

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published in *Religious Studies* 49 (4) (2013), pp. 459-480, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0034412512000340> First published online 23 November 2012.

‘Ontological’ Arguments from Experience: Daniel A. Dombrowski, Iris Murdoch,  
and the Nature of Divine Reality

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Abstract: Dombrowski and Murdoch offer versions of the ontological argument which aim to avoid two types of objection – those concerned with the nature of the divine, and those concerned with the move from an abstract concept to a mind-independent reality. For both, the nature of the concept of God/Good entails its instantiation, and both supply a supporting argument from experience. It is only Murdoch who successfully negotiates the transition from an abstract concept to the instantiation of that concept, however, and this is achieved by means of an ontological argument from moral experience which, in a reversal of the Kantian doctrine, depends ultimately on a form of the cosmological argument.

## Introduction

The centuries since Plato (1945, 509D-511E, 221-226)<sup>1</sup> and, more famously, Anselm (1962a, chs 2-4 and 1962b) formulated the proof of divine reality which Kant called ‘ontological’ (1929, 500) have produced many variations of the argument. At the end of his monumental study, Graham Oppy declares that all of them ‘are completely worthless’ (1995, 199). In this paper, I will suggest that we can develop from the ontological arguments of Daniel A. Dombrowski (2006) and Iris Murdoch (1992, chs 13 and 19)<sup>2</sup> a version of the argument which is not vulnerable to two types of

objection which apply to many, if not all, other forms of the argument – i.e., those concerned with the nature of God, and those concerned with the move from an abstract concept to a mind-independent reality.

### Dombrowski's ontological argument

Anselm's argument may be characterised as the claim that God exists necessarily, since God would not otherwise be 'that, than which nothing greater can be conceived.'<sup>3</sup> Gaunilo of Marmoutier objected that the argument fails because we cannot conceive of God. This is because we do not understand God's nature and, since God is unique, we cannot infer this from the nature of some other reality (1962, 306-307). A similar objection is found in Aquinas (2008, I, 1:2), in response to whom Dombrowski remarks that the ontological argument requires only 'a comprehension of the abstraction that God is that than which no greater can be conceived: no comprehension of the essence of God beyond this level of understanding is required' (2006, 19). Dombrowski pursues a related objection, however, rejecting the ontological arguments of Thomas Morris, Katherin Rogers and Alvin Plantinga on the grounds that the 'classical' conception of God with which they begin is incoherent. Dombrowski argues that the religious tradition has privileged one list of divine attributes without good reason; for example, a God whose omniscience entails detailed knowledge of the future and whose omnipotence entails that creatures have no power is difficult to reconcile with human freedom.<sup>4</sup> On his own 'neoclassical' or process view, there is no conflict between divine and human knowledge and power since the divine and human can work together: 'God is seen as possessing maximal power that is compatible with the other divine attributes, especially omnibenevolence,

but not as possessing *omnipotence* if this means that other existents ultimately have no power of their own' (141).

Gaunilo is, however, better known for highlighting the second difficulty – i.e., that Anselm's argument implies that there is no distinction between having an object in the understanding, and understanding that it is instantiated. This is illustrated by the famous *reductio ad absurdum*; just as we cannot prove the existence of an island which is 'more excellent than all other countries' by arguing that it is more excellent to exist in reality than in the understanding alone, so we cannot, by similar means, prove the existence of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived (1962, 304-309).

As Dombrowski has pointed out (2006, 122), Gaunilo's 'perfect island' objection is not unrelated to Kant's famous objection to Descartes' version of the argument that 'being' is not a real predicate, and that there is therefore no difference between the concept of 100 existing thalers and the concept of 100 merely possible thalers (1929, 504-506). Dombrowski suggests, however, that the existence of both islands and thalers is contingent whereas, for Anselm and Descartes, the existence of God is necessary. Contingent existence might – or might not – be a predicate, but necessary existence necessarily is (2003, 273). Much subsequent discussion has centred on the question of whether the nature of God's existence is such that, for God at least, non-existence is inconceivable. Any modern version of the ontological argument must therefore endeavour to show how this can be so.

Dombrowski attempts to formulate a version of the ontological argument which avoids the difficulties outlined above. The fundamental premise of his argument is similar to that of Norman Malcolm's – i.e., the assertion that, since the existence of a perfect being cannot be contingent, it is either impossible or necessary (Malcolm

(2003), 273-275). Malcolm claims that God's existence is not impossible on the grounds that the concept of God is neither self-contradictory nor logically absurd; God's existence is therefore necessary – the only remaining possibility (275). While it is not impossible for us to think of God as existing, it could, however, be argued that it is neither contradictory nor absurd for us to think of God as not existing – as Gaunilo pointed out (1962, 304 and 310).<sup>5</sup> Plantinga offers a more complex version of Malcolm's argument. For Plantinga, it is possible that there is a being with maximal greatness – i.e., one which has maximal excellence in every possible world. Since our world is a possible world, it must contain a being with maximal greatness (Plantinga (2007) 181-193).<sup>6</sup> Plantinga nevertheless acknowledges that only someone who accepts his main premise – that it is possible that there is a being with maximal greatness – would accept his argument (193). This seems to require an independent proof of God's existence.

Drawing heavily on the work of Charles Hartshorne, Dombrowski argues that God's existence is either impossible or necessary and that, since other arguments for God's existence, especially the argument from religious experience, show that God's existence is not impossible, God's existence must be necessary (2006, 96-97). For Dombrowski, it is not the case that God's existence is necessary only if God exists (126). The necessity in question is unconditional *de re* necessity; if we have a coherent concept of God, the nature of that concept entails its instantiation in any possible world. Dombrowski claims that, unlike other versions of the argument, his own version does not attempt to move from an abstract concept to a concrete reality. Instead, it moves from an abstract concept to the abstract conclusion that God exists necessarily in some concrete state (86). In other words, Dombrowski acknowledges that we cannot affirm the existence of a clearly defined object; we can affirm only that

some kind of God exists necessarily. We can know *that* God exists, but we cannot know exactly *how* God exists.<sup>7</sup>

Yet again, however, the argument seems to fall into the trap encountered by Malcolm and Plantinga. Dombrowski attempts to provide a basis for the claim that God's existence is not impossible – i.e., an argument from religious experience – but, given the well-known objections to this argument (concerning the reliability of testimony, the conflicting claims of believers from different traditions, the cogency of alternative explanations for alleged experiences of the divine, and so on), it appears to offer little support for such a claim. Further, even if the argument from religious experience shows that the existence of God is not impossible, the desired conclusion is reached only if one allows that divine necessity is the only alternative. Dombrowski attempts to support such a view by suggesting that, if the existence of God is not impossible, then the idea of God is necessarily instantiated, and 'an idea *is* an experience of a certain kind, with the idea of perfection being a very particular sort of experience that has to be taken seriously' (127).<sup>8</sup> This seems to imply that there is nothing beyond the experience of the concept with which the concept corresponds, however, an implication which, elsewhere (e.g. 56), he clearly rejects.

A second difficulty for Dombrowski's position lies behind his claim that the nature of the concept of God entails the instantiation of that concept in any possible world. If the concept of God is such that we are unable to think of it as not instantiated, the supporting argument from religious experience is rendered superfluous. If the concept of God, by its very nature, must be instantiated, we need no longer be concerned with the question of whether its existence can be shown to be possible. Nevertheless, questions remain about the nature of that concept and whether it is necessarily

instantiated, and these are, perhaps, addressed more effectively by Murdoch's version of the ontological argument.

#### Murdoch's ontological argument

Murdoch, like Dombrowski, has reservations about the concept of God as it has often been understood, although her reasons for rejecting it are different. She argues that belief in a personal God is untenable, partly because she thinks that scientific developments have made it more difficult for us to accept the supernatural elements of religious belief (1992, 159, 459), and partly because she thinks that belief in a personal God offers us false consolation in the face of life's difficulties (106, 119-20, 442);<sup>9</sup> the truly moral person must confront the terrible reality of suffering and act well without hope of reward – she must be good 'for nothing' (1985, 71).

Given the egocentric nature of the human psyche (51), this is very difficult to achieve. Following Plato, Murdoch therefore recommends contemplation of the Good, a transcendent reality which can help us to see other people and their situations as they really are, unclouded by our own illusions, and to act appropriately; the Good is 'an active principle of truthful cognition and moral understanding in the soul ... a "reality principle" whereby we find our way about the world' (1992, 474).<sup>10</sup>

The Good shares many of the attributes traditionally ascribed to God, defined by Murdoch as a 'single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention' (1985, 55). She rejects the view that we should retain the word 'God' to refer to a non-personal 'symbol of an absolute demand ... a traditional image of commitment to religious values' (1992, 327, 143-144), however. For Murdoch, "'God" is the name of a supernatural person' (419) and the use of this word to refer to

any other kind of spiritual reality leads to confusion. Nevertheless, while the Good is not to be understood as ‘God in disguise’, it is ‘what the old God symbolised’ (428). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Murdoch appeals to what she regards as a version of the ontological argument to support her notion of the Good.

Like Malcolm, Hartshorne, and Dombrowski, she identifies two forms of the argument in Anselm’s *Proslogion*. The first is the argument from perfection of Chapter 2 in which Anselm maintains that, since God is ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’ and it is greater to exist in reality than in the mind alone, God must therefore exist. The second is the argument from necessary existence from Chapters 3 and 4 of the *Proslogion* and the reply to Gaunilo in which, according to Murdoch, Anselm claims that he is ‘not speaking of something which is, or happens to be, greater than all other beings, but of something than which a greater cannot be conceived, and whose non-existence is impossible’ (1992, 395). Murdoch sometimes refers to these arguments together as Anselm’s ‘first’ or ‘logical’ argument (e.g., 404).

Murdoch notes Malcolm’s claim that Kant was mistaken in understanding the proposition ‘God is a necessary being’ to be equivalent to the conditional proposition ‘If God exists then He necessarily exists’, which implies that it is possible that God does not exist (Malcolm (2003), 278, quoted in Murdoch (1992), 409). She also notes Hartshorne’s claim that ‘We should, instead, say “If the phrase ‘necessary being’ has meaning, then what it means exists necessarily and if it exists necessarily then *a fortiori* it exists”’ (Hartshorne (1941), 312-313, quoted in Murdoch (1992), 409). For Malcolm and Hartshorne, the nature of God entails that God is not like Kant’s triangle, the possible existence of which can be denied without contradiction. The idea of necessary existence is uniquely God’s property, and it is not relevant to point out

that ‘in other cases (triangles or islands) existence is not a predicate’ (Murdoch (1992), 409).

Thus, according to Murdoch, a reformulation of the hypothetical interpretation of the argument from necessary existence yields the argument that, ‘if the concept of God is meaningful (not self-contradictory) God must necessarily exist’ (410). But, she asks, what counts as meaning? Is the concept merely *in intellectu*? She notes that ‘[o]f course the word “God” means something, sentences containing it are usually not nonsense, the concept has a history open to believers and unbelievers’ (410). Murdoch rejects Malcolm’s view that the concept of God is necessary only within the language-game of religious belief, however. This, she believes, is ‘a wrong turning’, ‘a perilous excursion’ (413); Malcolm rescues the ontological argument from the criticisms of Kant, ‘but is not the argument which is thus rescued still an empty one with merely grammatical merits?’ (412).

Instead, Murdoch holds the view that the concept of God is connected with absolute moral values, values which cannot be ‘thought away’ from human life (412), and this is supported by a supplementary argument in Anselm, ‘a metaphysical argument which is also an appeal to experience’ (395). Murdoch acknowledges that both Malcolm and Hartshorne offer, although without significant discussion, ancillary arguments from experience (408). Murdoch rejects Malcolm’s argument that it is the experience of overwhelming guilt, giving rise to the need for forgiveness, which has led human beings to form the concept of God, however, on the grounds that the extreme state of mind which Malcolm describes is not experienced by all human beings, and that there is no guarantee that forgiveness is available. By contrast, her own argument appeals to experience which is available everywhere, to everyone. The origins of her argument may be found in Chapter 8 of Anselm’s reply to Gaunilo,



which, she says, supports the ‘logical’ argument that that which is perfect, the ‘object’ of our best thoughts, must, in some sense, exist,<sup>11</sup> by claiming that

[e]verything that is less good, in so far as it is good, is like the greater good. It is therefore evident to any rational mind that by ascending from the lesser good to the greater we can form a considerable notion of a being than which a greater is inconceivable (Anselm (1962b), 325, quoted in Murdoch (1992), 394).

Murdoch notes that this argument from moral experience, sometimes referred to as the ‘degrees of goodness argument’, may also be stated as ‘a more homely *ad hominem* appeal to our sense of God (Good) as discovered everywhere in the world’ (1992, 404-405). In the experiences of everyday life, ‘we are continually shown the reality of what is better and the illusory nature of what is worse. We learn of perfection and imperfection through our ability to understand what we see as an image or shadow of something better which we cannot yet see’ (405). This is sometimes referred to as the ‘ubiquity of goodness argument’. For Murdoch, our consciousness of failure can also be a source of knowledge: ‘We are constantly in the process of recognising the falseness of our ‘goods’, and the unimportance of what we deem important ... We find out in the most minute details of our lives that the good is the real’ (Murdoch (1992), 430).<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Murdoch argues that the ontological argument might enable us to claim a ‘uniquely necessary status for moral value as something (uniquely) impossible to be thought away from human experience, and as in a special sense, if conceived of, known as real.’ This, Murdoch thinks, ‘might be associated with concepts of religion which reject a personal God and other supernatural beliefs’ (396). Although she does not wish to offer a new interpretation of the word ‘God’, she does want to preserve

‘religion’, defined as ‘a mode of belief in the unique sovereign place of goodness or virtue in human life’, as she thinks that there can be ‘a religious outlook, religious preoccupations, a religious psychology which is detachable from dogma’ (426):

Religion reveals and celebrates virtue and also exhibits the sense in which its place in human life is mysterious. An ultimate religious ‘belief’ must be that even if all ‘religions’ were to blow away like mist, the necessity of virtue and the reality of the good would remain. This is what the Ontological Proof tries to “prove” (428).

For Murdoch, Christ is ‘a personal Ontological Proof’ who is ‘partly a creation of art’ in that he is ‘a compact of everything we know about goodness’; he points towards ‘the mystery of good’ (429), although he is not, himself, perfect.<sup>13</sup> She suggests that Christ might be seen as occupying a place within Christianity which is analogous to that of the Buddha, thus enabling Christianity to preserve and renew itself by changing into something which can be believed, as it has always done (1992, 419).

In summary, then, Murdoch has argued that Anselm’s ‘logical’ argument of *Proslogion* Chapters 2-4 shows that the Good exists necessarily, and that we can derive from Chapter 8 of his reply to Gaunilo two arguments which support this: First, the ‘degrees of goodness argument’ shows that we can deduce from our experience of imperfect goodness the existence of something better, of which we are as yet able to see only an image or a shadow. Secondly, the ‘ubiquity of goodness argument’ suggests that experience shows us ‘the uniquely *unavoidable* nature of God (Good ...), its omnipresence, its purity and separateness from our fallen world, in which its magnetic force is everywhere perceptible. God either exists necessarily or is impossible. All our experience shows that he exists’ (405).

## Objections to Murdoch's ontological argument: Heather Widdows

It was suggested earlier that Dombrowski's argument is no more successful than earlier versions of the ontological argument because he relies on support from an argument from religious experience which that argument is unable to provide. At first sight, Murdoch's argument for the reality of the Good seems less vulnerable to a parallel objection; whereas experiences of God may be mistaken, we clearly do live in a world containing many kinds of goodness. Generally speaking, however, those who doubt the inference from an experience to a divine cause doubt not the reality of the experience but the validity of the inference which is made on the basis of that experience. Similarly, although we undoubtedly experience goodness in all its varieties, it may be the nature of that which is inferred from this experience which gives cause for concern.

Heather Widdows is particularly unsympathetic to Murdoch's ontological argument which, she thinks, fails to support belief in either God or the Good; it may help to clarify the nature of the Good, but it is not effective as an argument for its existence. Widdows claims that using the argument and necessary existence to assert that goodness is 'a constant certainty of the human condition and the enduring factor of the human quest ... takes the reader directly into the old debate about predicates and attributes which has surrounded the argument from its inception' (2005, 85). Some suggest that talk of the possession of attributes implies the existence of an object or being to which they belong, and this, she thinks, leads the reader to think of the Good as an object. Widdows therefore wonders whether Murdoch 'might have achieved her aim more easily by avoiding Anselm's argument altogether, especially given the

contempt in which many philosophers and theologians hold it, regarding it as little more than a word game' (85). Murdoch's fundamental point is that goodness is an essential part of experience, but, Widdows suggests,

[t]hose who cannot read her ontological argument without the associated criticisms may be best advised to disregard her ontological argument in favour of her other arguments – from perfection, and the Platonic degrees of goodness argument – which may be more helpful in establishing her realism and certainly less likely to give the impression that the good is an empirical object (85).

Widdows' main misgiving about Murdoch's ontological argument, then, is that, for Murdoch, existence is an attribute, the possession of which may be taken – by some, at least – to imply that the Good is an object. But the key to interpreting Murdoch's argument lies in her understanding of necessary existence as different in kind from contingent existence. Neither God nor the Good exist in the same way as islands or triangles, but this does not entail their non-existence. Widdows' objection perhaps arises because she sees the argument from perfection<sup>14</sup> and the Platonic degrees of goodness argument as separate from Murdoch's ontological argument when they are, as I have suggested in Section II, integral parts of that argument. For Murdoch, the ontological argument is not simply an attempt to move from a concept to the mind-independent reality of that concept by adding 'existence' to a list of attributes. It is, rather, an invitation to examine the concept of a perfect God/Good and to observe that a case for its existence may be supported by our moral experience.

Admittedly, there is some ambiguity in Murdoch's writings. While she refers to Plato's Good as 'an impersonal object of love' (Murdoch (1992), 344), however, she also explicitly denies that the Good is 'a particular thing among other things' (1992,

38; see also 405), and notes that ‘in an important sense goodness *must* be an idea’ (478; quoted in Widdows (2005), 82). Widdows acknowledges this, suggesting that, although Murdoch sometimes refers to the Good as ‘an *object* of attention’, ‘the fact that the good is not an object forms part of her reason for claiming that the proof works for good but not for God’ (82). Widdows objects that Murdoch has misconstrued the concept of God since, as Fergus Kerr has pointed out (1997, 75), there is a strong tradition in Christianity which teaches that God is not an object either. She claims that, if Murdoch were to accept this, it would weaken her distinction between God and Good. Murdoch does, indeed, refer to God as an object (e.g., 1985, 55 and 1992, 455), but her claim that God’s existence is not like that of islands or triangles suggests that God, for Murdoch, is no more ‘an “object” in the material sense’ (Widdows (2005), 82) than the Good. Thus, Murdoch’s distinction between God and the Good may not be, as Widdows suggests, a distinction between an object and a non-object. Rather, the distinction may be, as Widdows implies that it must be, between a personal God and an impersonal Good. Given the difficulties which she perceives to be associated with belief in the former, for Murdoch it is the latter of these which is more plausibly underpinned by a version of the ontological argument.

Objections to Murdoch’s ontological argument: Stephen Mulhall

Stephen Mulhall’s assessment of Murdoch’s argument is initially more positive than that of Widdows. He accepts that Murdoch shows, against Kant, that God’s existence is not like that of physical objects. And, just as Anselm argues that God’s existence is necessary, so Murdoch shows that our sense of value is indispensable and points

towards a perfection lying beyond our experience. Thus, Murdoch ‘detects and aims to recover far more of metaphysical and moral value from ... [the ontological argument] than most philosophers’ (2007, 30). But Mulhall is concerned about Murdoch’s rejection of a personal God and, in particular, her rejection of belief in God as Father and God as Son. Mulhall acknowledges the difficulties associated with thinking of God as Father, and in particular the danger of seeing God as a projection of a consoling human fantasy. Murdoch thinks that the only way to avoid this threat is to dispense with this way of talking about God altogether, and yet she also holds that ‘God is not in any way to be grasped in terms appropriate to entities within the world of our experience’ (31). Mulhall notes that any Christian who accepts this will agree that it is idolatrous to regard God’s fatherhood as an ‘infinitely magnified version of human parenthood’ (31), and concludes, first, that Murdoch’s critique of the traditional conception of God the Father does not require her to step outside of the Christian tradition; any believer would share her misgivings about the picture of God she describes. Secondly, there may be another way of understanding this use of language about God which avoids the difficulty. Mulhall suggests that God’s fatherhood expresses the idea that we are God’s children and that our existence is a gift, an expression of love understood as a kind of *kenosis*, self-emptying, in which God comes to see the point of His own existence as lying outside of himself. On such a view, Christianity asks us to view our nature as ‘calling us to express such loving self-abnegation in our own mode of life’; it might therefore ‘actually support the mode of moral perfectionism so central to Murdoch’s own thinking’ (31). Mulhall suggests that talk of God as Son can also be framed in language which side-steps Murdoch’s misgivings. For Mulhall, the incarnation articulates ‘the conviction that not only human reality but reality as such is not essentially distant from that of God’

(32); God's creation 'is essentially consonant with, even expressive of, His own nature' (*ibid*). In Christianity, perfection has become fully real (33).

Mulhall suggests, however, that the most significant problem with Murdoch's view is that 'her sense of the ubiquity of goodness is insufficiently earned' (33). Murdoch does seem to concede this in the penultimate chapter of the *Metaphysics*, 'Void', where she raises the possibility that there may be some experiences – 'black misery, bereavement, remorse, frustrated talent, loneliness, humiliation, depression, secret woe' (Murdoch (1992), 498-499) – which mitigate against her view that the Good is 'always and everywhere magnetic, that loving attention to the world will attract us to a clearer image of reality, that our transformative energies are never entirely in abeyance' (Mulhall (2007), 33). According to Mulhall, Murdoch claims that such episodes pass, and that, as Simone Weil suggested, they sometimes give spiritual succour by teaching us that we are nothing. But Mulhall points out that Weil was working within a Christian framework; Christ's despair on the cross expressed affliction, but also 'a moment in the internal dialogue of God with God' (33). Since God can suffer God-forsakenness, this 'recuperates even this most extreme crucifixion of the human self for the work of spiritual pilgrimage' (34). Thus, Mulhall argues, our ability to maintain 'a perfectionist conception of the human self' (34) depends upon the teachings of Christianity, and ultimately upon the person of Christ.

Mulhall's first objection aims to show that Murdoch's position is closer to that of theism, specifically Christian theism as traditionally understood, than she, herself, would care to admit. He agrees with Murdoch that divine fatherhood is not to be understood as a magnified version of human parenthood, and commends to us a metaphorical interpretation which conveys the thought that our existence is a gift of God's self to us which we must emulate by giving ourselves to others. Similarly, the

idea of divine sonship shows us that God's creation expresses God's nature; the person of Christ demonstrates the reality of perfection. But Mulhall's metaphorical interpretation of divine fatherhood seems to imply an element of divine agency which, given her rejection of interpretations of the divine as personal, Murdoch would be unlikely to accept – unless the notion of divine agency is also understood in a metaphorical sense. Mulhall's interpretation of divine sonship is, however, reminiscent both of Murdoch's ubiquity of goodness argument, and of her understanding of Christ as 'a personal ontological proof' – although, for Murdoch, Christ points towards perfection without, himself, being perfect.

Mulhall's claim that Murdoch's 'sense of the ubiquity of goodness' is 'insufficiently earned' is more problematic. If, as Mulhall suggests, God's creation expresses God's nature, the evils which Murdoch lists in the penultimate chapter of the *Metaphysics* are no less a challenge for his own view.<sup>15</sup> And Murdoch perhaps concedes too much when she acknowledges that some experiences mitigate against the ubiquity of goodness; although many experience terrible suffering, the world also contains numerous examples of the goodness on which Murdoch bases her argument. In addition, Mulhall focuses on the ubiquity of goodness version of her argument rather than the Platonic degrees of goodness argument, which may be less vulnerable to his objection. The degrees of goodness argument requires only examples of goodness which we can place in order of increasing goodness, and from which we might deduce the existence of a perfect standard. The existence of evil does not necessarily prevent us from making this deduction – and the Good thus deduced is the means by which evil, and the suffering to which it gives rise, may be resisted or alleviated.<sup>16</sup>

Mulhall also objects that, while Murdoch draws on Weil for the view that 'the void can give spiritual succour, insofar as it teaches us that we are absolutely nothing'



(Mulhall (2007), 33),<sup>17</sup> this makes sense only within Weil's Christian framework, in which even God, in the form of Christ on the cross, experiences affliction which becomes an opportunity for spiritual pilgrimage. By the time of the *Metaphysics*, however, Murdoch concludes that 'it is possible, but very often just too difficult, to "learn" from deep despair' (1992, 501-502), and recommends instead that we should 'hold on to what has really happened and not cover it with imagining how we are to unhappen it ... What is needed here, and is so difficult to achieve, is a new orientation of our desires, a re-education of our instinctive feelings' (503). We should seek a reorientation and relation to goodness: 'a deep, or a real, or a proper, recovery demands ... some sort of moral activity, a making a spiritual use of one's desolation' (503).

Objections to Murdoch's ontological argument: Peter Byrne

While the existence of the Good may not be like that of physical objects, it remains legitimate to ask what kind of existence it does have. Peter Byrne (1998) argues that Murdoch's Good is no more than a name for human aspirations. Since it does not causally account for anything, there is no reason to believe in the mind-independence which the ontological argument allegedly supports, and it is thereby distanced from traditional interpretations of theism.

Byrne points out that, for Murdoch, human life has no external point or *telos*, and human beings are subject to necessity and chance (Byrne (1998), 111, referring to Murdoch (1985), 78-79). Without an external point or *telos*, goodness is only good if it is good for nothing (Murdoch (1985), 71), and, for Byrne, this 'implies that we positively require good acts to produce no visible good for anyone in the long run,

especially not ourselves, in order to see them as good' (1998, 112). Further, if we accept that everything that happens is subject to necessity and chance, we have no adequate response to the secular problem of evil which questions whether the human good can be attained by means of good acts (112).

Byrne argues that the central problem which arises from Murdoch's rejection of teleology is that 'the concept of the Good seems to refer ... to something which is inert ... There should be something the Good *does*' (112-113). If that which is real is that which has causal power, the Good is not real because there is nothing for which it causally accounts; if the Good existed independently of our perception of it, human beings would not be subject to necessity and chance. Thus, Byrne thinks, for Murdoch, the transcendent makes no contribution to the structure of reality, and this raises the question of 'how far she can pretend to have preserved anything like the spirit of the ontological proof' (114). For Byrne, Murdoch's proof does not point towards divine things because perfection and value do not have the kind of existence which would put them at the heart and ground of everything that exists (115). On Byrne's view, a religion must provide an answer to the secular problem of evil by showing that the structure of reality is such that our moral actions are appropriately rewarded; in doing so, it preserves a minimal metaphysical realism. Since Murdoch's view makes no link between moral action and the nature of reality, it cannot be regarded as a form of religious belief.

It is not the case that that there is nothing which the Good does, however. I mentioned above the possibility that, on Murdoch's view, the notion of divine agency might be understood in a metaphorical sense. In response to Byrne, I would suggest that there are at least three ways in which, on Murdoch's view, a metaphorical interpretation of divine agency might be understood.

First, the existence of the Good explains our ability to recognise degrees of goodness. An interpretation of Anselm's argument similar to that of Murdoch is offered by Gene Fendt (2005, 149-166). According to Fendt, Anselm's argument, as it is found in both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*, aims to discover 'the evident presence of God in any judgement of value' (150). Developing an argument first put forward by Plato, Fendt asks us to consider five men, each of whom exhibits a different level of justice. He suggests that Anselm's point is that it is Justice itself which enables us to place these on a scale of increasing justice (152). Justice itself is not on the scale of justice, however; that through which we judge the variety of natures 'must exist in a way that is different from the way the five exemplary men exist ... because it is through Justice that we understand them and place them on the scale' (156). Fendt suggests that all human beings have the ability to recognise degrees of justice; if someone cannot or will not acknowledge that some things are more just than others, he recommends that we should 'put out his left eye – and see if he complains about something more than pain' (161). The same argument applies to all goods; we can 'start this meditation from anywhere on earth and get to God' (157). To deny the existence of that through which any scale of greatness exists and can be known is to render oneself unable to make any judgements at all (161). Thus, Gaunilo's 'lost island is ... entirely lost: it touches the world at no point; it is but a figment of the fool's imagination', but "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" does touch the world at one point: your conscience, which testifies that it recognizes an order of justice, good, etc.' (162).<sup>18</sup>

The reality of the Good, then, is a condition for our ability to place the varieties of goodness which we experience on a scale of increasing goodness. Although we sometimes disagree about the rankings of different types of goodness, even our

disagreements may be taken to imply the existence of a standard of perfection the nature of which our opponents have failed to understand.

A second function of the Good is to help us to overcome our ‘natural’ egoism, a feature of Murdoch’s account which has been influential in subsequent developments in Virtue Ethics (e.g. Taylor (1989), 3). Simon Blackburn objects that Murdoch’s moral vision is repellent because it ‘exalt[s] the mystery of the necessary and unconditional Good by debasing the everyday’ (1992, 3), but this overlooks her claim that attention to the Good enables ‘the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly’ (Murdoch (1985), 54). Contemplation of ‘the everyday’ – perhaps by means of something analogous to prayer, or meditation (e.g., 1985, 54-56 and 83, and 1992, 73, 245 and 448) or with the aid of great works of art (e.g., 1985, 85-87) which she describes at one point as ‘a sort of Ontological Proof’ (1992, 429) – can point us towards true goodness and this, once we have understood it to the best of our ability, can enable us to behave more ethically in the realm of the everyday.<sup>19</sup>

So the Good, first, accounts for our ability to recognize degrees of goodness, and, secondly, helps us to overcome our ‘natural’ selfishness. Thirdly, as we have already argued in response to Mulhall, contemplation of the Good and the action to which it gives rise is a means by which evil may be resisted and suffering may be alleviated. Byrne is, of course, correct to note that Murdoch’s Good does not ensure that the human good is ‘attainable through doing good acts’ (112), but this does not mean that she fails to address the ‘problem’ of evil. Byrne suggests that, for Plato<sup>20</sup> and Kant, in order to solve the secular problem of evil there must be some guarantee that human beings will achieve happiness in proportion to their moral strivings<sup>21</sup> and that, in this respect, there is a difference between their views and those of Murdoch.<sup>22</sup> But

Murdoch does not understand the secular problem of evil in the same way. She acknowledges that, without a personal God, there is no problem of evil in the traditional sense, but there remains ‘the almost insuperable difficulty of looking properly at evil and suffering’ (1985, 73) – i.e. the difficulty of representing evil and suffering accurately to ourselves, without introducing any element of consolation. For Murdoch, attention to the Good helps us to understand the true nature of evil and suffering, and is the means by which we attempt to overcome the challenges which they present. Clearly, there must be some expectation of success in at least some cases for this to be a worthwhile pursuit, but there is no need for success on every occasion. Further, any success which might be achieved must be understood as an increase in virtue, and not as a reward of some kind for oneself. Of course we may experience personal benefits as a consequence of virtuous action. As Byrne notes (41), most of our actions are likely to affect people from whose flourishing we may derive some satisfaction. Further, as we noted above, moral activity can enable us to focus away from our own concerns and thereby to endure or recover from terrible suffering (Murdoch (1992), 503). Any such benefits are necessarily secondary, however; it is not merely the case that there may be no reward, but that there should be no expectation of reward. Indeed, while Byrne sees death and chance as fatal to Murdoch’s position, Murdoch herself thinks that ‘there is a special link between the concept of Good and the ideas of Death and Chance ... A genuine sense of mortality enables us to see virtue as the only thing of worth’ (1985, 99). For Murdoch, the anticipation of a reward for virtuous action is incompatible with true virtue; contemplation of the Good helps us to be good, not to achieve a reward for our goodness.

Thus, Byrne thinks that the Good has no referent because there is nothing that guarantees the success of moral endeavour, but I have argued that there is no need to see the Good as something which provides a guarantee of this kind in order to see it as an objective existent. On Murdoch's view, there is no *external* end or *telos*, in that there is no guarantee of moral progress or ultimate destination at which we will be appropriately rewarded for our actions, but this does not mean that our actions have no goal; as Murdoch herself suggests, 'there are properly many patterns and purposes within life' (1985, 79). Murdoch has not abandoned teleology, therefore; she has only abandoned teleology of what she regards as an objectionable kind.

#### The nature of the Good

I have argued for the reality of the Good on the grounds that there are at least three things which the Good does: it explains our ability to make moral judgements, it helps us to overcome human selfishness, and it addresses the secular problem of evil. The nature of that reality is, however, still unclear. I have already noted Dombrowski's claim that his argument moves from an abstract concept to the abstract conclusion that God exists necessarily in some concrete state (2006, 86) – that we can know *that* God exists, but not *how* God exists. Murdoch, particularly in her use of the degrees of goodness argument, is perhaps more successful than Dombrowski in showing *that* God/Good exists. It might be to her advantage if, like Dombrowski, she cannot say exactly *how* it exists, as this might enable her to avoid the objection, common to many other versions of the ontological argument, that her argument attempts to move from an abstract concept to a concrete reality.

Murdoch herself notes the ‘indefinable and non-representable character’ of the Good (1985, 69 and 97-101). She suggests that we know some things about the Good; the ordinary person believes that some things are objectively better than others, and that we can make moral mistakes (97). We also recognize the existence of evil. But the concept of Good ‘remains obscure and mysterious. We see the world in the light of the Good, but what is the Good itself?’ (98). Good cannot be defined in terms of other virtues, such as Truth or Courage, since these must be defined in terms of the goodness which we are trying to elucidate. A refined Love is, perhaps, ‘practically identical with goodness’ (102), but Love cannot be identified with Good because, even when Love is purified, Good and Love have different functions;

Good is that which purifies Love. Murdoch argues that the Good is mysterious for three reasons. First, the world is ‘aimless, chancy and huge’ (100), which makes it impossible for us to comprehend all the ways in which virtue might be required of us. Secondly, human selfishness makes it difficult for us to recognise the Good; ‘If there were angels they might be able to define good but we would not understand the definition’ (99). And, thirdly, it is difficult to look at the Good because it is not like looking at other things. We have the idea that there is a Good, but we see only instantiations which point towards it; we do not and cannot know what the Good is like in itself (100).

Nevertheless, Murdoch’s writings do contain a number of positive references to the nature of the Good. In *The Sovereignty of Good* she suggests that the Good is a metaphor – ‘a very important metaphor and one which is not just a property of philosophy and not just a model’ (93; Plato’s Good is described as a metaphor at 71). As we saw earlier, Dombrowski seems to suggest that an idea of God might constitute an experience of God which, in turn, supports belief in God. In a similar manner,

Murdoch suggests that the Good is ‘real as an Idea’. For Murdoch, however, this Idea is ‘*also* incarnate in knowledge and work and love ... experience of the reality of good ... is a discovery of something independent of us’ (1992, 508). At the end of the *Metaphysics*, she seems to contradict this by suggesting that the first version of the ontological argument, the ‘proof by perfection’, supports the view that ‘[t]he good artist, the true lover, the dedicated thinker, the unselfish moral agent solving his problem ... can create the object of love’ (506). The contradiction may be only apparent, however, since the good artist creates, at best, an instantiation of the Good which points towards the metaphor of the Good. If the Good is a metaphor, it is, indeed, as Alan Jacobs suggests, ‘an imaginative creation’ (1995, 6), and, perhaps, something which we can make incarnate, but, for Murdoch, we do not create that to which the metaphor points.

The Good, then, represents our best attempt to describe something which must exist, but which most of us cannot fully understand or explain. Murdoch notes Wittgenstein’s claim that his propositions, the metaphysics of the *Tractatus*, are merely steps which, once we have understood them, we can climb beyond; we should throw away the ladder after we have climbed it (1961, 6:54; quoted in Murdoch (1992), 422). She invites us to compare Plato’s myths, which are not to be taken literally (1992, 423).<sup>23</sup> The implication would appear to be that the religious teachings which have been handed down to us, and even Murdoch’s own ideas about the Good, are also ladders to be thrown away after use.<sup>24</sup> But, as Murdoch acknowledges, few – except perhaps the saints and mystics to whom she frequently refers – will be able to be without ladders at all. Aquinas rejected the ontological argument because we do not know God’s essence and therefore cannot know that it includes existence (2008, I, 1:2), but it is not necessary for us to be able to conceive of God/Good as it is in itself;



we can deduce its existence from our limited experience and then struggle continuously towards a better understanding of its nature and what it requires of us.

Thus, for Murdoch, God is a symbol of the Good (1992, 428), which is itself a symbol for something we are unable fully to understand; although the Good is not God, both God and the Good are attempts to describe the same ultimate reality. But, while Murdoch rejects personal conceptions of the divine, she thinks that morality without religion is too abstract: ‘Religion symbolises high moral ideas which then travel with us and are more intimately and accessibly effective than the unadorned promptings of reason.’ (484) She recommends the use of religious imagery, which may be seen as images of a higher reality (451), or sources of spiritual energy (249), and thinks that religious rituals can serve as ‘vehicles of enlightenment, as exercises likely to strengthen good desires.’ (433)

But is belief in the Good a type of religious belief? I have argued against Byrne that, if religion entails realism, Murdoch’s view cannot be regarded as irreligious on the grounds that it depends on a non-realist outlook. If religion requires belief in a personal God, however, on her own terms, Murdoch’s view is not religious – although, even here, it might be argued that Murdoch’s Good shares, at least in a metaphorical sense, some of the characteristics of a personal deity.<sup>25</sup> But if, as Murdoch suggests, religion is defined as ‘the passionate love of the Good’ (1992, 326),<sup>26</sup> this clearly encompasses her own position. She describes her view as a ‘sort of mysticism ... a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good’ (1985, 74), and the ontological argument as ‘not exactly a proof but rather a clear assertion of faith ... which could only confidently be made on the basis of a certain amount of experience’ (63). If a religion explains how we are able to recognise goodness and helps us to do so by suggesting individual and/or communal practices

which enable us to become more virtuous, then perhaps it may reasonably be argued that contemplation of the Good and the conduct it requires of us can be regarded as a form of religious belief. With the assistance of Murdoch's ontological argument, it is a form of religious belief which might be more plausible than many of the alternatives.

## Conclusion

Following Dombrowski and Murdoch, I have suggested that it might be possible to construct an ontological argument for the existence of a divine reality which is not vulnerable to two of the most common objections to such arguments – i.e. those concerned with the nature of God, and those concerned with the difficulties associated with moving from an abstract concept to a mind-independent reality. For both Dombrowski and Murdoch, the responses to these objections are linked – i.e., it is the nature of the divine existence proposed which determines its reality. Both scholars recognise that a supporting argument from experience is required, however. Dombrowski follows Hartshorne in appealing to an argument from religious experience, but this can do no more than support the possibility of divine existence. Murdoch, like Malcolm, relies more plausibly on an argument from moral experience – although she appeals to our ability to recognise and rank examples of goodness, rather than to a desire for forgiveness, as Malcolm does. For Murdoch, experience shows us that that than which nothing greater can be conceived is a reality which, for most of us, can be conceived only by means of a metaphor, but which nonetheless explains our ability to make moral judgements and helps us to do so.

Since the idea of the Good is derived largely from our experience of goodness, this raises the question of whether such an argument can reasonably be described as ‘ontological’. Although Murdoch suggests that the Categorical Imperative was Kant’s substitute for the ontological argument (1992, 407),<sup>27</sup> clearly neither the Categorical Imperative nor her own argument conform to Kant’s definition of ontological arguments, which ‘abstract from all experience, and argue completely *a priori*, from mere concepts, to the existence of a supreme cause’ (Kant 1929, 500). It could, however, be argued that it is the *a posteriori* nature of Murdoch’s ontological argument which enables it to succeed where many others have failed. Whereas *a priori* versions of the argument falter if they attempt to move from an abstract concept to a mind-independent reality, it is human experience which enables Murdoch’s *a posteriori* argument for the existence of the Good to bridge that divide. It nonetheless remains ‘ontological’ in that it is the nature of the concept of Good which determines the nature of its reality; Murdoch merely suggests that we must examine our moral experience in order to understand this.

Fendt, however, suggests that this argument is not a type of ontological argument at all. He describes it as a ‘metaphysical’ argument, because ‘the possibility of ordering any set of goods depends on the necessity of there being a first good utterly superior to all the goods on the scale, superior *in kind* to all the goods on the scale’ (2005, 160). Whereas the ontological argument reasons towards existence, this argument begins ‘from experience and existence – specifically, the experience and existence of the good and the experience and existence of our desire (or eros) for such goods’ (151). Thus Fendt seems to share Widdows’ view that the degrees of goodness argument is not related to the ontological argument. He nevertheless notes that Anselm employs this argument in his response to Gaunilo’s claim that he cannot think

of ‘that than which a greater cannot be thought’. Anselm uses the degrees of goodness argument to show that ‘there is meaning in his phrase “than which nothing greater”’ and, Fendt argues, ‘he clearly understands that the significance of this phrase is arrived at by “inferring that than which a greater cannot be thought on the basis of those things than which a greater can be thought”’ (162-163). Thus, even for Fendt, this ‘metaphysical argument which is also an appeal to experience’ (Murdoch (1992), 395) is a supporting argument, without which the ontological argument cannot stand.

As is well known, Kant argued that the cosmological argument depends ultimately upon the ontological argument, since only the latter can supply the ‘completely determinate or determinable concept of ... [a] necessary being’ (1929, 523-524). For Murdoch, it may be that the reverse is the case – i.e. that her ontological argument depends not only on a form of the moral argument, but ultimately on a form of the cosmological argument. For Kant, the *a posteriori* argument depends upon a defective *a priori* argument. Murdoch argues that the defective *a priori* argument can be repaired by appealing to experience. The kind of experience to which she appeals is moral experience, but the kind of experience to which the cosmological argument appeals may also be important. If the cosmological argument supports a conception of ‘the divine’ as the ultimate explanation for the existence of everything which constitutes the universe, as a name for whatever it was that brought our universe into being, perhaps understood as personal in a metaphorical sense, the divine also determines that which is good for human beings, other sentient beings, and, perhaps, the universe in its entirety; for example, it is the nature of our ‘created’ humanity which determines what is, and is not, good for human beings generally, and for individual human beings specifically.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the divine is both the creative

process and the Good which it determines, and the cosmological argument supports the existence of the reality to which the ontological argument points.

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<sup>1</sup> See Johnson (1963). The ‘Platonic ancestry’ of the argument is also pointed out by Murdoch (1992), 392 and ch. 13 *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier exposition of her view of the relationship between God and the Good may be found in her two essays ‘On “God” and “Good”’ and ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’, (1985), 46-104.

<sup>3</sup> This assumes that the argument from Chapter 3 of the *Proslogion* is not, as Charles Hartshorne argued in 1953 (see Hartshorne and Reese (2000), 96-97), like many after him (including Dombrowski – e.g. (2006), 11-18), a different version of the argument from that found in Chapter 2, but an elucidation of it.

<sup>4</sup> There are, of course, alternative interpretations of these attributes, but discussion of these would create an unnecessary diversion from the line of argument being pursued at this point.

<sup>5</sup> The relevance of this objection to Malcolm’s version of the argument does, however, depend on the nature of the divine existence for which Malcolm argues, a question which will be considered again in the following section.

<sup>6</sup> Note, however, that, although Dombrowski considers Plantinga’s argument, he is concerned not with the respects in which it is similar to his own but with the respect in which it is different – i.e., Plantinga’s classical view of God.

<sup>7</sup> This seems reminiscent of Pascal’s claim that ‘we may well know that God exists without knowing what he is’ (*Pensees* 418, Pascal (1966), 149).

<sup>8</sup> As Dombrowski here acknowledges, the point is derived from Hartshorne (1941) 311. Dombrowski notes (2006, 149) that the point has also been made by Smith (1968).

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<sup>9</sup> Maria Antonaccio has pointed out (Conference, 'Iris Murdoch: Morality and the Novel', Kingston University, 15 September 2006) that, for Murdoch, 'Almost anything that consoles us is a fake' (1985, 59, my italics). This implies that some – if not many – forms of consolation may be genuine.

<sup>10</sup> I do not have the space to consider the extent to which Murdoch's concept of the Good and her arguments for it are derived from Plato. In the light of scholarly disagreement with regard to the nature of Plato's Good and the questions of which, if any, arguments he advanced in support of it and whether these were subsequently rejected in the *Parmenides*, the issue is a complex one. For more on Plato's arguments for the Forms, see Jordan (1983), especially ch. 4, Blackson (1995), Coxon (1999), Dancy (2004) and Grabowski III (2008). For the relationship between Murdoch and Plato, see Kerr (1997), Insole (2006), Goodyer (2009), and Broakes (2012) 55-78.

<sup>11</sup> This argument also appears in her novels. In *The Unicorn*, Max suggests that '[d]esire and possession of the true Good are one' (1966, 100). This is made more explicit in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. According to Father McAlister's version of the argument, 'if with a pure passion you love God, then God exists, because He has to; after all, what your best self, your most truthful soul desires must be real' (1988, 488).

<sup>12</sup> Maria Antonaccio notes that a forerunner of Murdoch's ontological argument may be found in 'On "God" and "Good"', in which she argued that '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' (Murdoch (1970), 61-62, quoted in Antonaccio (2012), 174).

<sup>13</sup> It is notable that the Christ-figure or Christ in Murdoch's novels is never portrayed as perfect. This lack of perfection is indicated, for example, in the 'yellowish-white' shirt and trousers worn by the Christ of Anne's vision in *Nuns and Soldiers* (1981, 295). See Guerin (1992), 163-164.

<sup>14</sup> Note that, for Widdows, 'the argument from perfection' appears to be not a version of the argument in Chapter 2 of Anselm's *Proslogion*, but a version of the argument from experience (Widdows (2005), 75-78). This might, perhaps, be better characterised as an argument *to* perfection.

<sup>15</sup> This is not to claim that there is no solution to the traditional problem of evil, of course.

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<sup>16</sup> One could object that an argument for Evil based on the existence of degrees of evil is no less plausible. [I am grateful to Victoria Harrison for this point.] One might respond, in the manner of Aquinas whose Fourth Way is similar to the degrees of goodness argument (see Fendt (2005), 149), that evil is a privation of the good and therefore has no independent existence. Kant certainly speaks of an Evil Principle, but claims that the Good Principle leads the good man in combat against the attacks of the Evil Principle in order to attain freedom from the sovereignty of evil (1960, 85). [I am grateful to Leslie Stevenson for pointing out the similarities between Kant's *Religion* and Murdoch.]

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Murdoch: 'The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves' (1985, 103).

<sup>18</sup> It could be argued that similar examples of non-physical realities, the existence of which may be inferred from their effects, can be found in the realms of mathematics and science. For example, the square root of four has a practical application in engineering, and the effects of a magnetic force can be detected. I am grateful to Leslie Stevenson for this point.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gail Fine's argument that for Plato, in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, and possibly also the *Phaedo*, it is philosophers' knowledge and love of the forms which causes them to embody the forms in the sensible world: 'The philosopher attempts to make the world as just a place as possible; and he does so, in part, by looking to the form of justice and trying to get people and institutions to approximate to it as far as possible. So at least the virtue forms – including, of course, the form of the good – are goals the philosopher aims at' (2003, 394). As Robin LePoidevin has pointed out to me, one might appeal to a version of J. L. Mackie's argument from queerness to object that the existence of the Good is queer in that it is different from any other kind of existence and therefore cannot provide a causal explanation for our ability to identify and practise goodness. But, just as a theist might argue that we do not have to have a complete, or even partial, understanding of the nature of the divine in order to argue that God is, in some way, responsible for the beginning and continued existence of the universe, so Murdoch might argue that we do not need to understand the way in which the Good is, in some sense, causal in order to assert this. Farland (2005, 11) argues that, if we reject the notion of queerness, all assertions of 'ought' claims are problematic since we cannot, ultimately, explain in what the 'ought' consists.

<sup>20</sup> Here, Byrne draws on Despland (1985).

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<sup>21</sup> Byrne also draws on the thought of Gordon Graham, who argues that ‘unless there is a reasonable hope that virtue will be crowned with happiness, if not in this world then the next, the rational and the moral will pull apart’ (Graham (1996), 83).

<sup>22</sup> Daphne Hampson observes that Kant later regretted his postulation of the *summum bonum* on the grounds that the claim that virtue must be rewarded by happiness undermines his claim that we should obey the moral law for its own sake (2009, 73). But this is derived from Theodore M. Greene’s exposition of Erich Adickes’ reading of the *Opus Postumum* (Greene (1960), lxv-lxvi), an interpretation which is questioned by John R. Silber (1960, cxl-cxlii).

<sup>23</sup> Murdoch refers explicitly to Plato’s myths as ladders to be thrown away after use at (1992) 318.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Jacobs suggests that Murdoch’s novels sometimes include characters – such as Bellamy James in *The Green Knight* – who begin their moral quests within traditional religious belief but eventually move on to ‘higher and better things’ (1995, 4).

<sup>25</sup> Byrne acknowledges that there are similarities between Murdoch’s view and that of traditional theism which could be further explored (1998, 111).

<sup>26</sup> Religion is, of course, notoriously difficult to define and any definition may be disputed by some as misrepresenting belief, perhaps by including or excluding too much.

<sup>27</sup> Murdoch suggests that Kant’s ‘command of duty’ is ‘unavoidable in a sense analogous to that of Plato’s Good, and equally to be understood as something which is everywhere in human experience’ (1992, 407). Greene, following Adickes, claims that Kant came to believe that his Categorical Imperative reveals God (lxvi), although this interpretation is again rejected by Silber (cxlii). Goodyer argues that Murdoch combines ‘an existentialist understanding of the meaninglessness of reality and the ultimacy of the individual with a Platonic call to be good’ which ‘results in a deontological understanding of the purposelessness of love which, in some ways, resembles a categorical imperative.’ (2009, 233)

<sup>28</sup> A similar point is made by John Cottingham, who argues that, for traditional theism, ‘the creative power that ultimately shaped us is itself the source of the values we find ourselves constrained to acknowledge’ (2009, 5).