

## Notes: Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good"

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In this essay Iris Murdoch formulates and defends a definition of art that is consistent with her belief that "art and morals are one...their essence is the same". She draws on Plato's ideas about art and ethics, but focuses primarily on the moral and aesthetic views of Kant, Hegel, and Tolstoy. She describes, critiques, and revises their views in developing her own definition of art.

It may strike you as strange to learn, near the end of the essay, that Murdoch's definition of art builds on a concept of love. Art and morals are the same. Their essence is love. Not romantic love, but a love based on respect and an encounter with something that transcends the self. "Love, and so art and morals," she tells us, "is the discovery of reality."

What concept of love is she working with? Where does it come from?<sup>1</sup> How does it apply to art? And how does it bring together art and morality?

### Murdoch's Approach<sup>2</sup>

Murdoch begins her essay with Tolstoy's approach to evaluating works of art followed by her sharp objection to it. Tolstoy claims we must start with a clear concept of art and then search for those things which satisfy the concept. Murdoch's approach is the opposite. She starts with the phenomena — works of art — and then moves to the definition or concept of art.

205 "Our direct apprehension of which works of art are good has just as much authority, engages our moral and intellectual being just as deeply, as our philosophical reflections upon art in general..." (42)

Murdoch takes our grasp of both aesthetics and ethics as given. Starting with artists such as Shakespeare, she searches for a definition based on the exemplary cases of his well-known tragedies such as *King Lear*. The same procedure — starting with what we know is good and fashioning a definition that accounts for its goodness — can be used in moral philosophy by focusing on what is uncontroversially good.)

Murdoch accepts the connection between art and morality in Tolstoy's theory of art. Judgments of moral value are inevitable in art. Art reflects our view of life and the nature of the world. But she questions whether it is possible to formulate a single definition of "art" or "ethics". How are we to do it?

We could start by distinguishing works of art from mere objects, and moral judgments from statements of fact. This approach sets aside the question of value. Or we could, as she has already suggested, start with exemplary cases and glean from them the essence of art and morals. While there is something to be gained from both, she believes working with the "highest manifestations" of art and ethics, a process which starts with value judgments, is more important than searching for the "lowest common denominator". She offers the following justification for her choice.

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<sup>1</sup> Although it's not made explicit, Justin Brookes argues that Murdoch's notion of love can be traced to Simone Weil, who Murdoch mentions in her essay "Against Dryness", *Encounter* (1961). See *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, Justin Brookes, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 33-5.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers in the left margin refer to the collection of writings published under the title *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Peter Conradi, ed., New York: Penguin, 1998. Numbers in parentheses reflect the pagination of the original publication in *Chicago Review* (Autumn 1959).

206 "Tolstoy rightly says, 'The estimation of the **value** of art...depends on men's perception of the meaning of life; depends on what they hold to be the **good** and the evil of life.' Whether we think art is an amusement, or an education, or a revelation of reality, or is for art's sake (whatever that may mean) will reveal what we hold to be valuable and (the same thing) what we take the world to be fundamentally like." (43, emphases added.)

### Kant's Theory of Art by Way of the Beautiful and the Sublime

Murdoch turns next to her own definition based on her reading and criticism of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Her account is brief and focuses on the concepts she needs to develop both her critique of Kant and the defining features of art.

206f "[I]n speaking of aesthetic judgment Kant distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime, and in speaking of the beautiful he distinguishes between free and dependent beauty. The true judgment of taste concerns free beauty. Here, according to Kant, the imagination and the understanding are in harmony in the apprehension of a sensuous object which is not brought under any particular concept and is verified in accordance with a rule we cannot formulate." (43)

Murdoch covers a lot of ground in three sentences. Let's fill in some of the details. Kant's theory of art is contained in a large work called the *Critique of Judgment*, the first half of which focuses primarily on the experience of the beautiful in nature and on the sublime.<sup>3</sup>

Kant's distinction between **free** and **dependent** beauty marks the difference between things that are beautiful with respect to a **purpose** or function, and things that are beautiful **independent of any particular end or purpose they may serve**.

Imagine, for example, that you are walking in the woods and you come across a lovely white orchid. You stop, gazing down at the flower, and say to your friend, "Look at that! Isn't it beautiful?" What you're experiencing is what Kant calls a judgment of taste. It occurs when we perceive and contemplate an object simply as it appears to us without regard for what it is or what purpose it may serve. We perceive it in a **disinterested** way, attending only to the aesthetic **form** of the object, which gives rise to a certain kind of feeling that, on reflection, we recognize as "the beautiful". The feeling we have in these moments, according to Kant, is due to the workings of the **Imagination** and the **Understanding** in a kind of "free play". Both faculties of the mind are working together in harmony, but without applying concepts or rules. We simply contemplate what we perceive without regard to anything else. And that constitutes the pleasure.

207 "Beauty is a matter of form. What is truly beautiful is independent of any interest, it is not tainted either by the good, or by any pleasure extraneous to the act of representing to ourselves the object itself. It has no concern with charm or with emotion. What is beautiful exhibits 'purposiveness without a purpose'; it is composed as if with a purpose, and yet it has no purpose which we can name." (43f)

We also assume in these experiences of the beautiful that the feeling is **universal** — that anyone in our situation would feel the same thing. And we feel this universality even though we can't explain it. We simply take it for granted.

207 "What Kant calls aesthetic judgments may be made in relation to either art or nature, and Kant says that art and nature please us by resembling each other; that is, we like nature when it seems to be purposefully constructed and we like

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<sup>3</sup> See my "Introduction to Kant's Aesthetic Theory" for a very brief and general overview.  
[http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/kant-intro\\_aesth.pdf](http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/kant-intro_aesth.pdf)

art when it seems to be pointless [that is to say, without having a particular purpose]." (42)

While the experience of the beautiful, as we've seen, involves two faculties of the human mind — the harmony between Imagination and Understanding — the experience of the **sublime** is a very different matter. It makes use of both emotion and **Reason** in response to certain extreme aspects of nature that lead to a **conflict** between Imagination and Reason.

208 "What is vast and formless in nature, or vast and powerful and terrifying, can occasion a sense of sublimity, provided we are [not in any immediate danger, and thus] not actually afraid. A mountain range, the starry sky, the stormy sea, a great waterfall — these things give us the sublime." (45)

At these moments, the awesome and extraordinary power of nature exceeds the capacity of our Imagination. The Imagination is overwhelmed and fails to form an adequate representation of the encounter. The result, at best, are ideas produced by Reason which can't be fully grasped or understood. The experience goes beyond us. Murdoch interprets this in the following way.

208 "[W]e experience distress at this failure of the imagination to compass what is before us, and on the other hand we feel exhilaration in our consciousness of the absolute nature of reason's requirement and the way in which it goes beyond what mere sensible imagination can achieve. This mixed experience is, Kant remarks, very like *Achtung*<sup>4</sup>, the experience of respect for the moral law. 'The feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea that is a law for us is Respect.' In *Achtung* we feel pain at the thwarting of our sensuous nature by a moral requirement, and elation in the consciousness of our rational nature; that is, our freedom to conform to the absolute requirements of reason." (45, punctuation corrected.)

Freedom and the good are involved in both the beautiful and the sublime. According to Kant, the beautiful does not include any aspect of moral goodness — that would make it "practical" and related to an end or purpose, what something "ought to be". The connection between beauty and the good is more by way of analogy — beauty, Kant claims, is a **symbol** of the good.

209 "The judgment of taste is a sort of sensuous counterpart of the moral judgment, in that it is independent, disinterested, free. But, as Kant puts it, the freedom of the judgment of taste is more like the freedom of play. The experience of sublimity has a much closer relation to morals, since here it is the reason, that is the moral will itself, which is active in the experience. And whereas the experience of beauty is like cognition and is contemplative and restful, the experience of the sublime sets the mind in motion and resembles the exercise of the will in moral judgment." (45)

### Minor Criticisms

Murdoch finds Kant's emphasis on free beauty, with the emphasis on play, too narrow for her purposes. [Note that she does **not** consider the sections on fine art in the *Critique of Judgment*, which include Kant's discussion of "aesthetic ideas".]

209f "I think very few of us would now accept the extremely narrow conception of art which is implicit here, however exactly we interpret it. We would wish I think to transform, if we are to accept it at all, the notion that the work of art is not

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<sup>4</sup> "*Achtung*" is defined in the CJ (§27) as the "feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea that is a law for us".

governed by a concept. We would not want to share Kant's ideal of the work of art as being if possible, as somehow striving to be, non-significant [that is, without regard to purpose, meaning or content]. The idea that it is in some sense an end in itself need not entail that; and we can speak of the work of art as having its own unique self-containing form, being indeed a quasi-object, and having no educational purpose, while at the same time allowing it to use concepts, or ever be a thing with other purposes, such as a church." (46)

[These limitations, it seems to me, are partly due to Kant's taking natural beauty, not works of art, as the primary focus in his account of aesthetic judgments. tq]

Murdoch is particularly concerned with the fact that Kant's aesthetic judgments of taste are on par with perceptual judgments. That puts literature in a precarious position and likely to be dismissed.

210 "We can keep, if we wish to, a great deal of what Kant has to say about form; absence of a rule we can formulate, disinterestedness, independence, while allowing conceptual content, and allowing too that aesthetic enjoyment is not a momentary quasi-perceptual state of mind. That is, the art object is not just 'given', it is also thought." (47)

### Serious Criticisms

Now Murdoch moves on to what she calls her "more important criticisms" of Kant's position.

Kant's theory will not do at all, she says, because it cannot account for the greatness of **tragedy**. Part of the problem seems to be that Kant thinks "art is essentially play".<sup>5</sup> (211; 47f)

Here she turns back to Tolstoy for help.

211f Tolstoy claims, "Art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen." It is "a means of union among men joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress towards well-being of individuals and of humanity." (48)

This view strikes Murdoch as "promising and serious" compared with the "unnervingly frivolous" view held by Kant. But she quickly undercuts her optimism by characterizing Tolstoy's view as "moralistic" rather than philosophical. And it presupposes, in addition,

212 "[A] sort of profound instinctive religious perception, shared by all, [which] takes the place of Kant's *sensus communis*. 'What distinguishes a work of art from all other mental activity is just the fact that its language is understood by all.' 'Great works of art are only great because they are accessible and comprehensible to everyone.' They are understood because everyman's relation to God is the same." (48)

But we know there is great art which is **difficult**, so we must broaden Tolstoy's concept of art.

212 "Can we however make something of his view that great art expresses religious feeling, or religious perception, to put the essence of the matter in a less

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<sup>5</sup> But how should we interpret Kant's notion of "play"? Murdoch characterizes play as "production of self-contained things" in "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", 267.

controversial form; and can we in any way connect this with some of the perhaps acceptable elements of Kant's view?" (48f)

Now here Murdoch uncovers two major problems. Contrary to what Kant claims, art is not necessarily "play", not entirely self-contained. Nor is it in every case immediately accessible to everyone, as Tolstoy thinks.

At this point Murdoch is inclined to bring together *Achtung* and the Sublime in formulating her own definition of art. But first she has to deal with **tragedy**, given her belief in the **centrality** of tragedy and that **any theory of art that cannot account for tragedy is clearly inadequate**. (213; 49)

Kant's theory of the sublime should complement his theory of art and offer an account for tragedy. But it comes up short.

213 "Kant thinks of the sublime as the failure of imagination to compass an abstractly conceived non-historical, non-social, quasi-mathematical totality which is not given but only vaguely adumbrated by reason. The sublime is a segment of a circle, grasped by imagination, with the rest of the circle demanded and as it were dreamt of by reason, but not given. The sublime is only occasioned by natural objects (non-historical, non-social, nonhuman), and the imaginative understanding the lack of which occasions the pain-and-pleasure of sublimity is a kind of vast systematic perception of nature which space and time and the nature of our sensibility forbids." (49)

Hegel's famous theory of tragedy has its limitations, as well, Murdoch claims.

213 "The experience of tragedy, according to Hegel, is the envisaging of a conflict between two incompatible goods. Not a conflict between good and evil but between two goods, which are seen to be such because they incarnate different real social forces with real claims in society. Antigone and Creon are both right, as we see if we understand the total situation which encloses them both. The unity of the ethical substance [binding social relations] is given as total, and within it we see and comprehend a conflict of goods." (49f)

213f "The difference then between Kant and Hegel is that Kant connects sublimity with the dream of an empty non-historical totality which is not given. [Recall the relatively incomprehensible role of Reason in Kant's theory of the sublime.] We have only a segment of the circle. Whereas Hegel connects tragedy with a human historical social totality which is given, within which we see a conflict the resolution and reconciliation of which is the totality itself. We have not just a segment, but the whole circle." (50)

Murdoch reframes the situation in terms of the concept of **freedom**.

214 "The sublime [in Kant] is an experience of freedom, but of an **empty** freedom which is the fruitless aspiring demand for some sort of impossible total perceptual comprehension of nature. Hegel humanises the demand of reason. Reason is now demanding a total understanding of a human social situation — but what is unnerving is that, according to him, reason's demand is satisfied. So that the freedom of the tragic characters is only relative to an **externally** comprehended social whole within which they move. Kant is concerned, though in a very narrow way, with the helplessness of human beings. But Hegel's tragedy does not seem to be tragedy at all, since the spectators are not in the helpless position of the dramatic characters, but comfortably seated at the point of view of the totality. Whatever Aristotle meant by *catharsis* it was not this." (50, emphases added. *Catharsis* in Aristotle's *Poetics* is related to the spectator's experience of fear and pity with respect to the tragic hero.)

[For Murdoch,] “the true view of tragedy is a combination of Kantian and Hegelian elements. To use an awkward mixed metaphor, the circle must be humanised but it must not be given.” (50)

### Conclusion — Provisos

In the end, Murdoch’s solution and, hence, her definition of art, builds on a concept of love.

- 215 “Art and morals are, with certain provisos which I shall mention in a moment, one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals [“free persons”, in Kantian terms]. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real [and free]. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man.” (51f)
- 216 “[T]he true sense of that exhilaration of freedom which attends art and which has its more rarely achieved counterpart in morals...is the apprehension of something else, something particular, as existing outside us. The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis.” (52)
- “[W]e may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own. Fantasy, the enemy of art, is the enemy of true imagination: Love, an exercise of the imagination.” (52)
- “The exercise of overcoming one’s self, of the expulsion of fantasy and convention, which attends for instance the reading of *King Lear* is indeed exhilarating. It is also, if we perform it properly which we hardly ever do, painful. It is very like *Achtung*.” (52)

What Murdoch insists on here is freedom of a particular kind — “**tragic freedom**”.

- 216 “The tragic freedom implied by love is this: that we all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others. Tragic, because there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there any social totality [a perceived “ethical substance”, to use Hegel’s term] within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled. We have only a segment of the circle. Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness.” (52)

Murdoch uses “compassion: the non-violent apprehension of difference” as synonymous with “love”. (218; 54) This may help us see more clearly the aspect of respect at work in love.

If art is love, it nurtures **moral improvement**. But it does not follow that art is **didactic**. The improvement we get is “accidental”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Is there a distinction here between “morality” and “moralism”?

218 "The level at which that love works which is art is deeper than the level at which we deliberate concerning improvement. And indeed it is of the nature of Love to be something deeper than our conscious and more simply social morality, and to be sometimes destructive of it." (54)

Murdoch concludes, enigmatically, with two provisos, defending the view that there is an important, in fact a **crucial**, position art can occupy between **art for art's sake** and **didactic art**.

219 1. "In the creation of a work of art the artist is going through the exercise of attending to something quite particular other than himself. The intensity of this exercise itself gives to the work of art its special independence. That is, it is an independence and uniqueness which is essentially the same as that conferred upon, or rather discovered in, another human being whom we love." (54f)

2. "The artist is creating a quasi-sensuous thing. He is more like God than the moral agent.... That is, the artist strives to make what he creates self-contained and as far as possible self-explanatory. What makes tragic art so disturbing is that self-contained form is combined with something, the individual being and destiny of human persons, which defies form. A great tragedy leaves us in eternal doubt. It is the form of art where the exercise of love is most like its exercise in morals. But in the end the sublime joy of art is not the same as *Achtung*, respect for the moral law." (55)

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