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Love in dark times: Iris Murdoch on openness and the void

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Abstract: **After situating Iris Murdoch's promotion of openness to love within a broadly Platonic ethic, I outline a familiar suspicion about such openness in the context of grief, where the finding of a new and intimate love may seem inappropriate. By drawing upon her treatment of spiritual crisis and grief as parallel instances of the void, I respond to this suspicion by arguing that love in the context of spiritual crisis offers a way to resist the dangers of the void and that similar considerations apply in the parallel case (grief). If we accept Murdoch's overall position we will then lack justification for rejecting love as a morally defensible pathway out of grief.**

Openness to love

Part of the moral story that Iris Murdoch has to tell is strictly naturalistic. It is a tale about the nature of humans. At its heart are the following simple but controversial claims: first, a concept of the Good is structured into our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking. Indeed, we cannot get away from it, and in that sense it is a necessary part of our conceptual apparatus. Second, this inescapable concept of the Good is not a convenient fiction. It is, instead, an aid to realistic vision. We are egocentric creatures and, because preoccupation with self tends to be fantasy-ridden, our default condition is one of entrapment in delusion. Concern for what is good helps us to redirect our attention outwards, thereby allowing us to undermine our delusional state. It helps to open us up to the world. *Being realistic* and *being guided by the Good* are therefore closely related.[1]

In metaphorical terms, the Good itself is not seen but is a source of illumination. It illuminates many things: natural phenomena, other creatures, the reality and value of other humans, and their appropriateness as recipients of love.

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Love, understood thus, is *not* rigidly restricted in terms of its intentionality (a view which sets Murdoch apart from an important trend in contemporary analytic philosophy of love).[2] Various things, and not just persons, may be loved. Moreover, we do not get to choose and control the ways in which the possibility of love appears in our lives. And love itself can be of various sorts. At the same time, it need not be thought of as a projection or bestowal of importance. Rather, there are reasons for love in the sense of justifying reasons. A genuine love, or a love of the best sort, is 'the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real' (Murdoch (1999), 215). It is a recognition of something which is already there and which serves as a justifying reason for a loving response.[3] However, without the illumination of the Good, without the capacity to recognize goodness when it confronts us, the value of what is other, and more particularly of other persons, might never be appreciated. We might lose our access to reasons for caring. And there *are* times when, for Murdoch, the illumination of the Good is compromised. While it is a presence in our lives that may never be entirely lost (because it is a necessary feature of our conceptual apparatus) there are times when we recognize goodness, the value of others, and the value of ordinary simple things, only in an attenuated manner. There are times when at least some of the lights go out and when goodness seems only a distant possibility.[4]

At such times, on the Murdochian account, love is called upon to perform difficult work, to help us seek out and reconnect with the significance and value of persons and of our shared world. Translated into the rather different terminology of analytic philosophy, there are times when love is required in order to overcome a special, morally significant, epistemic disadvantage or deficit. More figuratively, it may allow us to reconnect with the Good and with a sense of the possibility of goodness, and relatedly, with the possibility of happiness. There may even be times when love is *required* if such a reconnection or overcoming of the relevant epistemic deficit is to take place, times when nothing else can play the same role. Murdoch is, accordingly, committed to regarding *openness to love* as an important human virtue. But such openness comes with problems, not the least of which is the difficulty of preserving it without falling into moral failure of some other sort. Love, or what we often call love, *can* after all be tainted with egocentricity, a claim which is common to Plato, Freud, Schopenhauer, Stendhal, and St John of the Cross. But in what follows I will suggest, and to some extent argue, that a familiar suspicion about openness to one kind of love is unfounded. Against the backdrop of the already stated claim that openness to love is an important Murdochian virtue, and one which may be threatened by certain kinds of disheartening experience, I will proceed by outlining a familiar suspicion about openness to what I will call *love after love*. The latter involves the finding of a new, intimate, and personal love when we are grief-stricken over the loss of a loved one. I will then outline Murdoch's treatment of spiritual crisis as a parallel case of loss and will go

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on to provide an illustrative example of such crisis, drawn from Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels* (1966). In the closing section I will argue that the reasons for upholding openness to love, reasons which Murdoch identifies in the case of spiritual crisis, are also in place in the case of actual bereavement and that we have no obvious or good reason for constraining openness in a way which excludes *love after love* as a morally defensible pathway out of grief.

Suspicion about *love after love*

Above, I have alluded to dark times when the Good seems, figuratively, to become dim and distant. An example of such times is when we experience the depressive states which are partly constitutive of mental illness. But there are related, and similarly dark, states that we *ought* to experience under at least some circumstances. They are normal human reactions to *loss* of a profound sort, loss of hope, loss of faith, loss of a loved one. 'In such cases there is a sense of emptiness, a loss of personality, a loss of energy and motivation, a sense of being stripped, the world is utterly charmless and without attraction' (Murdoch (1992), 500). To say that, under such conditions, we ought still to remain open to love may seem overly demanding and judgemental. It is, after all, tempting to say that each of us deals with loss and grief in our own way. But perhaps this is a temptation that we would do well to treat with caution.

Let us consider a specific case. When Lisa Gherardini's husband died (in 1528 or 1539 according to different accounts) she retired to the convent of St Ursula in Florence. Her action in doing so gave the impression to contemporaries that she had loved and had been loved deeply in return. It is difficult to look at her painting (or at what is generally presumed to be her painting) without recognizing a woman who had known what it is to be loved. I will assume that, upon the loss of her husband, Francesco, she also came to know what it is to lose the love of another, to lose its everyday presence. It is hard, given the depths of such grief, to criticize her retreat to the convent, her withdrawal from the world and from others. Grief is private, personal, difficult.

But suppose we rewind history and remove the widow Gherardini from the nunnery. Suppose we place her back in the world and allow her to find another love *after* her love for Francesco, a love of much the same intimate sort. (Let us call this '*love after love*'.) Would such an event diminish, or cast doubt upon the earlier bonds that existed between Lisa and Francesco? Here the suggestion is not that she ought to have regarded herself as, in perpetuity, her first husband's property. The suggestion is, rather, that we might feel *suspicious* about love as soon as there is anything akin to replacement, as soon as one beloved seems to be put in the place of another.[5] When grief ends with the finding of a new love, we may (in spite of our best attempts to avoid judgement) suspect that something has gone wrong, that something crude has occurred, 'transference' perhaps, a 'cathecting' of *eros* or

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of *libido* towards a substitute object. And such a suspicion might bring into question both the depth of the new love and the depth of the original whose place it seems to take. After all, love involves identifying with the other as irreplaceable, investing our being in their well-being, rejoicing in their joys and experiencing sorrow in their sorrows.[6] When the beloved dies this connection and way of seeing the other persists, albeit under conditions where the concern for their presence and (worldly) well-being can no longer be satisfied. Given the depth of connection that is involved, how could we then transfer allegiance?

Consider matters from another standpoint, that of the children of bereaved parents. They themselves are bereaved, albeit in a different way. It may be difficult for them to accept the genuineness and wisdom of their parent's new love, and not just because of the resulting confusions about the authority which is to be held by such an interloper. But what if the new love is real and deep? What if it is genuinely *about* some other person and is not just an egocentric way in which a bereaved agent tricks themselves into a return to the world? After a long and loving relationship, the option of a new relationship in which the grief-stricken person is taken care of may seem acceptable, but one in which there is a fully fledged and reciprocated love may seem too much. From such a standpoint, the Lisa Gherardini option of seclusion may seem akin to a form of protection from any temptation towards future betrayal. The sense of guilt and even infidelity which may attach to the finding of a new love can, after all, be real: so real that in the demotivated state which follows loss, it may be all too easy to acquiesce in the face of the disapproval of others and in the face of a fear that guilt would poison any new relationship. Overwhelmed by such feelings, the bereaved agent's capacity for openness to *love after love* may be undermined. Murdoch's novel *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) presents a case of this which ends well (unusually for Murdoch) when a grief-stricken central character, Gertrude, falls in love with a younger man. The couple are driven apart by their friends and by Gertrude's own sense of guilt, but the obstacles are ultimately overcome, much to everyone's surprise. But perhaps Murdoch plays a trick on the reader by opening proceedings in the final days of Gertrude's husband. We do not see their life together. We see her grief but do not get to see what she has lost.

Even so, any general suspicion about the wisdom, genuineness, and defensibility of *love after love* will be hard to square with Murdoch's beliefs that (i) we do not get to choose and control the ways in which love and the possibility of love enters our lives; and that (ii) *openness to love* is an important human virtue.[7] But perhaps we can modify the latter claim by introducing a familiar series of Aristotelian qualifiers so that what is at stake is openness to certain kinds of love, for certain kinds of objects, at the right time and on the right occasions. And this seems quite right if it involves accepting that love *ought* to be tempered by practical wisdom. On the other hand, it is more problematic if taken to imply claims of the following sort: *a new love can be real and wise two years after the loss*

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of a loved one but not four or six months after such a loss.[8] While, as a basic psychological constraint, time may need to elapse before a new love because of the sheer engrossing nature of the earliest stages of grief, Murdoch does not exclude the possibility that love may itself be a suitable way out of grief at some point in time. On the contrary, she seems to hold that love in some general sense is our best guide in life and that this does not cease to be the case for those who have experienced loss. Moreover, she advances no precise rules about timescales and appropriate periods of mourning.

Spiritual crisis as a parallel case

In her late text, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), Murdoch claims explicitly that spiritual crisis forms a parallel case to actual bereavement in the sense that both may be regarded as instances of the void.

> If void continues there can be real ordinary familiar despair. Or this can be made into the kind of asceticism envisaged by Simone Weil, wherein the sufferer, refusing the consolations of fantasy, takes a firm hold upon the painful reality: as in the case of bereavement, for example, or in the terrible situation of waiting for the inevitable death of a loved person. (Murdoch (1992), 504)

This is, for Murdoch, a familiar predicament. 'Extreme suffering, from one cause or another, is likely to be the lot of everyone at some time in life; and innumerable lives are hideously darkened throughout by hunger, poverty and persecution, or by remorse or guilt or abandoned loneliness and lack of love' (*ibid.*). This strong connection and parallel between bereavement and spiritual crisis is asserted at several points in her text. 'A common cause of void is bereavement, which may be accompanied by guilt feelings, or may be productive of a "clean" pain' (*ibid.*, 500). At the same time, 'It is also, potentially, the dark night spoken of by St John of the Cross, wherein, beyond all images of God, lies the abyss of faith into which one *falls*' (*ibid.*, 501). As well as those stricken with grief, and those subject to a spiritual crisis, Murdoch also cites the case of 'prisoners with no term of release' (*ibid.*). They too may experience the void. Understood thus, the void is a general term for various states of loss and despair. And this does look like a point made also by Weil: 'The suffering caused by the death of others is due to this pain of a void and of lost equilibrium' (Weil (1963), 19). But here, it may be wise to show caution about just how much Weil and Murdoch agree upon. At the risk of generalizing, Murdoch accepts what she occasionally calls a 'practical mysticism' which is rooted in the limitations of language and consciousness, i.e. rooted in what is internal to the human (Murdoch (1992), 430). There are certain aspects of the Good or, in more analytic terms, the ultimate sources of normativity, which will always remain obscure to us. Weil, by contrast, is a mystic of a more thoroughgoing and familiar sort, someone who appeals to a language of the 'supernatural' in order to explain what is beyond our best understanding.

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'To accept a void in ourselves is supernatural. Where is the energy to be found for an act which has nothing to counter-balance it? The energy has to come from elsewhere' (Weil (1963), 10). This difference in the overall character of their mystical commitments feeds through into variations in their attitudes towards the void.

The concept itself is familiar from literature on religious mysticism and particularly, as Murdoch points out, from the idea of the dark night of the soul in St John of the Cross.[9] For the latter, the devotee begins with a confidence that God is real and that they are loved by God. However, during a crisis of faith, during the dark night, the devotee's sense of the presence of God may disappear. Even worse, it may seem that God has withdrawn his love. And what then must the devotee think of their own worth? But for St John, such a void is itself the operation of grace. The devotee is given a chance to empty themselves of their accumulated egocentric self-regard, a chance to acquire humility and (more or less passively) to accept whatever God wishes. The void is, thus, seen as a pathway to a deeper and truer love. This is a rather different and spiritual picture of a new love succeeding an old one, a picture in which it is the new love which counts as love of the best sort.

It is also an uplifting, hopeful picture of the void as a gift. Even so, some gifts may be rejected. In a dark and demotivated state, the sense of loss may be unbearable. The devotee may fill up the void with all sorts of consoling fantasies. Weil notes this danger. 'Every void (not accepted) produces hatred, sourness, bitterness, spite' (*ibid.*, 16). Murdoch speaks similarly of a void which 'may be felt as the senselessness of everything, the loss of any discrimination or sense of value, a giddy feeling of total relativism, even a cynical hatred of virtue and the virtuous: a total absence of love' (Murdoch (1992), 503). For both, the danger of fantasy as a response to the void is real. Again, for both, love offers those who experience the void in the form of a spiritual crisis an alternative to such temptation. And while such love can be the love of God (for Weil it ultimately *has* to be a love for God) there is, on Murdoch's approach, no such ready-made restriction.[10] As elsewhere, the intentionality of Murdochian love can vary. However, if Murdoch is right and spiritual crisis and bereavement are parallel cases, we may expect to find that love of some sort can also offer those who suffer, or have suffered from bereavement, a suitable way back to a fuller sense of reality.

One concern which might lead us to question this possibility is the unusually broad span which is given to the concept of the void by Murdoch. In some places Murdoch seeks to avoid any reductionist account by rejecting the idea that the void is just one thing. 'Any reflection shows that one is dealing, at a roughly recognizable level, with a lot of different states' (*ibid.*, 500). Similarly, 'The idea of void or emptiness, thought of in a moral and religious context, can be seen in various ways and can do various kinds of work' (*ibid.*, 504). But this acceptance of the diversity of what is involved in experiences of the void may lead us to challenge

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the idea that anything holds such experiences together as instances of one thing, apart from their unpleasantness or their causal history, as responses to loss. More narrowly, it may lead us to question the parallel between spiritual crisis and bereavement. And what is at issue here may be more than the legitimacy of a comparison, although that too is at stake. The temptation to assimilate the void to something more familiar may spill over into a kind of moral failing. It might be argued that only a spiritually adept agent such as Weil, or Murdoch or John of the Cross, can comment justly upon it. In which case, what follows may be not only misleading but morally reprehensible.[11] However, the inclusive approach which is shared by Weil and Murdoch undercuts this concern and licenses ordinary flawed agents to comment upon the void because it is a tract of experience 'such as many or most human beings have met with' (*ibid.*, 498).

In spite of the many differences that there may be between these two tracts of experience there is at least one reason for accepting the Weil/Murdoch attempt to bring grief and spiritual crisis together. And that is the apparent appropriateness of appealing to a language of loss and of grief in order to describe the loss of a devout faith or the loss of God's love. For the genuine devotee (the priest, nun, or monk) it is *as if* their God has died or (even worse, the St John of the Cross scenario) *as if* God persists but his love for the devotee has died. In the face of such loss, just as in the case of the loss of a partner or spouse, just as in the case of Lisa Gherardini's loss of her husband Francesco, moral courage may be required in order to face the dark times that lie ahead.

The Time of the Angels

Murdoch's novel *The Time of the Angels* (1966) deals with a failure of such courage in the face of a spiritual crisis, a failure to allow love (of God, of Good, or of particular other beings) to open up a life. Set in a fog-covered post-war London, the characters are persistently trying to deal with a reclusive priest, Carel Fisher, who lives with his family in a house that was once attached to a church. The church has been bombed and destroyed. But the house still stands, as a remnant. Like the house, Carel's religious affiliation is also a remnant. While his estranged brother is attempting to write a broadly Kantian text, in the analytic style, explaining the reality of goodness in a world without God, Carel's own sense of the reality of goodness is utterly bound up with a belief in God which he can no longer sustain (Murdoch (1966), 187). To underscore the reality of his loss, Murdoch gives Carel two daughters who have, in a quasi-existentialist manner, decided that God, Evil, and morality are all made up, but who have then 'dropped the subject forever' (*ibid.*, 46). Theirs is a false disappearance of illumination, a false loss of a sense of Good and Evil. Carel's loss is the real thing.

It is also combined with, and no doubt partly brought on by, the death of his wife at some time in the past, a wife to whom he had been unfaithful on more than

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one occasion. Murdoch's discernment of a connection between spiritual crisis and actual grief is again in evidence here. Following his wife's death and his loss of God, Carel's sense of the reality of goodness has grown dim. There is darkness at the centre of his life; the void is the place where he lives and moves and has his being. Optimistically, Carel's Bishop describes this as a familiar stage of religious growth that all intelligent clerics have to go through, ' "Meek darkness be thy mirror". Those who have come nearest to God have spoken of blackness, even of emptiness. Symbolism falls away. There is a profound truth here. Obedience to God must be an obedience without trimmings, an obedience, in a sense, for nothing' (*ibid*., 102). The Bishop's hope is that 'faith' will ultimately help Carel, just as it assists and guides the rest of us (*ibid*., 103). However, this hope is misplaced. Carel cannot tolerate, live with, and endure the void. Instead, in line with the warnings of Weil and Murdoch he succumbs to the temptation to fill it with various falsehoods and delusions.

His longstanding liturgical quirks and idiosyncrasies, which suited him so well to his previous rural parish, have (in a grimmer urban setting) grown into a cynical way of mocking the perceived shallowness and falsity of religious belief and practice. At one point Carel even toys with a replacement religiosity of his own devising, and when an opportune moment arises, he carries out his own ritual, an improvised form of black mass which ends in sex with his housekeeper (*ibid*., 167–169). He also takes steps to ensure that those around him, the other occupants of the house, are secluded from the world and are progressively subjected to his dark spiritualized control. In such an enclosed, courtly realm, with its restricted sexual opportunities, Carel seeks further solace in an incestuous relationship with his physically afflicted and dependent daughter who is supposedly his brother's daughter but is actually Carel's own unacknowledged child. These circumstances help to rule out any likelihood that he might be redeemed by or reawakened to the world and to a sense of the reality of goodness, through a guilt-free love for some tangible, flesh-and-blood person: either of his daughters, his estranged brother, or the housekeeper he has seduced (virtually enslaved) but from whom he now withdraws. The only sign of love is Carel's eventual and cruel distancing from his acknowledged daughter, who is threatened with exile and is pressurized by him to leave and to find an ordinary life. Reflecting upon this threat we may sense that perhaps Carel does have at least some residual connection to the Good. Perhaps he does not want to poison her existence. But he also does not want to be inconvenienced by her or to have her intrude upon his private reconstruction of the world. Ultimately, when knowledge of his incestuous seduction leaks out, when the world finally threatens to break in upon him, Carel takes his own life and the London fog lifts.

These are events of an extreme sort, *too* extreme perhaps to throw light on everyday loss. But when dealing with the void, Murdoch is at pains to stress that 'What I refer to here is something extreme: the pain, and the evil, which occasions

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conditions of desolation' (Murdoch (1992), 498). Nonetheless, even while instructive, there are so many terrible and interesting moral failures in Carel's life, in his response to the experience of bereavement combined with his loss of faith, that it may seem difficult to identify any particular failing as especially important. It is difficult to know where to begin. One option would be to see Carel's story in the light of Weil's view of the void, a view which dovetails well with the publicly stated position of the Bishop. We might then suggest that Carel has squandered an opportunity for spiritual growth. He ought to have accepted a void which God's grace might enter and fill. 'Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void' (Weil (1963), 10).

But this is Weil's view and not necessarily Murdoch's. What makes it difficult to square with the latter is that it brings a robust conception of grace into the picture: grace as a special and, in some complex sense, supernatural gift. Appeal to such grace may perhaps perform a useful role in combating the dangerous image of ourselves suffering heroically, an image which could deliver us back to egocentricity.[12] Even so, it involves an account of grace which Murdoch cannot readily endorse. While 'The concept of grace can be readily secularized' (Murdoch (2001), 62) and 'There is a place in Platonism for a doctrine of grace' (Murdoch (1992), 83) the concept of grace *cannot* be secularized by her in a way which conflicts with her suspicions about appeals to the supernatural or with her broader moral psychology which constrains the possibility of a sudden, unprepared, change of character. For Murdoch, some agents may discover a previously unsuspected resilience. They may experience a mysterious and unexpected reward for their efforts, if only in the form of 'help from the unconscious mind' (*ibid.*, 332). Moreover, 'Experiences of the void can also, sometimes perhaps "in the long run" when they have been lived with, be put to more positive and creative use, or as one may put it, assume a different meaning. The "dead" void may become "live", or "magnetic" ' (*ibid.*, 504).

But some agents may not be in a position to experience the 'grace that comes through faith' (*ibid.*, 25). Writing directly about the void Murdoch remarks: 'Yes, it is possible, but very often just too difficult, to "learn" from deep despair' (*ibid.*, 502). While one reason for this may be the overwhelming nature of the despair in question, another reason has more to do with the character of the agent and the way in which it has made grace (in Murdoch's sense) inaccessible. Addressing Anselm's idea that *anyone*, even the most undeserving, may be saved by God's grace, Murdoch draws a line. 'It is of course a part of Anselm's faith that an omnipotent God can save any creature, that all, however benighted, may receive grace, distinguish right and wrong, have intimations of light, pray to God and experience his presence.' But for Murdoch 'In this respect Anselm is closer to Kant than to Plato', and the reason why this is the case concerns Platonic (and also Murdochian) restrictions upon character change (*ibid.*, 403).

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'Action is an occasion for grace, or for its opposite.' However, 'Action also tends to confirm, for better or worse, the background of attachment from which it issues' (Murdoch (2001), 69). Murdoch's point here is a restatement of her familiar strictures about vision and choice: we can only choose what we can see as a viable option, and the quality of our moral vision will itself be shaped by our character and by our desires.[13]

What this leads me to suggest is that, from a Murdochian point of view, Carel's core failure in *The Time of the Angels* is twofold. On the one hand, there is his failure of courage, a failure to endure or accept the void and to do so without embracing fantasies and *without harming himself or others*. But there is also his failure to enter the void in the right kind of condition with the right background of attachment. And it is this failure which makes the absence of grace and his subsequent failure of courage almost unavoidable. For Murdoch, 'some sort of moral activity' is required of the void-stricken moral agent (Murdoch (1992), 503). However, the possibility of such activity depends upon the agent's prior constitution. It cannot issue from the will of God (an unavailable resource) nor can it simply be chosen by an act of will by the agent who finds himself in the midst of loss. And this is where Carel comes unstuck.

When he comes to know the void, to touch and experience the void, Carel is already an agent who is conspicuously lacking in a broad range of virtues.[14] (For which, Murdoch's regular suggestions of humility, truthfulness and patience look like good candidates.) Carel's recent betrayal of his unacknowledged daughter, by taking her to bed, is the latest in a long series of betrayals that have already done a good deal to remove the sense of goodness from his life. When he experiences his own personal dark night of the soul, he is already so compromised that any attempt to treat the void as an opportunity offered by grace would involve a radical failure of humility, a failure to act at his own moral level. I am tempted to say that while some other, and more virtuous, agent might take the Weil and St John option, what Carel needs to accept or (more actively) aim for is not a special and deep spiritual insight but rather *ordinariness* and a kind of spiritual insight which is compatible with the latter.[15] But the ordinariness in question is *not* the same as the insight of the spiritual adept who sees and experiences ordinary things in a dramatically new way (another image from St John). Rather, it is *ordinariness* simpliciter. Perhaps even this may be beyond him, but it is at least closer to Carel's own level of moral-spiritual competence.

There are persistent hints towards the end of *The Time of the Angels* which point in this same direction. Carel's brother almost shouts at him 'there are facts, real things, people love each other, it is just so' (Murdoch (1966), 187). The handyman and caretaker of the house, a saddened and world-weary man who briefly finds the beginnings of love with the abused housekeeper, recognizes that he may yet have some happiness: 'if he tried he could do ordinary things at last' (*ibid.*, 215). When Carel takes his life, his acknowledged daughter feels

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herself to be 'divided forever from the world of simple innocent things, thoughtless affections, and free happy laughter and dogs passing by in the street' (*ibid.*, 239). When his brother, Marcus, encounters an old love at the end of the book he glimpses what cannot easily be placed within the philosophical text which he is struggling to write, i.e. the possibility of goodness and contentment of an ordinary familiar sort: 'With her the ordinary world seemed to resume its power, the world where human beings make simple claims on one another and where things are small and odd and touching and funny' (*ibid.*, 248–249).

Love and the possibility of goodness

Suppose, in the light of Carel's tale, we accept that love has an important role to play in cases of spiritual crisis and that where the agent in question enters such a crisis in too compromised a condition the best available love may be an everyday and familiar love for other persons. Perhaps, with Weil, we might regard this as itself, indirectly, a form of love for God, or, following Murdoch, we might dispense with any such a view. Either way, it will still not be obvious that we should *also* accept that love is frequently required to play the same spiritually therapeutic role in the case of actual bereavement when the latter is experienced by agents who lead morally unambitious lives and who may therefore be less inclined than Carel to dramatize their circumstances.

Against this, we may turn to a claim which is basic to Murdoch's position: we are *all* regularly inclined towards egocentric dramatization. On occasions, we would *all* prefer to suffer, and to picture ourselves as suffering, rather than feel unimportant. As a generalization about moral psychology, this claim sounds plausible. It may even be true. But exactly what sorts of egocentric fantasy do ordinary bereaved agents resist when they (or rather we) remain open to love after the loss of another? Setting aside the peculiar spiritualized fantasies that Carel embraces, there are simpler forms of fantasy that any one of us may need to resist when we lose those we love. There is the familiar fantasy of enjoying not just autonomy (something that we all have) but a further and special kind of autonomy and self-sufficiency which sets us apart from the need for human contact and for a genuine *sharing* of our lives (whatever form such sharing may take). Such a need is deep. It is a mistake, a fantasy, delusional, to refuse to acknowledge that it is our own need, to acknowledge that we too crave, desire, and need affection and companionship. But to say this is to accept that I, you, and Lisa Gherardini may at some time in our lives need some form of love, and perhaps even *love after love*. The recognition of this need again connects the familiar experience of grief with the latter stages of the experience of the void as it is described in the tradition of St John of the Cross, as a time when the spiritual pilgrim comes to recognize their lack of self-sufficiency. However, none of this entails that a love which helps to end

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the void can ever be regarded by a loving agent as merely an instrumental means to secure psychological health.

If we accept, as Murdoch does seem to suggest, that embracing a new love can be a way to resist fantasy and a way to reconnect with the possibility of finding goodness in simple and ordinary things, a niggling unease may nonetheless persist. Perhaps we might accept that there is a need for openness to love but that this is true only with respect to a range of socially approved forms of love: familial love, the love of one's neighbour, or other kinds of love which can exist without remarriage or any intimate erotic entanglement. And here we may reflect that Lisa Gherardini did not retire from familial connection when she entered the convent; she went there to join one of her daughters. But I am inclined to ask just why any particular kind of love should be excluded as inappropriate unless that kind of love itself happens to be disreputable, which, on Murdoch's account, an intimate, personal, and indeed sexualized love is not. If we accept Murdoch's overall position we will then have no obvious and good justification for constraining openness in a way which excludes *love after love* as a morally defensible pathway out of grief.[16]

Of course, it may be tempting to say 'so much the worse for Murdoch's position'. And perhaps we might then return to some previous concern that has perhaps been given insufficient attention. There may, for example, be a good deal more to be said about the fear of betrayal. Perhaps the children of the bereaved who remain hostile to the prospect of any new and unsanctioned love may have a point. They may be rather selfish, angry, or jealous, but their suspicion about their parent's new love may nonetheless track some real problem with the love, a difficult-to-articulate problem of a sort which is not fully answered by appeals to the way in which a new love can help combat fantasy. But against this, it may be worth reflecting upon the awfulness of grief and upon what we desire, and ought to desire, for those we love, and especially for those we love in an intimate manner. Unless we are already hopelessly mired in egocentricity, we will *and ought to* hope that their future grief should, where possible, be curtailed. We should and ought to hope that the person we love will, at some point, find a way to return to the world and to an appreciation of ordinary simple things, to the possibility of goodness and to the possibility of some kind of happiness (again, however wounded and compromised). While the prospect of a beloved partner going on to share their life with someone else is, no doubt, a source of jealousy, the alternative of their enduring grief is too terrible to contemplate. We may, in the light of this, be tempted to accept that those we love can legitimately do what we must forbid ourselves to do. However, it is not obvious that such an asymmetry between the self and the other is appropriate in this context.[17] If, for the sake of those we love, we set aside the idea that acceptance of a new love *must* involve something akin to infidelity or betrayal, it may be hard to put it back in place as a justifying reason for our own personal denial. Doing so could seem to suggest that we hold

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ourselves to higher standards. Licensing others to have an openness to love that we deny to ourselves may sound suspiciously like an arrogant presupposition.

So where does this leave us? As a counter-picture to any representation of *love after love* as egocentrically suspect, as a love to which we should not be open, it leaves us with a plausible Murdochian picture of such love as a way of resisting the temptation towards a variety of fantasies which, although diverse, share a common origin in our egocentricity. And, as a counter-picture to the representation of such love as akin to betrayal, it leaves us with the idea that moral courage may at least sometimes be required to recognize that we too are not self-sufficient beings and that we ought to remain open to love even though we may be unable to dictate the form that an available love may take and unable, also, to dictate when it may begin to grow. Those who go thus far may also regard a genuine *love after love* as something which involves the exercise of the imagination, the seeing of possibilities for contentment that may take effort to recognize as genuine, as something that may be made real.[18] But courage of this Murdochian sort may be said to involve activity rather than passivity. Its great enemy may therefore be *accidie*, moral-spiritual exhaustion and the feeling that the effort which is required to go on and remain open to love is just too great.[19] But unlike the moral courage that we encounter in texts (such as existentialist texts) where *finding a way to go on* is itself the final accomplishment, there is in Murdoch a further prospect that courage and love may cooperate to reconnect us with the Good and, less figuratively, to bring a sense of the possibility of goodness back to our world.[20]

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Notes

1. The summary here draws upon Murdoch (2001). For a detailed exploration of her position see Antonaccio (2000).
2. Generally, those who hold that there are 'reasons' for love require some restriction of love's intentionality, and the form that this has taken in some cases, notably Velleman (1999), Kolodny (2003), and Helm (2010), is the view that love is a person-focused emotion. Jollimore (2011) is slightly more cautious but leans clearly in this direction.
3. For vision-based accounts of love which stress the recognition of value and also claim a strong connection to Murdoch see Velleman (1999) and, somewhat more convincingly, Jollimore (2011).
4. Mulhall (2006), 32–33, takes Murdoch's comments about the absolute absence of the Good literally, but in the light of her views on the *necessity* of the Good we may be inclined towards a reading which does not involve such an obvious inconsistency.
5. Parfit (1992), 295, invokes a duplication scenario in which a love one is replaced but is unusual in this respect unusual. Frankfurt (2004), Velleman (1999), Kolodny (2003), and Helm (2010) all regard an attitude towards the other as irreplaceable, as basic to loving.
6. Frankfurt (2004) and Helm (2010) both emphasize identification with the other as integral to love.
7. For the importance of openness to love, see Milligan (2013).
8. See Murdoch (2001), 93, for an example of the cooperation of wisdom and love.
9. Some broader connections between Murdoch and St John emerge if the latter is read in a strongly neo-Platonist manner as in Maio (1973).
10. Weil (1951) persistently advances the Kierkegaardian view that love for persons is indirectly love for God.
11. This unsettling point, about the difficulties of ordinary agents addressing the question of the void, was suggested to me by Marina Barabas.
12. For Murdoch on the dangers of spiritualized sadomasochism, see Milligan (2010).
13. This is one of the core themes of her 'Vision and choice in morality' (1956) reprinted in Murdoch (1999).
14. See Murdoch (1992) 500, for the metaphor of 'touch' in relation to the void.
15. See Soskice (1992) for Murdoch's way of bringing spirituality into everyday contexts.
16. Murdoch does not, for example, uphold some rigid *eros*/*agape* distinction. Against the latter as a plausible way of making sense of Christian love see Benedict (2006), 24, and Milligan (2011), 65–72.
17. For self–other asymmetry as a regular feature of ethics, see Slote (1984).
18. For an overview of Murdoch on imagination see Altorf (2007), although the latter locates Murdoch primarily in relation to the continental tradition. For an attempt to connect courage and imagination, see Murdoch (1992), 86, 215, 232–233, 234, 333.
19. For the classic account of *accidie* see St Thomas' *Summa Theologica* II.ii.35.
20. Earlier versions of this article were delivered at the 3rd Colloquium on the Modalities of the Good, Universitas Carolina, Prague, August 2012 and at the 53rd Christian Philosophy Conference at St John's Seminary, Wonersh, in January 2013. Thanks go to the organizers of both events and to both Robin Le Poidevin and the anonymous *Religious Studies* reviewer for improving comments, particularly on St John of the Cross.

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