialistic behaviourism with a dramatic view of the individual as a solitary will” (“Against” 16). In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, she faces a bifurcation that, though significant in distinction of the consequent medley of ideas, never affects the harmonious images of the individual it advocates.

The Humian side of this tradition, on the one hand, ends in the current linguistic empiricism which alters the Humian concept of reality a little. According to Murdoch in “Against Dryness,” Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is the consequence of a Humian notion of reality supported by mathematical logic and science. Down from Hume through Bertrand Russell, a line of philosophers argued for reality as “a quantity of material atoms” to which any “significant discourse must relate itself directly or indirectly” (16). In the later work of Wittgenstein and the writings of Gilbert Ryle a new derivative of this concept becomes popular; a conceptual analysis emphasising the dependence of concepts on the public language substitutes language for the atomic Humian reality, hence it reduces the philosophy of mind to a modified behaviourism which credits only public concepts and overt behaviour as the sufficient reliable sources to construe any actions of the individual.
The Kantian legacy in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, on the other hand, results in sundry of disciplines which again, according to Murdoch, promotes a similar image of man. In all the philosophies of Kant, Hobbes and Bentham through John Stuart Mill, man is presupposed as “a free rational will.” The same man in various shades emerges out of “modern psychology” and “utilitarian optimism” which respectively see man as, asserts Murdoch, “capable of self-knowledge by methods agreeable to science and common sense” and “eminently educable” (“Against” 16-17). Turning her attention to the French wing of modern philosophy, i.e. the Sartrean existentialism, Murdoch is surprised by the extreme Kantian nature of its image of man. Severed of any Kantian metaphysical background, the existentialist individual is “as solitary and totally free.” As in Kantian views, “there is no transcendent reality, there are no degrees of freedom,” in existentialism; “The mass of psychological devices and social habits are prejudices,” they are inert at the moral situations and people are believed to be guided solely by the will (“Against” 17).

The prevailing image of man that shapes out of the Kantian and Humeian fragments in modern philosophy is a “brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world.” Being in total contrast to the traditional picture which sets man against a background of transcendent values and realities, this figure provokes Murdoch to condemn the modern philosophy in its various forms for its “general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary.” She insists that philosophy has failed to provide “a satisfactory liberal theory of personality, a theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn” (“Against” 18).

To supply this real, liberal theory herself, Murdoch zooms in on the most recent philosophies of her time, namely, existentialism in its Sartrean version and linguistic empiricism in the traditions of Wittgenstein and Moore. Murdoch is both excited by their respective distrust of reason and conceptual analysis and dismayed at their definition of the self as the sum total of all the actions one does, and at their anti-metaphysical perspective which deprives man of any transcendental reality. As a neo-Kantian moral theory, existentialism is deficient in two ways in her views: it is unrealistic as it does not
correspond to what we actually experience at moments of choice. Moreover, as Schauber continues, it cannot offer an “ideal character” as an inspirational model sine man is only what he/she chooses to do (479). Its major fault is its attribution of moral significance to just what is subject to will because in that case self-absorption the becomes the inevitable feature of the moral agent: whatever people do is part of their constant self-creation process and has nothing to do with the vision of others; This, argues Murdoch, is a self-defining activity mostly inimical to ethical life (Schauber 481).

While for many critics, such as Schauber, Murdoch’s criticism of Kant is “unwarranted” since they find the both similar in attributing moral merit to the other (478), Murdoch attacks Kant throughout her philosophical career as the source of the collective moral amnesia she diagnoses in modern ethics. Tracing modern ethics’ rule-orientedness and its endorsement of self-absorption back to Kant’s moral theory, Murdoch opposes its various forms as the followers of Kant’s “Romantic theory of personality” which takes man as a separate, totalitarian individual who is self-dominant and potent of comprehending the world. She insists that it is only after Kant’s substitution of the image of movement for that of vision that ethics has come off its course to prefer, as Schauber sums up, “[u]niversal over particular, action over character, impersonal over personal” (477).

Apart from existentialism, such transfiguration of values is at the heart of linguistic philosophy which originates from the belief in the clarification of concepts as the fundamental function of philosophy. Seeing linguistic philosophy as the most prevalent form of modern empiricism, Murdoch discusses the ideas of E. Moore, Gilbert Ryle, R. M. Hare, C. L. Stevenson, Hampshire, and Wittgenstein in her elaboration on her own philosophical stance. Encountered with Ryle’s controversial book The Concept of Mind in 1949, she finds the same existentialist faults inherent there. By implication, the book is a refusal of the Cartesian ego. While animadverting over the whole mental apparatus, Ryle credits linguistic analysis over, as Levenson affirms, what he calls the “dogma of the ghost in the machine.” Therefore, in contrast to the Cartesian view which focuses on the self as a disembodied existence aware of only its own thoughts, the modern philosophy initiated by Ryle’s iconoclastic ideas concentrates on the visible, the
public, that is, “the over world of speech, gesture and physical actions” (Levenson 599). In such overattention to the visible, the linguistic philosophy totally loses contact with the inner life, the consciousness process prior to any choice of actions or words; even its most direct consideration of the inner life, identifiable in later Wittgenstein’s arguments about private language, does not attribute it an independent status. For Wittgenstein, explains Schauber, the introspectable objects, if any, can be known only via the knowledge of the outer (479).

Owing to such unanimous disregard for the inner life per se, Murdoch rejects the whole tradition as behaviourism which is like existentialism objectionable to her because, in its description of the mental status as various behavioral dispositions of a person, it fails to expose what undergoes the actual conscious experience (488); it advocates instead a kind of self-absorption while emphasising man’s attempt to correspond to the conventional idea of good conceptualized in a common language. Behaviourists believe that only facts compel us to action. Our moral choice is determined externally by our study of facts and has nothing to do with any possible inner experience. Ethics, in this regard, as Masong discerns, is “reduced to epistemology,” to the study of facts (15). Such ethics, for Murdoch, is crippled to illuminate the moral identity truly. Unable to advance humanity which has been deteriorated by technological and scientific advancement, it pushes it toward its debacle by supporting “the totalitarian forms of political ideology” (Masong 13). Modern ethics treats modern subjects as agents whose alienation from the religious sense of God authorizes the will to command life. Murdoch believes that for behaviourism, whether psychological or linguistic, the moral agent is an “empty” self, characterized only by “free choice”: a “fat relentless ego” that conforms to no “non-voluntary, morally imperatives” vis-à-vis others (Schauber 480). Although Sartre set to compensate for the lacuna in the behaviouristic scheme of things by highlighting the complicacy of inner aspect of experience, his philosophical views still suffer from the same solipsism that behaviourism naturalizes. Sartrean existentialism, as Murdoch understands it, brings the individual consciousness into the foreground; yet it wrongly regards it as “an absolute” struggling with “an impossible fulfilment” (Levenson 565).
Murdoch repudiates the false picture of the moral agent and the inherent solipsism in these versions of modern ethics, denunciating their distinct moral goals as unethical. In her appraisal of Ryle’s and Sartre’s views, she concludes that there is an apparently subtle distinction between them in particular and the philosophies descending from them in general that paradoxically unites them. Existentialism seemingly differs from behaviourism in terms of its advocacy of what she refers to as “neurosis” instead of “convention.” In “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,” she argues that the existential man is free and chooses without any social constraints while for empirical behaviourists man is free and alone in quite a different way. Unlike the existentialist stress on the neurotic struggle for self-creation, they put the emphasis on the social norms as moral guides: human beings’ freedom and self-sufficiency lie in their capability of “learning to make choices and recommending them to other as ‘good,’” asserts Levenson (emphasis mine 566). Ironically enough, while recognizing these different interpretations of freedom, Murdoch discovers an underlying similarity between them; the same picture of man is projected through both Oxford empiricists’ focus on the social norms and the continental stress on innerness: a “solitary moral agent” at “moment of choice” (“Sublime” 268). That is why, they share an antagonism against whatever that limits people’s sense of freedom and diminishes their authority in creating their own value systems. Levenson even claims that these two barren alternatives construct the symbolic strand of Murdoch’s novel The Bell (566). As two similar yet obviously contradictory institutions laid adjacent to each other, the nunnery and Imber Court respectively stand for a “rule-governed community” and a group of “flailing ego” on its vicinity. As clearly displayed through the final disintegration of Imber community and the highlighted portrayal of the secluded life of the nuns, none of the associated philosophies, i.e. neither existentialism nor empiricism, can be accepted as the true ethical view for Murdoch.

In her philosophical arguments and her fictional portrayals, Murdoch criticises “neurosis and social convention” as the source of man’s insensitivity to the loss of freedom. In their definition of the individual as self-absorptive, they are the true enemies of love, what blindfolds people to the reality of what surrounds them. Neurosis never allows the external world to keep its independent existence. The solipsistic consciousness swallows it totally so that the other subject becomes, as Masong asserts, “an extension of
the self, the instrumentalisation by the transcendental ego” (21). Not able to see others as ends in themselves but as means for its own end, the consciousness is caught in what Murdoch names, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, the “mechanical repetitive imprisoning of the mind” (139).

Identifying the same imprisoning mechanism in social convention, Murdoch deprecates it as the flipside of neurosis. Undoubtedly a rule-based ethics like linguistic behaviourism necessitates no less than the conformity to normative standards and mores. It never requires attention to the particularity of moral situations. To be good, the moral agent ought to do what is commonly designated as good action in society. “Goodness” is totally social bound; the moral agent, consequently, is, as Schaubek notes, “utterly contentless” (479). Similar to existentialism, linguistic behaviourism defines moral identity vis-à-vis whatever one does not what one is. For the same reliance on the process of becoming through actions, Murdoch opposes utilitarianism. In her eyes, utilitarianism, as a rule-oriented ethics, cannot offer an ideal self-improvement to man and its rules far from exhorting people to do good just function to keep them out of trouble and maximise their utility. It relates actions to the intellect not the will so blots out the issue of virtue all together (Schauber 485).

It is out of such minute comparisons that Murdoch’s philosophical stance shapes. Her appreciable mature worldview is the outcome of her extraordinary ability to form a holistic view of each philosophy. Levenson traces this unique merit in her “narrative disposition,” with which she easily disengages various ideas from their space-time boundary to discover any harmonious line of connection among them. Instead of attending to “separate coherent doctrines,” Levenson continues to say, Murdoch concentrates on the “families of ideas, webs of concepts” which shed light on the existing philosophical genealogies and propose any possible “rewaving and reinvention”. In addition to laying out the genealogy of the post-Kantian theories, believes Levenson, Murdoch identifies another line of ideas, in “The Novelist as Metaphysician,” among diverse thinkers as Hegel, Husserl, Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre as well as seemingly contradictory doctrines of existentialism and Marxism suggesting that they are the descents of the Phenomenology of Mind (571).
Owing to her “narrative disposition,” Murdoch conjectures every philosophical standpoint as a “picture” incarnating its specific interpretation of life. Scrutinizing all the available pictures one by one against the reality of everyday life, she condemns all them for the thin, dry image of man they represent. Believing this diminishment to be retrievable, she optimistically strives to flesh out that image by having an eye on the actual experience of people. In the modern age which realizes the Nietzschean call for destruction in its disregard of the nineteenth-century’s unwavering faith in what Levenson (570) reckons as “a common culture, a religion, a Cartesianism, a political hope,” Murdoch never crosses out modern moral philosophy totally as Schaubert affirms (480); having found the discrepancies between its various images and actual reality, she sets to interlace the existing stands of ideas into a new configuration more representative of human existence. From Kant’s moral theory with its focus on the public actions through the more recent neo-Kantian doctrines, modern philosophy, underlines Murdoch, has confused the urgency to reform philosophic discourse with a change in the value of human experience. That is why, Levenson believes, her “Nostalgia for the Particular” is a lamentation for the full disappearance of the notion of experience from all the sketches of modern philosophy (561).

To retrieve that lost notion of “experience” to ethics, Murdoch resorts to metaphysics, a philosophical enquiry concerning the transcendent reality readily negated in almost all forms of modern philosophy. According to Levenson, “the grandiose picture-making aspects of metaphysics” she emphasises in “Hegel” helps her in two ways: in the formation of her criticism against modern ethics and in the materialization of her own suggestive speculative picture (569). Highlighting the prominent features of empirical programme in restricting the philosophical enquiries to the visible conducts and norms obvious in the anti-essentialist, anti-Cartesian portrait sketched by Ryle, and projecting the tenuous, egoistic existential image of man detectable especially in the absolute, totalitarian picture Sartre presents of consciousness, Murdoch feels ready to improve the grotesque images, supplying them with the missing features: she substitutes a modified contemplative Platonic model for the dominant Kantian model. To be more comprehensive of moral experience, her model distracts the focus from actions to the inner aspects of experience, the aspects invisible to the eyes of the public. It is formulated
to reflect that “much of what is real and morally significant is independent of us and beyond our control” (Schauber 481). In other words, it signifies that much more than the conscious act of freedom is involved in any moral situation.

Murdoch holds that ethics must address the determining role of the inner life and the other in any moral decision; besides the particularity of the other, it must make room for, what she in “Vision and Choice in Morality” terms as, “personal attitudes, speculations, or visions of life” (79). Her opposition to the ethical projections of “convention” and “neurosis” is due to their disregard of such issues. Thus, she is in alliance with virtue ethics and ethical particularism, the two existing oppositional stances against moral rules and self-absorption. Her own ethical project is the coalition of the two, even though Schauber regards such a marriage implausible and Murdoch’s ethics of love a pure kind of ethical particularism. Ethical particularists believe that the ethical judgment is directed by the “perception of and response to the particular” and rules, being inconsiderate of the particular cases, are the major point of their contempt. (486). Virtue ethicists, on the other hand, give primacy to virtues, the ability for self-control in apprehending particular cases. Eschewing rules, they stress that a virtuous agent can best accomplish a moral task through learning form examples (Schauber 489).

Attracting attention to their apparent disbelief in the codifiability of morality, Schauber then highlights an inherent paradox in virtue ethics which makes it incompatible with rule-free ethical particularism (486); virtue ethicists assume that there is no moral checklist to help a moral agent decide a proper evaluation. Yet they cannot dispense with rules all together. Rules underlie the very definition of virtues; for it is impossible for a personal trait to be a virtue unless it is stable and enduring, that is, the person adheres to a certain way of conduct. So the virtuous agent certainly cannot choose case by case. Comparing particularism and virtue ethics, Schauber goes on to say that even particularists accept the existence and utility of rules of thumb despite the fact that they never find them “justificatory” and “morally binding” (489). Particularists project themselves as formidable adversary of all sorts of rules overlooking the fact that the motivation behind the actions of any virtuous individual is either the moral codes bounding the whole community one lives in or the standard of practical reason formed by
a process of generalization involved in any inductive education such as moral learning from each case. Schauber concludes since rules are the indispensable part of the formation of virtues, there is no point in marrying virtue ethics with particularism.

But Murdoch’s moral sketch, best represented in her parable of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, proves the otherwise. Her stress on the inner conflict man undergoes while attending consciously to the particularity of the other suggests a possible way of bringing together such inconsistent perspectives. Aware of their equal inadequacy, she still trusts their potentiality to contribute to the formation of a truthful theory of ethics. Similar to them, Murdoch dispenses with the thin values like rightness and goodness in favour of thick values such as courage, generosity as they are more reflective of the particular cases. Moreover, she accepts the absence of a definitive decision-making procedure; what differentiates her, however, is her denial of a contextual basis for moral determination; she does not restrict the context to the other as ethical particularists do, or to the virtue as Aristotelian ethicist effect. On the contrary, she deems that without virtues one cannot perceives others and without others there would be no virtues. Hence, moral situations are more complicated than what they are reduced to in either of these perspectives.

As a rule-free moralist aware of the contradiction Schauber diagnose in virtue ethics, Murdoch allows the reality of others outweigh the role of virtues in her own theory. She does not consider virtues the sole determiners in moral dilemma, yet she maintains moral significance for them; according to her, in attending to others through our virtuous character, what we ultimately do is not a choice but an obedience to the reality perceived. Such an amalgamation indicates that Schauber has mistaken the questions of consistency for the possibility of coalescence: the repudiation of the former does not sanction the negation of the latter.

Murdoch’s theory does not at all depend on rules which are essential to provide a guide for action, according to Schauber, in virtue ethics (489). Nor does it prioritized the inner life as ethical particularism and virtue ethics do, the theories that, according to Schauber (487), develop “a more personal concept of moral agency” as they regard it more “appropriate to be motivated by feeling and bonds of partiality.” For Murdoch,
moral significance lives in experience in its totality; the goal of a virtuous person is the perception of others. To accomplish it, one should command the thoughts and emotions in a proper direction. Such as double valorisation of people as moral subjects and the others as objects of morality paves the way for the realization of the Nietzschean prerequisite of a truthful life, a “transvaluation of all values.” Murdoch is against all moral concepts such as “goodness” or its derivatives such as “justice” and “equity,” which in the public sphere function as ineluctable rules in diverse situations, for being general and irrespective of particularity. She believes that all these prevalent concepts in modern moral discourse were initially nourished by, in Cordner’s words, a “real, lived, loving attentiveness to others” (200). However, as modern ethics became rule-oriented, they were deprived of their moral essence and turned into shallow, abstract notions. To restore moral importance to individuality, Murdoch suggests the replacement of such empty conceptual shells with thick-value concepts, like courage and generosity, which are morally loaded.

To pay homage to everyday reality, Murdoch celebrates “experience” in her moral philosophy. In fact, what distinguishes her morality form her peers is the primacy she gives to the particular experience. Experience is even what relates her to metaphysical tradition. It gives Murdoch the opportunity to rectify the faults of Plato’s contemplative moral model. As obvious in the title of the collection of her philosophical essays, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, metaphysics is the remedy for the atrophy modern ethics suffers from. A “distinct activity peculiar to philosophers” and “only supported by the philosophers’ argument,” as Robjant states, metaphysics is for Murdoch the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle of morals since it assists in bringing a more truthful picture of moral experience forward. In her simultaneous celebration of inner life and the other, Murdoch never dispenses with “the good” all together, on the contrary, reckons with its metaphysical value. According to her moral model, the fact that we are not obeying any duty or rule in our moral actions does not contradict the belief in “the good” as the absolute reality. “The good” should be there as the touchstone for the erratic actions of individuals and the justification for the idea of “perfection.”
This is an adaptation of Plato’s metaphysics not its replica. For Plato, explains Robjant, every entity is a metaphysical entity linguistically conceptualized; therefore, everyday reality is severed from the transcendent reality. In contrast, Murdoch’s metaphysics, continues Robjant, brings those metaphysical entities into the heart of immediate experience. Unlike Plato’s concept of experience as recollection of data, Murdoch conceives experience as a flux which can offer a vague, transitory glimpse of the nature of good in its very fluidity. This implies that, for Murdoch, the metaphysical entities are not pre-linguistic or perceptual as Plato suggests but are within the very language and experience, hence pre-philosophical. “The good” is therefore “indefinable.” It can be glimpsed, in her eyes, as Cordner notes, only at the moments of “virtuous insight” when our virtuous character motivates us to gaze at the particularity of others. Murdoch’s main philosophical aim, then, is the clarification of how the “immanent” particulars orients us to the “transcendent” good without it acting as principle to direct our conduct (200). She argues that an absolute reality must not be necessarily associated with a pre-ordained goal in life; that it is possible to believe in both “the good” and the absence of any “external telos” to human life since the good is not the call of duty but is included “in experience as an ever-present reality, which draws one towards it” (qtd. in Cordner 199). With such metaphysical interpretation of virtuous insight, Murdoch is truly the philosopher Cordner (201) and Widdows (165) emphasize: one who broadened contemporary ethics.

1.3.2 Tolerant of Plural Reality: A Postmodern Weltanschauung

Rey Chow, in her article, “Toward an Ethics of Postvisuality: Some Thoughts on the Recent Work of Zhang Yimou,” distinguishes the emergence of a new trend in ethics. Calling this trend “ethics of postvisuality” and the previous tradition “ethics of iconophobia,” she contrasts them as such: the ethics of iconophobia emerging out of post-structuralism and especially deconstruction, holds that any attempt to visualize the other ends in “the internal splitting, and self-reflection,” hence its “suspension (or aversion to) physical or phenomenological vision” (676, 679). Rejecting “non-vision” as factually impossible, the ethics of postvisuality, on the other hand, stresses the possibility of “the visualization and representation” of the other. In the cinematic art of Zhang Yimou,
Chow finds that the best way to repudiate the claims of the iconophobic ethics is through deconstructing the very binary opposition which supports the disavowal of the representation of the other. Reading Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of Murdoch’s concept of “love” and “vision” against Chow’s idea of ethics of postvisuality, Eskin asserts that Murdoch’s notion of true vision “can be read as anticipating and proleptically realizing Chow’s theoretical vision” (568). Throughout the following discussion the objective is to elucidate that what initiated the trend of ethics of postvisuality is actually Murdoch’s specific steadfast endeavour to bring back “the other” to the scene of moral criticism; moreover, arguing for the postmodernity of the ethics of postvisuality, it infers that Murdoch’s ethics is undoubtedly postmodern; in contrast to ethics of iconophobia, Murdoch assumes that the individuality of others can be visualized only if one undergoes the difficult but possible task of unselfing; that is, instead of non-vision, she holds to “true vision” that addresses the transformation the self undergoes in the encounter with the other. In the same manner, the ethics of postvisuality is not against vision totally; it undermines the opposition between visual and non-visual to alter the concept of vision to give a truer picture of moral perception and deflect the criticism the iconophobic ethics through its emphasis on the non-visuality of the other attracts against it.

Despite the fact that Murdoch’s philosophical writings are not straightforward and easy to grasp due to their dense allusions to the ideas of other philosophers and their unique elaboration on the interlink of those views, her parable of improvement of the view of a mother-in-law [M] of her daughter-in-law [D] is very helpful to have a firm grasp of her ethical vision. There in a simplified version, she vocalizes how moral experience is much more complex than what her contemporary philosophers hold to. Depicting a plausible, common experience, the parable helps her to show that “love” is the essence of any moral experience. By “love” she does not mean the erotic desire for the other which derives from self-centeredness. The “love” that she centralizes in morals is the idea of respect for the particularity of others. In “The Idea of Perfection” which contains this parable, Murdoch insists that the change of M’s attitude to a just and kind view of D is not the result of her sudden change of will or the improvement of D’s behaviour. It is actually because of M’s conscious “attention” to D; “attention” is a term Murdoch borrows from Simone Weil “to express an idea of a just and loving gaze
directed upon an individual reality” (SOG 33). M’s loving gaze toward D is, thus, the key to account for the change in the quality of her inner experience despite her fixed outer behaviour before and after this change.

Influenced by Weil’s belief in meditation as the only means of spiritual progress in an age that unanimously focuses on choice, Murdoch incorporates it in her own views to support her centralization of love in ethics. Meditation is attention to a divine spirit. Murdoch requires such a meditative attention, she calls “love,” in encounters with others. In her view, in loving, one is drawn out of the self to focus on the other. In this selfless attention, things are seen as they really are. Thus, our spiritual growth, that is the knowledge of reality, surely increases if only we continually practiced a shift from selfish concerns to concern for the perception of facts in all their subtle details. Such a concept of love, indicates Schauber, though reminiscent of Socratic love that brings about an acute recognition of the Forms, is more plausible and practical since she conceptualizes it as “knowledge of the individual” (482). In Murdoch’s hands, love is neither a psychological force nor a Socratic notion; it is a moral vision, a requirement for any morally salient action. Murdoch emphatically interprets the improvement of M’s evaluation of D, in the light of Weil’s “attention,” as a moral change which entails “a decrease in egoism through an increase sense of the reality of, primarily of course other people, but also other things” (MGM 52).

The moral change M undergoes is ignited evidently by her own determination. Murdoch presupposes D away even dead to eradicate the possibility that her change of behaviour is the cause of M’s shift of attitude towards her. As a virtuous individual, M tries to change her perspective deliberately. In her analysis of Murdoch’s concept of love, Schauber regards this “volitional component” of love as a tension in her formula of moral change; on the one hand, moral change is the direct outcome of loving gaze to external facts that is purely cognitive; on the other hand, it requires a conscious motivation. Schauber, thus, refutes it to be an acceptable alternative to the Kantian model since it cannot dispense with “will” altogether: “Love may be morally significant, but sometimes the will is needed in order to love.” Murdoch’s “love” is not totally “impersonal and exercise of detachment” as she claims. There is an attachment to will that makes her
ethics similar to what she has set to repudiate in Kantian philosophy. Such inherent inconsistency, concludes Schauber, signals the impossibility of Murdoch’s attempt to hybridize the “Platonic and Aristotelian virtue ethics” to bear on modern life (482); It is merely Murdoch’s fantasy since, in actuality, it is fundamentally contradictory.

The interesting point about the image of moral agent materialising out of M’s experience is that it is so realistic and familiar that we should check negating it just because of a seeming contradiction. M’s conscious attempt to see D as she really is does not necessarily support the Kantian view of moral agency as Schauber believes (484). Indeed, it implies that Murdoch’s view is not black and white; the placement of “love” over “will” does not disarm “will” of its importance in moral situation. It only restricts the role ascribed to it in the Kantian moral model. “Will” is required only for directing the attention to others, while “love” is more crucial in our moral decisions. It is only after M realizes D as someone distinct from herself that she becomes morally capable of change. Cognition and volition does not contrast each other as long as partiality is not interpreted as attachment to the will. And this is what Murdoch believes when she insists that the moral agent is not passive between the moments of choice but is involved in a constant moral task of looking.

In contrast to Schauber’s claim to the contrary, Murdoch is definitely aware of the necessity of “a special effort to attain an accurate view of reality” (483). What has misled the critics such as Schauber to attack her image of moral agent is their unduly focus on her equation of love and beauty perceptions which compellingly attract the attention beyond the self. Schauber stresses that the deliberate attempt of M to see D does not go with such a passive attraction to the beautiful. These critics do not see Murdoch’s concept of love in its totality. They fail to notice her stress on the impartiality of love embodied in the notion of attention: one cannot attend properly to the other if the detachment from the self is not willed. Insensitive to the dependence of Murdoch’s “love” on impartiality and attention, they reject, as Schauber does, her ethics as either unstable or a repetition of and a credit to Kant’s aggrandizement of the agent’s will.

For Murdoch, it is only in the modification of the role of will and perception in terms of the other that a truthful image of moral agent can be conceived. Far from the
Platonic notion of the attraction to the beautiful, her love is both cognitive and volitional: it is the wilful attention to the individuality of the other. Thus conceived, love takes the place of the Kantian will as the most morally significant concept; in Murdoch’s perspective, moral agents, as Schauber states, “must be lovers no so that they may be *moved*, but so that they might *see*” (emphasis mine 485). The prerequisite to judge and act ethically is clear vision, that is, knowledge of the situation-specific details not surrendering necessarily to general moral principles and rules. Love, thus, can provide a better guidance to our actions. Discovering an alignment between Murdoch’s respect for others and Kant’s conviction to treat persons as ends in themselves rather than merely means to one’s own ends convinces critics such as Schauber to consider her views as “a return to Kant’s moral theory”(491). But it should be noted that what Schauber calls “the recognition of the real and independent existence of other individuals,” is the very point of their deviation (491). The conceptualization of such recognition helps Murdoch to account for the complexity of moral situations rather than the moral agent who is the focus of Kant’s theory. Besides, Kant never allows the other to get ahead of the will in terms of moral importance.

In an age that Western societies have realized the “death of God,” Murdoch’s moral theory is an attempt to theorize what can take the place of God in guiding people morally. Despite her despise for the generic value terms, Murdoch maintains “Good” to codify the transcendent reality which is unidentifiable as the primacy of others’ particularity in her perspective indicates. So, to her view, striving to perceive the reality of the other is the only possible way available to modern man for spiritual insight. It distracts us from our selfishness and brings us a glimpse of the complexity of reality. Quoting Martha Nussbaum, Levenson shows that this stress on the other is what differentiates Murdoch from Sartre: “for if to Sartre . . . (‘Hell is other people’), for Murdoch by contrast, Hell is being walled up inside one’s own fat cosy ego without means of egress to the other or to the Good” (578). For Murdoch, the individual is doubly significant: first, it moves us toward perfection as we practice forgetting ourselves in seeing others. Second, we face the mystery of the world in attending each individual. In this picture, man, as Cordner sums up, is a moral subject who can see the ultimate and true reality through loving attendance to others (199).
To see those beyond oneself, one needs not to ‘erase’ the self, however. Murdoch is not advocating self-denial: the dissolution of subjectivity in either conventions or the object of love. “There is a heightened awareness of having to exist as an irreducible subject” in her philosophical portrait of man, insists Masong (21). By attentive love, she means attending while being aware of one’s subjectivity. Otherwise, our spiritual growth will not be possible. To acquaint the self with the other, imagination should replace the habitual practice of self-accretive fantasy.

Compared to Kant and Levinas who have also centralized the value of man in their philosophies, Murdoch is unique. She respects subjectivity in its all avatars whether in the moral agents or their human objects of attention. For this reason, she adheres to Mill’s image of the individual, one who she characterizes as “eccentric, unique, holy, pregnant with genius, but not alone” (“Sublime” 266). Optimistic about the possibility of a liberal philosophy to celebrate man’s individuality, she then offers what Mill failed to do due to his unfitting faith in general principles: a fundamental critique of romantic solipsism for its root in absolute freedom. In her liberal theory of personality, Murdoch reconceptualises freedom to account for the impure conditions that, according to Levenson, affect the act of choice from within and without (568): for Murdoch “freedom is not choosing; that is merely the move we make when all is already lost. Freedom is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves” (“Sublime” 284).

Only the most moral form of freedom can ideally compensate for “romantic freedom.” An “exercise of the imagination in an unreconciled conflict of dissimilar beings,” “tragic freedom” that Murdoch finds prevalently in tragic dramas is the ideal substitution (qtd. in Masong 18). In The Bell, Michael Meade and Toby Gashe experience such freedom once they have overcome their personal feelings of “horror, surprise, shame” after having kissed each other; in their accomplished freedom, notes Levenson, they ponder on the mystery of the other (568). Although very close to her idea of attractive love, her “tragic freedom” is another notion; as Masong quotes, while “freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible
work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducible dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness” (23).

Such context-conscious notion of freedom and love leaves no doubt that Murdoch’s ethics is an absolute celebration of diversity of individuality. Unlike Sartre, she thinks that both the agent’s character formed by the quality of his/her perceptions and the objects of perception are morally significant. In a moral experience, the subjectivity of neither the self nor the other should be ignored. Murdoch relates the difficulty of recognizing the other to man’s natural disposition. Accepting Freud’s emphasis on man’s egoism, Murdoch holds that since “selfishness is ingrained in human beings” they do not “err willingly.” To be good, the selfishness should be diminished not through suffering idealized in the image of Christ but through a conscious abstention of selfish desires. Murdoch agrees that any form of punishment and suffering are by nature consoling. They satisfy the self by assuring that sins can be blot out without confronting death and total self-removal. Near-death experiences are the best way for self-castigation since they allow one to be unselfish without being utterly selfless. The abundance of these experiences in her fiction resonates with Bradley’s idea that “the false god punishes, the true god slays,” (BP 301).

Her emphasis in “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” that suffering and guilt are forms of fantasy rather than self-castigating methods impedes her to be the Freudian she is considered to be (66). In his discussion of Murdoch’s affinity with Freud, Gordon regards her morals as a radical anti-psychological psychology in which apart from her agreement on the complacency of ego, Murdoch believes in Freud’s libido as long as it conforms to Plato’s Eros and rejects his idea of the “super ego” as a “pure moral faculty.” Gordon explains that Murdoch would not accept the super ego, the “punishing agency” in Freud’s view, since it can only make man workable not any good as it does not aim at the morally effective task of flaying the ego (123). To be morally good, one should strike the ego powerless in dealing with others. Goodness or the knowledge of reality is achieved only through “the absence of the dangerous charisma or psychological power over others” as Gordon puts it (121). And it is achieved through real freedom which is, as one character says in The Sandcastle, “the total absence of concern for self” (TS 213).
In sum, although Murdoch is not Freudian to the core, she is definitely what she calls herself: a “moral psychologist.” In her attack on the modernist valorisation of universal or even highly judicial rules as too blunt moral instruments, Murdoch brings the individual to the foreground hence explains how moral actions are ideally derived, in Gordon’s terminology, “from a perfect obedience of the will to the sovereignty of good” which cannot be caught in its totality (129). Such a perfect tolerance for the undefinability of the ultimate truth characterizes her perspective as a “moral phenomenology” that describes, “the nature of moral experience as presented to the subject or subjects whose experience it is” (Herman 554). In this phenomenology, evil is not the perversity of will but a kind of mechanism that ought to be subdued for any moral action. The other is known only when the subjectivity of the self is pinioned, when, as ethics of postvisuality validates, the vision as comprehension is supplemented by attention to the alterity.

For its disruption of the binary opposition between “vision” and “non-vision,” Murdoch’s ethics, an instance of ethics of postvisuality, is actually postmodern. Instead of vision/non-vision, ethics of postvisuality substitutes another possible cognitive relation with the other. It neither rejects vision nor credits it but reconceptualizes it as an insight into the reality of the other rather than a full comprehension that underlies the established binary opposition. This critique of full comprehension is the essence of postmodern ethics. With a resort to Levinas’s analysis of “omnivorous philosophy,” Eaglestone defines such a critical ethics as an attack on the “metaphysics of comprehension.” To comprehend means both, explains Eaglestone, to understand and to take hold of the known existent. It involves possession, the form in which, according to Levinas, “the other becomes the same, by becoming mine” (189). It is a practice Western thought indulges in to bring everything under a unifying system. To do so, Western thought employs neutral terms to explain everything so that the particular known existence loses its concrete particularity and is reduced to an abstract general. It is through comprehending, in Levinas’s view, the merging of the “objective quality and the subjective affection” that Western thought has always renewed itself in the hope of achieving an all-inclusive theory. Levinas condemns Western philosophy for its inattention to the diversity of reality; for its failure to disengage itself for the ontological
investigations that reduces all difference to the same by “interposition of a middle and neutral term.” Levinas identifies the examples of such term in “Hegel’s universal, Durkheim’s social, the statistical laws that govern our freedom, Freud’s unconscious,” to which Eaglestone adds Heideggerian “Being.” Such negligence of alterity turned Western philosophy in Levinas’s eyes into a “ecology,” a “philosophy of power . . . a philosophy of injustice” since any relation with alterity has been subordinated to the relation with Being, and freedom has been consequently taken for granted in the absence of the other (qtd. in Eaglestone 186).

Postmodern ethics is a backlash to the dominance of ontology in Western thought. It is an attempt to account for the particularity of alterity. Eaglestone even believes that postmodernism as a movement is before anything ethical: it “begins in ethics,” “when the mainstream of western thought encounter otherness and does not—or tries not to—consume it but instead response to it”(189). Rejecting Mary Midgley’s view that postmodernism is a response to the failures of Western thought, Eaglestone regards it as an ethical response within Western thought to its very horrifying success in subsuming everything in a “single pattern.” Made out of Western intellectual tradition, this response has a unique characteristic; to disrupt the “Greek” language for its predilection to deny the other, postmodernism has access to no other language but the same: once again another proof to the acknowledged ironical character of postmodernism.

Naturally, such a paradoxical trend of disrupting the metaphysics of comprehension should not substitute any new system of ethics for the “older ethical systems based on duty or on virtue or on use and ends” (Eaglestone 184). Nevertheless, the evidence shows that it actually ends in a very flexible ethical system that can conform itself to the requirements of any new circumstance. Two distinct ethics developed out of the growing sensitivity to the other which demand attention to “mass culture, gender or race” (Chow 673). The two ethics that Chow contradicts are, in fact, postmodern. The “ethics of iconophobia” is sensitive to the alterity in a selfish way. Associated with the high theories of poststructuralism and deconstruction, such ethics turns to the other just for defining the same. The other is important to shed light on the same. Thus, any vision and representation of the other is, in fact, self-representation. There should not be any
separate vision of the other as it decenters the same and obliterates the self; hence, the term “iconophobia” that Chow attributes to such a “fundamental distrust and rejection of images” (673). According to Chow, the embedded self-analysis and self-reflexivity in ethics of iconophobia is the outcome of the dominant view in the cultural critique that allows only the practitioners of any culture to evaluate it. Consequently, “the self, the subject, the center, and the origin that is the West” still remains under the spotlight (685).

As a reaction to the selfish perspective of ethics of iconophobia, “ethics of postvisuality,” a kindred view to Murdochian ethics arises. More realistic, this new mode of ethics is truly postmodern since it attends to the diversity of individuality in a more liberal, authentic way. In contrast to ethics of iconophobia which meets only to the latter part of Deleuze and Guattari’s criterion for postmodern ethics, it successfully accomplishes the disruption of “both the rational, judging subject and the contract based, liberal accounts of the individual’s allegiance to the social community” (qtd. in Eaglestone 192). Evoked out of the inevitability of the objectification of the other in any human communication, “ethics of postvisuality,” as Chow suggests, credits only the visuality that reckons with the relationship between the self and the other (676); no separate vision of the other or even the self is possible without considering the tie that links them together. As Eaglestone notes, such a tie is considered in Levinas’s philosophy: “I cannot disengage myself from society with the other” (47) (qtd. in Eaglestone 188). Levinas’s emphasis on the importance of the other is the key to his claim that ethics rather than ontology is the first philosophy. His argument is that, remarks Eaglestone, “the very need for ontology, for “I” philosophy, is predicated on the relation with the other” (188). To accept an inescapable link with the other is another way to acknowledge the independence and individuality of the other. Thus, Levinas brings back the focus of ethics on the “strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and possessions.” Condemning Western practice of comprehension for its ignorance of the ethical significance of the other, Levinas assigns the role of “the critical essence of knowledge” to ethics. (qtd. in Eaglestone 187).

In a different way, Murdoch brings ethics into the foreground as a critique of knowledge. Man-man relationship is at the heart of Murdoch’s ethics too. For her, vision
and blindness are not paired in a binary opposition as it is commonly done. She privileges neither of them to judge the other since she sees them almost the same. In her psychological perspective to vision, she believes that one’s vision of the world including oneself is a correlate or even an approximation of blindness since it is a product of the psychological mechanism that protects the self. It is only when she lets visuality become deconstructed in the process of its own making that “true vision” is born, a new vision that necessitates a moral task for its manifestation, the self’s struggle to rend the veil of selfish vision. The “deidealization . . . of visuality’s complacency and supremacy” in the favor of “true vision” is the distinguishing feature of “postmodern ethics” Chow terms “ethics of postvisuality.” Thus, vision cannot necessarily include clarity but most often involves distortion and obstruction. For clarity of vision we should undergo “unselfing” while attending others.

As illustrated above, what differentiates the two postmodern ethics of iconophobia and postvisuality is their different treatments of the concept of the other. In their invalidation of universal moral rules hence their “openness” and respect to otherness, they similarly oppose totalizing systems of traditional ethics; however, they diverge sharply as each relies on one part of Eaglestone’s definition of the other; for the former the other is important yet “within the system of ‘same/other,’ whose ‘otherness’ is really an inverted projection of the same”; for the latter, the other is “outside and underlies the system” (189). A true precursor to ethics of postvisuality, Murdoch’s ethics is undoubtedly postmodern, its decentered center is the other since, like Harpham whom Chow quotes in support of her discussion, Murdoch regards ethics as “the arena in which the claims of otherness—the moral laws, the human other, cultural norms, the Good-in-itself, etc.—are articulated and negotiated” (674). Her ethical standpoint like those of many other postmodernists forms a pliable system that in contrast to the inflexible system of traditional ethics always disrupts itself to be responsive to new obligations. In their openness, such flexible postmodern ethical systems just tend to keep people conscious of and responsible for themselves and the universe of diversity they live in. Not propagating chaos and immorality, it is, thus, unfair to discard them as ethics of freedom as their opponent critics usually do.
1.4 Murdochian Aesthetics: A Practical Ethics

Reading her novels with an eye on her philosophical outlook, one cannot avoid the paradoxical vista that opens vis-à-vis the relationship of her literary and philosophical enterprises. Emphasizing her status as a philosopher-novelist, Masong doubts that her readers’ may agree with her saying, “I don’t think philosophy influences my work as a novelist” (12). This statement indeed is right if she means she has not written philosophical novels; otherwise, it is undoubtedly unacceptable. Murdoch’s fiction is not a mouthpiece of her philosophy; however, as the stylistic analysis of her fiction in the following chapters shows, it is her deep faith in her ethical vision that turns her style unique enough to be labeled “Murdochean.” Murdoch tries to write fiction complying with the high ethical function she reserves for art.

Her belief that “man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the pictures” sensitizes her to the image of man that the cultural ethos of her age upholds (MGM 75). Her appraisal of this image gives her enough reason to convict it as the source of modern cultural impasse. The hovering apparition behind culture since Kant, discovers Murdoch, is “the offspring of the age of science,” a man “free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave” whose excessive confidence in reason ends in his/her alienation from the surrounding world (SOG 78). Such a Kantian image leaves aside the role of the internal and external elements unportrayed. To replace this thin image with a lustrous detailed one, Murdoch engages in the two distinct but complementary activities of philosophy and literature. To mount her own image, Murdoch avails of reconstructing the slightly different ethical images that Plato, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, Heidegger, Freud, Weil, Buber, Wittgenstein, Sartre and Derrida advocates. In her counter moral philosophy, “goodness” is displayed incorporated with “the attempt to see the unself, to see and respond to the real world in the light of virtuous consciousness” (SOG 91). It is to buttress this image that she starts to narrate from 1954 till her death (Levenson 569). Narration is one of those occasions that the will, “the natural energy of the psyche” in Murdoch’s perspective, can be employed for a worthy purpose (SOG 68).
The narrative can engage both the writer and the reader in an unselfing exercise. Murdoch even goes further and puts art on par with ethics, an “image of virtue.”

In an age that limits human beings to actions and choices, imagination—man’s faculty, in Kant’s view, to appreciate what reason fails to comprehend, has definitely lost its functionality. In “Metaphysics and Ethics” and “Vision and Choice in Morality,” Murdoch relates the dominance of the thin image of man in a myriad of novels and books of ethics to an imaginative disaster: it is due to the decline of imagination that man is alienated form himself, others and the world since, in her eyes, imagination helps us join the world not escape it. Modern man does not have a vision beyond his/her ego. That is why, Murdoch endorses anything that stretches the imagination, that is, directs the consciousness towards “unselfishness, objectivity and reason,” as virtuous (SOG 56).

Attending to virtuous people, great art, the idea of goodness (ethics) and involving in an intellectual discipline are among such activities (SOG 86-87). They are valuable not only since they “enlarge the vision and strengthen the judgment” but because they open our eyes to “our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly” (87, 88). Murdoch becomes a novelist to give herself and her audience an opportunity to be purged of selfishness.

The question of art and particularly literature takes up a vast portion of Murdoch’s non-fictional even fictional works. Their importance is reckoned in her conviction that “the study of literature” is “the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture.” People can learn from literature but not from science “how to picture and understand human situations” (SOG 33). Art and ethics are never treated separately in Murdoch’s hands. The discussion of either brings in naturally the argument of another since for her art has the same dignity Platonists saved only for philosophy. To contradict Plato’s disparagement of art and banishment of the artist, she develops a counter aesthetics. Agreeing with Plato that “beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct,” she questions why the moral value of the beauty of art or nature are not accounted for in Plato’s philosophy since the appreciation of such beauties requires “the checking of selfishness” in the interest of attending to something else (SOG 83). In her discussion of the value of art, she does not see a sharp distinction between attending a natural object, a
work of art or a person in need. She only rates the attraction to natural or artistic beauty as “the easiest available spiritual exercise” despite its essential difficulty (SOG 63).

More than an “analogy of morals,” art, for Murdoch, is a real “case of morals” (SOG 58); other disciplines like history, philology, chemistry take their disciples to “a new reality behind appearance” in their diversity of subject-matters. However, they cannot engage them in spiritual life as the works of art are capable of (SOG 88). In spite of their obvious eccentricity, good people are aware of their surroundings and acknowledge “the existence of other people and their claims.” In a similar way, good artists have a command on their surroundings (SOG 57). They undergo a difficult task of self-purgation “to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye” (63). So there is no difference between them. Both are free men who become “brave, truthful, patient, humble” through a self-inflicted moral discipline (SOG 84). Faced with the encoded reality in the resultant art, the audience whom Murdoch calls “the consumer[s] of art” become, moreover, good men only if they strive to apprehend the realities that artists has presented in their work of art rather than to “use it as magic” to satisfy the demands of their self (SOG 63).

“A portrayal of moral reflection and moral change (degeneration, improvement) is the most important part of any system of ethics” Bok quotes Murdoch. However, throughout the rest of her writings, she affirms that such portrayal can be drawn more informatively (though of course less systematically) in the works of art (77). Such stretch of faith in art forms the undercurrent of her statement that “[t]he realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice” (SOG 85). Besides depicting the state of affairs, great art reveals the inevitability of moral change. Unlike ethics that like all philosophical activities may stick to the clarification of just one problem, art can reflect a greater portion of reality not only through displaying the moral changes incorporated in every experience but by portraying the complexity hence incomprehensibility of the world. It is in this vein that Murdoch defends “the importance of parables and stories as moral guides” (“Vision” 91). As sources of moral inspiration, stories are reliably effective since they can incorporate the complex truths which are “paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual interpretation” without
converging them into one point addressed adequately by specific rules (Levenson 577). More generally, art is the best medium to convey the actual human existence as “transient mortal . . . subject to necessity and chance,” and reflect the unpredictability and incompleteness of life.

To present or appreciate the paradoxical realities, Murdoch requires the cultivation of virtue for both the artist and the spectator; they must be “unsentimental, detached, unselfish” and objectively attentive (SOG 64). It is for this generous gift of the objective attention to both the artist and the audience that art can surpass ethics in Murdoch’s view. She ascribes the role of displaying “suffering without a thrill and death without a consolation” to tragedy, comedy and painting (SOG 77, 85). Her disapproval of whatever violates the true sense of death and suffering implies that, despite its truthful capability, art can degenerate into a lie.

Murdoch’s belief in the contradictory function of art has been taken for ambivalence in her artistic attitude. Quoting Widdows to support his argument, Cordner notes this ambiguity as: “her view of art’s power to deceive, dazzle, and mislead as well as of the power of some art to illuminate things for us” (200). These critics connect this ambiguous view of art to her ambivalence regarding image-making in Christianity. As Cordner explains, according to Widdows, Murdoch, on the one hand, approves the theological “demythologisers” for their distrust in “image”; on the other hand, she insists that “myth, image, metaphor” can never be dispensed with since without them one can never know the reality that religion points to (emphasis mine 200). But why should this awareness of the paradoxical nature of image-making and art be read as ambiguity? Murdoch’s idea of art is not contradictory at all. She stresses the illusive nature of art to warn us about art’s vulnerability against being seen or used as “magic.” That is why, in her classifying art as great, mediocre or bad, she never spares great art of the danger of being degenerated by the gaze of an indecent spectator.

As a case of moral, art can be degraded by what impedes excellence in morality. Murdoch identifies this common enemy as personal fantasy by which she means “the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one” (SOG 57). “The intrusion of fantasy and the assertion of
self,” to use Murdoch’s words, in a work of art brings about “the dimming of any reflection of the real world” hence its mediocrity (58). This certainty of the falsifying tendency of art never makes her suspicious of the supreme capability of art to reveal truth; in An Accidental Man, it is mentioned that “[i]f a truth is complicated, you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie” (90). However, any artist is not authorized to do so. Murdoch believes in degrees of merit of art and avers that “even Shakespeare is not perfect” (though undoubtedly he is one of the best). Only good art is spacious enough to contain truth. Best explained in her own words, the appreciation of any good art is itself a moral task:

Good art, unlike bad art, unlike ‘happenings’, is something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness. We surrender ourselves to its authority with a love which is unpossessive and unselfish. Art shows us the only sense in which the permanent and incorruptible is compatible with the transient; and whether representational or not it reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull-dream-consciousness is unable to see. Art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance; it exhibits virtue in its true guise in the context of death and chance. (SOG 86)

Murdoch contrasts imagination and fantasy to identify the forces that causes a work of art to turn one way or the other. Among all art forms, Murdoch values literature particularly the novel for its intrinsic, natural capability to reveal truth. In Cordner’s and Masong’s words respectively, “with its richness of human details, occasions, and contexts” (200), the novel is for her like philosophy, a “truth-seeking and truth-revealing” activity (16). The faculty dominant in philosophy is reason; it is imagination in literature. The innovative play of imagination places literature over philosophy since, in contrast to reason that restricts philosophy to the illustration of one problem, it causes literature to be a more inclusive yet indirect reflection of reality hence an effective medium in and through which the Good can be imagined. To check her vision, she becomes a novelist. She does not write her novels as literary philosophy; Widdows states they are not arguing the soundness of her philosophy. Indeed, she writes them to, as Cordner beautifully expresses, “help us imaginatively register, the importance, the value, the preciousness of idiosyncratic, flawed, vulnerable individual human beings” (200). They are the right
complement to her philosophy in which she can reveal what her philosophical writings
could not clearly explicate or failed to notice.

As a species of art, literature is not immune to the risks of personal fantasy.
Though we should exhort in the liberating role of literature, it must not be reduced to a
consolatory agency since, emphasizes Murdoch, “as soon as any idea is a consolation, the
tendency to falsify it becomes strong” (SOG 55). As Masong paraphrases “it must not lull
us to fantasy,” to a dream land where we forget that though a mirror of reality it is the
product of imagination (53). According to Gordon, the intrusion of fantasy into the
creation and apprehension of any story in Murdoch’s eyes turns “its revelatory power”
into “a deceptive magic, a consolatory boost to the ego” (117). Murdoch rejects fantasy
because it is pattern-making: in “The Sovereignty of Good,” she asserts, “Any story
which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which
might otherwise seem intolerably chancy or incomplete” (87). This may seem very
redolent of Freud. As a matter of fact, it is here that Murdoch disagrees with Freud. In
Freud’s thesis, as Murdoch elaborates, the work of art per se is totally “overlooked” since
it is believed to be the result of the fantasy of the artist stimulating a work of fantasy in
the client. It is “a magic which excites the magical propensities of those who enjoy it”
(MGM 20). To repudiate such blanket condemnation of art, she brings art to the
foreground as a Janus-faced phenomenon, arguing for the vital aspect of art that deserves
commendation. She takes Freud’s view of art which she summarizes as “the egotistically
motivated production of maimed pseudo-objects which are licenses for the private
concluding processes of personal fantasy” for a definition of bad art, and defines instead
art, by which she means “good art,” as “the imaginative creation of unified
contemplation, with mystical analogies” (21).

Directly or indirectly all her novels confess the falsehood of stories. In Under the
Net, it is mentioned that “[t]he whole of language is a machine for making falsehood”
(68) and “all stories are lies, consolation.” In The Sea, the Sea, Charles Arrowby is
blamed for turning his lifelong erotic obsession “into a story, and stories are false.” Built
around the Irish civil war of 1916, The Red and the Green distrusts history as story and
sheds doubt on its own verisimilitude. The metafictional technique is the only available
solution to vocalize the contradictory nature of stories. As stories highlighting the falsifying tendency of tales, her fiction is more than evidence to the influence of Sartre, Beckett and Wittgenstein on her aesthetics, as Gordon takes them to be (116); they are successful epitomes of truthful fiction, the fiction that like all sorts of good art in her view “affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent” (SOG 83). Writing metafiction equips Murdoch to disrupt any selfish obsession that arises in the genesis and enjoyment of her novels. The consequent narcissistic narrative ironically inspires love in the highest part of the soul of the writer and the reader since, by attending to its own deficiencies, it emulates form nature “a perfection of form which,” in Murdoch’s observation, “invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream of life of the consciousness” (83).

The constant defense of art throughout Murdoch’s aesthetical and ethical writings is the consequence of her total faith in the significant role art can play in man’s moral pilgrimage. Adopting the Platonic model of man’s aspiration for the knowledge of the good, Murdoch is yet bitterly disappointed by Plato’s diminishment of art into an obstacle to man’s spiritual growth. In Plato’s moral philosophy there is no place for art since it is too remote form reality to offer man a glimpse of it. For Plato, elucidates Murdoch, “[I]ife is a spiritual pilgrimage inspired by the disturbing magnetism of truth, involving ipso facto a purification of energy and desire in the light of a vision of what is good” (MGM 14). The self-abnegating movement is guided by the idea of perfection and inspired by the instinctive love of Beauty (MGM 14), two of the spiritual Forms human soul had a clear vision in some previous state of being. According to the myth of recollection, the human soul has a natural attraction to those Forms which are forgotten once it was separated from the former state. The earthly reminders may evoke a dim memory in the incarnate soul. But to recognize the resemblance to the original in those imitations is a difficult task. Undergoing this difficult task constitutes a moral experience and makes man a moral being by nature in Plato’s philosophy.

Not an abstract, coldly intellectual view, Plato’s morality condemns whatever that distracts man from the highest goal of life. Art and artists are severely attacked consequently. Besides visual artists criticized as mere copyists, poets (and by extension
any literary artists) are disqualified as liars. In contrast to Aristotle, Plato holds that the arousal of feelings and self-indulgent emotions by poets leads to “a fostering of base impulses of sex and anger and selfish desire” rather than their purgation through fear and pity. So a poet hinders the soul from elevating by invigorating its irrational and base aspects (MGM 13). Like the painter, the poet is a copyist who imitates virtue even without understanding it. Such unreflective imagination prevents both the artist and the client from “the effort of penetrating beyond appearances.” The poet’s art is even more degenerative than painting since to keep its clients interested it needs to portray those who are “challengeable” rather than “monotonous and steady”; that is, it delights in presenting bad men instead of good men (12). Literature then is, for Plato, a debasing activity rather than a moral guide. Murdoch notes that he even fatally attacks literature because of his “uneasiness about the nature of language itself” (18). He doubts the representational nature of language and specially the truthfulness of written words.

Murdoch summarizes the objections Plato sets against written works, including literary texts, in the Phaedrus and Seventh Letter as follows: they are only “inert reminders of real communication.” Contextless, written texts are “ambiguous and defenseless in the hands of knaves or fools.” although intended to preserve truth, they become vehicles of falsehood. Similarly, art, as the eloquent use of written signs, is repudiated as a falsifying activity. Art especially literature corrupts because, by presenting an assimilated unified vision as “an attractive eloquent commentary upon human life” it encourages both the artist and the reader to abandon their own everyday personal quest for truth. In this sense, even serious art is as dangerous as bad art in Plato’s view. The latter provides a space for “false egoistic fantasy” to dominate while the former dissuades the actual moral quests by presenting itself as “a spurious short-cut to ‘instant wisdom’.” Written texts, whether good or bad, are instances of falsehood since the unity and perfection they offer (though satisfying man’s unconscious desire for ideal Forms) is not part of the actual everyday life (MGM 19).

Murdoch identifies this metaphysical anxiety underlying modern criticism of art as well. Surely the same Platonic distrust in communicative quality of language spurs W.H. Auden to assert that “no poet can prevent his work being used as magic.” Quoting this remark, Murdoch underscores a serious drawback in aesthetic perception: “even good
art can be taken over by its client as fantasy and pornography” (*MGM* 13-14). Aside from a Platonic doubt about the truthfulness of written signs, her contemporary vogue of disbelief in the value of art is part of, Murdoch explains, “a deeper concern about the independent creative thinking remembering *person*” (18). Art is simply divested of any value since the reliability and authority of its creator is recently distrusted. Such metaphysical anxieties over the nature of art empower the puritanical watchdog to judge art as “corrupting” and ascribe the anti-art artists to reckon art as “insincere.” They feel that with the advent of computer technology, in which, as Murdoch points to, the meaning is “‘written’ and ‘remembered’ in arcane computer language” instead of words, the status of art has deteriorated. More recently, the deconstructive trend stirred by Derrida has directed an anti-metaphysical criticism on art. The prevalent “pluralisation” or “demythologization of history, art, religion, science” is the outcome of the deconstructionist renouncement of “prized unities and deep instinctive beliefs thought to be essential to human nature” (*MGM* 12)

Despite all this strong condemnations of art, comparing art to love helps Murdoch justify her defense of art. Adopting the concept of love as an essential force for spiritual growth form Plato’s moral philosophy, she accepts the distinction he made between its two available varieties. Referring to love as Eros, Plato distinguishes high Eros from low Eros; while the latter indulges us in our fantasy dreams, the former motivates the human soul to pierce the veil of selfish desire to see what is beyond it. It rewards man the freedom from fantasy or, as Murdoch puts it, “the realism of compassion” (*SOG* 65). Murdoch ascribes the same paradoxical nature to art for it involves the image or invocation of love; good art like love at its best, “shocks us into awareness of a separate reality,” but bad art similar to low Eros “subjects others to our mechanism and fantasy” (*FAS* 36).

Parallel to love, the place of art is unique in Murdoch’s worldview. She attributes a more decisive moral significance to art in an attempt to supplement Plato’s abstract yet highly realistic picture of moral life in which the good is rightly presented as “a transcendent magnetic centre” (*SOG* 73). Believing in this image of the good as “the least corruptible and the most realistic picture,” Murdoch commemorates art as the only
concrete activity available to practice impersonal love in hope of a glimpse of good. The bad form of art is really bad. It directly comes out of and stimulates a fantastic vision in which the “blinding self-centered aims and images” are proliferated (65). As it never opens people’s eyes to something beyond the self, it is even below low Eros, the earthly attraction to other human beings. For Plato, human romance is still morally valuable since the momentary shift of the center from oneself to another gives people, as Murdoch notes, a “quasi-religious certainty” (16, 17).

As much as bad art is restraining to man’s perfection, good art, for Murdoch, is encouraging and supportive: it is morally helpful for both artists and readers; for the former because they are to purge their artefacts from fantastic defects and restrain their tendency to introduce their replica of the good as original; for the latter because they are forced to participate in the meaning production and face the complexity of human life. Highlighting the Janus-faced nature of art, Murdoch underscores the value of art as the highest empowering practice to liberate oneself from the powerful self-protecting mechanism of fantasy and to improve the perfectionable acquisition of truth.

Here, it may be inferred that Murdoch’s “horror of abstraction” is actually what sets her against Plato’s condemnation of art. But, it certainly would be a too quick generalization to consider her artistic career as a direct sequel of this anxiety. Likening her to Sartre, Gordon avers that for both literature is a way to concretize their self-acknowledged abstract thought, “an attempt at self-exorcism” (126). Though such observation is true of Sartre, it is not an apt description of Murdoch. Indeed, Sartre writes to make his philosophy accessible to a wider range of reader. On the contrary, Murdoch’s novel-writing practice is a much more complicated issue; she writes to show that art and love with natural tendency to impede and contaminate man’s vision can actually be the only true source of good vision. As a truth-revealing activity, art has to be metafictional, that is, it must highlight its defects to prove its truthfulness. It has to divert the consciousness form the consolatory practices of “imagined inflation of self” and “fictions of a theological nature,” to its own self-contained reality.

Good art is, as she tries to practice in her own novels, in contrast to magic, “messy or lifelike” as it contains what she terms “contingency” (Gordon 126). It expands
the notion of causation to include both psychological and contingent factors. In her own fiction, she brings psychological and moral causality together to suggest their interdependence and their importance in man’s everyday observations. Her novels are her sincere effort to incarnate her idea of good art, showing the ironical nature of human existence: man’s freedom to act morally in spite of “the defeat of human wishes by contingency” and “the rigid character” caused by beliefs, illusions and the past. Her handling of George in *The Philosopher’s Pupil* is the best sketch she provides about the grip of those restraining forces on man, the existential paradox of human life.

Murdoch’s practice of novel-writing, especially creating those extraordinary, bulky novels, is clearly justifiable in the light of this realistic aesthetics. Murdoch turns to voluminous fiction for two distinct aesthetical reasons. First, with their vast scope, the novels yield easily to the embodiment of the paradoxical nature of art. In almost all her novels, artistic craft or aesthetic perception is one of the incidents if not the main one. This inclusion helps Murdoch warn against the susceptibility of art to be subject to fantastic interpretations of the reader or to be blemished by fantastic illusions of the writer. Through the discursive feature of the novel, she sheds light on the mechanism of the mind, the fact that it is difficult, even for the saints, to escape the personal illusions that the “relentless egoism” contrives by habit as the good itself (Gordon 117).

Second, such novels have certain other features that make them the truest form of art. Murdoch’s discussion of the notion of comic and tragic is very illuminative in this regard; tragic and comic are not an opposite pair as it is often believed. They are two “asymmetrical” and “different” concepts, indeed. They cannot be contradicted as unserious and serious respectively. The comic may be much more serious than “the attempted tragic” is capable of, Murdoch insists. The tragic is not the same as sorrow and grief. It sometimes means the “serious, stoical” attitude to life, and more technically refers to the “appalling” aspect of absurdity of life. “Tragedies are then plays written by great poets” in which they try to embody great sufferings of man in closed artistic wholes. That is why “there are no prose tragedies.” Murdoch argues that it is very difficult for tragedy to be truthful to the absurd, simple ordinary life since as an art species it “offers some consolation, some sense, some form whereas the most dreadful
ills of human life allow of none” (*MGM* 93). Moreover, the tragic art form is extremely rare since, while focusing on horrors of life, the authors cannot help “slipping into an easier sentimental, abstract, melodramic (and so on) mode,” (104). Since the tragic account tends to transform great sufferings of mankind to lesser than actual, Murdoch avers that “tragedy belongs to literature” and there is no tragedy in actual life or as she says, “[r]eal life is not tragic” by which she means “the extreme horrors of real life cannot be expressed in art” (93) and any attempt to do so irritates the audience for “the prettified inadequacy of the presentation” (94). “Auschwitz is not a tragedy” since, influenced by Wittgenstein’s doctrine that “[w]hereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent,” she believes that its intense horror is unrepresentable (94). In Masong’s interpretation, “to think of Auschwitz as tragic is the pretense of speaking the unspeakable” hence a lie (17).

Despite the tendency of tragedy to tell lies and transform the reality outside, Murdoch insists that not all tragedies are bad. Tragedies can be great and good only if they do not restrict the sad fall of man to the effect of freedom of the will but bring into light the more powerful lead of chance and necessity on human life. “[A]ll good tragedy is anti-tragedy . . . [King] Lear wants to enact the false tragic, the solemn, the complete. Shakespeare forces him to enact the true tragic, the absurd, the incomplete,” comments Murdoch (emphasis mine Gordon 127). The good tragic, then, overcomes “unseeing,” the major problem Murdoch identifies in egoistic consciousness, the inability to be aware of the particular truth (Masong 15). That is, it is never purged of the funny absurdity of life, the aspect that in analogy to Murdoch’s “tragic absurd” can be called the comic absurd. Murdoch refers us to the funniness of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. By funny she does not mean ironical or witty but ridiculous, e.g. the terrible tale told at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment* by the ridiculous Marmeladov.

It is the funniness of art and its simplicity that terrifies the states since, discusses Murdoch, “it gives weight and interest to what is various, obvious and ordinary.” It easily connects to life and challenges “authoritarian mystification” which ironically aims to espouse the state by simplifying and romanticizing its policies (*MGM* 90, 91). A portrayal of the comic absurd, comedy exceeds the most attempted tragedies for its
mimetic properties. Murdoch favors comedy over tragedy because it “has an obvious built-in factor of disunity, a return to the contingent, an appeal to individual experience and common-sense” (91). Such outstanding features leave no doubt that comedy is the most lifelike structure art can fashion to capture the true essence of life. It does not support Gordon’s interpretation that for Murdoch life “is messily comic rather than inexorably tragic” (126). Indeed, her statement that “real life is not tragic” does not mean that it is comic since for her comic is not the opposite of tragic. Her premise is that life is absurd and the absurd “is very often funny, though it can be appalling too” (MGM 91).

“Comedy is chaotic and concerned with accidental details and unreflective absurdities,” Murdoch highlights (92). So any other literary genre that deals with similar concerns is comic. Murdoch favors the novel as the epitome of the comic. It is a “comic form” that, in contrast to tragedy that relies on certain limitation, “belongs to an open world, a world of absurdity and loose ends and ignorance.” The comic is the inextricable essence of novel so that “a novel which is not at all comic is in great danger aesthetically speaking” (qtd. in Gordon 127). Murdoch overrates the novel over the comedy for its two characteristic features which amplify its truth-revealing and moral capacity. One is the vast scope it projects and another is its discursiveness. The novel is an “inclusive genre” that brings in a great deal of messy particulars, contingency or, as Ann Cavidge in The Nuns and Soldiers says of Little Dorrit, “heterogeneous stuff” (NS 55). Moreover, more than any other form of literature it is discursive since it is greatly free from versification conventions. Discursiveness defined by Masong as the retrieval of the peripatetic in written form makes the novel more than the achievement of any great dramatic comedies compliant with the ordinary reality (17). The novel is, thus, for Murdoch, the most truthful human art:

the literary form best suited to . . . free reflection, sad-comic and discursive truth-telling. . . . what it loses in hand-edged formal impact [of poetry]. It gains in its grasp of detail, it freedom of tempo, its ability to irrelevant, to reflect without haste upon persons and situations and in general to pursue what is contingent and incomplete. (Masong 17)

This view toward the novel parallels that of Lawrence whom Murdoch criticizes for the extreme sentimentalism and romanticism in his fiction: as the highest form of human art,
the novel is “so incapable of the absolute . . . in a novel there is always a tom-cat, a black tom-cat which pounces on the white dove of the Word” (qtd. in “The Black” 1).

A post-war thinker, Murdoch pleads for the ultimate reality to dispel the fantasy-ridden ethos of self-obsession. Her Platonic retrieval of the Good ends in her unPlatonic celebration of art. In her philosophical discussion, Murdoch concludes that, as Robjant says, “there is always something in the imperative of goodness that is not reducible to rational discussions,” that the good is ineffable and its essence can be glimpsed vaguely but assuredly in man’s effort to see the other (things or people) (14). Art provides the opportunity and the novel is the most able genre. To be truthful, its fullest potentiality should be employed, and it is to this end that she writes novels, the novels that take advantages of what Gordon calls the paradoxical status of “language-destroying language” and “myth-destroying myth” (117), not only to associate the highest truth with silence (Wittgenstein’s legacy) but also to produce the closest replica of life she desires. Although she never wants life to be like her novels the way that Gordon believes, she definitely desires her audience to take life “intellectually adventurous and morally severe” (131).

In her extraordinary riveting yet remote fiction, she experiments for the inclusion of the highest possible amount of chance or accidentalness. Her effort to incorporate much more of what she calls contingency in the novel distinguishes her for two reasons: first, it lets her acknowledge the heterogeneity of “history” as Conradi comments. Second, it helps her readers strengthen their imagination, which, in Brugmans’ observation, is a faculty to develop moral consciousness of what is beyond the self (Wagner-Lawlor 13). Contingencies are less interesting than evil in a work of fiction but they are more challenging to the imagination. They can cause what Murdoch regards essential for the reader’s moral orientation: “a shift from the self-centered concept of sincerity to the other-centered concept of truth” (qtd. in Wagner-Lawlor 13). In this regard, the novel exceeds the intellectual, theological, physical activities of Imber Court communitarians in educating our moral sensibilities.

For the highest rate of chance in the novel, the characters should be fairly free; therefore, Murdoch emulates Shakespeare and Tolstoy. Besides, she welcomes, as
Gordon expresses, “the diffuse centers of interest, displaced motivation and point of view” as well as open-ended, detailed narration (128). In spite of all her innovations, she cannot strip herself of her magical power as an artist: she modestly confesses that the freedom of her characters is always scarified to the demands of her commanding plots. Aware of “magical nature of art” and attesting its sense of unity and form as inevitable, Murdoch never uses art to “protect reality against itself” as Gordon puts it (131). On the contrary, emphasizing that the intellect is “naturally one-making,” she considers art as an intellectual form via which man can have a glimpse of reality only if its magical power is restricted to its unity. To limit her own fiction’s tilt towards magic, she develops a unique style whose techniques will be explored more in detail in the following chapters.

The convergence of Murdoch’s philosophical and novelistic projects into a full support for “the engagement in a work of creation” turns her into, what Denham avers, a “phenomenological moral” psychologist, one who regards the novel as the best form “for recording human subjectivity,” as well as capturing the reader’s attention to the complexity of that subjectivity (Wagner-Lawlor 15). The stress on the ethical effect of the novel on the reader puts Murdoch forth as a genuine theorist of fiction: storytelling is cognitively and morally valuable for mankind. Pointing to Levenson’s comment on the role of storytelling in the life of the characters in The Bell, Herman believes that narrative is very significant in the formation of both her novels and her philosophical writings (552). Surely, tale-yarning is crucial in man’s evaluation of the universe as her self-reflexive novels and her philosophical treatises suggest. Most obviously in Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues she creates a story of a fictional dialogue between Plato and Socrates over art. There the humanistic Socrates challenges the severe Platonic attack on art by observing that as man is brought up by storytelling “we should not be too hard on ourselves for being comforted by art” (63). For Murdoch, stories invoke a utopian sensibility in both the artist and the spectator through sharpening their imaginative sympathy. The imaginative sympathy requires an objective detached gaze at others. The same is required of any man in moral situations. So the artist and the client are like good man only if they stifle their desire for self-representation and the satisfaction of their personal fantasies for realism. In this sense, art is more significant than philosophy which “is a very different kind of thought, in an essential sense abstract” (Herman 552).
In her survey of the tradition of the novel, she identifies certain features of the various forms of the novel. Even she indicates the faults and potentiality of her contemporary fiction, especially British tradition, vis-à-vis the revelation of truth (“The Anti-Artist” 136). She, eventually, comes up with a view of the truest form of the novel which despite the inevitable demands of its artistic form can most functionally reveal “the nonsystematic or contingent elements of human existence” (Herman 552). She admires the realism of the nineteenth-century fiction where different characters live their different lives. However, for good philosophical and epistemological reason, she denounces that form of the novel as unsuitable for her contemporary era (“The Anti-Artist” 136). In her attempt to identify the apt novelish characteristics for her age, she ends up with a moral theory of the novel that, as obvious in her own novels, encourages the emergence of a new form to nullify the death of the novel, the belief that novelty has been exhausted under the extreme experiments of modernism. Her own novels are the result of interweaving various useful traditional techniques that allow artists to follow the great artist who, according to Murdoch, “sees his objects (and this is true whether they are sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil) in a light of justice and mercy” (SOG 65). Murdoch’s faith in the moral achievement of fictional realism interlocks her aesthetics and ethics. It does not support Nicol’s deconstructive argumentation that Murdoch’s novels are philosophical despite her wish for the otherwise, but is more in line with Denham’s observation that there is a deep consistency between her two careers (Herman 553-54).

Writing an anti-philosophical philosophy (a philosophy that exhorts art) and an anti-literature literature (fictions that are self-critical), Murdoch succeeds to revalue literature and philosophy. Literature surpasses philosophy in offering salvation to human race since as “the realm of contradiction and irreducibility, of chaos and muddle,” it is more truth-revealing than the clear and logical discussions of the other (Herman 553). In her deconstructive treatment of the age-old binary opposition of literature and philosophy, she argues that, more than “a playful diversion of the human race,” art “is the place of the most fundamental insights” (SOG 71-72). Only the highest and greatest art can truly reflect “suffering and sin . . . without falsifying the picture in some way while making it bearable” (71). Such art is impersonal, and able to present the world, “our
world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all” (63).

Due to its counter-natural ability, great art can direct us away from ourselves to “the surprising variety of the world” (SOG 65). It never satisfies our narcissistic desire to attend the self. Its only consolation, Murdoch insists, is aesthetic; that is, through its artistic beauty it teaches us that “nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous” (SOG 85). Literature, particularly the novel can yield the greatest art. Any great novel can teach us “how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self” (SOG 64). It, thus, expands our knowledge hence our freedom since, concludes Murdoch, freedom is “not strictly the exercise of the will” but a moral concept that cannot “be separated from the idea of knowledge” (65, 37). The accurate vision of great literature makes us good people since, according to Murdoch, appropriate vision occasions action (65).

Works Cited


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