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Getting the measure of Murdoch's Good

“It is the traditional inspiration of the philosopher,
but also his traditional vice, to believe that all is one”

Murdoch ‘On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”

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§1. *The idea*

In the first essay in *The Sovereignty of Good*, ‘The Idea of Perfection’, Murdoch deploys a bit of arcane idiom that is easy to pass over without much hesitation. With only a few exceptions, the passage in which it appears, close to the start of the part of the essay that sees Murdoch develop her positive proposal, has drawn little critical assessment.¹ Murdoch’s alternative ‘soul-picture’ is pitched against a neo-Kantian existentialist, behaviorist position (whose ethics and politics are utilitarian and ‘democratic’ (p.9)) which she sees as fueled by a genetic – and for her faulty – analysis of concepts: Concepts are understood to have a structure that is public, grasp of which is a skill; ordinary words for concepts are learned from observation of some ‘typical outward behavior pattern’; in the case of moral concepts, ‘to copy a right action is to act rightly’. This latter is the view of Stuart Hampshire to whom *Sovereignty* is dedicated; but, she writes, while ‘this is all very well to say’, the question still arises: ‘What is the form that I am supposed to copy?’² (p.30). She finds she *wants* to attack this ‘heavily fortified’ (p.16) position: ‘I am not content’ (ibid.)

Her alternative will be sketched out, though incompletely, in the rest of the paper. For now, a partial summary: Concepts have a complicated structure, a grasp of which is private and necessarily fallible. There is no skill a public display of which is a criterion of concept possession. Instead, concepts shift and alter – “we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty” (p.29). Words may mislead here; “words are often stable while concepts alter” (ibid.). Concepts deepen. They acquire structure over time, their inter-relations shift and ramify but always in ways that are personal. This is since concepts that historical individuals have – and express in thought and action – only acquire structure in the context of the progressing life of a person (p.26); the full extent of what courage is for me and means to me will depend on the historical individual I am and the life I have lead. But unlike the existentialist Kantian ego which appears only at crucial moments of choice, quick as the flash of needle³, the progress of the life of a person, someone with a ‘live personality’, involves more than outward behavior. It involves inner, private conscious reflective activity. It involves the continuous reassessment of past events, relationships and individuals. And, as concepts deepen, it involves *redescription* (p.26) – what looked courageous at twenty may seem foolhardy at forty. Such reassessment and the redescription that it involves is moral work; it is an attempt to see and understand things clearly. It is not a skill that can be exercised at isolated moments, but an endless task, one that is regulated by the eponymous ideal limit – the idea of perfection. For instance, a *perfected* idea of courage would be a full understanding of what ‘courage’ is, its relation to other the virtues and to human life, an understanding which is unattainable, try as the historical individual imperfectly may. This activity is not parasitic on the outer. It is serious. You have to do it for yourself, if not by yourself.

Here is the passage:

None of what I am saying here is particularly new: similar things have been said by philosophers from Plato onward; and appear as commonplaces of the Christian ethic, whose centre is an individual. To come nearer home in the Platonic tradition, the present dispute is reminiscent of the old arguments about abstract and concrete universals. My view might be put by saying: moral terms must be treated as concrete universals. And if someone at this point were to say, well, why stop at moral concepts, why not claim that all universals are concrete, I would reply, why not indeed? Why not consider red as an ideal end-point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual object of love? (p.29)

In this paper I hardly talk about love, something which is so central to Murdoch's alternative 'soul-picture'. Instead, I say something about her easy-to-miss appeal to the concrete universal, a notion now almost banished from contemporary discussion. For there is reason to think that Murdoch's conception of the concrete universal is inflected more by British Idealism than by Hegel directly, though this inflection is not explicit ("I am not, in spite of the philosophical backing which I might here resort to, suggesting anything in the least esoteric" (p.30)) - and this difference is philosophically significant. But, as I show, it is also inflected by Wittgenstein in ways I try to illustrate in the middle part of the paper. Following Murdoch's tendency, method even, I draw an analogy. I want to suggest that Wittgenstein's discussion of the Standard Metre in the *Philosophical Investigations* helps get the measure of what Murdoch is up to with her talk of 'concrete universality' and ultimately too of the Good, more a concern of the other two papers that make up *Sovereignty*: 'On 'God' and 'Good'', and 'The Sovereignty of the Good over Other Concepts' as well her of 1992 masterpiece *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. I then introduce a hopefully not terminal problem for my exegesis and so for the analogy: Murdoch is not wholly sympathetic to all aspects of Wittgenstein's program.

In the last part of the paper, I offer a way around this problem by picking up a different Wittgensteinian strand. This could have been lifted from Murdoch's own work but instead I appeal to Chapter 13 of *The Problem of Metaphysics* by Donald MacKinnon, Murdoch's tutor while an undergraduate at Oxford (and later Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge). This work originated in Gifford Lectures delivered in 1965 and 1966 and was published in 1974. Murdoch's Archive at Kingston University contains her copy with its characteristic notes, handwritten on spare intervals of blank page. Her Gifford Lectures, later *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (MGM), were delivered in 1982 and published ten years later. MacKinnon isn't cited but his 'problem' of metaphysics echoes hers, and hers his - 'The Idea of Perfection' was first published in 1964 and perhaps he read it. No scholarly work has been done on MacKinnon and Murdoch's intellectual relationship and I can only hint at overlaps here, a strategy that is justified I think by the content of my argument, and by the passage above, around which the whole paper spins.⁴

§1. *Some questions*

Three questions immediately arise on reading the passage above. Which 'old arguments'? How 'near to home'? Why moral terms? Start with the first.

Murdoch is referring to the problem of individuality, though this might not at once be clear from its textual setting (I'll return to this issue in §4 when I pick up her reference to the 'Christian' ethic). This problem concerns what makes something individual, *an* individual, a unified entity distinct from other individuals. Two distinct roses could instantiate all the same properties - both might be red, have variegated petals, the 'same' damask scent and so on; they might be qualitatively identical in all respects. What makes them distinct over and above the properties they instantiate?

Two classes of solution have been proposed: non-qualitative and qualitative. The notion of a trope belongs to the latter class, as does bundle theory (roughly, what matters is the *way* the properties are bundled together). Among non-qualitative solutions are appeal to a bare substratum or to space; what they qualify or where they are is what makes two otherwise qualitatively identical individuals numerically distinct. Invoking a mysterious haecceity is a further option.

Hegel's *Logic* Book III offers a new response and with a different kind of foundation. Hegel urges that we need a conception of universality whereby the universal which the individual exemplifies is not merely accidental but is constitutive of it. He introduces the notion of a substance universal. 'Rose' is a substance universal - it is essential to a rose that it instantiate the substance universal 'rose'. This contrasts with 'red' which is an abstract universal.

When we say: 'This rose is red,' the copula 'is' implies that subject and predicate agree with one another. But, of course, the rose, being something concrete, is not merely red; on the contrary, it also has a scent, a definite form, and all manner of other features, which are not contained within the predicate 'red'. On the other hand, the predicate, being something abstractly universal, does not belong merely to this subject. For there are other flowers, too, and other objects altogether that are also red (Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §172 Addition, p.250)⁵

So, while there may be other flowers, only *roses* instantiate the substance universal 'rose' and this explains why an individual, as an individual of a certain kind, instantiates some of the particular properties it does, for instance having a damask scent. Nevertheless, there are different ways the same substance universal can be – an individual is a rose *in its own determinate way* in virtue of instantiating different properties (or the same properties differently; its variegated leaves have a peculiar variegation that is particular to it). And likewise in the case of the human:

[E]ach human being though infinitely unique is so precisely because [he or she is a human being] and each individual is such an individual primarily because it is an animal: if this is true, then it would be impossible to say what such an individual could still be if this foundation were removed, no matter how richly endowed the individual might be with other predicates, if, that is, this foundation can equally be called a predicate like any other' (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp.36–7)⁶

Substance predicates are special then. They are concrete. They are not just a *way* an individual may be (red): but *what* the individual *is* (rose). They can support statements of natural law ('a rose is a perennial flowering plant') and normative statements ('a wolf that does not disperse from its natal pack is defective'). They can be exemplified in individuals which have different properties. A contemporary development of this view can be found in the work of Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson, though they do not (so far as I know) deploy the exotic idiom of the concrete.⁷ But however exotic now, this notion remained a live, if flagging concern 'nearer to home' even up until 1930s, when Murdoch went up to Oxford. And this proximity to home is theoretically significant, at least where Murdoch exegesis is concerned. This is because as Stern (2007) argues – and here my exposition is indebted to his – the British Idealist conception of the concrete universal, while Hegelian, is not Hegel's.

Very roughly⁸, Hegel's conception is holistic insofar as what dialectically unifies the class of individuals *as a kind* is the fact that they each instantiate the concrete universal in their own determinate way; their each instantiating it though differently to each other *is* what makes them individuals *of that kind*. The holism of the British Idealists is different. Individuals instantiating a universal concretely are *themselves* inter-related. They are - almost incredibly - *inter-related* by the universal. Bradley offers a tellingly 'esoteric' example:

By [both] being red-haired [...] two men are related really, and their relation is not merely external... ‘But I am a red-haired man’, I shall hear, ‘and I know what I am, and I am not altered in fact when I am compared with another man, and therefore the relation falls outside.’ But no finite individual, I reply, can possibly know what he is, and the idea that all his reality falls within his knowledge is even ridiculous... But, as he really is, to know perfectly his own nature would be, with that nature, to pass in knowledge endlessly beyond himself. For example, a red-haired man who knew himself utterly would and must, starting from within, go on to know everyone else who has red hair, and he would not know himself until he knew them... Nothing in the whole and in the end can be external, and everything less than the Universe is an abstraction from the whole, an abstraction more or less empty, and the more empty the less self-dependent. Relations and qualities are abstractions, *and depend for their being always on a whole, a whole which they inadequately express, and which remains always less or more in the background* (Bradley 1908, pp. 580-581)⁹

I say a little about the distinction between internal and external relations as far as Murdoch’s epistemology goes in closing, though I say nothing at all about the fragile status of individuals in Bradley’s whole, which tends to monism, and which elsewhere, for this reason, Murdoch supposes “intolerable!” (MGM, p.491).¹⁰ For now, I will make a distinction that Stern borrows from Bosanquet and which is, I think, a handy gloss. I picture it below (again leaving aside all consideration of the ontology of the relations represented). The British Idealists conceived of the concrete universal as ‘the universal in the form of a world’ rather than in the form of a class. Where the universal has the form of a world (fig 2), individuals exemplifying it are inter-related and mutually interdependent.¹¹



Fig 1: The concrete universal ‘rose’ in the form of a class – individual roses each instantiate the substantial universal rose in their own determinate way (i.e. through particularisation of abstract universals e.g. colour)

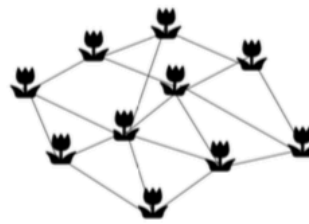


Fig 2: The concrete universal ‘rose’ in the form of a world – individual roses are interrelated. Individual colours are concrete not abstract

So, to answer the question ‘how “near to home”?’ it is likely that Murdoch is thinking of the British Idealists. While she certainly counts Hegel as a *Platonic* thinker – in the passage, recall, it is the Platonic tradition she has in mind - she criticizes his dialectical system as ‘omnivorous’, and in a way that would hardly seem apt to illustrate the treatment of concepts that she is recommending:

Hegel’s Reason proceeds by a continuous discarding of possibilities; doubts, ambiguities, alternatives, ramblings of any kind are officially not permitted and cannot be left ‘lying around’. Seen in this way, the process seems not an increasingly widening, increasingly well-lighted all-embracing prospect, but rather an entry into some dark narrowing almost mechanical confinement.... (MGM, p.227)¹²

The British Idealist alternative in contrast might well be thought have an embrave aura, at least as insofar as the universal is understood to form a world. And perhaps Murdoch is even

thinking in particular of Bradley. We know that she writes about Bradley in her journals between 1945 and 1948 and then again in 1951 when she reminds herself to re-read Bradley and see his attack on simple ideas. In Oxford, in the summer term of 1952, she gives as yet untraceable lectures on 'Some Problems in Bradley' and she mentions that she is considering writing a book on him in two letters to Raymond Queneau dated that year.¹³ Tantalisingly, there are even literal audible rings between IP and *Ethical Studies* (though I do not suggest any conceptual attunement), and particularly essay VI on 'Ideal Morality':

Morality is an endless process and therefore a self-contradiction; and being such it does not remain standing by itself, but feels the impulse to transcend its existing reality. It is a self-contradiction in this way: it demands for what cannot be (1962, p.312)

Scholarly work is needed to unearth these connections and echoes in full. In particular, we might draw on her journal writings as well as her 1992 comments on Bradley and wonder: How did Murdoch read Hegel and Bradley? Did she read the former through the latter? Given Bradley's tendency towards monism, what dimensions of his scheme might have survived the caution sounded in her epigraph (she herself notes that she is monist by temperament (GG, p.50) – perhaps the epigraph is also a reminder to herself)? Finally, suppose Murdoch *did* prefer Bradley to Hegel (as the present paper assumes), would she have been justified in doing so? Since all these questions overrun any capacity I presently have to answer them (and until Murdoch's Bradley lectures turn up),¹⁴ I return only to Murdoch's rhetorical "why not indeed?"

Murdoch wants, though does not argue for, the thought that *all* terms might be treated as concrete universals, including colour terms. I think it does not take much imagination to appreciate how the painter's grasp of red should be progressive, and sustained by continuous, detailed conscious reflection on and attention to red in the world, an example she develops in the sentences following our passage. The child's 'red' belongs to buses and postboxes, blood and apples. But what is 'red' for the great painter? His concept (she elsewhere mentions Cezanne) is deeply complicated and highly elaborated, an 'increasingly widening', 'all-embracing prospect' tied up, surely, with all the hues and light and shade and in substances of all kinds in all conditions and in living things and much more besides. The great artist *treats* 'red' as an individual object to be infinitely learned and his or her own grasp of it as infinitely perfectible. But 'red' is an abstract universal for Hegel.

Now, earlier I noted some biographical detail relevant to the thought that Murdoch's concrete universal is in the form of an all-embracing world (not in the form of a class), but these dates are significant for another reason. This is the period when Murdoch is first exposed to Wittgenstein's thought. Fragments of the *Philosophical Investigations* are passed to her by Elizabeth Anscombe. In 1948 she records reading it in a letter to a friend ("it is like nothing on sea or land").¹⁵ And she helps Anscombe with aspects of the translation which appears in 1953. John Haldane has written of Peter Geach that his precocious and ardent study of McTaggart (and in particular McTaggart's treatment of community) may have prepared him for Wittgenstein's later work. It is tempting to wonder whether Murdoch's study of Bradley might not have imaginatively shaped her reception of Wittgenstein.¹⁶ And with that in mind, we can finally ask, though briefly (see Wiseman, this volume) 'why moral *terms*?'

The emphasis on language is of course symptomatic of the general linguistic turn that animates mid-century analytic philosophy, but the import is peculiarly Wittgensteinian. Though words stay the same (and recall this may mislead us), the concepts those words express, when used by a historical individual, deepen over the course of a life and acquire structure. But on this view concepts are *personal* – the concept which an individual's *use* of a word expresses on an occasion is a function of the user's history. This understanding of concepts and words then – namely as expressive of concepts that are personal – contrasts with the genetic analysis of meaning, behaviorist in spirit, where words lock onto typical outward patterns. But it also diverges from an

Ordinary Language approach to meaning, understood as an impersonal reservoir or network which anyone can dip into (p.29). But meaning is rarely ordinary for Murdoch; what everyday words mean becomes increasingly personal as an individual language user's life unfolds.

§2. *An Analogy: The Standard Metre*

To draw out the respect in which Murdoch's idealist-inflected notion of concrete universality is also Wittgensteinian, I offer an analogy. This follows Murdoch's own tendency. Unlike early and exuberant positivists such as the young A.J. Ayer, Murdoch does not suppose that metaphysical statements are nonsense because unverifiable. Instead she recognizes that their apparent unverifiability should point us in another direction – certain metaphysical truths need to be spoken about analogically or metaphorically. Beauty is an exception: “I can *experience* the transcendence of the beautiful, but (I think) not the transcendence of the good” (GG, p.60). Her analogization of the Good (invulnerable and ‘higher’, distant) to the sun is the most avid, if notorious expression of her Platonism. Motivated partly by a cue in “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”, the second paper in *Sovereignty*, I instead explore a comparison of the Good with the Standard Metre:

It may seem curious to wonder whether the idea of perfection (as opposed to the idea of merit or improvement) is really an important one, and what sort of role it can play. Well, is it important to measure and compare things to know just how good they are? In any field which interests or concerns us I think we would say yes. A deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect. Increasing understanding of human conduct operates in a similar way. We come to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously we were prepared to ‘let by’. The idea of perfection works thus within a field of study, producing an increasing sense of direction [...] The idea of perfection is also a natural producer of order. In its *light* we come to see that A, which superficially resembles B, is really better than B. And this can occur, indeed must occur, without our having the sovereign idea in any sense ‘taped’. In fact, is in its nature that we cannot get it taped. This is the true sense of the ‘indefinability’ of the good [...] (GG, p.62)

Both the idea of perfection and the Good are noted here. Absolute good has the attribute of being perfect. The idea of perfection moves us in the direction of the idea perfected. I say more about the relation between the idea of perfection, and the Good (as I understand it) below. For now, reconsider Murdoch's incredulity at Hampshire's supposition that ‘to copy a right action is to act rightly’.

There ought to be profound difficulties here by Murdoch's reckoning. I need to know *which* action is right (this is an epistemic problem, which human psychology makes immensely, if not intractably difficult thinks Murdoch – ‘What is the form that I am supposed to copy?’). I need to know *what particular course* I should take at context (a pragmatic problem which is augmented by specificities of space and time and by politics). And both difficulties are at once compounded when an unrealistic concept empiricism is replaced by a treatment of concepts as private concrete universals, where a historical individual, not a Kantian agent, attempts to copy that which they settle on, with difficulty, as ‘right’ (or good). For instance, suppose ‘I want to write like Shakespeare’. To borrow Murdoch's way of framing things *that is all very well to say*. Copying cannot be in question here: “beyond the details of craft and criticism there is only the magnetic non-representable idea of the good which remains not ‘empty’ so much as mysterious. And thus too in the sphere of human conduct”; “one has got to do the thing oneself alone and differently” (p.63)¹⁷

The analogy I want to develop takes off from a certain indefinability that pertains also to the Standard Metre. Wittgenstein remarks of that peculiar, *individual* thing:

There is *one* thing of which one can say neither that it is a metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the Standard Metre in Paris. – But this is, of course, not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre rule (*Philosophical Investigations*, §50, p.25)

As Diamond (2001) explains, this treatment of an individual marks a divergence from a Tractarian view whereby language describes what is the case by compounds of names. Things named cannot be said to be or not to be; what is the case only are facts - a feature of the view that we know chimed readily with and by turns inspired the positivist emphasis on verification. But there is no procedure *to verify* whether the Standard Metre is a metre long, or so it might be thought. Kripke disagrees: “This seems a very ‘extraordinary property’, actually” (Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* 1980, p.54). (What relevance this lengthy quotation serves will hopefully become plain later):

Part of the problem which is bothering Wittgenstein is, of course, that this stick serves as a standard of length and so we can't attribute length to it. Be this as it may (well, it may not be), is the statement ‘stick S is one meter long’, a necessary truth? Of course, its length might vary in time. We could make the definition more precise by stipulating that one meter is to be the length of \underline{S} at time $\underline{t_0}$. Is it then a necessary truth that stick \underline{S} is one meter long at time $\underline{t_0}$? Someone who thinks that everything one knows *a priori* is necessary might think: ‘This is the definition of a meter. By definition, stick \underline{S} is one meter long at $\underline{t_0}$. That's a necessary truth.’ But there seems to me no reason so to conclude, even for a man who uses the stated definition of ‘one meter’. For he's using this definition not to give the meaning of what he called the ‘meter’, but to fix the reference. [...] There is a certain length which he wants to mark out. He marks it out by an accidental property, namely that there is a stick of that length. Someone else might mark out the same reference by another accidental property. But in any case, even though he uses this to fix the reference of his standard of length, a meter, he can still say, if heat had been applied to this stick \underline{S} at $\underline{t_0}$, then at $\underline{t_0}$ stick \underline{S} would not have been one meter long. (ibid)

Now, for Diamond, Kripke makes two mis-steps here, at least so far as Wittgenstein exegesis goes. First, he misunderstands Wittgenstein's point concerning the Standard's peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre rule. But he also makes an attendant mistake about the intelligibility of the notion of identity when applied to length. Consider: There is something odd about the person who in response to the question ‘How tall are you?’ puts their hand on their head and says ‘This tall! Why so?’

On the one hand, they seem to have a notion of length as *intransitive* – as something that can be made sense of without appeal to a metric, that is by comparison with some other thing. Rather, they seem to suppose that their length is the length of the space they fill, something which has a ‘length’ *tout court*. On the other hand, they recognize that length is a peculiarly transitive notion. Things are reckoned to have length only in relation to other things, with which, along that dimension, they can be compared, *a dimension which thereby becomes available*. The oddness of the present case then is that the self-measuring subject is using themselves as their own Standard but this ‘Standard’ can't play a role in the game of measuring which involves comparing lengths of different, other things.

It is plain that Kripke has an intransitive conception of length in mind. He supposes that we use a rod to fix on a length at time t , which we thereafter designate as the Standard Metre. It is *a priori* that the Standard Metre is a metre, though it only contingently had *that length* – we could have chosen another rod. But again what the oddness of the above case shows is that we cannot chose just anything. This is because the Standard Metre only has ‘life’ in the context of certain

practices that themselves have a form – practices of measuring, comparing, sizing up etc. Manifold other artefacts articulate these materially and must themselves be mastered - pencils, protractors, fences, lasers. And countless other practices intersect with these practices and artefacts and sustain them and make them intelligible. But critically the same is true of the concept ‘length’. On this view, the concept ‘length’ has *no life* independently of these practices. So, there is no intransitive notion that regions of empty space (say) can be said to *have*, as a property, *tout court*. And yet the intransitive conception is crucial for Kripke. I return to intransitivity below. For now, I sketch the analogy I have in mind (sketch being a fair designation I hope – the link is presented only schematically).

Suppose metre sticks everywhere form *a class*. They are all individuals that are particularisations of the universal ‘metre stick’ understood concretely – the universal is not a *way* those individuals could be (a metre long, a length which manifold other things have). It is what they are. This treatment doesn’t say anything about the special role of the Standard Metre, as a standard, in forming the class. But here we could follow Kripke: Not all individuals are created equal. Some are anointed, and these individuals so baptized bring about the possibility of universalisation and so normativity insofar as the unanointed resemble the anointed.

On the Wittgensteinian alternative by contrast, the emphasis is not on individual things (which could be one way or another) or on classes of things, but on the *forms of life* in which those things participate and which thereby come to constitute the form of a world. In the case of the Standard Metre, there are forms of life that are intelligible *in light of it* and that can go on because of it. So, there is, in this respect, *an inter-relation* between the diverse acts of measuring, lining and sizing up and so on that make up the ‘world-form’ which the Standard Metre sustains. That is, there is an inter-relation between the child in the playground lining up sticks, the baker weighing flour, and the astronomer and her telescope. On this view, other material metre sticks, where they exist, are related to the Standard and have a length not because they form a class, but because they are interrelated through the forms of life that the Standard Metre sustains and the practices in which they participate and make possible.

Now, Murdoch insists that it is important to measure and compare things to know just how good they are. But unlike the length of something which can easily be measured, at least by one who participates in the form of life where such a practice is sustained, it is often (though not always) difficult to tell if something is good (Which form am I supposed to copy?). Certainly goodness cannot be verified. But here our ideas of perfection can move us in some direction of assessment and of measurement, Murdoch thinks. At the same time, recall, these ideas themselves deepen and become elaborated with the progress of a life - I have a different image of courage at forty than I had a twenty. But accordingly the acts and people that fall under that description ought not to be conceived to form a class; they do not *resemble*.¹⁸ Rather I come to see them as *related* as my idea of courage deepens. And I come to see that quality (courage) as related to others (honesty), and I see those qualities and their manifestations against the backgrounds in which they appear which I also come to appreciate in ever increasing particularity and detail (what looked like reticence was honesty). My concern, that is, widens, ramifies and complicates; it becomes detailed. But it also modulates. For as part of this ever-widening process some connections are sundered as reassessment prompts redescription (what looked courageous was foolhardy). And this shifting is endless and ongoing. And for Murdoch where the movement is towards knowledge of what is real, the achievement is moral.

There is a great deal more to say here – I have simplified to a very large degree. Indeed, I have oversimplified. But I want to keep the analogy itself uncomplicated and schematic for now. This is because it is easy to at once raise a problem for my exegesis and analogy – at least so far as the Wittgensteinian dimensions of Murdoch’s concrete universal are concerned.

I have suggested that the idea of perfection acts as a standard, one's grasp of which, and evolution towards shifts and alters and can be deepened over the progress of a life. Good reigns sovereign here, since just as the Standard Metre gives life to diverse but inter-related practices (weighing, sizing up etc. etc.), the Good 'gives life' to "all our struggles for truth and virtue" (*MGM*, p.38). Murdoch's analogy with the Sun is naturally invited here. It is distant and separate. Things go on *in its light* and because of it. We know "more or less where the sun is" (*GG*, p.70); but we cannot look at it. But likewise with Murdoch's Good. It cannot be defined or represented, but "we are not usually in doubt about the direction in which the Good lies" (*SGC*, p.97). To be good, to act well, can be an object of intention, even where one does not know 'what form to copy'; "Good is the focus of attention when an intent to be virtuous co-exists (as perhaps it almost always does) with some unclarity of vision" (*GG*, p.70) Absolute good is perfect for Murdoch. It is the pinnacle of our idea of perfection. But just as there are many different ways to measure - exemplified in different ways by particular historical individuals at particular places and with whatever is to hand - there are many different ways of being good. e.g. courageous, kind, insightful, creative, generous and so on.¹⁹ All of these ways are differently realized at different times and places by different individuals living their own lives. But as our grasp of moral concepts deepen, regulated by the idea of the individual concept perfected - i.e. the idea of courage - we can come to see, though dimly and with difficulty, those differing ways as *themselves* interrelated manifestations of the same virtue or quality, and those in turn as inter-related manifestations of the Good.

Good as absolute, above courage and generosity and all the plural virtues is to be seen as unshadowed and separate, a pure source, the principle which creatively relates the virtues to each other in our moral lives. In the iconoclastic pilgrimage, ... we experience the *distance* which separates us from perfection and are led to place our idea of it in a figurative sense outside the turmoil of existent being. (*MGM*, p.507)

I cannot say anything about Murdoch's epistemology here, but it seems she takes our knowledge of the transcendence of the Good to be certain. This is coupled with a view of human psychology which makes the iconoclastic pilgrimage she describes difficult. Indeed, the very fact of this process is 'proof' for Murdoch of the existence of the Good.

But now a difficulty for the analogy I am proposing. My way of getting the measure of Murdoch's Good relies on the notion of a form of life - the Standard Metre is that in light of which certain forms of life are intelligible and go on. But in *Metaphysics as Guide to Morals*, Murdoch is starkly critical of this notion and in a way that is more than reminiscent of her criticism of Hegel's dialectic. Lebensformen are 'rigid' (p.273); Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is as much a 'cage' as the *Tractatus* - "there is a feeling of constraint" (ibid). Forms of life "freeze" a quasi-logical picture of language as a spatio-temporal phenomenon, which is instead "a colossal, infinitely various creative ferment" (p.275). Most seriously, "[t]he *Lebensform* concept suggests the loss of the individual" (p.281) - but the problem of individuality was where our discussion began!

At the same time, Murdoch also attributes to Wittgenstein a certain kind of moral injunction that is addressed *to philosophers*: 'Do not try to analyse your own inner experience' (*Investigations* II xi, p.204). It might be thought that Murdoch is reading this injunction seriously and is mistakenly attributing a constructive philosophy to Wittgenstein where this is not his purpose.²⁰ But what Murdoch objects to is a philosophical picture. She thinks Wittgenstein is urging a philosophical picture that discredits the density and real existence of inner life. To see the significance of this, it is helpful to return to an early passage that almost has the status now of proverb (at least in Murdoch studies) where Murdoch articulates what she thinks the task of moral philosophy is. She writes "man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture" (*Metaphysics and Ethics*, *EM*, p.75). This, she thinks, is the process that moral philosophy needs to describe and to analyse. And it is surely what her own critique of

Wittgenstein amounts to. The philosophical picture Wittgenstein paints, when taken up a certain way – by the analytic behaviourist existentialist for whom consciousness is ‘empty’ and the will is all – risks the loss of certain concepts: those of the Good, love, consciousness and attention. But this loss amounts not just to a way of describing the world, but as Mark Hopwood insightfully comments, “the loss of a way of being in it”, a loss that is of moral concern (2019, p.255). And this is because, if I am on the right track, the way in which a person comes to resemble the pictures he makes and valorizes is not best understood as a matter copying those pictures. It is by coming to see the world *in light of them*; it is by seeing the world in terms of *what the picture relates*. Wittgenstein’s philosophical picture, the way it was taken up by many mid-century Oxford philosophers, relates things in a way that obfuscates certain details and so precipitates their loss.

But this way of reading Murdoch’s criticism suggests a different way of elucidating the analogy – one that I think rescues the centrality of the historical individual from the “cage” or apparent rigidity and inflexibility of forms of life.

§4 *A suggestion*

To return to the passage that this paper treats, the reader might now see that I myself have missed out a detail. When Murdoch comments that nothing she is saying is new, she notes that similar things are commonplaces of “the Christian ethic, whose centre is an individual”. In what way might Christ, an individual, be considered ‘a centre’?

It might be thought that moral exemplars are historical individuals that are central to an ethic insofar as they are to be copied or imitated – to wit, they are anointed as the standard to copy. But the picture I am building suggests something different, and here I draw on Donald MacKinnon’s *The Problem of Metaphysics* to explain how, a work which in my view *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* offers a response to.

While Murdoch herself makes no reference to the Standard Metre so far as I know, MacKinnon observes the “genuine analogy” he finds between the role of the just man or just city in Plato’s ethics and the Standard Metre, though commenting that while the Standard Metre can be destroyed, the form of justice is indestructible – here he references Peter Geach’s discussion of the *Parmenides*, which explicitly refers to Wittgenstein on the Standard. He then makes a curious move, which from the perspective of my analogy is important. He notes that Plato, at the beginning of the *Parmenides*, rejects the concept of the forms as *noemata*. But *he*, MacKinnon, wants to take this possibility seriously, and so, I think, does Murdoch. Murdoch’s *ideas* of perfection are ways of looking at the world, if infinitely perfectible ways.

Very early in the *Parmenides*, Plato rejects out of hand the suggestion that the forms may be regarded as *noemata*; it is such passages that have helped earn for the critics of constructivism in modern philosophy of mathematics, the name of Platonists. But in rejecting the suggestion that his forms are *noemata*, Plato is implicitly rejecting any treatment of his doctrine as a way of looking at the world (*PM*, p.160)

MacKinnon develops two examples which help crystallise a conception of form as noematic. One focuses on his experience of the 1941 painting *Totes Meer*, by artist Paul Nash, which can be viewed today in Room 9 of Tate Britain.²¹ He writes of this painting, which he treats as a landscape:

“[I]n it the painter realised as a vast Sargasso sea a great dump in which the wreckage of combat aircraft, both British and German had been deposited....It so happened that after I had seen several reproductions of this painting I passed the dump between East Oxford and Garsington which had provided the artist with the subject-matter of his composition. I knew that it was there that Nash had found his subject, when I myself passed the place, and I recall vividly that my perceptual experience was deeply effected, indeed suffused by

memory of the painting I had seen reproduced. I might say that ‘I saw’ the dump as ‘the dead sea’...that I saw more, and in the seeing was made aware of the sheer waste of what, conveyed by the works of human ingenuity, was wrecked and destroyed....*one would not exaggerate to say that the painter had made an experience possible for the percipient*...he brings out the inwardness of the scene by enabling us so to see it...he does so not simply by eliciting the richness of what he views but rather by offering *his vision* as a supremely effective judgment on the civilisation whose fruits are there displayed *before his eyes*” (my emphasis, 1974, p.161)

On this conception, the artwork, displaying the artist’s way of looking, his vision, makes possible, an experience for the percipient *which would not otherwise have been possible*.

His second example concerns Christ, the centre of the Christian ethic. Christ is not treated as a moral exemplar; his life is not considered an illustration of a principle to be copied. Instead, it is presented *as making possible a certain life*. While the artist makes possible a way of seeing, contemplation of the life of Christ (by those who as he puts it ‘receive’ the tale of the life of Jesus as a means of coming to see the world in a certain way) ‘thrusts on human notice’ a pattern that is only made available through the action of the individual “through *whom in history* it is achieved” (p.163).

Murdoch’s analysis is secular, but her treatment of the legacy of Wittgenstein as well as her repeated notice of our picture-making tendencies, and in particular, where philosophy is concerned, metaphysics as “image-play” (SGCp.77), resonates with this conception in ways I can only gesture at here. Pictures, theories and models make possible for us certain kinds of experiences as well certain kinds of *lives*. And they do this, not because they illustrate principles to be copied, nor even because of what they show. But because of what they relate. The “great surprising variety of the world” can be made intelligible and *can be seen* in light of them – for it is thrust upon our notice by the form of work, itself an achievement of a historical individual (or, as it might be, a collective of individuals). This partly explains Murdoch’s preference for realism in art as well her contention, which I cannot broach here, that both great art and morality have a common source in a capacity to direct attention to reality, a capacity which, for Murdoch, is love. But pictures also obfuscate and diminish too - that which is thrust upon our notice is so thrust at the expense of detail elsewhere; detail that is fine-grained, particular, impossible to depict. And that is why, as Murdoch puts it, we must *grow by looking*. We always apprehend more than we understand – the detail of our experience is rich and always particular, which is *why* our ideas are infinitely perfectible. In the case of Wittgenstein’s extraordinary creative achievement, the way in which his philosophical picture relates – or seems to - especially where this picture is realised as a method in philosophy, risks, for Murdoch, the loss of a central feature of our moral lives and humanity: the inner. At the same time, Murdoch follows Wittgenstein. Look, don’t think.

§5 Murdoch’s realism

I have offered a very early, and tentative approach to reading Murdoch’s conception of the concrete universal, though perhaps only to raise more questions than I can answer. To continue that trend, I want to say something in closing about Murdoch’s realism which will, I hope, at least unify some of the still distinct threads running unconnected through the paper.

If I am on the right track, Murdoch’s take on the concrete universal is inflected by both Wittgenstein and British Idealism. Since the latter is Hegelian, we ought not be surprised to find fragments of the original also animating Murdoch’s thought, itself notoriously omnivorous – and it is here of course that the ideas of history and progress have a home. However, I have suggested, without defending the thought, that concepts are akin to *noemata* for Murdoch – they are ways of looking that can be perfected. Here formal objects, including philosophical theories, the lives of individuals and Art have a special *generative* role to play; not because they illustrate principles to

copy but because of the ways in which they make the world intelligible in light of them and the forms of life and experience they sustain or make possible.

Earlier, I left aside all discussion of the nature of the relations that connect the idealist concrete universal. For Murdoch however, if the image of her philosophy that I am projecting is to have traction, and is to make sense within her wider ethical picture and moral philosophy, at least some of the relations which our elaborated concepts picture or represent must be external. We are distinct and separated from other individuals and things. We are spatio-temporally limited, and our experience is likewise. We encounter but a small fraction of the world, ever contingent and subject to change. Our situation is tragic.²² But to this extent perhaps there are aspects of the *Kripkean* treatment of the metre stick which we would do well to recover.

Recall, for Kripke, it is contingent which rod we choose as our standard. Likewise, for Murdoch it is largely contingent which picture (*noemata*) we choose to put ‘in the archives’ and by whose lights we choose to live our lives individually and collectively. Some pictures are false – they are valorized by a false love, or they are the emanations of a false and corrupting system (Capitalism for instance; there are glimmers of Murdochian Marxism throughout *Sovereignty*). In such cases, the lives that such false pictures make possible can at best only make room for false forms of transcendence. “False conceptions are often generalized, stereotyped and unconnected. True conceptions combine just modes of judgment and ability to connect with an increased perception of detail” (SGC, p.96).

At the same time, Murdoch takes it that we really do have an *intransitive* conception of the Good. And this is where she agrees with G.E. Moore. The Good is sovereign. We are *certain* of its existence and primitively oriented in its direction. Despite our fallen, easily corruptible human nature, despite our limited ideas, infinitely perfectible, we feel it’s magnetic pull. This is metaphysics: “there is more than this”; “the spark is real” (GG, p.73).²³

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¹ Some exceptions are Merritt (2017, p.9) and Bagnoli (2012, p.222). I will use the abbreviations (IP) for ‘The Idea of Perfection’; (GG) for ‘On ‘God’ and ‘Good’; (SGC) for ‘The Sovereignty of the Good over Other Concepts’. MGM stands for *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and E&M for *Existentialists and Mystics*.

² Bob Stern notes in email correspondence that Kant expresses the same worry about moral exemplars in the *Groundwork* 4:408-9 – could it be that Murdoch is thinking here of Kant?

³ See ‘On God and Good’ (1970, p.53)

⁴ In November 1982, Murdoch records in her journal that she has received the kind of letter she’d been hoping for after her Gifford Lecture: it records the impact her lectures had had on the Gifford audience as only matched by two other lecturers, one of whom was Donald MacKinnon. Thank you to Dayna Miller, archivist at the Murdoch Archives in Kingston for help with this reference.

⁵ Quoted in Stern (2007, p.128), fn 38.

⁶ Quoted in Stern (2007, p.128), fn 40.

⁷ For discussion see Stern (2016).

⁸ My discussion is hugely elementary – I refer the interested reader to Bob Stern’s brilliant (2007) paper for detailed and lucid exposition.

⁹ Also quoted in Stern (2007, p.124).

¹⁰ Thank you to Bob Stern for pointing out this fragility which is plainly relevant to an adequate development of the position I sketch in this paper, but which I do not treat here.

¹¹ See Stern (2007, p.122).

¹² It might be wondered whether Murdoch is reading Hegel through Bradley here – a matter for scholars of all three.

¹³ Her friend Richard Wollheim, a little younger than her, ends up writing one. Bradley is somewhat ‘in the air’.

¹⁴ All of this paper is deeply indebted to correspondence with Bob Stern over the course of two years – including detailed comments and reflection on the present piece.

¹⁵ Letter to Hal Lidderdale, 1948.

¹⁶ McTaggart also wrote on Hegel’s *Logic* – there is a question then to what extent Geach’s reception of Wittgenstein, particularly in *Mental Acts*, has Hegelian undertones.

¹⁷ Here the point is that one cannot be *what Shakespeare is* – i.e. a great writer – by copying him.

¹⁸ For Bob Stern, a better Wittgensteinian analogy *would* use the notion of resemblance – namely the idea of *family* resemblance. The concept of a game (for instance) might be treated as a concrete universal insofar as all its concrete manifestations cannot be reduced to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, though they all resemble *in some way*. It is true that the metre stick analogy does not line up so favourably with this alternative, since it might be thought that a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for being a metre stick *is* to resemble the standard in Paris. The way I pitched the analogy with the metre stick is however different. On a class conception, which admittedly is somewhat artefactual (and here the game conception is, I think, to be preferred) it is allowed that different metre sticks are *individual* metre sticks insofar as they particularisations of the universal, metre stick, which is essentially concrete. But my analogy was meant to emphasize rather a conception of a universal in the form of a world, albeit read through a Wittgensteinian lens. So understood, the idea of a game is treated as what sustains and makes possible a huge range of interlocking practices and the associated skills, and indeed virtues and moral concepts associated with those practices. On this view, while there is no family resemblance between a child playing tiddlywinks, an octogenarian checking the racing results in a local newspaper and an adolescent’s dejection at not being selected for a squad because of a tendency to cheat, those events, episodes and histories are related. A different way of approaching this same thought is to consider what areas of human life would vanish with the loss of the concept of a game. It is hardly imaginable. What a game is, amounts to, on this view, is not limited to a

clustering of various activities whose particular instantiations might intelligibly fall (including metaphorically) under the description 'game'.

¹⁹ It might be objected that there are *not* many different ways to measure. Yes, I can measure metres in lots of different contexts, but insofar as I am measuring *in metres*, there is not variability here. My point however concerns measuring practices, which are multifarious and which can be more or less expert. The thought is that the idea of a standard sustains the intelligibility of these which are interrelated because of the standard – 'in light of it'.

²⁰ For excellent discussion of this charge see Søndergaard Christensen (2019)

²¹ Or online here: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nash-totes-meer-dead-sea-n05717>

²² See especially 'The Sublime and the Good', and 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', in *E&M*.

²³ Thank you to Bob Stern for his extraordinary intellectual generosity; to both Andre Muller and Andrew Bowyer for sharing their work on Donald MacKinnon with me, which I think promises to unlock so much in Murdoch; to Dayna Millar for helping me with material in the Murdoch archives (I'm so grateful); to my colleagues Joe Saunders and Jeremy Dunham and everyone who participated in the Durham Concrete Universal Workshop; to the organisers and audience at the Murdoch Centenary Conference in Kingston, Canada, and particularly to David Bakhurst, Lesley Jamieson and Jacqueline Maxwell; and especially to Rachael Wiseman for insightful conversation on all of this over many years.