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***Murdoch and Hegel***

## **Introduction**

What is striking in Murdoch's reading of Hegel is her aversion to Hegel's claims to absolute knowledge. Murdoch's critique imagines Hegel's philosophy to represent a very different style of philosophy from her own. On the face of things, this is not surprising. Murdoch is very much a twentieth century thinker, whereas Hegel is poised between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hegel responds directly to Kant and the hopes and doubts fostered by the Enlightenment, and aims to fulfil the classical claims of philosophy to be a first order science of wisdom by providing a systematic understanding of reality. He charted the overall pattern of historical development and imagined his own philosophy as resolving the questions posed by Kant, and remaindered by preceding philosophies. Murdoch, in contrast, is engaged with post war Anglo-American analytical philosophy, and is exercised by the linguistic turn, and a contemporary shrinking of the philosophical imagination. Murdoch denies an overall historical scheme of development, is sensitive to the contingencies and particularities of experience, and concentrates upon engaging with particular issues that are dealt with by contemporary Anglo-American philosophical analysis.

Murdoch's overriding scepticism over Hegelian claims is expressed in a number of essays and is rehearsed in her last philosophical publication, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. The text's arguments are frequently developed via criticisms of Hegel, but Murdoch summarises her fundamental objection to Hegel by observing, 'What makes metaphysical ('totalising')

coherence theories unacceptable is the way in which they in effect disappear what is individual and contingent by equating reality with integration in system, and degrees of reality with degrees of integration, and by implying that ‘ultimately’ or really’ there is only one system. Hegel’s philosophy as expressed in the *Phenomenology of Mind* implies this...’ (MGM: 196) For Murdoch, Hegel’s totalising philosophy is at odds with contingency and genuine individuality, and hence she opposes the component elements of Hegel’s system, which she takes to reduce human and natural phenomena to a totalising, absolutist logic. Hegel’s metaphysics, his dialectic, his phenomenology, his reading of history and his moral and political philosophy all suffer from what Murdoch takes to be his overreaching absolutism. It is this absolutism, which Murdoch sees as framing his approach to phenomenology, experience and to metaphysics. It is a theme that is registered in her radio talk of 1950, ‘The Novelist as Metaphysician’, in which she maintains that Hegel’s *Phenomenology* superimposes an abstract philosophical rationalism upon the phenomenological development of self-consciousness, so that the self of the *Phenomenology*, which apparently becomes increasingly self-aware, is an unreal self, lacking genuine individual identity. She observes, ‘Behind the story of the Hegelian self lies the dialectic, the self-development of reason, or, if not that, then the intelligible onward march of history, as the Marxists would say. The Hegelian self, for all its historical and psychological colour, has no fundamental structure, and no fundamental predicament, for it is not ultimately an independent irreducible entity at all. In the end there will have been nothing but the different phases of the Absolute... (NM: 103) For Murdoch, Hegel’s project of providing a comprehensive understanding of the totality of experience is vitiated by the absorption of experience within the embrace of a totalising absolutist frame. As Murdoch suggests in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, actual individuals make way for the schematism of philosophical speculation so that ‘...the inevitable process itself is what is real.’ (MGM: 227)

The force of Murdoch's critique of Hegel is to be recognised, and the manifest differences between Murdoch and Hegel are to be respected. Yet these differences do not reveal the whole story. More needs to be said about the Murdoch- Hegel relationship, as Murdoch's philosophy is closer to Hegel's than is revealed in her acerbic critique of his absolutism. Affinities between Murdoch and Hegel can be traced to two sorts of reasons. On the one hand, Murdoch's critique of Hegel masks her own respect for a number of features of his work, which suggest he can be read profitably without highlighting his absolutism. For instance, if Hegel's philosophy is read without focusing upon his grand claims, then his perceptive awareness of the historicity of the moral and social world can be appreciated, and his identification of key aspects of modernity can come to the fore. On the other hand, Murdoch's response to her own philosophical context can be interpreted so as to allow Hegel to assume a more positive role. Murdoch's philosophy engages with issues arising out of the work of contemporary Anglo-American analytical philosophers. In engaging with those issues, however, Murdoch can also be seen as responding to contemporary Continental philosophy, which develops out of Hegel and as directly drawing upon historical forms of metaphysics, including Hegel's, in addressing those issues and in criticising aspects of current Anglo- American philosophical practice.

In the following pages, against the backdrop of Murdoch's opposition to grandiose Hegelian claims, attention will be paid to the several ways in which Murdoch and Hegel can be seen as philosophising in affiliated ways to Hegel to pursue similar goals. Murdoch's first philosophical book was a critical study of Sartre, in which she recognised the profound influence of Hegel upon his phenomenological approach. (See SRR: 7-8) She herself saw the value of close phenomenological description of aspects of experience, and in doing so, aligned with a Hegelian approach. Murdoch also went against the grain of contemporary analytical philosophy by embracing metaphysics. In this move, in which she recognised the

influence of Plato, she compounded expectations further by self-consciously looking back to Hegel as a precursor. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and the essays on moral philosophy that compose *The Sovereignty of Good* she analyses relations between concepts and the virtues as well as observing the relations between political, public morality and personal, private morality. In framing these aspects of her metaphysics she reaches back to Hegel in recognising a dialectical interplay between concepts. Moreover, all of Murdoch's philosophical work also testifies to an historical approach that is markedly different from that of contemporary analytical philosophers but is akin to Hegel's characteristic way of philosophising. Like Hegel, Murdoch aims to make sense out of lived experience and that for both of them entails focusing upon the distinctness of their times.

Murdoch's affinity with Hegel is brought out very clearly in their shared critical reading of modernity, and in particular their reviews of its moral, social and political forms of life. They both look back to Ancient Greece to gain a purchase on the moral and social phenomena of the modern world. Their invocation of Ancient Greece, however, is not nostalgic, in that they retain a focus upon the modern world, and look back to facilitate understanding what is distinctive about the current situation. The both identify modern individualism as representing a disruptive phenomenon for moral and social life, but differ in how they invoke Ancient Greece, and Plato in particular, to interpret this phenomenon. Hegel, in his mature work, understands the Greek world as a beautiful world evincing powerful ethical communities, which are not to be reclaimed. Modern individualism, however, is to be conceived of as enhancing the character of modern forms of ethical life in ways that were not available to Plato. Murdoch is drawn to the strong commitment to a form of goodness in Plato that goes beyond a fissiparous individualism, and seeks to revive its spirit in the modern world. While she is aware that aspects of Plato's thought are not to be assimilated into the present, her invoking of Plato is designed to highlight deficiencies in contemporary moral life

and to challenge standard ways of interpreting moral practice. . Hence Hegel and Murdoch invoke Plato and the Ancient world to identify the disruptive subjectivism and individualism of the modern world, but they do so in distinct ways and for different purposes. Hegel, in his mature writings, contrives to see history in its modern guise as incubating a complex differentiated form of freedom, not available to the Ancients, and Murdoch uses Plato in a new context to highlight deficiencies in the present even if she is aiming to restore the past.

### **Phenomenology and Recognition**

Murdoch's first published book is a sympathetic analysis of Sartre, and it is a token of her engagement with Continental philosophy. In *Sartre – Romantic Rationalist* she admires Sartre's hard-edged phenomenological engagement with lived experience, even if she is critical of his abstraction of the individual from social and political life. She takes Sartre's novels to complement his philosophy, because she sees the novelist as a sort of phenomenologist. (SRR: 11) In 'The Novelist as Metaphysician' Murdoch identifies Hegel as the principal source of Sartre's phenomenological perspective, and in this radio talk she shows an appreciation of how Hegel's *Phenomenology*, while ultimately collapsing experience into the dictates of an absolutist philosophy, nonetheless remains a rich guide to experience and represents a paradigm of the phenomenological approach. She observes how the *Phenomenology* is, '...a remarkable book. It can be taken as a world history of ideas, as a world history of societies, as a possible history of an individual consciousness...' (EM, 103).

Murdoch's valuing of a phenomenological approach is evident in her own philosophical work. It might be said that Murdoch's philosophy is informed by the phenomenological insight of a novelist, just as she imagined Sartre's to be so influenced. I argue elsewhere for

the continuity between Murdoch's philosophical writings and her novels. (Browning, 2018) Her well-known close description of a mother reworking her understanding of her daughter-in-law in 'The Idea of Perfection' shows a phenomenological approach, inspired by her literary imagination. Murdoch says expressly that the kind of struggle over her imagining of her daughter-in-law that the mother undertakes is evidenced in novels. She observes, 'Innumerable novels contain accounts of what such struggles are like.' (EM: 317)

Throughout 'The Idea of Perfection' Murdoch points to the importance of thick evaluative descriptions that tend to be ignored in more abstract philosophical discussions of morality. She is critical of contemporary analytical philosophy, which present moral questions as combining behaviouristic accounts of states of affairs with abstract and general forms of moral approval. The upshot is that in such presentations of moral questions, an individual is taken to be acting morally when she has to make a choice over what to do in a situation that is to be described in purely factual terms. In reality, and in the realistic terms that a novelist or a phenomenologist would use, situations are not susceptible of neat non-evaluative description. Situations are always being valued in particular terms. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Knowledge* Murdoch points to how fact and value are correlative in all forms of experience, from the most basic acts to highly sophisticated linguistic engagement. (MGM: 25-57).

Attention is a key concept in Murdoch's philosophy. Close attention to others and to what is going on, offers the prospect of individuals stepping back from the distortive egoism, which masks reality by reducing experience to what satisfies the ego. Personal development is correlative to the processes of coming to see reality more clearly, and requires and allows for a form of unselfing, whereby a person escapes from the egoism of assimilating reality to their own self to acknowledge the otherness of others. In the example of the mother and daughter-in-law, the mother does not perceive the daughter-in-law justly and lovingly when her initial attitude is coloured by a snobby myopic concern for her son's welfare. She is inattentive,

projecting her own attitudes onto another rather than seeing another for what they are. When she steps back, and reviews her attitude, she begins to reappraise the daughter-in-law's attributes. It might be said that in coming to recognise the daughter-in-law, she herself gains a greater measure of self-recognition, in that her world becomes less distorted by her own egoism. Likewise characters in Murdoch's novels tend to be wrapped up in egoism and misperceive things and themselves, but occasionally, and usually after undergoing disturbing forms of suffering, which are occasioned by their egoism, they begin to cease to misrecognise themselves and others, and acquire a degree of insight into themselves and the world. For instance, Michael Meade, in *The Bell*, might see his benign aspirations to guide a lay religious community crash around him, notably through his own failure to attend closely to the troubled Nick Fawley, with whom he had had a sexual relationship, but by the close of the novel he begins to understand something of himself and his own situation, however, miserable they might appear. (Murdoch, 2004: 297-316)

Hegel is not a novelist, and his systematic approach to philosophy and truth may seem a long way from a novelist's insight. Yet his early writings show him in a different light. His *Early Theological Writings* are insightful imaginative studies of religion, the contemporary situation and the history of Christianity. Within these essays Christ is reimagined in ways that bear upon Hegel's own contemporary reading of the state of society and religious faith. He portrays Jesus as a Kantian in 'The Life of Jesus' and then in 'The Spirit of Christianity and its modern Fate', he imagines how Jesus had to work with the grain of contemporary Jewish experience and expectations, and in doing so his message of love was misinterpreted as a divine intervention to deliver the Jewish people from their contemporary malaise. (Hegel, 1948)

The imaginative impact of Hegel's engagement with history and contemporary experience can also be seen in his engrossing early work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. It represents an

arduous and speculative journey through the experiences of consciousness in its investigation of the truth of consciousness. Many forms of experience are imagined as representing partial or distorted standpoints, the internal tensions of which, under phenomenological examination demand supersession and propel them to further perspectives. Ultimately a standpoint is reached whereby there are no pressures to move onwards to achieve enhanced coherence.

This state is termed absolute reason by Hegel, and might be taken, as Murdoch suggests, to represent a spectacular teleological endpoint that undermines the supposed internal generation of experiential standpoints that have been examined in the course of the phenomenological journey. On the other hand, Hegel presents the achievement of reason as being developed from the internal momentum of the preceding examination of the series of experiences without the endpoint of reason determining the movement between them..

Tensions are diagnosed as bedevilling even the most simple form of consciousness, whereby the bare assertion of a simple 'this' is undermined by its failure to identify conclusively the particular identity of what is designated by 'this.' (Hegel, 1971:149-160) In the quest for truth consciousness is shown to require confirmation of itself from other consciousnesses so that self-consciousness might certify the truth of consciousness. In the ensuing struggle for recognition, Hegel introduces within the *Phenomenology* the celebrated encounter, whereby a self demands recognition from another self. Hegel outlines a master slave encounter, whereby selves confront one another in a mortal struggle, and the victor demands obedience from the vanquished. The unfolding irony is that the victorious self is denied a satisfying victory, because the defeated self is a slave, and the quality of recognition is undermined by its source being that of a devalued slave. It is a form of misrecognition rather than mutual recognition from equilibrated selves. (Hegel, 1971: 228-240)

Hegel's phenomenology, as Gillian Rose, observed, can be seen and appreciated for its series of images of misrecognition, rather than for the absolute reason in which the work



culminates. (Rose: 1997) There is an affinity between the phenomenological approaches of Murdoch and Hegel. Murdoch acknowledges the tendency for selves to misrecognise themselves and others, given the distortive effects of egoism, and the demanding quality of the labour involved in perfecting one's understanding of others and oneself, which is highlighted in 'The Idea of Perfection' and in her novels. The process of genuinely coming to see another is a demanding struggle as is demonstrated by Murdoch's phenomenological account of how the mother has to reconsider her own unreflected initial disdain for her daughter-in-law. Something of this disruptive struggle of the self with its own self is evident in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, though his work undertakes a review of consciousness on a grand scale, encompassing numerous historical episodes, which work through revealing attitudes that have emerged in past experience. What is conveyed by the master- slave dialectic is that mutually antagonistic egoistic selves cannot achieve an equilibrated form of consciousness whereby the self and other can be recognised. This dialectical engagement between selves is maintained in Hegel's mature system, notably in his *Subjective Spirit*, where Hegel rehearses a brief account of the master-slave dialectic. In his mature political philosophy Hegel is exercised by the egoism in civil society, where individuals see themselves as competing with other selves in the market place. He is insightful in depicting the internal problems of a modern civil society, in which market behaviour produces endless problems that are only to be rectified by a change of perspective whereby individuals recognise themselves as citizens of a state, who appreciate others as fellow members of a community. Hegel's late work, the *Philosophy of Right* is imaginative in its elaboration of forms of misrecognition and the impulse to develop ways of sustaining forms of mutual recognition. His phenomenological attentiveness to experience, and what can go wrong in how individuals identify one another and themselves, is of a piece with Murdoch's phenomenological focus upon experience and how we misrecognise and recognise ourselves and others.

## Metaphysics and Dialectic

Like Hegel, Murdoch undertakes metaphysics. Notwithstanding her opposition to what she took to be Hegel's 'metaphysical (totalising) coherence theory', she herself, and against the tide of contemporary analytical philosophy, cultivated a form of metaphysics. Murdoch's philosophy is animated by her criticisms of the self-imposed limits of contemporary moral philosophy, which contrive to reduce moral theory to the bare bones of individual choice. (See IP, OGG and SGC) Murdoch aims to promote an informing vision that will inspire moral life, and that expansive vision involves metaphysics. She sees metaphysics as not only possible but significant in yielding insights that can inform practical life. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* sees moral life as depending upon metaphysical insight. Murdoch is aware that in the past morality has been assumed to consist in more than the exercise of choice on the part of an individual, and that religion and metaphysics had furnished individuals with insight into how goodness might be realised. Murdoch was acutely aware, however, that in the modern world processes of demythologisation have eroded religious beliefs, ideologies and the dogmas of metaphysics. A rejection of supernatural beliefs and a reliance on scientific method have reinforced a commitment to reason, while diminishing the resources available to reason to make sense of the world and to support moral practice. What Murdoch aims to do is to invoke metaphysics to frame forms of knowledge and beliefs, while at the same time avoiding reliance upon the supernatural and the dogmatic.

In the essays on moral philosophy 'The Idea of Perfection', On God and "Good", and 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', which were subsequently published as *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch looks to a revived form of Platonism to underpin an individual's quest for goodness. (IP, OGG, SGC) She maintains that the Platonic idea of the good might serve as a magnetic force for individuals to orient their lives to the good, and also, as she outlines in 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', it represents the

ultimate source of the unity of the virtues. (SGC: 92) In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, she points to an expressly metaphysical backing for morality, imagining reality as evincing muddle and mess, but also order and goodness. A philosophical conception of reality can identify aspects of experience that intimate the disinterested goodness of moral practice. Murdoch points to religion and art as providing routes to a moral perspective. Art furnishes a paradigm of beauty and order, which can capture the ordering reality that lies outside an individual's egoism, and hence orient the pursuit of moral perfection. Great art steers individuals away from egoism and fantasy. Artists, such as Rilke, depict reality in ways that are realistic and disturb preoccupation with selfish concerns. Religion intuits the order and goodness of the universe and encourages faith in the possibilities of moral life. Philosophy in making sense out of and connecting areas of experience can highlight how the public world requires protection of individuals to preserve order, while personal morality can aim to attend to others in attuned and loving ways. .

While Murdoch is critical of Hegel's metaphysics she is also drawn to aspects of his practice of metaphysics. She rejects Hegel's totalising absolutism, insisting on the fallibilism within her own metaphysics, but respects his focus upon experience, and the plausibility of the connections he makes between areas of experience such as art and philosophy. In her unpublished 'Manuscript on Heidegger' she is sympathetic to Heidegger's critique of traditional forms of metaphysics that fix upon entities and concepts that are taken to be external to experience. She is expressly appreciative of Hegel, as well as Heidegger, for providing a unifying way of mapping experience, in establishing a coherence between the various projects and forms of experience. (Murdoch, unpublished) Certainly, Hegel, like Murdoch, provides a capacious and rich understanding of experience, which extends to nature, social and political life and art and religion. Hegel's interest in diverse areas of experience incorporates an historical sense of how cultural and social beliefs and practices

change over time. Like Murdoch he deals with personal and public morality, art and religion, tracing connections between them, which he designates dialectical, in that a complete understanding of these forms demands appreciation of their fit with one another. Likewise Murdoch in following Hegel by making connections between concepts, and tracing connections between areas of experience. If she differs from Hegel in expressly affirming the non-necessary character of these connections, she nonetheless can be seen as a dialectical thinker, who is akin to Hegel.

Hegel's practice of metaphysics is post-Kantian and, like Kant and Murdoch, he eschews a dogmatic form of metaphysics, developing his conception of things by a scrutiny of what is revealed within experience. In 'A House of Theory' (1958) Murdoch reflected upon the changing political and philosophical climate within post-war UK. She observed the changed political and cultural circumstances in which the appeal of radical ideologies, notably socialism, was being eroded. In part the welfare state and a renewed Keynesian capitalism had undermined the economic claims of socialist argument. Philosophical support for socialism was also held to be waning due to the general decline in metaphysics and large scale theorising in the wake of a general scepticism over the claims of metaphysics. In her consideration of this situation, Murdoch expressly and sympathetically invokes Hegel as a philosopher, whose metaphysics eschews dogmatism, but who undertakes the conceptual exploration of actual and historical moral and social beliefs. Unlike Kant and Hume, who likewise repudiated dogmatic metaphysics, she takes Hegel to offer an example of how beliefs might be conceptualised, She observes, 'He (Hegel) did not class theories as either whole truths or total errors, but allowed to all the influential beliefs that men have held the status of interpretation and study of the world.' (EM: 176)

Murdoch's sympathy for Hegel's style of philosophising is evident within her discussion of the internal relations between moral concepts in the essays that compose *The Sovereignty of Good*. The moral virtues are linked to one another, so that, for example, courage is connected to wisdom, just as Hegel sees distinct moral attributes contributing to an overall ethical community. Individuals are also seen by Murdoch as developing their moral dispositions in ways that evoke Hegel's notion of conceptual development. In her discussion of the mother and daughter-in-law in 'The Idea of Perfection', the mother shows a capacity to reflect and to change her attitude to her daughter-in-law in the light of her reconsidering her in a just and loving way. The upshot is that by attending more closely to the daughter-in-law she is enabled to supersede her former snobby and dismissive attitude. Moral life is thereby shown to be susceptible to development, and its concepts are not fixed and external to one another. Murdoch disputes the sufficiency of merely genetic explanations of moral concepts. Indeed she suggests that such genetic explanations of all universals are inadequate, because our conduct can be perfected and understood in terms of its relationship to the telos of perfection. Moral concepts are to be comprehended teleologically rather than genetically, which means that their meaning cannot be fixed, because they are susceptible of internal development and change. Concepts such as justice and courage can be viewed as being realised by degrees, and our conceptions of them change as our experience of life develops. Murdoch observes, 'My view might be put by saying: moral terms must be treated as concrete universals' (EM:28-29)

<sup>1</sup> Even the concept of red can be understood as revealing differing levels of achievement (EM: 29). This conception of moral concepts aligns Murdoch with Hegel's expressly dialectical way of understanding concepts. At the outset of the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel commences with a general and abstract conception of freedom but he progressively develops the concept in more concrete ways so that it is fully realised in the ethical community of the

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<sup>1</sup> In seminars Bob Stern has commented on Murdoch's use of the term 'concrete universal'

state. The various stages in the development of freedom, morality civil society, the family and the political state are hence dialectically related to the achievement of a fully concrete realisation of freedom.

## **History**

Murdoch is both drawn to and repulsed by Hegel's preoccupation with history. She is excited by Hegel's historicism. In her essay on aesthetics, 'The Sublime and the Good' she contrasts Hegel to Kant by highlighting the former's concrete, historical perspective in comparison with the latter's abstractions. . She observes, 'Hegel here, as indeed everywhere else, makes social and historical and human and concrete what Kant has offered as abstract, non-historical etc.' (SG, 213) Yet, she adds the rider, 'Hegel humanises the demand of reason. Reason is now demanding a total understanding of a human social situation - but what is unnerving is that, according to him, reason's demand is satisfied.' (SG 214), Murdoch welcomes Hegel's engagement with concrete aspects of the social world, and recognises his insight into the historical character of human identity. For Murdoch, and for Hegel, human beings are not simply or naturally free. Rather, they develop their freedom over time. However, Murdoch is also suspicious of Hegel's claim to sum up the essence of historical development and to deliver a univocal account of historical development. It smacks of the schematism that she rejects in Hegel.

Murdoch shares Collingwood's appreciation of Hegel's mastery of a historical perspective, as well as his denial of a philosophical scheme that reveals history's overall meaning.

(Collingwood, 113-122) Murdoch appreciation of Hegel's rich sense of the historical character of human activities is accompanied by a scepticism over his philosophical conception of an overall teleological development underpinning all historical change.

Murdoch's ambivalence can be said to reflect distinct aspects of Hegel's consideration of

history. On the one hand, Hegel's work demonstrates an informed sensitivity to the historical nature of culture and human identity. His understanding of art and religion identifies development and continuity, whereby these disciplines testify to the universality of thought in distinctive historical ways, which reveal continuities and discontinuities between past and present. Moreover, no philosopher, before or since, for instance, has shown such a profound awareness of the historicity of philosophy as a discipline. Hegel maintained the reciprocity of the history of philosophy and philosophy, in so far as he recognised that to engage in the history of philosophy raises philosophical questions on the relations between past and present just as the practice of philosophy demands awareness of its prior development. (Hegel 1892: 15) He identifies links between the Platonic conception of form and his own modern notion of reason, just as historical formulations of scepticism contribute to the depth and sophistication of modern rationalism. On the other hand throughout Hegel's historical analyses of past human activities, there is an overriding philosophical conception of the necessary development of increasingly concrete and developed rational forms. The teleology of Hegel's view of the history of philosophy sees past philosophies as developing smoothly into Hegel's modern system. This reading of philosophical development is questionable. Plato's use of art and imaginative metaphors, for instance, are dismissed by Hegel as representing a primitive mentality that is gradually superseded by the development of increasingly sophisticated and rational discourses. (See Browning, 1991: 9-14) This projected transition from past to present does not allow for a continued questioning of the form of philosophy. The assumption is that a final destination of truth has arrived.

Above all Hegel identifies historical change as emerging out of nascent political life, which supersedes the natural ties of family and provides a public culture in which freedom is gradually developed and free behaviour is recorded. His contention is that the achievement of

freedom makes possible a retrospective conception of its teleological development, which registers how advances in freedom are made. This historical approach to political philosophy does not equate the past and past political forms with modern institutions, and resists postulating preceding political cultures as possessing modern concepts. For instance, Hegel avoids the dubious formulation of natural rights as devices, which have been universal within political experience. Hegel recognises the significance of rights, but he designates them as abstract without their actual development and provision in political arrangements. (Hegel, 1967: 37-75) Hegel recognises that the political world of the Ancient Greeks is distinct from the modern practice of politics, which has developed out of what went before, The concepts of rights and freedom were not established in the Ancient world, and it is inappropriate to assume that Ancient and modern forms of politics are the same. If Hegel shows historical insight into the political worlds of past and present, his assumption that an overall pattern of teleological development links past to present forms of politics is questionable. He maintains that the key aspect of political development is the gradual development of freedom, from the singular ruler's freedom in Oriental Despotisms to the general freedom of citizens in modern states. This generic reading of the overall pattern of political development suffers from ignoring much which is of significance in political development. The significance of gender, the environmental impact of modern forms of industry, and the development of Empires and suppression of indigenous cultures are either ignored or justified by the development of Western forms of gendered freedoms. (See Browning, 1999: 143-157) To understand historical political development from a single Western perspective is problematic, and lends support to Murdoch's critique of Hegel's schematism.

Murdoch stands out amongst post-war Anglo-American philosophers due to her recognition of the historicity of culture, politics and the practice of philosophy. She is a modern thinker, who highlights what is distinctively modern about the world, and how an historical approach



can provide insight into current circumstances. Her early essays on moral philosophy recognise that the form and content of modern moral philosophy bear the imprint of recent developments rather than exhibit universal truths. Modern moral philosophers are seen as focusing upon individualism and individual choice. This concentration of interest reflects the rise of individualism in modern society, and a modern reluctance to situate individuals in a wider field of vision. It works with supposedly neutral factual descriptions and the ascription of choice to individuals, and in so doing harmonises with the economical expectations of contemporary philosophical reasoning. In 'Metaphysics and Ethics' (1957) Murdoch argued against attributing universality to moral concepts, and highlighted how moral concepts change over time. She observes, 'Logic, whatever that may be determined to be, has its own universality; but when we leave the domain of the purely logical we come into the cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men love by- and- these are subject to historical change. This is especially true of moral concepts.' (EM: 74-75) In the essay she also points to the morality of liberal individualism as representing only a single, if increasingly dominant, moral standpoint. She attends to the neglected moral framework of Natural Law moralists, a number of moral theorists who differ from the liberal insistence that nothing is to be taken as containing the individual. She includes Hegelians amongst these Natural Law moralists, and is sympathetic to their perspective, which is more inclusive than standard contemporary liberal doctrines. She observes, 'What I have called Natural Law moralists - Thomists, Hegelians, Marxists, and less reflective persons who are camp followers of these doctrines, see the matter in a quite different perspective. The individual is seen as held in a framework that transcends him, where what is important and valuable is the framework, and the individual only has importance, or even reality, in so far as he belongs to the framework.' (EM: 70)

Murdoch's turn towards history is wide-ranging, and is not confined to her writings on moral philosophy. Her essays on ideology, literature, aesthetics and politics are all informed by a distinctive historical perspective. She traces the many forms that are given to the novel over time. She is evidently sympathetic to the high tide of realism in the nineteenth century, but in 'Against Dryness' she recognises that the contemporary novel cannot merely resume realism, because the contemporary world is different from the nineteenth century and requires different techniques. (EM: 290-293) Murdoch's political philosophy is informed by a sensitivity to historical developments. In the 1950s she recognises how socialism as an ideology is threatened by recent cultural developments that militate against ideological thinking. In 'A House of Theory', she recognises how the radicalism of the working class has been muted by the welfare state and the success of capitalism in supplying the (economic) goods, while ideology as a form of thinking has been inhibited by a contemporary scepticism over largescale theorising about values. She sees the post-war world as different from what has gone before, due to the evisceration of ideological fervour. (EM: 180-182) Murdoch's later more conservative political thought is influenced by a reading of the political history of the late twentieth century. The tyrannical despotisms of socialism in Eastern Europe and Fascist states in Europe serve as a warning against utopian forms of politics. Hence she outlines a cautious pessimistic approach to politics, which foregrounds basic axioms or rights to protect individuals against potentially overly powerful states. These axioms, however, are not conceived as being universal, but rather are construed historically as changeable over time. Murdoch recognises that Plato would have held a different set of axioms from that of a modern thinker and she postulates the possibilities of axioms developing to safeguard the rights of animals and the planet. (MGM: 385-88) She also entertains the possibility of international forms of governance to supersede the dominance of nation states.

Her last philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* teems with references to history and philosophical predecessors. If Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* are orderly and systematic, with an organisation of material that follows a strictly chronological path, Murdoch's text betrays no overriding principle of organisation. Its inventive weaving together of seemingly disparate themes perhaps deflects attention from its continuous commitment to a historical perspective. A guiding thread for interpreting the text is Murdoch's recognition at its outset of the processes of demythologisation that have marked the modern world, curtailed religious thought and set limits to the ambitions of philosophy. She recognises, for instance, how rationalist criticism of the supernatural elements of religion has detracted from its credibility and how metaphysics is now to be sustained within the limits of sense and rational speculation is to be eschewed. In exploring arguments that resume the relevance of metaphysics for the moral life, within the limits of an increasingly rationalist and secular culture, Murdoch draws upon historical predecessors. Kant is taken to set the limits for modern metaphysical argument, and the ontological argument is revisited to intimate how metaphysics is to draw on experience to support its claims to make sense of things. (MGM: 391-431) In her wide-ranging engagement with a host of philosophical predecessors in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch shows an affinity with Hegel's historical approach to philosophy. Yet within the text she resumes her critique of what she takes to be Hegel's absolutism by contrasting the openness of Plato with the closure of Hegel. She observes, 'Plato is not systematic in the Hegelian sense. (After all, he was inventing the whole of Western philosophy). His dialectic is the pen-ended to-and-fro, sometimes inconclusive, movement of serious argument, wherein his art gives life to opposing positions. He tells us when he is using a myth (metaphor). He changes his mind, ne expresses doubts. His Forms are separate and distant. In Hegel's account, things may be distant, but nothing is separate, and in spite of the contrasts or changes of consciousness, often so stirring and

interesting, offered by the theses and antitheses, the inevitable process itself is what is real, the end is contained in the way, there is a continuum to the Absolute.’ (MGM: 227)

The historical focus of Murdoch and Hegel, and their different styles of philosophising about history, are brought out by their distinctive interpretations of their own times. They were both disturbed by features of their times, which they considered to be distinctively modern. Their diagnoses of modern times share some features in common, yet they offer significantly different philosophical ways of construing them that highlight their distinctive attitudes to the relations between philosophy and history. Central to their readings of modernity is their recognition of a developing individualism. Hegel’s early writings, notably his *Early Theological Writing* perceive his own times to be troubled by a lack of social and spiritual community, which might unite alienated individuals. If Hegel’s early writings are marked by this unresolved concern, his mature writings show him to be confident that developing social and political practices can deal with modern developments that have exerted a strain upon the conditions of social life. In his late work on political philosophy, the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel distinguishes between three inter-connected elements, abstract right, morality and ethical life, and within ethical life he examines distinct components, the family, civil society and the state. These inter-connected elements indicate that he regards the modern state as a complex entity, containing diverse aspects. The idea behind the work is that the modern state allows for individualism, in its provision for rights and through the practices of civil society, notably market relations, while also containing this individualism by framing these elements within a wider ethical community that is maintained by the state. Hegel contrasts the nature of the state in the modern world with that of the Ancient world. He argues that Plato does not advocate an imaginative utopia in *The Republic*, but, rather, theorises the character of the Ancient polis, and in doing so does not allow for individual freedoms. His reading of Plato and the Greek polis forms part of his teleological philosophy of history, whereby

philosophers interpret the world rather than reinventing it. He observes, ‘The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk’ (PR: 13) Hence Hegel maintains that unlike Plato he is in a position to theorise a rational state that encompasses individual freedom, precisely because he is a modern philosopher, who is thereby enabled to appreciate the development of history towards the telos of a realisation of freedom. (See Browning 1987 and Roupa 2020)

Murdoch, like Hegel, is troubled by aspects of modern individualism. In her early essays on moral philosophy, she contrasts modern moral life and moral philosophy with preceding forms. Adherence to religious doctrines and principles that are held to be objective is taken to loosening, so that morality is being reduced to a matter of subjective choice. Murdoch sees contemporary moral philosophy as concentrating upon individuals, whereas in preceding eras individuals were seen as participating in wider social frameworks that shaped their moral identity. This focus upon individual choice also fits with the sceptical turn in contemporary philosophy, whereby metaphysics has been ditched, and close attention is paid to procedures of verification. For Murdoch, the upshot in the post-war world is the emergence of a style of moral philosophy, reflecting a cultural change in the form of moral life, which denies defining ties between individuals and fails to perceive that moral life is more than the expression of authentic or reasonable choices. Aligning moral conduct with a notion of the good, which supersedes individual inclination or welfare, is absent from dominant modern expressions of morality. In confronting this situation, Murdoch does not resort to a theory of history, which perceives the present as moving towards a realisation of a richer form of ethical life that can incorporate and supersede preceding forms of morality. . Unlike Hegel, she rejects a teleological conception of history, and instead invokes past philosophies to highlight what is being lost in contemporary discourse. Hence she appeals to Plato’s notion of the Good to serve as a magnetic force, drawing individuals away from egoism and fantasies

and towards considering the reality of others and the possibility of virtuous action. Her use of Plato is strikingly different from Hegel's in that Hegel had taken Plato's *Republic* to represent the principles of the traditional Greek polis, whereby his relevance is confined to his own time. In contrast, Murdoch does not see the present or past as closed, and Plato can be invoked to intimate a change of moral perspective in the present, precisely because he is not implicated in the current trend of individualism.

## Conclusion

Reviewing Murdoch and Hegel is instructive. Murdoch takes Hegel to be a significant philosopher and she draws upon and discusses his work extensively throughout her philosophical texts. She recognises problems with Hegel's philosophy while appreciating its richness. He is seen by her as a paradigmatic metaphysician, whose work can contribute to reviving metaphysics in the late twentieth century. Yet she is averse to what she takes as his tendency to closure. She is suspicious of his linear univocal reading of history, and his systematic philosophical conception of reality, whereby problems and tensions are apparently resolved in the absolute understanding of the Hegelian system. She takes Hegel to underplay the openness of experience, the fallibilism of metaphysical reasoning and the possibilities of agency, by operating with an overly schematic philosophical framework. In contrast Murdoch neither styles her philosophy as absolute nor as establishing a procedure, which is other than fallible, in resolving problems and tensions. Her moral philosophy critiques contemporary theory and practice, and points to an alternative conception which is to be supported by her own metaphysics. In reframing moral theory and metaphysics she draws upon past philosophy, and in doing so she neither assumes that it is severed from the present,

nor that it is to be absorbed into her own philosophy. For instance, she invokes Plato to counter features of present moral philosophy, which she finds problematic, and in doing so she assumes that the present is open to reminders from the past of alternative standpoints.

The value of relating Murdoch to Hegel is that it allows for a clearer understanding of their respective positions and enables us to see how much Murdoch draws upon Hegel. Murdoch's work is more aligned to a Hegelian perspective than is generally acknowledged. Her philosophy rests upon a historical appreciation of how human activities change over time, and how moral individualism represents a distinctly modern phenomenon, which is not to be misconstrued as universal. Her moral philosophy follows Hegel in looking to go beyond what she takes to be an unduly narrow individualism, and in doing so she also employs a phenomenological and dialectical style that is akin to Hegel. Close attention to how another appears to us, which is conducted by both Hegel and Murdoch, reveals blind spots, and how our judgments are informed by socially acquired concepts and are susceptible of dialectical development. Her affinities with Hegel highlight the continued relevance of Hegel to modern moral and social philosophy. In her own philosophical practice and in her comments on Hegel's metaphysics, politics and moral philosophy, she shows how Hegel is relevant to debates in the post-war world of analytical philosophy. Murdoch's approach to philosophy is more Hegelian than is generally recognised and Hegel's philosophy, when seen through the reflecting mirror of Murdoch's philosophy, appears more imaginative and experientially insightful than is standardly acknowledged.

Murdoch's critique of Hegel is also valuable, because it asks questions of Hegel while recognising the force of his ideas. The question of closure in Hegel's system is worth asking. It can be argued, and indeed is so argued, by many Hegelians that Hegel does not apply a schematic incontrovertible procedure to close down arguments. Rather his dialectical approach is to examine the tensions and contradictions evident in experience, and to work

through those conceptual tensions to arrive at a fallible perspective to resolve them. On this view, the system arises out of an examination of concepts and experience, rather than being dictated at the outset. While I am more sympathetic to this view of Hegel than is Murdoch, her criticisms are worth airing and show how Hegel's thought might be best developed. In some areas her critique strikes home. For instance, Hegel's teleological view of history focuses on the achievement of freedom in the West, but ignores or distorts many aspects of historical experience, relating to the non-Western world, including imperialism, indigenous communities, the environment and gender. Likewise, Hegel's approach to the history of philosophy too readily assumes that philosophy is heading in the direction of systematic formulation, whereas Murdoch is surely right to indicate that Plato's use of imagery and metaphor is suggestive in interesting and enduring ways. (See F&S)



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