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Forgiveness without God? – Glen Pettigrove

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Abstract: Of the many forgiveness-related questions that she takes up in her novels, the one with which Iris Murdoch wrestles most often is the question, “Is forgiveness possible without God?” The aim of this paper is to show, in the first instance, why the question Murdoch persistently raises is a question worth asking. Alongside this primary aim stands a secondary one, which is to consider how one might glean moral insights from the Christian tradition even if one does not (any longer) endorse its theological commitments.

Although recent years have seen a significant increase of philosophical interest in forgiveness, some of the most insightful work done on the topic by a philosopher has been completely ignored. The philosopher in question is Iris Murdoch. The reason her treatment of forgiveness has been overlooked is because she says so little about it in her philosophical writings. And when it does come up in that context, chiefly in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, it tends to be mentioned in passing rather than being the focus of a more systematic discussion. This limited engagement with the topic in her philosophical texts stands in marked contrast to its treatment in her novels, where forgiveness is a central theme from her first published novel (*Under the Net*, 1954) to her last (*Jackson's Dilemma*, 1995). What is it? Why is it important? When is it possible? When is it admirable or objectionable? What can we do to facilitate it? She repeatedly explores these questions in her 26-novel corpus.¹

¹ Some readers may have reservations about using Murdoch's novels as a resource for philosophical reflection, especially in light of the frequency with which she claims that she does not do philosophy in her novels (Dooley 2003, 3, 36, 42, 46, 58; and Murdoch 1978b). This is not the place to attempt a thorough discussion of this oft-debated issue (For two recent discussions of the relationship between her philosophy and her fiction, see Leeson 2010 and Moore 2010). However, it may be worth making a couple of brief remarks about it here. First, when Murdoch claims that she is not doing philosophy in her novels, one must bear in mind that she is employing a very narrow conception of what counts as “doing philosophy” that excludes much of what is commonly referred to under that heading. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, for example, do not count as doing philosophy according to this conception (Murdoch 1978b, 4). In a symposium that took place in 1978 she suggested that “those who attempt to

Of the many forgiveness-related questions she takes up, the one with which Murdoch wrestles most often is the question, “Is forgiveness possible without God?” In part because the question is raised in the novels by characters whose thoughts are not always transparent, the reasons for finding such a question compelling are seldom explicitly laid out. Thus, the aim of this paper is, in the first instance, to show why the question Murdoch so frequently poses is a question worth asking. So, after looking at what “forgiveness” means in part 1, we will turn in parts 2 and 3 to consider why the loss of Christian ritual and belief – both in the individual and in post-Christian Western society at large² – might pose a challenge to people seeking forgiveness. Then we will turn our attention to a consideration of a) how forgiveness might still be found and b) how it might be altered after the death of God. Alongside this primary aim stands a secondary one. Throughout her career Murdoch insisted that one might glean moral insights from the Christian tradition even when one does not (any longer) endorse its theological commitments. Her discussions of forgiveness provide a central example of Murdoch attempting to do precisely that. So in addition

write it would probably agree that there are very few moments when they rise to the level of real philosophy ... I don't think I have done it in more than a few pages in all the stuff that I have written about philosophy” (Dooley 2003, 78). Doing philosophy, according to this narrow conception, is concerned with “stating the very basis of everything” (Dooley 2003, 128). “It is an attempt to perceive and to tease out in thought our deepest and most general concepts” (Murdoch 1978b, 8). And it is marked by “a special plainness” and directness of expression as well as a “strictness about ideas and argument” (Murdoch 1978b, 4, 19). The kind of reflection in which this paper engages does not count as doing philosophy in this sense, so her remarks about not doing philosophy in her novels are not directly relevant to it. In Murdoch's preferred terminology, this paper would be classified as an exercise in religion and moral psychology (Dooley 2003, 92). About these matters she suggests her novels say a great deal. “A novelist is bound to express values,” she insisted during a 1988 interview with Jeffrey Meyers, “and I think he should be conscious of the fact that he is, in a sense, a compulsory moralist” (Dooley 2003, 226-27). And in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, she says, “Good novels concern the fight between good and evil and the pilgrimage from appearance to reality. They expose vanity and inculcate humility. They are amazingly moral” (Murdoch 1993, 97). Thus, Murdoch herself invites the reader to view her novels as a potential resource for moral reflection. In fact one might even go so far as to argue, as Flora Ruokonen has done, that they are a more authoritative resource for moral reflection than are her philosophical writings (Ruokonen 2008).

² In her interview with Bryan Magee, Murdoch suggested that “the disappearance or weakening of organised religion is perhaps the most important thing that has happened to us in the last hundred years” (Murdoch 1978b, 27). Of course, specifying the sense in which organised religion has been weakened or in which the modern West is post-Christian is notoriously difficult. As Charles Taylor observes, “Almost everyone would agree that in some sense we do [live in a secular age].... But it's not so clear in what this secularity consists” (Taylor 2007, 1).

to grappling with the substantive question of forgiveness without God, I hope to provide a case study in how one might draw upon the moral wisdom of the Christian tradition even if one does not identify (in whole or in part) with that tradition.

1. Forgiveness

“It’s dangerous to become careless about words,” Murdoch asserted in a 1962 interview for the London *Sunday Times*, “and literature should always be seeing to it that we don’t.”³ Perhaps nowhere is this danger more evident than in discussions of forgiveness. The word “forgive” and its derivatives get used in a number of ways. Murdoch is alert to this fact and devotes considerable attention both to exploring its versatility and to clarifying its nature.

“Forgiveness is often thought of as an emotion,” writes Bradley Pearson, the protagonist of *The Black Prince*. “It is not that. It is rather a certain kind of cessation of emotion.”⁴ One way to think of forgiveness is as the cessation of anger, resentment, or some other hostile emotion.⁵ Insofar as the anger it overcomes can

³ Dooley 2003, 2. The point about words is one she made repeatedly over the course of her career. See, for example, Murdoch 1957, 72; and 1972, 241-42.

⁴ Murdoch 2003/1973, 375. There are, of course, questions that arise about the extent to which the utterances of her fictional characters can be ascribed to Murdoch. Murdoch herself says, “I think it’s quite easy in the case of Bradley Pearson to tell when he’s got a just idea and when he hasn’t, as it would be in the case of a real person telling you the story of his life. I mean you’d assess this person, wouldn’t you, and you’d soon get a jolly good idea of when he was exaggerating, when he was lying even, and when it was the truth” (Dooley 2003, 186). His reflections on forgiveness are among his more obviously “just ideas.” However, the degree to which the characters quoted in this section can be trusted is of limited importance. They can be deeply confused, as Peter Mir is in the passages in *The Green Knight* to which I will refer in a moment, and still illustrate conceptions of forgiveness that are in current circulation in Western society. And insofar as these conceptions are introduced by Murdoch and quite intentionally played off one another in the dialogues and plots that she constructs, the distinctions drawn in this section can unproblematically be ascribed to her.

⁵ Which emotion it is (if any) that ceases when one forgives has been a matter of considerable debate among contemporary philosophers. Some, like Paul Hughes (1993) and Robert Roberts (1995), have argued that it is anger. Others, such as Jeffrie Murphy (1982) and Charles Griswold (2007), have suggested that resentment is the relevant emotion. Still others, including Norvin Richards (1988), Jeffrie Murphy (2003), Margaret Urban Walker (2006), Macalester Bell (2008) and I (2004, 2009) have argued for a much wider range of emotions that might be overcome when one forgives, including anger, hatred, resentment, indignation, contempt, loathing, and scorn, among others. Murdoch’s discussions of forgiveness reflect a position closely akin to Richards and company. In response to undeserved harm, we can feel a number of different hostile emotions, and forgiveness might involve the cessation

vary significantly from one context to another, we should expect the forgiveness that overcomes this anger to differ in certain respects as well. So, for example, in *The Good Apprentice*, Bettina Baltram describes the anger she feels toward her father, Jesse, because of the illness that requires the rest of the family to look after him, saying, “He was a god and has cheated us by becoming a child. It is hard to forgive” (Murdoch 1985, 197). Bettina’s experience represents in vivid detail the range of emotions often felt when a loved one’s illness, particularly mental illness as in Jesse’s case, subjects family members to undeserved hardship. It is quite natural for family members to think of their emotional stance in terms of the desire and/or inability to forgive him or her. What is central to this first sense of “forgiveness” are the emotions we commonly feel when we are the victim of an undeserved harm or hardship. The (potential) forgiver’s experiences in such cases tend to focus on her own innocence and on what she has suffered. She is angry *at* another person, her anger is directed *toward* him, but in a certain way it is not really *about* that other person. Rather, it is about how she has been put upon or hurt in some way.

However, typically the content of our angry thoughts extends beyond ourselves and our experiences to encompass the one who caused our suffering. Our thoughts do not stop at “I have suffered an injustice” but continue on to “He has done me an injustice.” In such cases the concept of forgiveness differs in certain respects from the mere cessation of anger or resentment. How it differs depends, in part, on how the other person has factored in our emotions.

Sometimes our anger has something like the following shape. It is built around the thought that his actions have cost me something and he ought to repay me, but has not yet done so. Forgiveness will then be understood as a cancellation of that

of any one of these. In what follows anger and resentment will be used interchangeably as generic placeholders for the range of emotions that one might cease to feel when one forgives.

debt. The forgiver no longer expects or demands repayment.⁶ Sometimes our anger is built around an adversarial narrative: the other is seen as one's enemy. Forgiveness will then be understood as the resumption of either neutral or positive emotions and/or relations between forgiver and forgiven. One no longer harbours ill-will toward the other, no longer desires revenge, and may even go so far as to wish the other well.⁷ These two narratives are often combined, as Murdoch vividly illustrates in the case of *The Green Knight's* Peter Mir.

Peter has been struck a violent blow by Lucas Graffe and left for dead. But to everyone's astonishment, Peter survives and tracks down Lucas with the intention of obtaining some kind of satisfaction from him. Sometimes the satisfaction he seeks is described in terms of just compensation, understood retributively as involving "the reception of a blow upon the head delivered with equal force" (Murdoch 1995/1993, 126). At other times, Peter describes the satisfaction he seeks in terms of conquering a foe or taking revenge upon an adversary. Often, these two images are so thoroughly intertwined that Peter slides from one to the other and back again in the space of a sentence or two (1995/1993, 225). Given the way in which these two narratives and their associated desires are woven together, Peter's forgiveness, to be complete, must involve both. And this is precisely what we see in the final resolution of the conflict between Peter and Lucas: "My desire for revenge, an eye for an eye, the humiliation and destruction of my enemy, is now understood by me as an impulse of

⁶ The debt-cancelling conception is often linked to retributivist conceptions of punishment, as is the case for Peter Mir early in *The Green Knight* (Murdoch 1995/1993, 126). The metaphor of debt-cancellation is frequently employed in New Testament discussions of forgiveness (see, for example, Matthew 6:12; 18:21-35; and Luke 7:36-50). The most influential recent advocates of a debt-cancelling conception of forgiveness are Herbert Morris (1976) and Richard Swinburne (1989).

Elsewhere I argue that this model has a number of significant shortcomings and recommend against building our conception of forgiveness around notions of debt-cancellation (Pettigrove 2009, 584-85).

⁷ See the conversation between Peter Mir and Bellamy James in Murdoch 1995/1993, 225.

unenlightened egoism, a submission to determinism, an evil fantasy, which I now hereby repudiate and make to vanish” (1995/1993, 306-7).

These three conceptions – a) the cessation of anger, b) the cancellation of debt, and c) the resumption of (at least) neutral relations after suffering an undeserved harm – cover much of the conceptual territory associated with forgiveness. However, the map they provide is not yet exhaustive. Two other conceptions come into focus when, as Murdoch so insistently encourages us to do, we consider forgiveness from the vantage of the one forgiven. From that vantage we can see that we might be forgiven in one of the abovementioned senses and still not “feel” forgiven.

Midge McCaskerville has been having an affair with her husband’s best friend, Harry Cuno. After learning of the affair her husband, Thomas, is honestly able to tell his wife that he is not angry. What is more, he says, “I wish you well. I want you to be happy” (Murdoch 1985, 408). Nevertheless, Midge rightly senses she is not forgiven. Thomas still holds her infidelity against her and sees her in its light. In its strongest form, such a holding-against involves defining the other in terms of her moral failure. She is, depending on the nature of her failing, a “traitor,”⁸ “a little lecherous adulter[ess],”⁹ “a sort of – dreadful being – a sort of vile cruel malevolent – killer,”¹⁰ “a demon ... a cancer ... a worthless person ... a monster,”¹¹ “the boggy man ... the devil himself.”¹² This moment is taken to be the key to interpreting the whole of who she is. However, holding-against need not be so dramatic. One need not define her wholly or even largely in terms of this failure. Holding it against her may simply involve an inability to see or think about her without simultaneously being

⁸ Hilda Chase-White’s description of Casement and others – including members of her family – who would fight for Irish Home Rule in *The Red and the Green* (Murdoch 1967/1965, 40).

⁹ Hilary Burde’s description of himself in *A Word Child* (Murdoch 1976b/1975, 265).

¹⁰ Gunnar Jopling’s description of how he saw Hilary Burde (Murdoch 1976b/1975, 265).

¹¹ Peregrine Arbelow’s description of how he saw Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea* (Murdoch 1999a/1978, 398-99).

¹² Titus Fitch’s description of the way his parents saw Charles Arrowby (Murdoch 1999a/1978, 260).

mindful of the failure. Forgiveness, on this conception, would involve not (any longer) holding the moral failure against the other.

The final conception of forgiveness I will mention, which is likewise most readily seen from the vantage of the one forgiven, is concerned with the latter's guilt. The transgressor is thought to have been stained by her transgression or to be carrying a burden of guilt.¹³ The guilt in question is thought to be not merely a matter of how she feels but is an objective fact about her. The transgressor would continue to be stained or burdened even if she did not notice the stain or feel the burden's weight. When forgiveness is understood in relation to the transgressor's guilt, it amounts to absolution: forgiveness is the erasing of the stain or removing of the burden.¹⁴

There are, then, at least five different things that go by the name "forgiveness." To forgive, in the first sense, is to cease to be angry with someone who has caused one undeserved hardship. To forgive, in the second sense, is to cancel a moral debt. To forgive, in the third sense, is to resume at least neutral relations with someone who has caused one undeserved hardship. To forgive, in the fourth sense, is no longer to hold someone's moral failings against her. To forgive, in the fifth sense, is to absolve an agent of guilt.

These five activities are conceptually distinct but functionally and experientially they can – and often do – overlap. Resenting is one of the ways in which one agent might hold another agent's wrongdoing against her, and in such a case, when one ceases to resent one may thereby cease to hold her transgression

¹³ Barnabas Drumm, for example, conceives of his guilt in these terms in *The Red and the Green* (Murdoch 1967/1965, 172-73). So does Edward Baltram in *The Good Apprentice* (Murdoch 1985, 12). See Stump 2004 for a discussion of how the erasing of guilt's stain might be related to forgiveness.

¹⁴ In a conversation that takes place between Theo Gray and Willy Kost in *The Nice and the Good*, Theo's longing for forgiveness is identified with his longing for absolution. Willy attempts to prise these two notions apart, suggesting that forgiving is in his power but absolving is not (Murdoch 1978a/1968, 131).

against her. Indeed, all five of these activities may be combined in a single moment,¹⁵ so that the one forgiving ceases to be angry, cancels the wrongdoer's debt, absolves her of guilt, no longer holds her moral failings against her, and resumes at least neutral relations with her all at the same time. However, they can – and often do – come apart so that one might perform one of these acts without performing one or more of the others. One can still define the other as a traitor or an adulteress even though one does not (any longer) feel angry or resentful toward her. One may remain emotionally distant toward the other or be deeply suspicious of her long after anger and resentment have ceased. In such a case, forgiving in the sense of “ceasing to feel anger or resentment toward” might have already taken place but forgiving in the sense of “not holding against” might not yet have occurred. Likewise, one may cancel the other's debt to oneself even though one does not absolve the other of her guilt (perhaps because one does not think absolution is in one's power). Consequently, a person's conception(s) of forgiveness can have a profound effect on her sense of when she thinks it either possible or appropriate for her to forgive.

2. Forgiveness and God

Although as an adult Murdoch broke with much of what she had been taught growing up in the Church of England, she repeatedly insisted that “in a sense one is never outside Christianity if one has been caught up in it. Nor would I altogether want to be. There is all the wisdom one requires there, if one can get hold of it” (Dooley 2003, 7). Consistent with this observation, Murdoch expended considerable effort trying to get hold of the wisdom embodied in the Christian teachings and rituals associated with forgiveness.

¹⁵ This is not to suggest that forgiving is the sort of thing that typically occurs in a single moment. Forgiving, especially in the sense of “not holding against,” is often a slow process of change that takes place by small steps and is subject to frequent setbacks.

There are a number of features of Christian belief and practice that enable or encourage forgiveness (in one or more of the above senses). I will not attempt to canvass all of them. Rather, I will focus on five areas that are of particular importance to Murdoch: belief in God, the practice of prayer, sacred rituals and spaces, what might be called a Christian consciousness or vision, and the community of faith. (Of course, not every community that calls itself “Christian” will exemplify these qualities or share these beliefs. However, they are endorsed and manifested – to a greater or lesser degree – by significant segments of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christianity.)

First, a victim’s belief in God can have a profound effect on her experience of wrongdoing. It is easier to endure the taunts of the playground bully when you can see what the bully cannot, namely, that your big brother is standing behind him preparing to intervene. When you know that you are being taken care of, insults that would otherwise wound can leave you unaffected. The example highlights how much of our anger is rooted not in our judgments regarding the wrongness of the act – that judgment remains fixed whether your brother is there or not – but in our feelings of vulnerability. The more secure we feel, the less likely it is that we will become angry or, if we do, that the anger will last for long. If you know that the offender is being taken care of and will soon be taught a lesson, it further reduces your felt need to offer an emotional protest. One need not think of the intervention in vindictive terms. Your brother might be a gentle giant, whose size is sufficient to convince the bully of the error of his ways. His presence guarantees that the bully does not gain any lasting

advantage from his treatment of you and it cancels the message implicit in the bully's actions that it is acceptable to treat you in this fashion.¹⁶

Likewise, a victim's belief in God can alter her experience of forgiving. Part of the difference follows directly from the effects on her anger that follow from knowing she and the wrongdoer are being taken care of.¹⁷ Insofar as believing in God reduces her anger, there is much less for her forgiveness to overcome, which means that she will not have to work as hard at it. If she believes that God is committed to the project of reforming wrongdoers, then it may be easier for the wrongdoer to become the object of her goodwill. She can focus her attention not on who he has been but on who she believes he is in the process of becoming. Such a focus can make it easier for her not to define him in terms of his past transgressions.

A belief in God can also have a profound effect on our experience of forgiveness when we occupy the role of transgressor. God is there to see us for who we are and love us anyway. "In fact what we sinners usually want is love, to be in touch with pure just loving judgment" (Murdoch 1993, 248; and 1985, 77). God takes seriously the wrongs we have done and others have suffered. At the same time, he works to ensure that our past need not imprison our own or others' futures. God guarantees that those who are hard-done-by in the present will be taken care of in the end. God can redeem their suffering and fix what we have broken. God also encourages and empowers us to become better than we were when we injured the other. God makes possible a transformation in character, which enables us to

¹⁶ See Murphy and Hampton 1988 for further discussion of some of the implicit messages that may be communicated by wrongdoing.

¹⁷ How God will "take care of" wrongdoers is a matter of some debate within the tradition. Some, inspired by passages like Deuteronomy 32:35-43 and Romans 12:19 – "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" – adopt a rather vindictive stance. Others, inspired by passages like I Corinthians 13 and I John 4:7-21, think of this "taking care of" in a more restorative fashion. For a discussion of the relevance of these competing orientations for Christian conceptions of forgiveness and atonement, see Gorringer 1996.

continue hoping that we will not manifest the same character flaws tomorrow that we have displayed today.¹⁸ God is able to turn the subjective guilt and punishment that we suffer into something good. And God is able to absolve our objective guilt, restoring us to the freedom and joy of innocence. (Indeed, for several of Murdoch's characters, like Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers*, this is the primary attraction of Christian belief.)¹⁹

Among Christian practices, the one with the greatest significance for forgiveness may be prayer, whose value Murdoch frequently underscores both in relation to forgiveness and more generally.²⁰ First, from the point of view of the wrongdoer, prayer provides a forum in which to confess one's wrongdoing. The incentive structure in this forum rewards complete honesty: since the one to whom the confession is made can see into the depths of one's heart, it makes little sense to try to save face or downplay the objectionable aspects of one's motivation. Indeed, to do so is to commit yet another transgression. Further, the confession one offers in prayer can serve as a dress rehearsal for making an apology to the persons one has wronged. If one has honestly confessed one's moral failing to God, it may be easier to make an honest confession to them as well.

For the person who has been wronged, prayer may also be of use. Prayer can facilitate a readiness to forgive by inviting a shift in one's perspective. It encourages one to think about how the relationship between the two parties looks from a point of view other than just that of the victim. This may involve thinking about other

¹⁸ See Barney's Maundy Thursday meditations in *The Red and the Green* (Murdoch 1967/1965, 170-6).

¹⁹ Murdoch 1982/1980, 53-54. See also William Eastcote's address to the Quaker meeting in *The Philosopher's Pupil* (Murdoch 2000b/1983, 204-5).

²⁰ See, for example, Murdoch 2001b/1970, 81; 1985, 46-47; and 1993, 143-44, 323, 337, 418-19; and Dooley 2003, 49, 62. Charles Farhadian and Robert Emmons (2009) draw attention to the fact that prayer is one of the first steps that each of the major world religions encourages transgressors to take after they realize they have transgressed. Mark Butler, Julie Stout, and Brandt Gardner (2002) have chronicled a number of the ways in which prayer can help reduce or resolve conflict within Christian marriages.

moments in the relationship between the two parties, including moments in which today's victim may have been yesterday's perpetrator. If the perspective invoked in prayer is that of a loving God, who stands in a parental relationship to each of the parties to the conflict and wants what is best for both, then prayer encourages the victim to view the wrongdoer from a more benevolent perspective than she might otherwise take.

Prayer can not only work to make one readier to forgive, it can also help one begin to enact forgiveness. Praying for the one who has wronged me is a way of expressing good will (Enright 2001, 35) that a) is a comparatively small and undemanding act that is easier to perform than many other acts that might express good will, and b) does not require special opportunities or abilities for its exercise, which means it can (in principle) be performed by anyone at any time. It can also c) be done without coming into contact with the wrongdoer, which means it can help one begin to forgive even when confronting the wrongdoer face-to-face might still provoke anger or fear. And for both the wrongdoer and the wronged it has the potential to draw one's attention away from oneself and toward someone else, which can be of the utmost importance for breaking the grip of guilt-obsessed fantasies of irredeemability or resentment-rehearsing fantasies of revenge (Murdoch 2001b/1970, 53-55, 99).

Richard Wollheim has suggested that guilt and shame require a response from us that is not just "in the mind" but also "in the outer world"(1999, 206-7) and Christian rituals provide a number of resources for making such a move. These include silent actions and postures, such as the lighting of candles or kneeling, that although mute can nevertheless give physical expression to one's acknowledgment of the seriousness of one's moral failings. These actions are encouraged through the

establishment of places “of purification and healing ... the place of pilgrimage, the place of worship, the shrine, the sacred grove” where one might go to think about and confess one’s moral failings (Murdoch 1993, 486). In Orthodox and Catholic communions, in particular, there is also the practice of vocally confessing one’s sins to another human being (namely, a priest) who joins the remorseful wrongdoer in declaring the trait, thought, attitude, or action to be wrong but who also offers the promise of absolution.²¹ The ritualised practices of penance often include an encouragement to apologize to those one has wronged and to take steps to repair – to the extent possible – the damage one has done. And they include the injunction to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11).

These places, postures, and practices can also be of benefit to the one wronged as she comes to terms with the wrong she has suffered and attempts to forgive the wrongdoer. The writers of the New Testament consistently discourage anger and encourage forgiveness.²² So persons who are dealing with anger stemming from having been wronged will have reason to make use of the very same resources as the person who has wronged them. There will, of course, be an important difference between the experience of the wrongdoer and that of the wronged in the use of these resources. The latter’s use of sacred spaces and confessionals will come within a context that affirms that the treatment she received was, in fact, wrong. (I will say

²¹ Paavo Kettunen observes that for some confessants the power of the confessor to absolve is terribly important. But for others, it is the process of confessing that does all of the significant work: “It is not really the other person who takes away their guilt but rather they themselves who give it to the confessor” (2002, 15-16).

²² See, for example, Matthew 5:21-22, 43-45; and Colossians 3:7-15. Even the passage that looks like it is commending anger – “Be angry but do not sin”(Ephesians 4:26) – in fact, is not. The author is offering a paraphrase of Psalm 4:4, which says, “If you are angry, do not sin; ponder it on your beds and be silent.” The writer of Ephesians strengthens the Psalmist’s point a) by restricting how long you may ponder it on your bed – “do not let the sun go down on your anger”(4:26) – and b) by putting anger in the same class as lying, stealing, evil talk, slander, malice, and grieving the Holy Spirit (4:25-30). We are to “put away” these things and, instead, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you”(4:32). James 1:19-20 puts the final nail in the lid: “Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.”

more about the significance of this affirmation in a moment.) Nevertheless, the confessional and the sanctuary will be available for her to acknowledge the resentment she harbours toward the one who wronged her and to help her let go of it.

The rituals, spaces, and spiritual practices mentioned above are intimately intertwined with the teachings of the church. These, too, provide resources that encourage forgiveness. We have already mentioned the explicit injunctions to confess and forgive and warnings about the seriousness of not doing so.²³ To these we can add the exemplars of forgiveness whose stories are told and retold in sacred texts, liturgies, songs, sermons, stained glass, sculptures, and countless other ways, presenting admirable models that invite imitation. These stories provide concepts, pictures, patterns, and scripts “which remain vividly in the memory, playing a protective or guiding role: moral refuges, perpetual starting points ...” that are useful for making sense of our mundane experiences and relationships, but even more for helping us find our bearings in extra-mundane experiences that by their very nature seem to defy the attempt to make sense of them.²⁴ All of these things – parables, exemplars, rituals, spaces, and doctrines – can contribute to the formation of a distinctive “vision of the world” or “consciousness” that is itself an extraordinarily important part of the moral life (Murdoch 1956, 81, 90-91). “[C]onsciousness is a form of moral activity: what we attend to, how we attend, whether we attend” (Murdoch 1993, 167). And a consciousness shaped by “turning our minds to good people, to our best work, to beautiful and noble art, to the pure words of Christ in the

²³ See, for example, Leviticus 5:1-6, Matthew 18:21-35, and James 5:16. For further discussion of Christian teaching on forgiveness, see Pokrifka-Joe 2001, 165-72 and Bash 2007, 95-9.

²⁴ Murdoch 1993, 335. Similarly Taylor 1996, 11, 14.

Gospel, and to the works of God obedient to Him in nature” will be prepared to attend in a loving way to the world around it.²⁵

Finally, there is the role of the community of faith. Given what has been said about the importance of forgiveness within the ideals that govern Christian life, one would expect members of the Christian community to encourage one another to forgive when they have been wronged. Some of this encouragement may come in the form of explicit advice to forgive, whether in the context of a general address (such as a sermon) or in a personal conversation. But much of the encouragement to forgive will come in more covert forms. For the victim of wrongdoing it may come through the awareness that the community rejects the way in which he has been treated and affirms his standing as someone who ought not to have been treated in this way.²⁶ It may also come through his awareness that the community admires those who forgive and disapproves of being unforgiving (Farhadian and Emmons 2009, 59). But even more importantly, the community is there to stand by him, to love him, and to support him in this moment, so that he need not carry the emotional and material burdens (inflicted by the wrong) alone.

For the transgressor, the encouragement to seek forgiveness may come through her awareness that she has fallen out of favour with the wider community as a result of her transgression together with her awareness that the route back to favour involves making right (to the extent she is able) the one she has wronged. It may come through her recognition that they believe her capable of making a change for the better and are willing to help her realize that potential. And when she has taken reparative steps, the community may also play an important role in encouraging her to

²⁵ William Eastcote in *The Philosopher's Pupil* (Murdoch 2000b/1983, 205). Suguna Ramanathan (1987) argues that William Eastcote is an exemplary figure who embodies the normative ideals that Murdoch articulated in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Thus, he is someone whose judgment we can consistently trust.

²⁶ On the importance of these affirmations for forgiving, see Hieronymi 2001, 530.

accept forgiveness, whether from God or from her victim, if she continues to struggle with the weight of her guilt.

3. Forgiveness without God

But what if there is no God? If one's loss of faith has cut one off from the rituals and resources mentioned above, what then? Murdoch notes that "a Christian who loses belief in God and resurrection and immortality" need not be cut off from religious rituals and resources. It is possible to "demythologize Christianity" and nevertheless remain religious, sincerely participating in the life of the church and making use of the forms and images of traditional Christianity. However, "in practice, differences of religious style, though in a sense superficial, stir such deep emotions that those who lose hold of the traditional dogmatic structures of their religion are often unable to carry the concept further and lose religion altogether"(Murdoch 1993, 376).

Murdoch underscores the significance of the loss of faith for wrongdoers, in particular, in *The Good Apprentice*. Edward Baltram is a university student who sneaks a hallucinogen into his best friend's food. His action is clearly objectionable, both because he deceives his friend, Mark Wilsden, and because his reasons for doing so are, at best, petty. Mark had "so loftily disapproved and so peevishly refused" when Edward had taken the drug on another occasion. Slipping the drug into Mark's food is a misguided attempt to restore a sort of equality to their relationship. Nevertheless, it is not his intention to hurt Mark. He "admired and loved" Mark. Consequently, he remains sober so that he can take care of Mark when his friend no longer has the presence of mind to take care of himself. He watches with with a bit of anxiety until "it became clear that Mark was destined to have a happy journey. If he

had sent his friend even temporarily to hell he would have felt most uncomfortable” (Murdoch 1985, 1). After enjoying a pleasant trip, Mark eventually falls asleep on Edward’s bed. A short while later Sarah Plowmain, a girl in whom Edward is romantically interested, rings and asks, “Could you come and see me? I’m low. Come across and have a quick drink.” Since Mark is asleep and Sarah lives nearby, Edward decides to go see her, but “just for five minutes” (3). However, five minutes stretches into “a little over a half an hour” and while Edward is out of the room Mark awakens. Under the influence of the drug, he pulls a chair to the window, opens it, and leaps to his death. The novel is built around Edward’s attempt to deal with the overwhelming grief and guilt that follow.

At one point, several months after Mark’s death, Edward’s uncle, who is a psychotherapist, asks,

You’re sure you don’t want to see a priest? It’s always worth wondering whether the remnants of your religion could help. A priest could hear your confession and absolve you I don’t think I can forgive you There’s something else I can do, but not that. We need priests, we miss them and will miss them more, we miss their power (69-70).

Edward cannot do anything to make it up to his deceased friend, Mark. Nor can Mark forgive Edward: “Oh forgive me, will not someone forgive me? If Mark were alive in a wheelchair would he forgive me? Surely he would. But he is not alive, and I killed him. Edward heard these thoughts, endlessly repeated, ringing in his head, ringing out as if everyone could hear them ...” (12). Mark’s mother cannot be expected to forgive Edward, either, since she is consumed by her own grief and anger at the loss of her son. And given that he is the object of her anger, Edward is in no position to comfort her, ease her pain, or take any steps that might be seen as reparative. He is paralyzed by his inability to ameliorate any of the harms he has caused and thereby to redefine himself, in his own and others’ eyes, in terms of something other than his

transgression. Without God or God's priests, Edward despairs of ever being forgiven. And Murdoch repeatedly suggests that there is a good deal of sense in Edward's response: "God is a belief that at our deepest level we are known and loved, even to where the rays can penetrate," Thomas observes at a later point in the narrative. "But the therapist is not god, not even a priest or a sage, and must prompt the sufferer to heal himself through his own deities, and this involves finding them. How many souls there are who, encountering no good powers, are never healed at all" (77).

God or no God, we will all too often find ourselves wrestling with the guilt and resentment that stem from our own and others' moral failings. Even after many other doctrinal claims have stopped making sense for a person, he may hold onto the doctrine of original sin: "However good a life is, it includes moral failure" (Murdoch 1993, 509). But in the absence of God, the wrongdoer will be forced to come to terms with the fact that many of "those, including himself, whom he harmed by an imperfect way of living, remain irrevocably harmed" (Murdoch 1993, 263). There is no one who can be expected to put the pieces back together again, no one capable of changing both the world and me so that things are "just as if I'd never done it." If God exists then one can take comfort in the idea of redemptive suffering: "I never went in much for suffering," Bruno Greensleave confesses to Nigel Boase in *Bruno's Dream*. "But I wouldn't mind it now if I felt it had any meaning, as if one were buying back one's faults" (Murdoch 1977a/1969, 90). The same possibility of redemptive suffering can bring comfort to those who have been the victim of wrongdoing as well: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:3-5). Indeed, although the church has historically resisted this position, it has been common for people to think of the hardships they are currently enduring as victims of

wrongdoing as being a way of paying for the wrongs they have themselves perpetrated against others. However, without God suffering is pointless. There is no one to “work all things together for good” (Romans 8:28) for either the transgressor or the one transgressed against.²⁷

Finally, without God, there is no absolution.²⁸ There is no one who can wash away the sin. Guilt is permanent. However much we might long for it – and Murdoch’s characters are perpetually longing for it²⁹ – there is no return to innocence.

However, the prospects of forgiveness without God are not quite as bleak as the preceding paragraphs might suggest. Admittedly, the death of God is not a trivial change. When we lose God we lose the hope of absolution, the cancellation of debt, and many of the symbols, teachings, and practices that facilitate forgiveness. Even if one has not lost faith oneself, in a post-Christian culture one can count on fewer of those with whom one interacts daily to have had their consciousness shaped by the stories and images of forgiving exemplars – like the parable of the Prodigal’s Father – that are central to Christian moral education. Nevertheless, Murdoch’s novels repeatedly underscore the fact that there are other senses of forgiveness that remain available and other steps we can take to help facilitate it.³⁰ In particular, I will highlight two of the ways that she suggests we might cultivate forgiveness even in the absence of God. Each of them bears the marks of Christian belief and practice, but can nevertheless be extracted from that tradition by those who can no longer endorse

²⁷ Murdoch’s characters repeatedly link the possibility of redemptive suffering to the existence of God. See, for example, Guy Openshaw in *Nuns and Soldiers* (1982/1980, 66); and John Robert Rozanov in *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (2000b/1983, 189).

²⁸ Crystal Burde in *A Word Child*, 136.

²⁹ See, for example, 2000a/1964, 45, 75, and 137; and 1967/1965, 170 and 176.

³⁰ Jennifer Spencer Goodyer claims that at the end of *The Nice and the Good* Theo Gray learns, “that he must let go of every consoling metaphysical structure. This includes the concept of forgiveness . . .” (2009, 225). I am arguing that a more qualified statement is required in order to reflect what is going on at this point in the novel. Theo may need to let go of some concepts of forgiveness, such as the concept of forgiveness as absolution, but he need not let go of every concept of forgiveness. At the end of the novel Theo discovers that the advice he has just been giving Willy about needing to forgive oneself is relevant to his own case as well.

those beliefs or embody those practices in their traditional form. And each of them can be nurtured through the process of reading one or more of Murdoch's novels.³¹

The first forgiveness-promoting experience involves coming to see that the wrongdoer is not as bad as their wrongdoing might make them seem.³² As noted above, we often tend to define the wrongdoer in terms of their wrongdoing. We take the moment of transgression to reveal their true nature. This happens more often when we are the victim of someone else's transgression, but as Murdoch makes clear in the characters of Hannah Crean-Smith and Denis Nolan in *The Unicorn*, of Hilary Burde in *A Word Child*, and of Edward Baltram in *The Good Apprentice*, it can also happen when we are the perpetrator of the wrong. Defining the wrongdoer in this way, as traitor, villain, adulterer, thief, racist, monster, or demon misrepresents most wrongdoers. As Lisa Watkin sagely observes in *Bruno's Dream*, "Human beings are not demons. They are much too muddy."³³ We cannot accurately be identified with and reduced to a single act, motive, or trait of character. Our lives are a mixture of good and bad acts, motives, and traits.³⁴ This is not to excuse our wrongdoing. Nor

³¹ The thought that reading one of her novels might have moral benefits of this sort is quite in keeping with her remarks about the value of reading good literature, as well as with her claim that "there is a sort of [moral] pedagogue in my novels" (Dooley 2003, 134). Particularly suggestive, in this regard, is an exchange between Murdoch and Jeffrey Meyers at the end of their 1988 interview. Meyers asked her, "Do you think your books have been generally understood?" to which she responded, "I don't know. I get letters which I value from people who say that my books have helped them in some way. That's pleasing news" (Dooley 2003, 234). One might read her response as a *non sequitur*, a simple change of subject. But there is another – and I think better – way to read her reply: Although she is not prepared to answer the general question, she has evidence that at least some people have understood her novels, namely, the letters from those who say they have been helped by reading her books. This is perfectly consistent with her oft repeated claim that an artist should not aim directly at being a teacher or presenting a philosophical creed (Dooley 2003, 240). For there may be various goods that one hopes one's artistic creation will possess that one, nevertheless, cannot take as one's direct aim when one is engaged in (certain stages of) the creative process.

³² This need not involve adopting a rosy view of human nature. In a symposium held on her work in 1978, Murdoch said, "I think that people are pretty bad on the whole, not bad in the sense of wicked, but selfish and so on, selfishness is absolutely ingrained in human beings" (Dooley 2003, 92). And this view is consistently reflected in her novels.

³³ Murdoch 1977a/1969, 154. Murdoch expresses this same point in her own voice in an interview with William Kent Rose in 1968 (Dooley 2003, 24).

³⁴ "Miss Murdoch knows that our moral existence is ambiguous: we are creatures who are seldom completely good or completely bad" (Hauerwas 1981, 43-44).

does it rule out the possibility that some acts or persons are unforgivable.³⁵ But if there is more to us than our wickedness and if even our wickedness is often the result not of demonic intentions but of garden-variety self-absorption, then seeing us in that light may counter-act the image of us as seen through the lense of our wrongdoing. Murdoch's most compelling argument for this possibility is not presented in one of her explicit discussions of it, but rather in her portrayal of the inner lives of Hilary Burde in *A Word Child* and of Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, where the first-person narrative shows the reader the world as seen through the eyes of messy-but-still-lovable wrongdoers.

Charles Arrowby is a retired stage actor, director, and playwright. He is the classic protagonist, whose humble beginnings make his subsequent success all the more impressive. We are introduced to him, through his journal, at the moment of his retirement, just after he has renounced a life of fame and influence in favour of a quiet existence by the seaside. He is cultured yet down-to-earth. In spite of living in a professional world that is renowned for its love of luxury and its fondness for exotic cuisine, Charles has maintained simple tastes and has chosen an austere home in a rugged, out-of-the-way location for his retirement. In short, he is a respectable, likable person, with whom it is easy to sympathize and for whom one wants things to turn out well. He is the sort of person one would welcome as a neighbour and would be happy to meet at the pub over a pint.

However, as the story unfolds one discovers that this protagonist is deeply flawed. While perhaps not embodying all seven of the deadly sins, he nevertheless exemplifies a good number of them, and in place of the ones he lacks he substitutes a number of other familiar vices. He is vain, self-centered, insensitive, envious (his

³⁵ See Murdoch 1978a/1968, 353-54.

claims to the contrary³⁶ notwithstanding), jealous, lustful, obsessive, and controlling. In fact, although he is the protagonist of Murdoch's story, he has been the paradigmatic antagonist in the stories of many of those with whom he has lived and worked. His onetime friend Peregrine Arbelow underscores this point.

You deliberately smashed my marriage, you took away my wife whom I adored, you did it carefully, cold-bloodedly, you *worked* at it. Then when you had got her away from me you dropped her. You didn't even want her for yourself, you just wanted to steal her from me to satisfy the beastly impulses of your possessiveness and your jealousy! Then when they were satisfied, when my marriage was broken forever, you went jaunting off somewhere else. And what is more you expected me to tolerate this and to go on liking you! Why? Because you thought everybody always went on liking you whatever rotten things you did because you were wonderful wonderful Charles Arrowby.... Of course everyone knows you regard women as trash. But what bugged me was that you wrecked my life and my happiness and you just didn't seem to care at all, you were so bloody perky (Murdoch 1999a/1978, 397).

Peregrine is only one of the many people whose lives Charles has adversely and culpably altered. He has caused numerous others deep, lasting pain and has left his spectre to haunt them for years to come.

Yet, although Peregrine is largely correct in his account of the facts, one cannot help but feel there is something he is missing. There are different ways to put the point. One way is to say that the Charles who is the object of Peregrine's hatred does not correspond to the Charles who is the protagonist of *The Sea, The Sea*. Peregrine's Charles is too flat. Although he clearly understands Charles better than Ben Fitch (another person in whose mental life Charles plays an important, antagonistic role), and in some ways understands him better than Charles understands himself, he still doesn't understand Charles. Or to put it another way, using one of Murdoch's favourite metaphors, Peregrine still doesn't really *see* Charles. He only ever imagines enough of him to serve as the object of his resentment.

³⁶ Early in *The Sea, The Sea*, he admits to being jealous but denies being envious (38). However, as the story progresses it becomes clear that he has always envied his cousin, James.

If we can come to see more of the other person, then it is harder for us to define them simply in terms of their transgression. Without denying that they have culpably performed wrong actions – even actions that stem from deep, persistent flaws in their moral character – sympathetically understanding them may enable us to reach a point where we no longer see them through the lense of their wrongdoing. Murdoch often explicitly appeals to the common assumption that there is a link between understanding and forgiving.³⁷ Her most persuasive case for this connection appears when, as in *The Sea, The Sea*, she tells a protagonist’s story about someone who is, for so many around them, merely an antagonist. By inviting the reader to sympathize with these characters, she enables us to want things to turn out well for them at the same time that we are confronted by their moral flaws. And this invites us to think more deeply and, perhaps, more sympathetically about persons in our own lives whom we are tempted to define in terms of the wrongs they have done us and to resist this temptation to see them as less or other than they truly are. Being able to understand a wrongdoer in this way may, indeed, encourage us to forgive them.³⁸

One might worry that the way in which understanding encourages forgiveness is by distracting our attention away from the relevant features of the case. Are we not just putting their wickedness out of our minds and choosing to think about something else when we understand a wrongdoer in this way? That this is not what Murdoch is talking about is evident, among other places, in *Bruno’s Dream*. Bruno Greensleave and his son, Miles, have been estranged for years. The real and imagined reasons for their estrangement are unremarkable for their commonness. Bruno was not a particularly attentive father or husband. To this shortcoming he added an extramarital affair, whose discovery deeply wounded Miles’s mother (now deceased) and Miles as

³⁷ She does so most frequently in *An Accidental Man* (Murdoch 1973/1971).

³⁸ For more on the relationship between understanding and forgiving see Pettigrove 2007.

well, by extension. The proverbial last straw came years later, when Miles as a young adult told his father of his intention to marry a girl named Parvati (whom Bruno has never met), and Bruno responded with a racial slur and an authoritarian mandate. Now, years later, Bruno longs to be reunited with his son.

Sometimes when Bruno is thinking about their reunion, what he really wants is for Miles to excuse him. At a fairly early moment in their first meeting Bruno blurts out, “I’ve got to have your forgiveness. You’ve got to *understand*” (Murdoch 1977a/1969, 109). And it is clear from the context that what he really wants is to “explain everything” so that Miles can see that his extra-marital affair “wasn’t much after all, it really wasn’t” (109). and that his remarks about Parvati had merely been “hasty” and “careless” (14). He wants Miles to realize that what led to their estrangement were simple “misunderstandings,” and to respond by telling Bruno that he really wasn’t so bad after all. But on a deeper level, this is not what he wants, because he knows that such statements are false. He knows that he has behaved in undeniably, inexcusably wrong ways. What he wants is not an excuse, predicated on a failure to understand who he is and what he has done, but forgiveness. More precisely, he wants Miles to forgive *him*, and not just one or another of his acts. In order to offer the kind of forgiveness Bruno seeks, Miles will have to understand him. There will have to be a transformation in the way Miles sees him, such that Miles comes to see him truly and at the same time is able to love him, warts and all.³⁹

³⁹ This involves the kind of Gestalt shift or change in “reading” that Murdoch, following Simone Weil (1990/1946), takes to be such an important part of moral reasoning. As Nancy Snow (2005) demonstrates in considerable detail, it is difficult to say precisely what such a loving gaze would see when looking at a flawed other. Murdoch identifies a number of things that one would not see, many of which have already been mentioned. One would not see a demon, a one-dimensional creature that is wholly defined by their transgressions or our resentful fantasies. The difficulty of saying what one *would* see is compounded by the fact that the object of an honest gaze is always a particular person, whereas the language we might use to describe what such a person is like is inescapably general. This is part of the reason that Murdoch thinks the novelist is in a better position to portray certain kinds of truths than is the philosopher. The novelist is not merely attempting to assemble a string of general predicates that she can use to identify a person. She is able to employ a full range of narrative

Miles, on the other hand, wants no such thing. He wants a different, less demanding sort of “forgiveness”.

He did not want to hear Bruno’s confessions. As far as he was concerned now, Bruno had no past. He had long ago forgiven Bruno, that is he had amputated from his mind and his heart all further consideration of Bruno’s offences. He did not want to think about the past in the company of his father.... What he could not do was enter into a live relationship with his father which involved the reopening of the past” (136).

Neither Miles nor Peregrine really understands the person who has been the object of their resentment. Peregrine fails to understand Charles because his resentment had fixed on the caricature of him that best served its purposes. Miles fails to understand Bruno because he has found putting Bruno out of his mind is the easiest way to deal with the hostility he feels toward his father. By contrast, what Bruno is seeking is not something that arises because Miles’s attention has been distracted away from salient features of the case. What he desires is for Miles’s sense of Bruno and Bruno’s sense of himself to merge in a way that makes it possible for them to share a sense of who Bruno is and what he has done that is more honest and more complete than either of them had in isolation. What Bruno longs for is to be seen by his son as one might think God sees us, to be really understood – and loved anyway. Of course, the fact that he wants it does not yet tell us that it is possible. But by showing us how we as readers might come to understand and sympathize with morally flawed characters, Murdoch enables us to see how it might be both possible and epistemically responsible to work toward gaining a comparable understanding of persons in our own lives who have wronged us in similar ways.⁴⁰

resources to give one access to – or at least bring one closer to – the person herself (see, for example, Murdoch 1959a; 1959b; 1961; and 1972; as well as Nussbaum 1996, 38).

⁴⁰ The claim is not that we can gain a better understanding of any agent and by so doing find ourselves more disposed to forgive him. There may be some agents who defy our understanding – such as Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* whom Murdoch identifies with Satan (Dooley 2003, 51) – or who are so thoroughly identified with their transgressions that one cannot but see them in that light – such as Carel Fisher in *The Time of the Angels*. But Murdoch repeatedly suggests that such individuals are

The second type of forgiveness-promoting experience that Murdoch highlights involves changing the focus of the potential forgiver's attention. If the potential forgiver is the resenting victim, then it will help to focus her attention on something other than the wrongdoer (seen chiefly in the light of the wrong). If, on the other hand, the situation involves someone who cannot forgive herself, then it will help to focus the attention of the guilt-ridden wrongdoer on something other than his wrongdoing.⁴¹ For Danby and Bruno in *Bruno's Dream*, and John Ducane in *The Nice and the Good* the forgiveness-promoting experience is the confrontation with the looming possibility of their own death. For Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, it is the discovery that Clement Makin has a terminal illness. For Henry and Gerda Marshalsen in *Henry and Cato* it is the threat to the life of Cato and Colette Forbes. In each case, the transgressions and the guilt or resentment rooted therein, seem insignificant by comparison.

As above, one might worry that these momentary encounters with mortality are mere distractions that lead to forgetfulness rather than forgiveness. However, this is not, in fact, how they appear in Murdoch's narratives. Rather, these encounters perform three important functions, each of which has the potential to give us a truer perspective on the transgressor who is the object of our guilt (if the issue is self-forgiveness) or resentment (if the case involves forgiving another). First, they provide an emotional interruption. Feelings of guilt and resentment carry with them an obsessive potential. If unchecked, they can easily take over one's mental and emotional life. They invite us to focus on the transgression in such a way that it

fewer in number than we ordinarily think. Certainly it is a smaller set than the set of persons we routinely resent.

⁴¹ It is sometimes argued that self-forgiveness is not, in fact, an instance of forgiveness but of some quite different phenomenon (Downie 1965, 129). Murdoch takes self-forgiveness to be an important species of forgiveness that raises a number of the same moral and psychological issues as other-directed forgiveness. For further discussion of the nature of self-forgiveness and its status as a genuine (or counterfeit) species of forgiveness, see Dillon 2001, 53-83 and Norlock 2009, 137-57.

comes to overshadow other things of equal or greater moral significance. By breaking our focus on the moment of transgression, these encounters with mortality have the potential to give us a bit of emotional distance. Often, by the time we return to thinking about the moment of transgression, it no longer appears quite as important as it once seemed.

Second, they force our attention away from “the dear old self.” Murdoch repeatedly argues that one of our central moral challenges is to break out of our self-absorbed engagement in our own personal affairs in order to see those around us more truly (Murdoch 1959a, 215-16; Blum 1987, 362). And as Brendan Craddock observes in conversation with Cato Forbes in *Henry and Cato*, guilt and resentment often reinforce our natural egocentric tendencies by making a virtue out of self-absorption.⁴² This is unlikely to yield a true vision of the overall importance of either the transgressor or the transgression.

You dress these difficulties up in a certain terminology. I think you should wait a while and consider whether this is the right terminology You are in a dream state. Ordinary human consciousness is a tissue of illusion. Our chief illusion is our conception of ourselves, of our importance which must not be violated, our dignity which must not be mocked. All our resentment flows from this illusion, all our desire to do violence, to avenge insults, to assert ourselves.⁴³

Later, Brendan makes a similar point about guilt.

You keep going over and over what happened and picturing it and imagining it otherwise. You mustn't. Repentance isn't a bit like obsessive guilt Your guilt is vanity, it's to do with that self-esteem you were talking about, which you haven't really lost at all, it's only wounded. Repent, and let these things pass from you (348).

Learning of a loved one's death or terminal illness has the potential to break through our self-absorption and direct our focus outward. By so doing, it puts us in a better

⁴² Elizabeth Dipple observes that “Brendan is one of Murdoch's characters of the good, and a voice to be listened to” (1992, 128).

⁴³ Murdoch 1977b/1976, 153-54. Murdoch makes similar claims about resentment in a number of places. See, for example, Murdoch 1978b, 14; 1986, 515; 1993, 264; and 2001/1970, 89.

position to see the situation more accurately. Likewise, anticipating the removal of oneself from the world – “the total obliteration of your present being” (Dooley 2003, 137) – can have a profound impact on the vantage from which one views the world. An experience of one’s own mortality can draw one toward the self-less stance that Murdoch argues is central to virtue.⁴⁴

The third benefit of these encounters with mortality is closely related to the first two. By forcing our attention away from the self and its grievances, these experiences enable us to see others with clearer eyes. “The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves” (Murdoch 2001b/1970, 100). Murdoch likens these moments to the experience of waking up from a dream:

One sees now how pointless it all was, all the things one chased after, all the things one wanted. And if there is something that matters now at the end it must be the only thing that matters. I wish I’d known it then. It looks as if it would have been easy to be kind and good since it’s so obvious now that nothing else matters at all. But of course then one was inside the dream ...

“If only it could work backwards, but it can’t.”

Some people believed that too. That life could be redeemed. But it couldn’t be, and that was what was so terrible. He had loved only a few people and loved them so badly, so selfishly. He had made a muddle of everything. Was it only in the presence of death that one could see so clearly what love ought to be like? If only the knowledge which he had now, this absolute nothing-else-matters, could somehow go backwards and purify the little selfish loves and straighten out the muddles. But it could not.

Had Janie known this at the end? For the first time Bruno saw it with absolute certainty. Janie must have known. It would be impossible in this presence not to know. She had not wanted to curse him, she had wanted to forgive him (1977a/1969, 263-64).

⁴⁴ Effingham Cooper, in what is perhaps the most famous near-death experience in Murdoch’s corpus, thinks, “since he was mortal he was nothing and since he was nothing all that was not himself was filled to the brim with being and it was from this that the light streamed. This then was love, to look and look until one exists no more, this was the love which was the same as death” (Murdoch 1966/1963, 167). See Tony Milligan (2007) for a discussion of several potential objections to Murdoch’s conceptualization of the relationship between death and virtue.

These experiences have a self-authenticating quality to them. When we are in the midst of them, they strike us as involving genuine insights into what really matters.⁴⁵ This conviction-of-the-moment gains further support upon reflection. The perspective opened up in these moments closely resembles the perspective advocated by persons who are commonly deemed moral visionaries. And it is consistent with numerous, mundane experiences of re-evaluation that are afforded us by hindsight: when we look back from a distance of ten or fifteen years, we realize that many of the things in which we invested our time and energy, and many of the actions about which we grew angry, were not nearly as important as we took them to be.

So rather than involving a morally problematic forgetfulness, the suggestion is that these extra-mundane moments reframe mundane transgressions. They provide a kind of conceptual as well as emotional distance from which to view the original transgression. By so doing, Murdoch suggests, they provide a better, clearer, more honest, less illusory perspective from which to view oneself and others. And at the same time they facilitate forgiveness.

There are, of course, two rather obvious limitations to this kind of forgiveness-promoting experience. First, we cannot go around manufacturing life-threatening crises for ourselves and those we love.⁴⁶ Second, the vision-transforming effect of these experiences fades over time: “Hardship reveals eternal truths, but only for a moment, since human beings soon recover and forget” (1973/1971, 99). Our egos and their illusions quickly reassert themselves and begin clamoring for our attention. This is not the place to launch into a full-blown discussion of Murdoch’s views on how we

⁴⁵ Cheryl Bove observes, “Nearly all of the characters in Murdoch’s novels who have near-death experiences realize some truth, even if their spiritual states are such that they cannot maintain this vision and make any real changes in their lives” (1993, 26).

⁴⁶ Nigel Boase, perhaps the most challenging character in Murdoch’s corpus for an interpreter to make sense of, does precisely this. However, even if he does express a number of important insights, he is clearly not someone on whom we ought to model our actions. For an interesting discussion of Nigel’s role in *Bruno’s Dream* see Luprecht 2010.

go about nurturing and developing the virtues.⁴⁷ It is sufficient for our purposes to point out that it is possible to incorporate experiences like these into our moral consciousness in a more lasting way and to cultivate what, in the *Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch calls “a genuine sense of mortality ... the clarification of vision and the domination of selfish impulse” that is an aspect of virtue (2001b/ 1970, 96-97). Indeed, reading and reflecting upon novels like *Bruno’s Dream* can be an important part of this training, as can a number of other, less extreme and less tragic, experiences.

Conclusion

Anne Rowe has suggested that, for Murdoch, “the desire for God ... is the desire to find sense and unity in human life, to be forgiven for one’s sins and to find a spiritual home” (2010, 143). This paper has explained why one of these, namely, the desire to be forgiven, is so closely linked with the desire for God. Murdoch insists that we should not give up either of these desires even when we can no longer believe in God. And we are now in a better position to appreciate why she thinks they should not be abandoned. However, if there is no God, then the desire for God will need to undergo some kind of transformation if it is to be, even partially, satisfied. Likewise, we have seen, the desire for forgiveness may need to undergo a comparable transformation. Some of our longings cannot – in the absence of God – be fully satisfied. But some of them can, and Murdoch both helps us see what the transformation might involve and provides us with new parables to aid us in our journey.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ For such a discussion, see Antonaccio 2000, especially 134-43.

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