

**EROTICISM, FANTASY, AND TRAGIC CONFLICT: ON NUSSBAUM'S ARISTOTLE
CONTRA MURDOCH'S PLATO**

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Abstract

I argue that Martha Nussbaum presents us with an invaluable stance toward nonmoral goods—especially those of fantasy—relative to 1) the anti-perfectionist view regarding moral goods taken in Susan Wolf's "Moral Saints" 2) the perfectionist stance taken by Iris Murdoch.

I show how Nussbaum critiques Murdoch not by taking issue with her perfectionist agenda, but by suggesting an alternative to Murdoch's regret-less "coolness" in applying this agenda to the ubiquitously tragic situations that humans encounter.

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In "Love and Vision," Martha Nussbaum closes her somewhat elliptical investigation and critique of Iris Murdoch's treatment of Eros with a comparison of two other closings:

Murdoch ends her Gifford Lectures with a praise of spiritual disciple, of "our experience of the unconditioned and our continued sense of the holy" (*Metaphysics [as a Guide to Morals]*, 512). I chose to end my Gifford Lectures with *Ulysses* and Molly Bloom, with the sun on the Howth and the rhododendrons and the fantasy of Mulvry and the real semi-ignored presence of Poldy and the fantasy of Poldy and the Yes inside the fantasy and the Yes to the fantasy (Nussbaum 1996, 52).

The implication is that the divergence in the content of these two endings is revelatory of a more general divergence between Murdoch's thought and her own. These divergences in turn mirror one which Nussbaum sketches out in the same essay: that of Plato's and Dante's common "departure" from

“Joyce’s Aristotle” (Nussbaum 1996, 52). Murdoch is identified with Plato and Dante insofar as they both make this departure, while Nussbaum’s own “identification” with Aristotle is admitted to at the end of the essay. Left as merely implied are Nussbaum’s evident sympathies in the essay for the particular “Aristotle” in question—namely, that of Joyce.

In this essay, I will attempt to elucidate the significance of Nussbaum’s laying out of this series of contrasts, because I understand Nussbaum, in doing so, to be pointing to a conflict in contemporary ethical theory whose character is very much in need of articulation. It is a conflict concerning the ethical status of concern for the self and the same, against a background where the centrality of other-concern in ethics is a given. In broad terms, it is a conflict between the neo-Romantic and the moralist, between a positive and negative understanding of the ethical value of the self’s manifold projections: of its fantasies, schemes, and dreams of—and for—its own pleasure, survival, and un-checked flourishing.

To make the nature of this conflict clear, I will consider first the neo-Romantic’s positive stance toward the self’s projections. It is a stance, it should be noted, which extends to projections into—to use Levinas’ term—the “We” relationship, such as is found in relations which can somewhat questionably get placed under the label of “*egoism a deux*.” This positive stance of the neo-Romantic involves, first of all, seeing the self’s projections as crucial motivations and supports for other-concern: for example, emphasizing sexual desire and its attending fantasies as a route to other-concern, despite the evidence of

the egoistic, narcissistic tendencies which spring from sexual desire; or, to approach this positivity through the negative, emphasizing the way in which ethics *must* seek to harness such selfish tendencies, rather than dispel or (merely) contain them. This positive stance of the neo-Romantic further, and, for the purposes of this essay, much more importantly, involves, beyond belief in the beneficial effects for the other which can be gotten from the self's projections, belief in the value such projections have in their own right as part of human flourishing, irreducible to their value as supports to other-concern.

In opposition to the neo-Romantic's stance toward the self's projections, we have on the other hand the suspicious, demanding stance of the moralist. The moralist, while not denying that one might be impelled to cultivate one's own virtues and certain of one's own powers, nevertheless emphasizes the way in which the self's projections are obstacles to the demands of other-concern. Moreover, she takes the demands of other-concern to be supreme. As such, the self's projections are seen as having an overwhelmingly negative character, ubiquitous though they may be whatever one's vigilance against them.

I would align the views of Aristotelians such as Nussbaum, and perhaps those of Bernard Williams as well, with the views of "the neo-Romantic," even as would not wish to subsume them under this label.

With "the moralist," I would align the views of Platonists such as Murdoch, and the views of Simon

Weil—and perhaps those of Levinas as well, whose understanding of “the Other” has informed my discussion.

My contention is that Nussbaum is working in a “neo-Romantic” vein by attempting to bring to light a problematic in highly “moralistic”—i.e., negative—accounts of the ethical value of the self’s projections, in a very similar vein to the critique, found in “Moral Saints,” which Susan Wolf gives of absolutizing conceptions of “moral perfection.” This problematic is namely that of the inhumanity involved in dismissing, à la Murdoch, the self’s projection—for instance, of fantasy upon the chaos and contingency of existence—as an intractable impediment to true vision of the Good.

As Nussbaum writes: “For [Murdoch], there is a real sense in which the fantasies and the follies of our sexual life are sewage; and art of the truest kind is the great cleansing Platonic sewer-pipe that will in a certain sense carry all that off...” (Nussbaum 1996, 51). It is this understanding of fantasy which Nussbaum finds problematic.

In considering Murdoch and Nussbaum’s respective treatments of fantasy, we need to keep in mind that, beyond their status as “sewage,” there is also perhaps a real sense in which for Murdoch—a Freudian—the fantasies and follies of our sexual life are the only kind that count; and one can accept this premise without further accepting that such fantasies and follies only subtract. It is in harmony with the

hypotheses of such a non-negative Freudianism that I take Nussbaum to be working when she writes that Joyce “inverts the image,” providing, *contra* Plato and, thus, *contra* Murdoch, a “frankly sexual art [which] is a kind of sewer-pipe that will drain off the censorious metaphysics of the Irish-Catholic church as he knew it, to leave the body in peace and health”; or as, it is also described, “drain[ing] off Platonic metaphysics to be ourselves” (Nussbaum 1996, 51). Nussbaum does not deny the power of the Freudian thesis that fantasy can be, in some sense, “reduced” to sexuality. She does not exactly accept this thesis either, but makes the related point that much of human sexual life consists of fantasy: the implication being that much of fantasy is in one sense or another erotic. What Nussbaum wishes to question is the suggestion that any Freudian “reduction” of fantasy to the erotic would be a reduction that denudes fantasy of its value. This suggestion is present in Murdoch, on Nussbaum’s reading, in that Murdoch is seen as praising sexuality only as a route to vision of the Good; the fantasies attending sexual desire receive no such praise, to say the least. As such, fantasy is left to be described as being merely part of the egoistic, narcissistic activities of the self, part of the way desires blind. Nussbaum opposes to this a view she imputes to Joyce: that sexuality is something good quite apart from how it lead to the Good, something of value in itself, one might say. Fantasy, even if it might be “reducible” to sexuality, would still share in this value in-itself on the “Joycean” view.

Nussbaum then, is taking issue not *simply* with a devaluing of sexual desire, but with a devaluing of what the Freudian sees as “reducible” to it. It is in this context that we should interpret her questioning of

Murdoch's valorization of purification of the self from the distracting effects of pointless sexual desires and from fantasy. As such, beyond understanding Nussbaum as being concerned with a lack of recognition of the full value sexuality on the part of Murdoch and, in general, on the part of the moralist, we should also interpret Nussbaum as having a more general concern. We should interpret her as taking issue with a sacrificing of the activity of human dreaming for the sake of better contact with the real.

A central claim in this essay is that Nussbaum is not denying the possible need for such "sacrifice" of the goods either of the erotic or of fantasy in general, but is pointing to something troubling about the way in which such need is presented: *without true recognition of the violation of a good of human flourishing that the needed sacrifice would involve*. Her emphasis is thus ultimately very different from Wolf's in "Moral Saints," in that Wolf there suggest that limits need to be placed on the demands of "moral perfection," due to the violation of goods of human flourishing living up to such demands can involve, while Nussbaum is more concerned to 'simply' point to the need for recognition of this violation.¹

Nussbaum is as such pointing to a problematic area in the thought of the moralist whose questionableness can be framed in terms of her understanding of tragic conflict.² In other words, we can understand Murdoch *et al* as being guilty of the sin of R. M. Hare's Utilitarian Archangel, who would coolly dismiss the "remorse and reparative efforts" Nussbaum considers appropriate when one

good is sacrificed for the sake of another (See Nussbaum 1992, 66). Murdoch's protreptic has no time for such remorse in the case of the self's projections; it demands that we leave behind our cozy narcissistic fog for reality, and the more so, the better.³ This is what it means to be a good person for Murdoch. It is not a question of balancing goods like those of sexual desire and fantasy against goods like other-concern. These first "goods," if they would be that on Murdoch's view, can only be termed as such in relation to concern for the Other of the Good, in relation to "unselfing."

There is of course some question as to whether Murdoch merely denies that such as fantasy would be a good at all, or whether she recognizes that it can be, and is willing to coolly sacrifice it. The question is, however, redundant. Her ethics does not admit of the heterogeneity of the Good in any real sense. Whether fantasy could be a good or not does not figure in determining why Murdoch ignores the tragic conflict between goods of the self's projections and goods of other-concern, because even if fantasy is *a* good, it cannot in any meaningful way tragically conflict with *the* Good.

Still, it is needs to be kept in mind that the Aristotelian belief in the heterogeneity of goods—that is to say, the belief that there are many goods, and that these are often incommensurable—in no way entails belief in the Aristotelian position that these goods include external ones such as wealth and beauty as well as the goods of virtue; neither does it entail the related belief that human sexuality and fantasy

contain goods the damaging of which is blameworthy (for discussion of the heterogeneity of the good, see “The Discernment of Perception,” in Nussbaum 1992).

But it should be clear that belief in the heterogeneity of goods, while perhaps not absolutely *necessary* to make belief in such blameworthiness credible, nonetheless frees up a theoretic space within which the goods of desire and fantasy that concern Nussbaum can be seriously taken as ethically important, and thus worthy of calling up blame on those who violate them. Without belief in the heterogeneity of goods, the “magnetic pull” of the *concept* of the Good will tend to assert its own rather powerful effects and cause the goods of human sexuality and fantasy to appear to be themselves but fantasy. In comparison to the ethical demands of other-concern, these goods, tied-up as they are with egoistic impediments to other-concern, can appear so relatively un-important as to be un-worthy of attention in ethical theory. Belief in the heterogeneity of goods, however, secures the “sovereignty” of even relatively un-important incommensurable goods, so that goods of fantasy and desire would have their own inalienable place as part of human flourishing insofar as they are in fact incommensurable with other goods.⁴ The ideal of ethical perfection—one shared by both Murdoch and Nussbaum—when coupled with belief in the heterogeneity of goods would make even the most minor incommensurable good something to at least someday be striven for; something whose loss or absence could never be ignored.

One might describe the situation thus: recognition of the heterogeneity of goods leads to recognition of the goods neglected and marginalized in moral thinking. “Pagan,” worldly excellencies return to our attention when morality is re-inscribed within ethics, to use these terms in the manner of Bernard Williams; when, from another angle, a distinctively moral realm is rejected (for discussion of ‘pagan’ virtue, see Casey).

Indeed, following Anscombe’s critique of the use of “ought” in a moral sense would have to lead one to accept a multitude of ethical descriptors, such as “unjust,” “honest,” “courageous,” etc., to replace the use of the global descriptors of (morally) “wrong” and “right” that she rejects. More significantly, Anscombe’s rejection of a distinctively moral realm of obligation, of “oughts,” leaves open the way for inclusion of a wide variety of goods as being “*not* permissible *not*” to pursue. To deny a discrete realm of moral obligations is in a way to spread obligation over ever disparate kind and feature of human endeavor: here we come again to the ideal of perfection, and the way it can operate to preserve the “sovereign” demands even of goods for which there exists no “moral” obligation to pursue. And let us add: even of goods the possibilities of whose attainment may be foreclosed by factors not “up to us,” such as goods of fantasy, sexual desire, magnanimity, physical grace, health, beauty, etc. (See Casey for a good discussion of how we value such goods even in a nominally non-pagan age.)

We can see that Anscombe “opens up” as possibly significant to ethics a wide variety of goods—many of which surely will be incommensurable—if we consider that, to reject with Anscombe a distinctively moral sense to “ought,” is to take as problematic, to say the least, attempts to divide goods into categories of “moral” and “non-moral.” It is in this way that the possibility of vast numbers of new ethical dilemmas—“tragic conflicts,” on Nussbaum’s terms—arise. If one believes that there are moral goods as distinct from non-moral goods and—to describe the further belief that normally accompanies the belief in this distinction—that moral goods are always to be preferred to non-moral ones, then one has reason *not* to see conflicts between moral and non-moral goods as dilemmas. If, on the other hand, one denies this distinction, one is left with the possibility of quite a lot of new “plural incommensurable goods” existing that can come into “irreconcilable conflict,” so that some will have to be sacrificed.⁵ And should one wish to term some such conflicts dilemmas, or “tragic,” but others not, one will have to use some other justification than those based on dividing the (incommensurable) goods up into “moral” and “non-moral.”

I do not here wish to consider the question of how precisely one would then go about making such a distinction. What concerns me is the more general question of why one would think it important, as Nussbaum does, to feel remorse or make reparative efforts for having sacrificed a good even when one had no choice but to make such a sacrifice. Of particular importance too is the question of whether on Nussbaum’s account something like remorse or reparative effort would be required by the sacrifice of

any of the self's projections or egoistic desires, such as those of fantasy, as I have suggested would be required.

The first question is, on Nussbaum's account, one of proper moral psychology. If one is forced to sacrifice goods, one cannot do so callously: this would be to destroy one's responsiveness to such goods, so that one may fail to see the possibility or desirability of attaining them in cases even where they do *not* come into tragic conflict with other goods—not to mention cases where they merely do not come out on the short end of the stick, as it were.⁶ A more narrow aspect of this principle might be stated thusly: callous sacrifice gets one into the habit of ignoring goods, while regret helps to keep one's sacrificing from irreparably damaging one's character. And if we take seriously the imitative nature of humans, we must further take seriously the way in which even forced sacrifice might signal a devaluing of a good; and, more importantly, the way in which an attitude of callousness toward such sacrifice signals such a devaluation.

Sartre's statement in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, to the effect of "In choosing for myself, I choose for all people," is most applicable here; as indeed, is its source, Kant's categorical imperative, in the formulation, "Act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it be a universal law." Nussbaum claims that her view of tragic conflict is not compatible with Kant's moral theory, because Kant does not allow for conflict among moral principles (Nussbaum 1986, 32). But

she can also claim, with her understanding of tragic conflict, to in some ways be very much a Kantian.

As Nussbaum writes:

We could say to Kant that an agent who takes his principles seriously enough cannot but be stricken by the necessity of violating them. If the law really is a law, then the transgression really is a transgression—at least if the agent acts deliberately and in full awareness of what he is doing—no matter whether the situation was of his own making or not... We can claim to be following a deep part of the motivation behind Kant's own view of duty when we insist that duty does not go away because of the world contingent interventions. Greek polytheism, surprisingly, articulates a certain element of Kant's thought better than any monotheism could: namely, it insists upon the supreme and binding authority, the divinity so to speak, of *each* ethical obligation, in all circumstances whatsoever, even in those in which the gods themselves collide (Nussbaum 1986, 49).

The Law for Nussbaum ceases to be well described as Law given the plurality of the particular ethical “obligations” to which she wishes us to be “finely aware and richly responsible.” The Law, pulled toward an infinite plurality, is left as the regulative ideal of the *sensus communis*; but the Law nonetheless keeps its sacredness. Its violation is a violation of both own one's character and the shared character which is the *sensus communis*.

I am thinking here of the two sense of “knowledge” which Aristotle distinguishes: “knowledge” possessed but not applied, and true knowledge (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1146b32-4). Weakness of will keeps the agent possessing un-applied knowledge from passing to true knowledge: we can think of the problem of being “blinded by desire,” or by the “narcissistic fog” individuals create around them, whose many forms Murdoch has done so much to detail; and, more generally, of “habits of vision.” It is in the connection between true knowledge and such habits that justifies identification of the *sensus communis* with shared character: the shared good character of both particular communities and sub-communities, as well as of the community of humankind.

The sensibility which informs ethical action is crucially determined by individual and communal attitude toward sacrifice. That is to say, first of all, that the position of sacrifice within individual moral psychology is crucial in determining the ethical climate of the community, and that, conversely, the communal attitude toward sacrifice impacts individual moral psychology. (Likewise, this relation of individual to community holds between sub-community and that which encloses it.) It is secondly to say that, since individual and collective psychology are determinative of what is seen—of what is sensed—individual and collective attitudes toward sacrifice are therefore determinative of the goods available. The logic here is that if a good is invisible, be it to an individual or a community, it is not available to that individual or community.

This is why callous violation of the Law is such a serious manner (if I may speak in what Nussbaum would undoubtedly take to be a most un-Aristotelian fashion). To transgress the Law is bad enough, even if it may be impossible to avoid; but to seek to re-define the limit one has transgressed is something much worse. For consider what it is to include transgression within a moral system in the manner which Anscombe identifies as endemic to the Utilitarian project; or what is to act, from an otherworldly distance, as if one's transgression could be so included. It should be apparent that doing such is to occlude the Law itself, and thus to perhaps commit an evil whose effects can easily spread widely over time and space.

Such occlusion of the Law becomes an ever present possibility on Nussbaum's account, given the way it posits the Law as regulative ideal the extent of whose demands is very vast indeed. (Just how vast it is difficult to say, given that new demands can be found in any particular situation or individual.) We occlude the Law, for ourselves both as individuals and as a community, in a variety of ways; our attitude toward sacrifice is a central factor in such occlusion. Callousness towards the transgressions of sacrifice inures us both to the goods we know we lose, and to the need to further develop of our sensibilities so as to become aware of new goods, and thus new ethical demands (see "An Aristotelian Conception of Rationality" in Nussbaum 1992). As such, it leads to occlusion of aspects of the Law known as well as

to those aspects at the limits of our vision; and thus keeps unavailable goods both known and never glimpsed.

Nussbaum is, I have claimed, pointing to a way in which the moralist, and Murdoch in particular, displays such damaging callousness toward sacrifice. In considering this claim, let us begin with the way in which the moralist might display such callousness in a negative attitude toward sexual desire. Why might Joyce in some way have an ethically superior view to that of Plato and Murdoch, in that, as Nussbaum writes:

Joyce, I think, really loves sexuality in a way which neither Plato nor Murdoch actually does, much though they give it high praise. For they praise it as a route to something else, whereas Joyce made a big point of inverting the direction of signification. *Ulysses* ends with the word, “yes,” he explained in a letter, because the word stands for a woman’s cunt. In other words, the body is not the route to metaphysics; metaphysics, insofar as it has a function, is a route to the body. (Nussbaum 1996, 50).

I think what Nussbaum is pointing to in this description of Joyce and the “otherworldly metaphysician[s]... against whom Joyce rebels” might be stated in this way: the “otherworldly metaphysician”—the moralist—loses sight of the human *telos* in her zeal to counter-act the egoistic tendencies of humanity which are the principle impediments to moving nearer this *telos*. In short, from the neo-Romantic’s perspective, the moralist forgets that virtue is not the whole of flourishing. She “forgets” that such things as bodily “peace and health” too are involved in flourishing—goods whose role in flourishing is to be seen from a worldly perspective. And while it might be agreed by both the

“Joycean” Aristotelian and the “ensorious” Platonist that a good like bodily well-being might need to be sacrificed for virtue in this-or-that instance, everything depends on whether such sacrifice is made with proper recognition of the loss it involves.

The Platonist, not really concerned with the incommensurable bodily value of sex, or of much anything else besides, likewise wouldn't recognize any real loss; there are other routes to the Good than sexual desire, after all. The Aristotelian, on the other hand, would see degradation of the body as an impediment to flourishing, and as such would have to recognize such degradation as loss. Whether she would specifically see a life in which one's desiring, erotic nature had to be violated as a necessarily marred life is another question, whose answer would depend on the value accorded this nature: in particular, whether it was seen as being of incommensurable value. But to commit such a violation is surely plausibly understood as similar enough to losing such goods as health, the honors of noble birth, a non-deformed physical appearance, good children, etc., that we could imagine Aristotle himself seeing it as a serious impediment to flourishing (See *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1099a30-1099b9).

Let us stipulate that a violation of one's erotic nature would involve the loss of important and incommensurable goods. Callousness in committing such violation would then raise the specter of significant goods of human life becoming unavailable. By that I mean not just unavailable in the particular case, but in other and even all cases. Recognizing the possibility of such specters is what it means to

take the Law seriously. Or to put this in language somewhat closer to Nussbaum's own: that is what means to take seriously the ethical import of individual and communal habits of vision, and of their interrelation.⁷

Even if in every situation that is *in situ* foreseen, it is agreed by all that it will be necessary to sacrifice a good, it still matters whether such sacrifice is done with proper recognition of loss or not. Indeed, such recognition becomes even more important in such cases, because it might then be the only thing that keeps such tragic goods from passing out of the human world entirely. Hence Murdoch's vision of human egoism and the various projections emanating from it as intractable obstacles to virtue provides no defense for the moralist who would wish to callously sacrifice the goods involved in such egoism and projection—such as, arguably, many, if not most, of the goods of eroticism.

What of the goods of fantasy? In what way might the moralist's attitude toward fantasy display a callousness toward the sacrifice of goods? Insofar as, firstly, the moralist displays a callousness toward the sacrifice of the goods of eroticism, and, secondly, fantasy is part of or an extension of eroticism, the moralist displays callousness toward sacrifice of the goods of fantasy. This argument is the long and short of how one defends fantasy against the Freudian possessing an overly-negative view of the dangers of human sexual desire. By analogy to Marxist theory: if one can invert the description presented of the "base"—sexual desire—one can invert description concluded concerning the

“superstructure”—fantasy. This line of inversive critique would seem to be a strategy Nussbaum takes up in “Love and Vision.”

But let us consider the goods of fantasy in a context where their (complete) reduction to goods of eroticism is not assumed. We could interpret Nussbaum as suggesting a role for goods of fantasy in human flourishing alongside goods like bodily health: that is to say, that goods of fantasy might operate as external goods. For we might consider fantasy as part of the more general activity of the self’s projections, of “its fantasies, schemes, and dreams of—and for—its own pleasure, survival, and unchecked flourishing.”

Nussbaum closes “Love and Vision” by quoting one of “the passages in Murdoch that, recalcitrant Aristotelian, I most cherish,” one which gives what Nussbaum describes as an “Aristotelian” sense that “the real physical being of the object is out there somewhere and the better for not being seen with the purifying vision of art” (Nussbaum 1996, 45). This passage is from the Postscript to a narrative written by a character within Murdoch’s novel, *The Black Prince*, Bradley Pearson, dealing with his love for a woman, Julian. It is interesting that Nussbaum earlier in the essay describes this love by saying that:

There are certainly doubts as to the Platonism of Bradley’s love. We wonder, for example, how truly he sees Julian. She once remarks, with some justice, “You say you love me, but you aren’t *interested* in me in the least.” Both her agency and her specificity seem to be to some extent disregarded (Nussbaum 1996, 45).

How should we put these two descriptions together: i.e., that of the “object,” in this case, Julian, being better off for not being seen “with the purifying vision of art,” and that of the problematic of to some extent disregarding the other’s specificity and agency? Nussbaum sees the second aspect of Bradley’s love as an unfortunate flaw that does not dispel the goodness his love does involve. This I conclude from the kind of apologetic Nussbaum gives of Bradley’s love:

And although love ultimately brings with it the torment of jealousy, and although this initial loss of self does prove to that extent “false,” it is evident that Bradley is freed from egoistic self-preoccupation, to the extent to which he is, thanks only to the intensity of his desire, not in spite of it (ibid.).

Here we find again a relating of desire and fantasy: the former, if intense enough, would seem to cause the latter. The inverse relation is of course also possible, as Nussbaum somewhat playfully indicates:

[T]here would probably not be any sexual arousal at all without [fantasy]. As Bloom says, watching Gertie McDowell limp down Sandymount Strand, ‘See her as she is spoil all. Must have the stage setting, the rouge, costume, position, music’ (ibid., 50).

In the end, it is not clear precisely to whom the benefit of fantasy lies, to the other “out there,” to the one who projects the fantasy, or—and let us here also imagine the dialectic in which these roles are inter-changed—to both. It is a certain dream of the “We,” of the survival of a sameness not equivalent to—indeed, in excess of—the self that is perhaps at issue.⁸ This survival would not seem to be wholly other than an “egoistic self-preoccupation,” as Nussbaum’s apologetic would seem to some extent to recognize; even as left un-pursued in her essay is the degree to which such egoistic self-preoccupation

might be essential to the “Aristotelian” way in which the object is left “the better off” when seen without the “Proustian,” “purifying vision of art.”

In Nussbaum’s “defense,” I would point out that she highlights the fact that fantasy cannot be confused with reality. To quote the final passage of “Love and Vision” which I have been discussing, itself a quote from Murdoch’s character, Bradly Pearson:

And I would not wish it to seem at the end that I have, in my own sequestered happiness, somehow forgotten the real being of those who have figured as my characters.... And Julian. I do not, my darling girl, however passionately and intensely my thought has worked upon your being, really imagine that I invented you. Eternally you escape my embrace. Art cannot assimilate you nor thought digest you... (ibid., 53).

This is Bradley speaking from an older, somewhat wiser perspective, one which recognizes the limits of vision. But it not a perspective which seeks to replace fantasy with truth; rather, it is one which recognizes fantasy as a projection onto the unseen surrounding the seen. Nussbaum and Levinas agree in a very real sense in their critique of the Platonic view of Eros; for Bradley’s recognition is precisely the recognition of an “I and other” in place of a “We.” —Or is it, as the fantasy would have it, not the recognition of an “I an other” in *place* of a “We”, but rather in addition thereto?

Following Nussbaum’s text, I will leave the issue of the value of egoism in fantasy aporetic. I would only mention the obvious point that insofar as such dreams of the “We” as we find in Bradley dreaming are

ones that do in fact involve incommensurable goods of human flourishing, a damaging attitude of callousness toward the sacrifice of such dreams is demonstrated by Murdoch's apparent lack of recognition of their value. As we might very well expect to find this recognition accompanying Murdoch's wish to do away with dreams of the "We," due to the egoism she finds endemic to them. But this recognition is not evident, much less emphasized. And so we should not be surprised to find the neo-Romantic making a complaint.

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Notes

¹ I am “translating” Wolf’s argument into the terms of virtue ethics with my reference to “flourishing,” but with little violence to her meaning.

² For the presentation of this understanding, see Nussbaum, 1986. See also “The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Rationality,” and “Flawed Crystals: James’ *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy,” in (Nussbaum 1992).

³ See Murdoch. For example, on p. 84: “Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world... anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue.”

⁴ As Nussbaum would put it, such a good would be a “separate jewel in the crown... which does not cease to be separately valuable... just because it loses out in overall rational choice” (Nussbaum 1992, 63).

⁵ Citations from (Nussbaum 1992, 63). See pp. 63-6. E.g., p. 63: “[E]mphasis on the recognition of plural incommensurable goods leads directly and naturally to the perception of a possibility of irreconcilable contingent conflicts among them.”

⁶ See (Nussbaum 1992, 63-6). E.g., “[T]o focus on these dilemmas and not.. .“solve” them... reaffirms and strengthens our attachments to the values in question, in such a way that one will be less likely to violate them in other circumstances” [pp. 65-6].

⁷ Note that the fact that it might seem implausible that such a “becoming unavailable” as I am concerned with would occur in the case of goods of eroticism, in present Western society, is besides the point. Such a “becoming unavailable” need only be conceivable for an attitude of callousness toward sacrifice of these goods to be of concern. And that many of the goods of eroticism—particularly as these goods blend into play and the non-erotic, and as they result from a life-enhancing understanding of the erotic in non-erotic discourse—are goods that might become unavailable for at least most of the people most of the time is certainly conceivable; that they might become unavailable for specific groups is even more so. However, should what I have said about “goods of sexual desire” not be found convincing, consider the case of fantasy or other aesthetic phenomena.

⁸ See (Levinas, 53-4). “Plato did not grasp the feminine in its specifically erotic notion... Beginning with Plato, the social ideal will be sought for in an ideal of fusion... It is the collectivity that say ‘we’....” I.e., Plato’s attitude toward eros is linked by Levinas to his conception of community. The “we,” then, is not just the “we” of a certain erotic love, but also of the tribe, the nation, the “Republic of Letters,” etc.

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