

## Murdochian humility

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**Abstract:** The following paper sets out a view of humility that is derived from Iris Murdoch but which differs from a strict Murdochian approach in two important respects. Firstly, any association with self-abnegation is removed; and secondly, the value of a limited form of pride (recognition pride) is affirmed. The paper is nevertheless strongly continuous with her work, in the sense that it builds upon her rejection of universalizability on the specific grounds that we have varying moral competences. A liberal commitment to equality should not be allowed to spill out of the political domain. We are not all equal when it comes to the demands of morality. Humility is treated as a just discernment of our own limited moral competences. As such, it is a recognition of our particularity and not a form of radical self-effacement.

### **A tension in Murdoch's view of humility**

Iris Murdoch advances an ideal of moral progress. Such progress involves an improvement of vision (where vision is a metaphor for any kind of discernment of the world). By *seeing* the world more justly, we advance, and we do so even when no alteration in behavioural patterns takes place. Progress involves working our way into a view of others, and of states of affairs, that is less obscured by egocentricity than our initial or default moral condition. That is to say, moral advance is cognitive advance.

When it comes to specifying the results of progress, Iris Murdoch is guarded. She favours exemplars of virtuous persons over any straightforward enumeration of their virtues. As an early exemplar Murdoch appeals to unselfish mothers of large families. This appeal is later replaced by an appeal to aunts and sits alongside less homely citations of Socrates, Jesus, and certain saints.<sup>1</sup> These plausible candidates for goodness partake of the indefinability of the unitary and transcendent Good which they imperfectly instantiate. Goodness, in Murdoch's sense, cannot be adequately represented in a straightforward, ontologically unambiguous manner. We are *a long way* from perfection. We are pilgrims attempting to move *towards* an ideal that we can never fully realize or understand. These metaphors

of movement and of distance are (in part) Murdoch's way of stressing a commitment to moral gradualism. There is a long way to go, hence we cannot suddenly leap into the end state, nor even imagine, in adequate terms, what it would be like. Progress requires industry and effort; we must not mistake our own *moral level* and attempt to do too much too quickly.

At the risk of introducing the vexed question of how Murdoch's novels relate to her philosophical texts, a quote from *The Bell* may help us to understand her view that patience is necessary.

We must not, for instance, perform an act because abstractly it seems to be a good act if in fact it is so contrary to our instinctive apprehensions of spiritual reality that we cannot carry it through .... We must not arrogate to ourselves actions which belong to those whose spiritual vision is higher or other than ours. From this attempt, only disaster will come.<sup>2</sup>

Moral progress is possible, but advance will always be piecemeal and constrained by the moral pilgrim's prior (unavoidably flawed) quality of discernment.

The more advanced the pilgrims, the better their quality of moral vision and the more humble they will be. (These are not two separate achievements.) 'The good man is humble, he is very unlike the big neo-Kantian Lucifer' (the one who would rather rule in Hell than serve anywhere else). 'Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it shines.' Any name for the virtues other than Good will be a 'partial name'. Although Murdoch rules out a simple enumeration of the good pilgrim's virtues, *humble* is nevertheless treated as a special case. It is less misleading than either *courageous* or *free*. 'The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are ... although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good.'<sup>3</sup>

Her good pilgrim, on such a description, may seem rather more saintly than heroic but, given that Murdoch connects humility with courage, he will perhaps be a little of both. It is 'the humble man' who 'perceives the distance between suffering and death', and for Murdoch this is a deep moral requirement.<sup>4</sup> To value self too much is to be blind to mortality and vice versa. Death is the great teacher and what it teaches the pilgrim is his unimportance.

On this theme of personal mortality, Murdoch's philosophical views are reminiscent of Simone Weil. It is 'an illusion' for Weil 'that there is some positive value in my own existence', something that might stand resolutely in the way of treating moral pilgrimage as a metaphorical death or unselfing.<sup>5</sup> Some allowance may be made here for rhetoric and for discontinuities between Murdoch and Weil. Murdoch works with Weil's problematic legacy, she does not simply translate the latter. For Weil, 'Humility consists in knowing that in what we call "I" there is no source of energy by which we can rise.'<sup>6</sup> And, on this particular theme, there *is* some continuity. Murdoch's humble man will be of a like mind.

‘Ultimately we are nothing’, remarks Murdoch, ‘[a] reminder of our mortality, a recognition of contingency, must at least make us humble’.<sup>7</sup> For both Weil and Murdoch personal nothingness and humility, in some difficult-to-understand sense, go together.

Nevertheless, there are also differences, grounds for proceeding with caution. Weil lacks anything remotely akin to Murdoch’s life-affirming corpus of novels. But even when we restrict our view and attend only to the philosophical texts there are still important discontinuities. For Murdoch, ‘There is nothing that cannot be broken or taken away from us.’<sup>8</sup> For Weil, we seem to be *nothing* to begin with. If we ignore such fault lines and read Murdoch in accordance with her more Weilian formulations, problems quickly emerge. How can any ethic that involves a self-abnegating view of humility connect moral vision with moral progress? Insofar as moral progress is possible it will make sense to speak of *advanced* pilgrims as *both* humble and discerning. But if humility involves a failure to see this accomplishment then it involves a movement into self-blindness (a view once suggested by Luther).<sup>9</sup> On such a reading (one-sided and excessively Weilian though it may be), Murdochian humility begins to look like what Julia Driver calls a ‘virtue of ignorance’, an epistemic deficit that is a moral plus.<sup>10</sup>

Treating humility in this way is not an option that is open to Murdoch. Whatever else she may say, Murdoch is clear that ‘Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice.’<sup>11</sup> Humility is ‘selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues’.<sup>12</sup> As *respect for reality*, i.e. a commitment to truthfulness, it cannot involve embracing an epistemic deficit simply because that deficit happens to be functional in some way or other.

While a reading that plays upon Murdoch’s more Weilian formulations runs into this problem, a reading that ignores them may plausibly be charged with a lack of textual fidelity. There may be some consistent resolution of this tension (I am not suggesting otherwise) but it is not obvious that such resolution is possible. Nor, given Murdoch’s explicit affirmation of a practical mysticism, is it entirely obvious that she views comprehensive consistency as morally preferable to instructive tensions. Resolving tensions is sometimes *not* the Murdochian way to go.

What follows will, however, propose a way out of this tension: an abandonment of the overtones of a self-blind abnegation in order to preserve a role for a discerning humility at the heart of the moral life. By making this move, the resulting account of humility abandons any claim to being *strictly* Murdochian, but it is still Murdochian *in the more limited sense* that the influence of her work is continuously in play. Exactly how Murdochian the result is taken to be will depend upon how her texts are read (a matter on which sudden agreement is not to be expected).

### Recognition pride and self-sufficient pride

I will take it as uncontroversial that, for Murdoch, humility operates as a break upon pride. This is one source of suspicion about it. It may seem (as it did to Hume) *too much* of a break on pride, or (in his preferred terminology) too ‘monkish’ a virtue to be valued.<sup>13</sup> Pride is important to us: pride in our accomplishments and in those of our nearest and dearest. The father who tells his daughter on her graduation day that it is nothing special to have a degree is surely missing something. If we allow for some form of first/third person asymmetry here, one of these individuals should surely feel a sense of pride. Even if we were to frown upon the daughter’s pride, the pride of the father would still be connected to his valuing of her and recognition of her (real) achievement.

Similarly, pride seems to play a positive cognitive role when appealed to by those who are discriminated against and who, in response, call for respect. Accordingly, I will depart from Murdoch by accepting that an appropriate form of pride is a moral (and even political) desideratum. This is not to abandon *any* sense that pride is a dangerous response but rather to open up a way of specifying where this danger is greatest and where the risk is worth taking. To do this I will introduce a terminology of ‘recognition pride’ and ‘self-sufficient pride’. By ‘recognition pride’, I will mean an emotional recognition of accomplishment. As such, it will be an inappropriate response, a cognitive failure, when there is no accomplishment to recognize. By ‘self-sufficient pride’, I will mean haughtiness or conceit, i.e. a response that is *always* out of place, *always* a moral-cognitive failure.

To draw the same kind of distinction, Gabriele Taylor points towards Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Coriolanus in Shakespeare’s eponymous play. In both cases, a self-sufficient pride is plausibly depicted as directing attention away from real accomplishments. Both of these characters are embarrassed by any fuss about their sacrifices. Their sense of what matters, of what they have to be proud about and should be recognized for, is *breeding* or *position in society*.<sup>14</sup> As these are largely fortuitous and involve no genuine accomplishment, I will take it that if humility reins in pride *of this sort* then it is a good thing that it does so. But if we say that Darcy and Coriolanus are lacking in humility this need not imply that they would do better to act like Uriah Heep. Humility, of any sort worth having, will not amount to humiliation.

Unlike humiliation, humility is the kind of thing that it makes sense to aspire to. Attributions of humility presuppose that it is a good thing. We only make them in the case of those who have accomplishments. In Murdoch’s case, it is her good pilgrim who succeeds in becoming humble. Similarly, when someone who is a liar, cheat, and thief says ‘I am a liar, cheat, and thief’, he may be regarded as brazen or penitent, but not humble. It is only after he has left his life

of wrongdoing behind that we may speak about his newfound humility. Nor would we be inclined to attribute humility (in any straightforward sense) to someone who felt that, in spite of his best efforts, he was not as good a torturer or liar as he ought to be. (Perhaps we might say that he lacked confidence in his vice.) A particular character trait constitutes humility only in the presence of other character traits of an appropriate kind.<sup>15</sup>

When we say that men or women are humble, not in regard to this or that, but quite generally (perhaps we might say that they are ‘very humble’), part of what we are implying is that they have real accomplishments *about which* they are humble. They do not brag or puff themselves up as others (or we) might do in the same circumstances. Leaving aside the question of whether the following ascriptions are correct, the sorts of people whose exceptional humility is plausibly commented upon are figures such as Nelson Mandela or Mother Theresa, although perhaps not both. In either case, someone might claim that this individual has done great things and still kept his or her feet on the ground. And while we might disagree with the assessment of the individual concerned, we would have no difficulty in making sense of why it was made.

Humility, on this view, is *discernment that avoids overestimation*. This is close to the view articulated by Thomas Aquinas in response to a real or imagined monastic tendency to conflate humility with humiliation: ‘the proper role of humility is for a man to restrain himself from being carried away by craving things above him. For this it is necessary that *he should recognize where his abilities fail to match that which surpasses them*’. Progress into this sort of humility need not involve any advance into flawed vision. It requires only ‘not reckoning ourselves to be above what we are’.<sup>16</sup> Articulated in terms of the distinction given between different forms of pride, we may say that humility in this sense is a form of temperance or self-control which militates against recognition pride only on occasions when it is misplaced and against self-sufficient pride at all times.

Having formulated matters in these un-Murdochian terms, appeal can now be made to Murdoch’s insistence upon the moral dangers of overestimation.

### **The particularity of moral competence**

If it turns out to be an *accomplishment* to be of good character then, according to Murdoch, we are no longer down on all fours with each other; we do not all have the same moral abilities. Once we accept an idea of moral *progress*, ‘we cannot be as democratic or egalitarian as we might like’, although we may still separate out a hierarchy of competence from any form of ossified elitism.<sup>17</sup> Her position is based upon the claim that liberal political commitment has been allowed to distort our concept of the self. This is not to suggest that Murdoch is hostile towards liberalism *per se*; she is clearly a liberal of sorts. Her concern

is rather that liberal political concepts have spilled over into a context where they are no longer at home.

The upshot of this misapplication is: (1) that freedom is sometimes seen as an absence of any form of constraint; and (2) moral competence is seen as a universal default condition rather than something that varies from person to person. While (1) is no longer quite so fashionable as it once was, (2) retains its appeal. A symptom of this is the way in which contemporary virtue ethicists embrace a mimetic formula which is (rather loosely) derived from Aristotle: *the right thing to do is whatever a virtuous agent would do in any given situation*.<sup>18</sup> Murdoch, rather unkindly parodies any such view, '*imitatio Christi* does not work simply by suggesting that everyone should give away his money, or wondering how Christ would vote'.<sup>19</sup> Acting as if we were ideally virtuous agents would be a perilous business.

Any such mimetic formula won't work for Murdoch for two reasons. Firstly, she treats goodness as in some ultimate sense beyond *any* conceivable discernment. Hence, it cannot be defined in terms of what even the best sort of pilgrim would see. She is not a response-dependence theorist but has a more 'mystical' conception of Good. Secondly, hers is a practical mysticism, and when it comes to practical deliberation about action, such deliberation may occur in contexts where virtuous agents might undertake commitments that *they* have a reasonable chance of carrying through but which could turn out to be too demanding for lesser mortals.<sup>20</sup>

For an example of this danger, consider the following scenario depicted by Murdoch in *The Bell*. This novel is set in a small lay religious community attached to Imber Abbey. In quick succession, the leader of the community, Michael Meade, and a *no-nonsense* member of the community, James Tayper-Pace, deliver sermons on the theme of 'Be ye therefore perfect'. For James, there are things that we must do and things that we must avoid, 'God has not left us without guidance'. This guidance is straightforward,

... the relief of suffering is enjoined, adultery is forbidden, sodomy is forbidden. And I feel that we ought to think quite simply of these matters, thus: truth is not glorious, it is just enjoined; sodomy is not disgusting, it is just forbidden. These are rules by which we should freely judge ourselves and others too.<sup>21</sup>

For Michael Meade, by contrast, we cannot suddenly leap into a perfect uniform obedience. Our personal best may be a second-best informed by an ideal of perfection that we must not imagine to be within our grasp: 'We must not arrogate to ourselves actions which belong to those whose spiritual vision is higher or other than ours. From this attempt, only disaster will come.'<sup>22</sup> In other words, the rules for practical deliberation are not universal. Practical reason must involve a greater attention to particularity than James allows when he says 'As sinners we are much the same and our sin is essentially something tedious, something to be shunned and not something to be investigated.' For

Michael, by contrast, 'The chief requirement of the good life ... is that one should have some conception of one's capacities. One must know oneself sufficiently to know what is the next thing.'

Here, we might pause to wonder about just how robust and explicit such self-knowledge would have to be. It is tempting (given Murdoch's rejection of the finely grained self-knowledge aspired to by psychoanalysis) to imagine that it can involve only *knowing how* to go on. And this does seem to be what Michael's sermon suggests. We need to know 'what is the next thing'. However, it is not obvious that moral progress *could* take place without a more reflective *knowing-that*. Sometimes *knowing-how* breaks down and we have cause for reflection about just why it has gone wrong. To take a well-known Murdochian scenario, it may be necessary for a mother-in-law, M, who is aware that she is going astray, to *recognize that* she is jealous of her daughter-in-law, D, in order to *know how* to go on in a more appropriate manner. M's progress requires her to be 'capable of self-criticism'. What she tells herself is that 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish, I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.'<sup>23</sup> Given the plausibility of this Murdochian scenario, there may be limits about how far back we can pare Murdoch's own minimal requirement for self-knowledge. The kind of moral progress that interests her may require more robust forms of self-knowledge than her texts sometimes imply.

A central strand of the storyline in *The Bell* deals with the way that Michael Meade conspicuously fails to follow his own advice. He tries to act above his moral competences. He is a man who has left teaching, having been hounded out after unfair allegations of impropriety with a male pupil. In retrospect he sees that he did not defend himself properly, in part because of guilt about homosexuality. (This is very much a novel of the 1950s.) He was unwise, but nothing worse. He wants to put the record straight and seems to have a chance to do just that when the former pupil turns up at his religious community burdened with severe problems (too much guilt for getting Michael sacked; too much alcohol; too little human contact; too much and too little of everything). In spite of practical advice to send him away to someone who can help, Michael feels an obligation to sort matters out himself precisely because of his own poor track record of relations with the young man. He takes on more than he can cope with, arrogates to himself actions that are *above* his abilities. Disastrous consequences ensue.

Here, we can see the way in which the idea of a hierarchy of moral competence (or 'capabilities') works. Following Murdoch, I want to suggest that we should not model morality on the egalitarianism of liberal politics but (with some qualification) upon the differing competences of a *techne* or skill (although this metaphor has some limitations).<sup>24</sup> Consider the skill involved in mountain-climbing. It would, in many cases (not all) be both dangerous and unproductive

for an inexperienced climber to be guided by asking: 'What would my mountaineering hero do now, what holds would he use, what route would he take?' It will be less dangerous if she focuses upon *how to go on* in a way that is currently within her grasp. She might stretch herself a bit, but not too much.

The upshot of this approach is that the right thing to do will *not* be whatever a virtuous or ideally virtuous person would do in the same situation (as long as we assume that the specification of *the situation* is independent of details about the agent's own character). In support of such a competence-based view, I will appeal to the example of self-criticism by saints and heroes. Such criticism does not automatically entail any denigration of others. Such individuals characteristically do not follow the bluff, no-nonsense James Tapper-Pace's use of the same rules to judge self and others. As sinners we are not all the same. St Francis reproached himself for failing previously to preach to the birds; he did not reproach others for this fault. Oskar Schindler, a more heroic than saintly figure, is sometimes depicted as having reproached himself for not saving more lives, yet he found excuses for others, sometimes excessively so, but his appreciation of differing requirements was not radically misplaced.

Part of the moral-cognitive accomplishment of these individuals, part of what they rightly discern, is that others are not failing in relation to the same requirements.<sup>25</sup> Similar actions should be seen as required of agents in similar situations only insofar as they have similar moral competences of a relevant sort. Humility, as I have tried to articulate it, is a matter of *the just discernment of our own particular level of competence*. It is a matter of not overestimating, not overreaching, not making the wrong sort of comparisons, not judging by the wrong standards.

### **Achievement and demandingness**

Given that a liberal political standpoint is broadly the right one to have (a view which Murdoch holds and which again I share) it may be objected that the above Murdochian conception of humility is altogether too hierarchical and lacking in egalitarian commitment. Morality should, after all, be appropriate to our world and not to an illiberal and pre-democratic world well lost. Two considerations may help to blunt any such criticism even if they do not remove all legitimate concern. Firstly, to side with Murdoch on this matter is not to compromise liberal *political* commitment. There is no suggestion in Murdoch that an inequality of moral competences should be enshrined into state structures, levels of political influence, or inequality before the law. She is not, *in that sense*, a Platonist in the political realm. Siding with Murdoch commits us only to a refusal to allow political egalitarianism to colonize our conception of the self.<sup>26</sup> (Her point here is the Wittgensteinian one that liberal *political* values have gone on holiday.)



Secondly, at the risk of using a very un-Murdochian metaphor, the advantages of her approach can be *cashed out* in the following two ways.

*This approach renders pride consistent with humility*

Attending to differing levels of moral competence allows us to preserve the important intuition that a limited form of pride (recognition pride) is a desideratum, *and* that humility is also a worthwhile virtue. To see the way that these two can now work together consider the following example. Suppose that a young and untutored violinist, whose intonation and bowing are *relatively* accomplished, responds to her playing only with frustration. Her lack of recognition pride will not only be a real cognitive failure but it will also be a failure of humility. What she has not grasped is the *appropriate* kind of comparison to make.

What makes a comparison appropriate, in the relevant sense, is that it helps the people who make it attend to the *particularity* of what is under judgement, and does not lead them to focus exclusively upon widely shared shortcomings.<sup>27</sup> If the violinist says ‘My bowing is not as good as Zuckerman’s’, this will not, in most cases, be appropriate. And the appropriate comparison for Pinchas Zuckerman himself will be different again. It may involve more of an idealized standard rather than a comparison between two real persons. Alternatively it may involve localized comparisons with the technique of this or that other great player in this or that respect. Even then, any ensuing recognition pride would have to be tempered by an appreciation of the relative roles of effort and moral luck (having had such-and-such support, meeting such-and-such a teacher at the right time, and so on).

Here, it may be useful to speak of the kind of comparisons that mark a person out as humble as ‘humble comparisons’. Such comparisons are particularly disclosing; they inform us about which of our accomplishments are good candidates for recognition pride. It may take humility for someone to acknowledge that ‘For me, a fairly modest accomplishment may happen to be worthy of pride and that I should not act as if I am above such a response.’

Against this, it may be objected that any rehabilitation of pride (however limited and intuition-preserving) is still going to be problematic. In response to the example given, it might plausibly be said that what the violinist ought to attend to is not any fact about herself but the quality of the violin playing itself and/or its impact upon others. The violinist should say ‘They enjoyed the performance’ rather than ‘I gave them pleasure in my performance’, where the difference between these two is in the way that the latter is indexed directly to the self.<sup>28</sup> Here, I want to suggest that although this may be a desirable response in the sense that it puts other people first (and by virtue of this it does seem the right Murdochian thing to do) it is an instance or token of a broader way of responding (or type of response) to which we may only progress via an initial recognition of personal achievement. That is to say, it is not the kind of

response into which we can simply leap. It may seem to involve a more Murdochian way of responding, but there is a question mark over how quickly or suddenly Murdoch expects moral beings or agents to be able to progress into her kind of pilgrimage.

Suppose we allow that a way of responding that lacks any direct indexing to the self really is a better way of responding than any form of recognition pride could possibly be. How could such a view tackle the intuitive appeal of pride as a way of recognizing achievement? One way would be to claim that there is a first/third person asymmetry here, such that someone might remark to the aforementioned violinist that 'she should feel proud of her accomplishment', while admiring her all the more if she happens to lack such pride. Tempting though this option is, it is important to avoid divorcing such an asymmetry from the developing way in which the ongoing game of praise and criticism is played. At some stage in the young violinist's development we will want her to say, 'Yes, that was good, I am making real progress.' Unless she is already a junior version of Socrates, this realization will be needed as an encouragement to continue (and a good teacher of this or any other skill will try to build in opportunities for this kind of recognition of progress). This will be the case even though we may hope for a *later* advance beyond any such self-indexed response.

What I may concede here (but all that I am forced to concede) is (1) that the positive role played by recognition pride may be more restricted than I have allowed; and (2) my account of humble comparisons as a basis for pride may need closer specification in the case of those advanced levels of achievement which will always remain, for most of us, an entirely alien territory. Neither of these concessions will prove fatal to the attempt to render recognition pride and humility compatible with one another.

Be that as it may, such criticism serves as a reminder that not everyone will see pride *of any sort* as intuitively desirable. For those who take the view that it is unwelcome in any form, the reconciliation of pride and humility can hardly be offered as a reward for adopting the view that humility involves *a just discernment of moral level*. Those who remain hostile to pride will require some other cashing out of the advantages offered by a Murdochian account of humility that presupposes a hierarchy of competence.

*Murdochian humility offers a way out of the problem of moral demandingness*

Humility that involves a just discernment of moral level should lead a moral agent to reject any suggestion that he ought to act as a virtuous agent would act unless the moral agent in question has relevant competences that are comparable to those of a virtuous agent. That is to say, Murdochian humility, of the sort outlined above, would lead moral agents in many cases to reject a course of action that accords with some version of the mimetic formula of virtue

ethics. The upside of such a rule of imitation, its motivating appeal, is the way in which it appears to show that virtue ethics can be just as action-guiding as utilitarianism and deontological ethics. The downside is that it generates problems of demandingness of a sort that also afflict these rival approaches. The requirements placed upon individuals will, in many instances, be impossibly difficult for anyone to meet successfully. The rule that we should *act as a more virtuous person would do* will often be no more plausible than the mountaineering rule that instructs us to *climb in the way that a better climber would do*.

This is not to say that virtue ethics faces any *peculiar* problem of demandingness. Nor is it to deny that there are plausible strategies available for restricting its impact. One familiar way to do just this is to follow Bernard Williams's response to the excess of utilitarianism by suggesting that we need only be moral some of the time, i.e. by curtailing the domain of the moral. At other times we may pursue legitimate personal interests that belong to another domain or domains. For Murdoch, such partitioning is not an option because the personal domain *is* the primary arena of moral effort. We are morally engaged all the time. This view might seem to push Murdoch straight into excess and there is *one sense* in which she does allow that morality *is* impossibly demanding: she holds that we cannot attain the standard of perfection that our moral judgements presuppose.

Nevertheless, on a moment-to-moment basis we are not normally required to act perfectly, or even in a way that is *close to* perfection. It is *far* from where we are, too far to leap. A Murdochian approach requires ordinary imperfect agents to act at, or close to, our own moral level *and not beyond it* (all other things being equal). This makes Murdochian humility a bulwark against excessive demandingness. Taking on more than we can cope with, *without some special legitimizing reason for doing so*, amounts to overestimation of self, and is a familiar fault. If a limited codification is deemed necessary, then this is what needs to be codified: *act in accordance with a humble assessment*. This situates humility as a touchstone for the moral life as a whole.

## Notes

1. Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), 51–52, and *idem Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 429.
2. Iris Murdoch *The Bell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 204.
3. All quotations from Murdoch *Sovereignty of Good*, 100–101.
4. *Ibid.*, 101. This humbling of self can be seen at work in Murdoch's problematic death-theme; see Tony Milligan 'Iris Murdoch's mortal asymmetry', forthcoming in *Philosophical Investigations*.
5. Quoted in Rush Rhees *Discussions of Simone Weil* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 164.
6. Simone Weil *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 27.
7. Murdoch *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 501.
8. *Ibid.*
9. 'Holiness should then be hidden too, even from consciousness in a certain measure'; Simone Weil *Gravity and Grace*, 33.
10. Julia Driver *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

11. Murdoch *Sovereignty of Good*, 95.
12. *Ibid.*
13. David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, section IX.
14. Gabriele Taylor *Pride, Shame and Guilt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).
15. See Michael Slote *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 61ff, on humility as a dependent virtue.
16. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 44, Thomas Gilby (ed.) (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode/Blackfriars, 1972), 2a2 ae. 161.2, 161.6.
17. Murdoch *Sovereignty of Good*, 28.
18. This variation on the theme of response-dependence is particularly emphasized in Rosalind Hursthouse's Kantian-leaning *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). She is not suggesting that the associated action-guiding V-rules cover all contingencies.
19. Murdoch *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 11.
20. Murdoch's rejection of universalisability goes back to her critique of R. M. Hare in two articles immediately preceding publication of *The Bell*: Iris Murdoch 'Metaphysics and ethics' in P. Conradi (ed.) *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), 59–75, and *idem* 'Vision and choice in morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 30, 32–58.
21. Tayper-Pace's sermon: Murdoch *The Bell*, ch. 9.
22. Michael Meade's sermon, *ibid.*, ch. 16.
23. *Idem Sovereignty of Good*, 17.
24. For an example of the metaphor see Murdoch *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 87. The metaphor is limited in this respect: a *techne* or skill may be used or not used, but specifically moral competences *must* be brought to bear, when appropriate, otherwise we do not have them.
25. This point is made by J. O. Urmson in 'Saints and heroes', in A. I. Melden (ed.) *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle WA: University of Washington Press, 1958), and Lawrence Blum in *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ch. 5.
26. Maria Antonaccio's *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), although bracketing off her mysticism, draws out Murdoch's strong liberal commitment.
27. Norvin Richards 'Is humility a virtue?', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 25 (1988), 253–259, emphasizes the role of comparison in humility; Taylor *Pride, Shame and Guilt*, emphasizes what she calls 'norms of expectation'.
28. For several formulations used in this section, and for the identification of a number of problematic claims (now happily removed), thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.