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personality to the concept of virtue*

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Abstract

SIMONE WEIL AND IRIS MURDOCH: the relevance of personality to the concept of virtue

I have tried to trace a recurring theme in Simone Weil's thought: I have not tried to make an appraisal of her theology as a whole. She was trained as a philosopher but her work transcends the conventional boundaries between disciplines. She was widely read and wrote with authority on history, education, poli_tics and comparative religion as well as philosophy, and in her personal faith and consequently her theology she drew extensively on this formidable cultural and intellectual background. As a result her theological writings are complex but ^{as} they are also very much of a piece I have been able to follow in them the theme of the fraudulence of personality.

Simone Weil is deeply pessimistic about human nature and speaks of its gravitational force which only divine grace can reverse. This process she pictures as the takeover of the soul by Christ at the expense of the individual's personality which in itself can never offer the key to the attainment of virtue. She believes virtue to be very close to obedience, which we achieve through the exercise of attention.

I have tried to explore the strong similarity which exists between this position and some aspects of the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch who is also a pessimist about human nature. She too believes in an absolute good which we can only know by breaking down the barrier of self. I have used Dorothy Emmet, Elizabeth Anscombe and Mary Midgley as commentators on the state of British moral philosophy as deplored by Iris Murdoch, and

Mary Midgley has provided me with a picture of personality which I think is more realistic than that of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch because it admits virtue as an actual quality not a mere ideal.

SIMONE WEIL AND IRIS MURDOCH:
the relevance of personality to the concept of virtue

by

Rosemary Sim, B.A. Honours in Philosophy 1979

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In the text I have used the following abbreviations for Simone Weil's works:

AD	<u>Attente de Dieu</u>
CI	<u>Cahiers I</u>
CII	<u>Cahiers II</u>
CIII	<u>Cahiers III</u>
CS	<u>La Connaissance surnaturelle</u>
E	<u>L'Enracinement</u>
LR	<u>Lettre à un religieux</u>
OL	<u>Oppression et liberté</u>
PCAD	<u>Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu</u>
PG	<u>La Pesanteur et la grace</u>
SG	<u>La Source Grecque</u>

The Sovereignty of Good by Iris Murdoch is referred to as "S o G".

Unless it is stated otherwise, the translations are my own.

PART ONE

I Introduction

I should like to discuss various elements in Simone Weil's religious thought in the light of some particular strands of thinking in current moral philosophy. I think it is fair to discuss Simone Weil's writing against a philosophical rather than a theological background for several reasons: she was a professional philosopher but had had no formal theological training; she particularly valued the intellectual freedom which the study of philosophy allows and her teacher Alain at the Lycée Henri IV positively encouraged; and for her the religious and the moral are anyway inextricably mixed.

Iris Murdoch calls Simone Weil "that admirable Platonist"¹. She is a Platonist herself and in her crusade against a certain kind of moral philosophy clearly counts Simone Weil as an ally, though she refers to her only in passing; she is doubtless aware of the problems that Simone Weil's Platonism has raised for her Christian commentators - is her thought Christian at all? - but does not comment on them. And she need not: that Simone Weil wrote in the wake of what she took to be a genuine mystical experience, which propelled her from complete agnosticism to the brink of entry into the Catholic Church, is a circumstance which must weigh heavily on any assessment of her work which comes from within the Church; but secular commentators are free to be selective, to lay their emphasis on the aspects of her thought which best match their arguments or which they find most inspiring. On closer study Simone Weil is not what she at first sight might appear - that is, a particularly striking and committed witness to the truth and power of the Christian message. The theological



task of making clear just where and how she departs from orthodox Christian belief has been well and thoroughly carried out by Georges Frénaud amongst others², and with hindsight we can see her stubborn refusal to accept baptism and her gruesome death as indications that all was not well. Divorced from the context of her life and the charge of heresy, her writing not only retains its fascination, but freed from an obligation to comply with a fairly rigid set of principles, is somehow vindicated, at least in part. Obviously this process takes place in the mind of the reader who, if he is not a Christian, is at liberty to take Simone Weil as he finds her, so to speak, without agonising about her immortal soul as do some of her Roman Catholic commentators. The Christian, as we have seen, is not at liberty in the same way: one wrong emphasis throws doubt on her whole body of thought. Iris Murdoch is agnostic, though she is far from being ready to dispense with the vocabulary of religious belief (she has something to say about grace, for example). She comes to the study of Simone Weil without any obligation to judge either Simone Weil as a person or her work in relation to a certain tradition; she can be said to take Simone Weil's thought in its "soft" sense, and would probably find much she could recognise in Simone Weil's picture of human nature.

For Simone Weil not only man but the whole of creation was fallen - from which we can infer that she believed our imperfection to be a necessary and not a contingent fact about us. For her man was essentially wretched: "Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything. Contradiction is our misery and the consciousness of our misery is the consciousness of reality. For we do not create our misery. It is real. That is why we must value it. Everything else is imaginary" (PG126). Catholic commentators on Simone Weil are critical of her characterisation of the creation:

"God abandons our entire being, flesh, blood, feelings, intellect, love, to the pitiless necessity of matter and to the cruelty of the devil, save the eternal or supernatural part of the soul.

Creation is abandonment. By creating what is other than himself, God has necessarily abandoned his creation." (CS49)

The suggestion that there is something shameful in our human condition is to be found elsewhere in Simone Weil's work, when, for instance, she writes that "God has emptied himself of his divinity and filled us with a false divinity. Let us empty ourselves of it. This act is the end of the act which created us". (CS91)

And:

"There is a necessary link between the supernatural and suffering. Man is made of flesh: how can he not suffer when united with the divine nature? In him, God is suffering so that he can be finished. Suffering made inevitable by the creation. Suffering without consolation, for consolations are manufactured by the imagination and one must be emptied of these to leave room for God. Imagination is the false divinity." (C II 116)

In creating the world God has destroyed himself in a sense; his creation, being absolutely other than himself, is beyond his power to control. Necessarily, for were it not beyond his power to control it would be but an extension of himself, and Simone Weil would have had no answer to give to the question which tormented her of how a loving God can reconcile himself to the existence of suffering in the world. But she found an answer:

"God causes this universe to exist while consenting at the same time not to command it - though he has the power to do so - but to let reign in his place on the one hand the mechanical necessity attached to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul, and on the other hand the autonomy essential to thinking people." (AD 146)

This characterisation of creation is repugnant to the Catholic theologian Charles Moeller who speaks for many critics of Simone Weil on this subject when he says that the creation is not an abdication of power by God but a communication of his power with us so that we can share in it.³ Hilary Ottensmeyer considered Simone Weil's belief that creation is offensive to God to be her fundamental error and the root of her contempt for human nature⁴. Iris Murdoch, while not contemptuous of human nature, is not optimistic about it either, and this sets her apart from some of her fellow moral philosophers.

Indeed, she does not consider herself to be in the mainstream of modern British philosophy. She stated in a recent interview with Rachel Billington⁵ that she feels very separate now from Oxford philosophers. This is presumably not only because she has decided to turn her whole attention to writing and sees herself as a novelist first and foremost, but also by virtue of her philosophical views which are out of tune with a tradition characteristically analytic and reductionist. If it is not too misleading to picture philosophical activity as a spectrum with, at one end, philosophy as an abstruse intellectual game demanding no qualifications apart from cleverness, and at the other, philosophy as the search for wisdom leading eventually to salvation, Iris Murdoch would be situated nearer to the latter end of

the spectrum than most of her former colleagues. In the same interview she touched on this difference. "Philosophy is difficult", she admits, particularly her sort which does not divide the intellect from the will. Much recent philosophy sees things of the intellect as "clear and hard and factual" while the will and the emotions are "peripheral and unclear" and that is where the religious instinct is presumed to lie. Philosophy, she would seem to imply, should involve the whole man, that is to say that not only should its subject matter comprise the whole range of human experience, but that the opacity and the irreducibility of the self should be respected. Iris Murdoch reproaches modern philosophy with failing to provide an adequate picture of human personality, with the result that our spirituality loses its crucial nature. Rachel Billington writes: "She does not believe in God, 'a personal God', which is why Buddhism has such an appeal for her. She does believe in 'spiritual change'. Christ is no more than a prophet. But the Christian mythology is, in her opinion, very important as 'a mode of understanding'. The religious dimension is essential". It is essential if we are to attempt to understand what people are like and essential if we are to attempt to become better. Iris Murdoch thinks that the main task of the moral philosopher is to address himself to the question, "How can we make ourselves better?", and that some moral philosophers have lost sight of this end because they have been blinded by an attractive but misleading "scientific" model of human nature. The religious dimension is essential because it allows us to express truths about ourselves which can be expressed in no other way.

Iris Murdoch is a moral philosopher with a mission to guard the special "moral" quality of this branch of philosophy against moves to subsume it under a view of philosophy which can broadly be called linguistic. Of course philosophy is to a great extent concerned

with the way language relates to the world and with the definition and redefinition of concepts, and internal coherence must be required of any philosophical argument if it is to be worthy of that description. But as Iris Murdoch points out, ordinary language is not a philosopher. (SOG 57). The idea that our experience should be limited and even defined by the language we employ to talk about it is a dangerous one, she believes, because it neutralises moral philosophy by denying the truth that good is "outside" us where no process of analysis, however thorough, can find it. Several things follow from this, for instance, that goodness and knowledge are connected. Iris Murdoch rightly perceives that in today's philosophical climate of opinion this is a radical view which has to be defended and this she does in particular depth in her essay entitled "The Idea of Perfection". (From now on I shall use the term "existentialist" as a blanket one to cover the existentialist/rationalist/linguistic/analytic conglomerate against whose picture of morality Iris Murdoch is setting herself.) Roughly, her argument is as follows: that the insistence by the existentialist tradition that goodness, and wickedness, exist at the point of contact of the executing will with the public world, and at that point alone, is mistaken; that what we can infer from this about human nature is not only inaccurate - people are not as the existentialist thinks they are - but morally reprehensible. There would be something wrong with people if they were like that, so that to restore both goodness and the human will to their correct places in the scheme of things we have to see that goodness can never be a function of the will. Values, says Iris Murdoch, are transcendent. They provide a standard against which we succeed or fail, improve or deteriorate, grow in moral stature or decline - and in the light of which we might be judged, if Iris Murdoch believed in a God to do the judging. In this atmosphere the idea of moral progress, for which there is little

use in the split-second, one-off, disconnected world of existentialist decisionmaking, deserves re-examination and it is at this point in particular that Iris Murdoch looks to Simone Weil for inspiration.

1. I. Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, 85.
2. G. Frénaud, "Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the light of Catholic Theology", *passim*.
3. C. Moeller, Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme I : Silence de Dieu, 246.
4. H. Ottemsmeyer, Le thème de l'amour dans l'oeuvre de Simone Weil, 57.
5. The Times, April 25, 1983.

II The idea of moral progress in Simone Weil's work

Simone Weil, could not believe in special providence, which, along with the concept of the miraculous, she dismissed as meaningless:

" an ingenious thought expressed in a New York Catholic review, on the last anniversary of the discovery of America. It was that God had sent Christopher Columbus to America so that several centuries later there should be a country capable of defeating Hitler..... this is atrocious the extermination of the peoples of America in the sixteenth century did not seem to him a high price to pay for the salvation of twentieth century Europeans"(E 238).

Charles Moeller believed that disgust with the way in which Christians would like to monopolise providence for the benefit of their little personal projects pushed Simone Weil into the arms of Stoicism¹ (where she was anyway happy to be because of her great admiration for the thought and civilisation of ancient Greece). Her acceptance of necessity as destiny is condemned as heretical by most of her critics, though Louis Salleron says her theology of the creation as God in retreat, and suffering and death as the only ways of salvation, is both Christian and Catholic.²

" God sends misfortune indiscriminately to good people and to bad, as he sends the sun and the rain. He has not kept the cross for Christ. He only comes into contact with the human individual as such through purely spiritual

grace which is his response when we turn our regard to him. That is, he comes into contact with the individual to the exact extent that the individual gives up his individuality. No event is a favour from God except grace."⁴
(PG 148)

In the meantime - and I do find in Simone Weil's theology hints that God's withdrawal from us is not for all time - he might as well not exist. But our obligations towards him remain. Blind necessity is the instrument which reveals to us our essential wretchedness - essential because it has as its cause a gravitational force which grips our very nature, not just the weighty objects of the external world. There is no escape from gravity and yet we must love it because it represents to us the will of God. So she says, "Matter is entirely passive, and by consequence entirely obedient to the will of God. It is for us a perfect model" (AD112). If this is the case then, as Charles Moeller points out, it would have been better for man not to have existed. And to reach this conclusion is to play into the hands of the devil, all of whose activity is jealousy of man made in the image of God⁵. For Simone Weil believes that we can and should achieve the state of obedience and that suffering is the means by which we are trained for it. She makes a distinction between suffering and affliction. Simple physical pain is nothing beside real affliction; a few hours of violent pain once over are soon forgotten, but affliction, of which physical suffering is a necessary but not a sufficient component, tears at the very roots of our being and destroys us in our own eyes, fragmenting the person we believe ourselves to be and removing all hope. It is a characteristic of affliction - a necessary one - that it should imprison us in a kind of hell from which there is no escape, because belief in the possibility of escape would be a consolation and in

affliction we are inconsolable. Simone Weil, to put it mildly, dwells on this subject. Charles Moeller described her attitude to suffering as morbid and pathological⁴, which it no doubt is if considered in the light of so-called normal behaviour. One thing even her harshest critics allow: Simone Weil's pain on behalf of the afflicted was real and her attempts to identify with them - for example the few months she spent working in the Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt - were more than academic exercises, however artificial they may seem. These experiments did not and could not work at the level Simone Weil intended them to for reasons which Susan Taubes makes clear in her article "The Absent God": Simone's wealthy parents made repeated efforts to rescue her from situations which threatened to destroy her, and she may despite herself have welcomed their interventions even though they were a proof of her failure. She was bitterly disappointed not to be chosen for dangerous resistance work in occupied France. Instead she was given a task - to write a treatise on human values - for which she was clearly more suited but which did not allow her to sacrifice herself in the way she felt she was called to do. The inquest on her death returned a verdict of "suicide while the balance of the mind was disturbed". She had not told her parents that she was ill, thereby cutting herself off from their saving influence. Understanding Simone Weil's theology of affliction is very difficult because we are bound in our reading of it to be influenced by what we know of her behaviour, and rightly so. In human terms Simone Weil's life was not a happy nor a successful one; she did things that happy people do not do, such as refusing desperately - needed medical attention, and she did not achieve that degree of adjustment which we would consider normal and healthy. So we feel not only that something had gone very wrong for her to end her life in the way she did but that her basic premises must

have been mistaken for her to have ever found herself on the road which led so directly to self-destruction. Charles Moeller said that if death had not existed Simone Weil would have invented it⁵. Affliction is real and Simone really suffered because of this in a way which is a lesson to the complacent, but Susan Taubes believes that she bore this suffering in the wrong spirit, passively:

"It is the specific mark of human suffering that it points beyond the sheer immediacy of pain to an ideal norm which applies to man as such within a historical reality. The chain of the oppressed of all ages burdens man not merely by its physical weight but as a wrong. It has been the crime of religion against humanity to teach men that slavery under whatever form is not a wrong but a fate. It reaches its most scandalous expression in the view that the suffering of the innocent is a special sign of the love of God. Thereby religion not only sanctions the present sufferings of the injured but paralyses the nerves of a historical community based on a mutual responsibility between the generations."⁶

What disturbs Susan Taubes is Simone Weil's characterisation of extreme affliction as the bridge between God and man, the concentration in the strongest possible form of that immensity of blind brute force which is the sum of necessity as it exists throughout space and time, and which separates man from God. Extreme affliction Simone Weil likens to a nail whose point is positioned at the centre of the soul, the head of this nail being necessity. In this way anonymous affliction can be said to pierce our very soul at a point which represents the whole burden of man's infinite

distance from God, localised in such a way that if in the midst of his pain a man can continue to want to love God then he will find himself no longer separated from God but with him at that point of intersection between the creation and the creator. In other words affliction is a device which allows man to return to God the love which God has lavished on man.

Simone Weil calls affliction a marvel of divine technique. Victor Gollancz, an admirer of some aspects of Simone Weil's work, is moved by this to call her god a monster of cruelty if he chooses such a way to enable himself better to love himself.⁷ Setting aside for a minute the devastating conclusion, the mechanics of her argument from affliction to the love of God are far from easy to follow because she makes cryptic statements, such as, "Relentless necessity, misery, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of exhausting labour, cruelty, torture and violent death, constraint, terror and disease - all this is but the divine love. It is God who out of love withdraws from us so that we can love him" (CS49). We also find statements which seem almost deliberately perverse:

"For those who love, separation, however painful, is a good because it is love. Even the distress of the abandoned Christ is a good. There cannot be a greater good for us here below than to have a part in this abandonment. God cannot be perfectly present to us here below because of our flesh. But in extreme affliction he can be almost perfectly absent from us. For us on earth this is the sole possibility of perfection. This is why the Cross is our one hope." (AD 110)

Such statements of belief would seem to have their origin in a profound sense of personal guilt and unease, and demonstrate a contempt for all that is human, including our human need for encouragement and solace. She despises any tendency to meet this need through a belief in divine providence or an indulgence in day dreaming and wishful thinking. There is a trace of this same austerity in Iris Murdoch's thought, one of the first indications of the connection between the two. Here then is the first clue to her understanding of what may count as moral progress.

Next, Simone Weil believed that we were created only so that we could become uncreated:

"A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when not only does it consent to love, but actually, truly loves. So in its turn the soul must cross the universe to reach God. The soul does not love like a created being with a created love. This love it feels is divine, uncreated, for it is the love of God for God which is passing through the soul. Only God is capable of loving God. All we can do is consent to the loss of our own feelings to make way in our soul for the passage of this love. That is what it is to negate oneself. It is for this consent alone that we were created." (AD 118)

Her view was that before that day comes there is likely to be a period of struggle because the soul, subject to the laws of gravity in all but a tiny, hidden part of itself, will want to embrace its created state by equipping itself with a substantial self, a personality. Simone Weil believes that this personality is in fact insubstantial, illusory even, but that the attraction

it exerts over us is so strong that it takes the terrible force of affliction, which destroys us in our own eyes as well as the eyes of others, to show it up for what it is, or was - a dream:

"For so long as circumstances play around us while leaving our being more or less intact or only partly damaged we believe more or less that our will has created the world and is governing it. Misfortune teaches us all of a sudden, to our great surprise, that our will is nothing." (PCAD 122)

Now it is certainly true that people can be broken by their suffering - and that one can set about breaking people in a cold-blooded and calculating way, provided that one has some knowledge of psychology. But from this we should not conclude that personality is an illusion (this applies to will, too, as it is another aspect of the same concept) - quite the reverse is true. That we can be broken suggests that there is something to break; that we can be broken in a deliberate way suggests that we have a psychology, that human personality is real to an extent where it can be studied and certain generalisations can reasonably be made about it. And secondly, Simone Weil does seem to be dealing in very extreme situations; it is not many of us who experience the extreme affliction which she so graphically describes, nor who are megalomaniac enough ever to think that our will is everything. Of course it is true that we are not quite the people we believe ourselves to be, that sometimes we protect our images of ourselves with lies and deceptions. This is a different thing from trying to drive a wedge between two aspects of our nature, which when considered in isolation one from the other can only be understood as metaphors and even then are misleading.

Simone Weil believes that the chief obstacle on the road to uncreated love is personal fantasy, to which we are all addicted because of its tremendous power of consolation, which is so great that sometimes even great suffering is not enough to open our eyes to the real world, in which "... there is affliction every time necessity in whatever form makes itself felt so violently that the person who has undergone the shock cannot possibly find an escape in self-delusion. This is why the purest beings are the most vulnerable to misfortune." (AD 202)

Space and time are the formal conditions of our experience as created beings - as long as we are in their thrall we are in a false position from which we must continually be struggling to escape - that is, trying to see beyond appearance to reality. I think there is a lot of truth in this; the value of art, or one of its values, lies in its perception of truths which are universal, and recognisable as such when presented to us in a convenient form, but which do not announce themselves to us in everyday life in the absence of the artist's discerning eye. This is to posit the existence of two worlds, one immediately accessible but full of illusions and trickery, the other more distant somehow and more real. When Simone Weil says, "Let us draw back the veil of unreality and see what is thus given to us" she is of course speaking figuratively, but even a figure of speech which suggests a possible dislocation between "the world" and "our perception of the world" is unfortunate if it suggests that we are potentially trapped and isolated in our minds. I shall come back to this point. Simone Weil says that if we want to see beyond the created world to the supernatural truths of uncreated love we must rid ourselves of time's illusions: "Time, strictly speaking, does not exist (except for the present as a limit.) But despite this it is time to which we are subject ... We are genuinely bound by unreal chains.

Time is unreal and it veils ourselves and everything else in unreality " (PG 67).

As an example, Simone Weil cites the very human tendency to believe that the future will be more fulfilling than the present. There is a temptation to put off living until some point in the future, which is a pure product of the imagination guaranteed to have no correlate in experience. We know this and yet we persist in our belief of a good time to come (PCAD 13). Perhaps Simone Weil was diagnosing a personal failing for she writes in a notebook "You live in a dream. You are waiting to live " (CI 13). Letting go our imaginative hold on the future is one step on the way to decreation, that complex spiritual discipline which might be crudely summed up as getting rid of personal baggage which will burden the soul returning to God. Another step is accepting the past, that is, ceasing to expect future compensation for past injuries (forgiving). We should try to reduce ourselves to the point which we occupy in space and time - to nothing (PG 17). So,

"We must empty ourselves of our false divinity, deny ourselves, give up being in imagination the centre of the world and recognise all the other points of the world as being as much a centre as we are to ourselves, and the real centre as being outside the world. To do this is to consent to the reign of mechanical necessity in the material world, and free will at the centre of each soul. This consent is love. The face of this love when turned towards thinking beings is love of our neighbour; turned towards matter it is love of the order of the world, or - what is the same thing - love of the beauty of the world." (AD 148)

It is a very real danger of our created state - the siting of our perceptions in space and time - that we come to think of ourselves as being at the core of the universe, with the consequence which Simone Weil rightly deplores that other people do not always seem quite real to us, existing only in relation ourselves, and coloured by our attitude towards them.

The moral dangers here are obvious, but in particular, I want to take issue with her on two points. Firstly, I dispute that we are in the grip of fantasy to the extent she suggests when she says: "We are born and we live with lies. We hear only lies. Even about ourselves; we think that we are seeing ourselves, and we are only seeing the shadow of ourselves " (SG 91). Even allowing for poetic overstatement I think Simone Weil puts her case too strongly. It is true that we very often deceive ourselves, but only in certain areas and not, unless we are mentally ill, about everything, and these delusions can be revealed for what they are without causing the person that harboured them to crumble away to nothing. My second objection is really an extension of this point: it is wrong to speak of the self as if it were something we should - and could - dispose of if we are ever to know reality, impersonal and universal, as when she writes, "... that which we take to be ourself is a product as fleeting and as dependent on exterior circumstances as the form of a wave in the sea " (PCAD 115).

At this point we notice that Iris Murdoch joins with Simone Weil in looking for salvation beyond the self. She believes that:

" The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine; in order to operate it needs sources of energy, and

it is predisposed to certain patterns of activity. The area of its vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great. One of its main pastimes is daydreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. Even its loving is more often than not an assertion of self. I think we can probably recognise ourselves in this rather depressing description." (SOG 79)

Well, that is debatable. However, what we can recognise is a Weillian insistence on the gravitational force of human nature in the raw, its fundamental badness. With regard to moral progress therefore, Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil coincide to a marked extent in the remedies they propose for our sickness, which are concerned with cutting through the mass of self-centred fantasy with which we tend to obscure reality, and thereby obtaining knowledge of reality as it is in itself rather than as we would like it to be. According to Simone Weil we should go about this - paradoxically - by being passive even to the extent of not being. Iris Murdoch is admittedly less extreme; she does not say we should annihilate the self, only forget it, and one way to do this is to learn to appreciate beauty because our appreciation of beauty is necessarily disinterested.

Following Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch D. Z. Phillips says:

" when ambition threatens to destroy us,
and we have come to regard everyone and

everything as instruments for our own use, what Simone Weil calls 'The love we feel for the splendour of the heavens, the plains, the sea and the mountains, for the silence of nature' can give us something which cannot be used, namely, the beauty of the world. One cannot use beauty, one can only contemplate it, since as Simone Weil says, 'it only gives itself, it never gives anything else'... By this kind of contemplation one's self-centredness is destroyed.⁸

Although this line of reasoning does carry some conviction, there are objections which can be levelled against it. Firstly, I do not find the gloomy picture of our human nature which Iris Murdoch, (and to some extent D. Z. Phillips) provides to be one which is essentially true, but I think this is what Iris Murdoch implies (Simone Weil certainly does). Now of course everyone is selfish some of the time and probably quite a lot of people are selfish most of the time, but that is a fact about them as individuals. It should not be used as a ground for saying that this is what human nature really is like, and that those people who appear to act unselfishly quite a lot of the time are either clever at seeming to be what they are not, or have by use of the quasi-religious techniques which Iris Murdoch recommends, managed to achieve self-mastery and are now no longer ordinary people at all but a sort of higher being. It is not true that we achieve goodness, if at all, in spite of ourselves, or perhaps - as Iris Murdoch is a Platonist - in spite of the lower parts of ourselves. This is how she describes the Platonic view of the soul:

"The lowest part of the soul is egoistic, irrational, and deluded, the central part is aggressive and ambitious, the highest part

is rational and good and knows the truth which lies beyond all images and hypotheses. The just man and the just society are in harmony under the direction of reason and goodness. This rational harmony also gives to the (indestructible) lower levels their best possible satisfaction.⁹

This idea of a divided self permeates Simone Weil's writing, as does her belief that the flesh, in itself, is bad and must be broken; only on this condition can we be lifted up by divine grace.

1. C. Moeller, Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme, 234.
2. L. Salleron, La théologie de Simone Weil, 77.
3. C. Moeller, Littérature de XXe siècle et christianisme, 247.
4. ibid, 244.
5. ibid, 248.
6. S. Taubes, "The Absent God", 118.
7. V. Gollancz, More for Timothy, 102.
8. D. Phillips, "The Christian Concept of Love", 322.
9. I, Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, 5.

III Moral progress and grace

The greatness of Christianity, says Simone Weil, lies in the fact that it does not look for a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use of it (PG 106). Thus, "Resignation to the suffering of the innocent can only arise in the soul through the contemplation and acceptance of necessity, which is the rigorous chain of secondary causes" (LR 54). Charles Moeller understands the supernatural element to be a chain of necessity superimposed on that of inert matter. From this it follows that we need do nothing to improve political and social conditions because such as they are, a blind mechanism, they destroy the flesh and thus automatically assure union with the divine.¹ That Simone Weil did not really accept this logical conclusion of her belief in the acceptance of necessity as destiny she showed in her life through her concern for the conditions of the workers.

There is however, a strong element of a certain kind of mysticism in her work and a feature of this is her tendency to discount the importance of human personality and political and social action through a too-rigorous programme of abstraction. Human responses cease to be valued for their individuality and the ideal held up is of a being whose flesh has been disciplined not to interfere with the action of grace (SG 113). Victor Gollancz takes issue with Simone Weil on this point:

"She sees us as objects of God, capable of nothing good of our own human nature, capable of something good only when visited, or as she might put it, when kissed by spiritual grace; when visited specially or kissed specially. My thought is quite different.

I feel God about everywhere: and I feel him far more naturally and regularly mixed up with us, and us with him and his goodness, than Simone does."²

We have seen how Simone Weil interpreted the creation as abdication of God in favour of necessity. God is absent from this world and with him has gone the doctrine of Adam created in the image of God, and its consequence that we can freely chose the good. We may think we are free but we are no more free than a falling stone (AD 101). "To carry one's cross is to carry the knowledge that one is entirely subject to this blind necessity in every part of one's being save a point in the soul so secret that one is not conscious of it " (PA 110).

Once again the idea is present of man as a passive vehicle for grace - our virtue should take us almost by surprise. This is very important; Simone Weil is drawing a radical distinction between spirit and matter, including the psychic matter of the soul. It is as if each one of us harbours an alien, mysterious potential for saintliness which is not explicable in terms of human nature but rather is our means of escape from that human nature. "This mechanical necessity has us constantly in its grip; we can escape from it only to the extent in which the true supernatural has a place in our souls " (AD 73). We escape from what is dangerous or distasteful; in this instance our natural tendency to behave badly. For example, it is only human to want revenge for some evil which has been done to us or to transfer the harm done to someone else, "to take it out on someone", so releasing the tension created by aggressive instincts and recovering lost self-esteem. Only through divine grace, says Simone Weil, can we resist the downward pull of gravity. "One cannot acquire for oneself by suggestion things which are incompatible. Only grace can do this. A compassionate person who makes himself

courageous by suggestion becomes hard ... only grace can give courage without reducing a person's capacity for compassion, or give an ability to feel compassion without sapping courage." (PG 132)

There is support in this for those who accuse Simone Weil of Manicheanism; she seems to want to say that the soul is a battleground in the war between good and evil, in this case represented by the opposing forces of gravity and grace. Now this is quite intelligible up to a point because we all know what internal moral struggle is, and during it we do feel, figuratively speaking, as if we were being pulled first in one direction and then in another. And it is probably true that for most of us at least it is easier to behave badly than to behave well - not of course that we do always take the line of least resistance, but doing so will lead us more often to the moral depths than the moral heights. But Simone Weil is saying more than this, namely that we as individuals are not only not in control of the warring elements within us but not even involved in the struggle. For that necessity which governs our thoughts and actions is impersonal, effecting as it does indiscriminately everything within its sphere of influence, while supernatural grace working in us is represented as a secret flame lit and fanned by some mysterious other, in a way quite beyond our power to understand. As Victor Gollancz says, we become objects to be acted upon rather than whole people whose infinite perfectability can be understood in terms of our own humanity. This is not to dispense with God; because God created man in his own image he is already there. We do not need to introduce him through the back door. I think this is what Gollancz means when he says - "I feel God about everywhere: and I feel him far more naturally and regularly mixed up with us, and us with him and his goodness, than Simone does."³

Here is another point of contact between Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, who also understands grace (though divorced from its theological context of course) as something essentially mysterious, whose workings are outwith our control. "We often receive an unforeseen reward for a fumbling half-hearted act: a place for the idea of grace " (SOG 43). Neither is in agreement with Victor Gollancz over the possibility of goodness being absolute and entirely human at the same time; both think grace is a supernatural phenomenon which brings us extra help.

1. C. Moeller, Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme,
251.
2. V. Gollancz, More for Timothy, 107.
3. ibid, 107.

IV Moral progress and Cartesianism

The prevalent Cartesian dualism of mind - (understood as reason) - and matter in Simone Weil's work has far-reaching consequences. Mary Midgley says that as soon as we start thinking of ourselves as disembodied intelligences cut off from the main-springs of our being (the concept of disembodied existence on close examination proves to be meaningless or at least highly problematic), we run the risk of deceiving ourselves into thinking that essential characteristics, such as our need for security, are contingent: "We are not disembodied intelligences, tentatively considering possible incarnations. We have highly particular, sharply limited needs and possibilities already - in return for which restriction, of course, we have the advantage that our satisfactions, such as they are, are actual."¹ As Mary Midgley points out, existentialist claims that we operate in total freedom are very wide of the mark, as is the existentialist assumption that we do not have a history in the biological sense. In a perceptive comment she remarks that

"The really monstrous thing about Existentialism too is its proceeding as if the world contained only dead matter (things) on the one hand and fully rational, educated, adult human beings on the other - as if there were no other life - forms. The impression of desertion or abandonment which Existentialists have is due, I am sure, not to the removal of God, but to this contemptuous dismissal of almost the whole biosphere - plants, animals, and children. Life shrinks to a few urban rooms; no wonder it becomes absurd."²

This isolation of reason so that it can be set up as the supreme faculty has led to an identification of the will (reason in action) with the self. The criteria by which actions are judged have become purely public ones, operating in a material world in relation to which my inner mental world is shadowy or parasitic. It is the way in which I relate to the world which makes me the person I am, thus, ideally, I should be totally responsible for my actions and always fully aware of my range of options. Of course these conditions may turn out in practice to be impossible to realise, but they are held up to us as the ideal for which we should strive. Let us assume that they have been fulfilled and that the moral deliberation which can now take place is pure and untainted by any suggestion of fear, ignorance, neurosis, love or hate etc. The trouble with this picture, which is by virtue of its clean simple lines undeniably attractive, is that life is just not like that. With the virtual disappearance of the substantial self we lose that fund of imaginative sympathy - and the richer it is the better - which makes morality a going concern. Iris Murdoch is eloquent on this point:

"How recognisable, how familiar to us is the man so beautifully portrayed in the Grundlegung, who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgement of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy. The *raison d'être* of this attractive but misleading creature is not far to seek. He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from

the material universe which his discoveries reveal ... He is the ideal citizen of the liberal state, a warning held up to tyrants. He has the virtue which the age requires and admires, courage. It is not such a very long step from Kant to Nietzsche, and from Nietzsche to existentialism and the Anglo-Saxon ethical doctrines which in some ways closely resemble it. In fact Kant's man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer." (SoG 80)

The idea of free choice as understood by the existentialist, Anglo-Saxon and analytic traditions in philosophy, appeals to the strong and the rational among us, those who can live in a world which is without the familiar supports of religion, conventional morality and blind instinct. They may be exhilarated - but are they not also deceived? As Iris Murdoch says, "It is obviously, in practice, a delicate moral problem to decide how far the will can coerce the formed personality (move in a world it cannot see) without merely occasioning disaster " (SoG 39). A balance must be struck between a total denial of will and identification with matter on the one hand, and deification of the will on the other; because both extremes reflect an arrogant contempt for the individual. We find this contempt, I believe, in Simone Weil's writings:

"The forgiveness of injuries done to us by others is the giving up of our own personality. I should give up everything that I call "me" without exception, knowing that in what I call "me" there is nothing, not a single psychological trait, which exterior circumstances could not make disappear. I should accept this and be happy that it should be so." (AD 225)

"It is impossible to believe without being forced to by some experience, that everything in one's soul - all the thoughts, all the feelings, all the attitudes held towards ideas, men and the universe, and especially the most intimate attitude of the being towards himself - all these are completely at the mercy of circumstances ... Believing this with all one's soul is what Christ called - not what we normally translate as renunciation or self-denial - self-negation, and it is the condition for deserving to be his disciple."
(PCAD 113)

Simone Weil could not have said more plainly that she believed the self to be of two parts, as did Descartes, and one more important than the other. The natural part of us is contingent on our created state, which Simone Weil believed was offensive to God, and distinct from the divine uncreated part of us which is God himself, reverting to him at death while the created part of us perishes. ("Tragic and hopeless"³ is how Georges Frénaud described this point of view, but there cannot be any doubt that Simone held it.) We cannot will our own salvation - this is why the idea of a lay morality is absurd (AD 191).

Simone Weil believed that all good which is absolutely pure is independent of the will and transcendent (PG 59) and Susan Taubes rightly thinks she has an obsession with purity. Simone's argument is briefly this, that nothing can have as destination what it does not already contain, the implication of which is that we are trapped in our human condition which our faculty of intelligence allows us to see as wretched but from which our human capacities alone can offer us no means of escape. She writes that "Every human being has probably had in his

life several moments when he admitted honestly to himself that there is nothing good here below. But as soon as one has seen this truth one covers it with lies. Many people even enjoy announcing it, trying to find a morbid pleasure in sadness, when really they have not been able to face up to it for more than a second " (AD 210). And, further, "... no one is satisfied for long with living purely and simply. One always wants something else. One wants to live for something. We only need not to lie to ourselves to know that there is nothing here below for which one can live " (PCAD 14).

It never seemed to occur to Simone Weil that this despair, for which there is no lack of evidence and some reason, might not like any other sickness have causes and cures within our control to a greater or lesser extent. Instead she took it out of its historical context - the fact that it had a beginning and so might have an end - and incorporated it, universalised, into her theology. It would seem, then, that all our supposed pleasures and satisfactions are empty, but as we cannot bear this terrible knowledge we deceive ourselves into thinking otherwise. And it is this self-deception that blinds us to the truth that salvation is possible through grace alone; grace is the unique source of salvation and this salvation comes from God and not from man (SG 79). How are we to receive this grace? Or to formulate the problem in another way, how do we bring out the spiritual side of our nature which Simone Weil is sure we all possess, the proof of which is our ability to form general ideas (SG 106)? We must make the first move but it is an unusual kind of move in that it is purely mental and is not accompanied - or need not be accompanied - by any resolution to behave in a different kind of way. Simone Weil describes it as a withdrawal: as God withdrew to make way for us so we must withdraw to make way for him. Desire is the key; so she argues that

"The effort by which the soul saves itself resembles that by which we look, that by which we listen, that by which a fiancée says yes. It is an act of attention and of consent. On the other hand what is spoken of as will is something analogous to muscular effort " (AD 189).

Simone Weil's mistrust of our animal nature is so profound that its part in salvation has to be minimised. Only pure intelligence, functioning independently of our interests and desires, can help us achieve salvation by bringing home to us our true state of wretchedness and by being the tool for that exercise of attention which can bridge the gap between the self and reality. Hence Simone Weil's belief in the importance of study, and accusations that her theology is too cerebral and rational. She would seem to have denied this, when she wrote that "After months of inner darkness I was struck once and for all by the certainty that any human being, however ungifted, can enter this kingdom of truth reserved for genius if only he desires the truth and makes a continual effort of attention to reach it " (AD 39). Yet the Platonic influence remains dominant and gives weight to Charles Moeller's accusation that instead of illuminating Greece by Christ as she claimed to do, Simone Weil illuminated Christ by Greece.⁴

Perhaps one reason why Iris Murdoch finds Simone Weil's thought attractive is that she too, as a Platonist, remains within that tradition which produced Descartes and existentialism, and which separates mind from body with the result that moral philosophy remains theoretical and bloodless. As we shall see, Mary Midgley wants to restore the practical force of moral discussion by relating it to human personality.

1. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 71.
2. *ibid*, 18.
3. G. Frénaud, "Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology", 371.
4. C. Moeller, Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme, 237.

P A R T T W O

I The character of moral dilemmas

To illumine the view of moral philosophy to which Iris Murdoch finds Simone Weil such an effective antidote we should look more closely at the moral "ought" in an attempt to understand the distinguishing features of a moral dilemma. Taking various kinds of prescriptive statements and testing them against each other leads us straight away to ask the question, Why is this a moral "ought" while this is only a prudential one? The answer must be that no recommendation on how to act which is based solely on considerations of effectiveness for achieving a certain end, whether good, bad or indifferent, can be classified as a moral imperative. Prudential "oughts" deal exclusively with means: practical, unambitious, they raise more questions than they answer. If I say to someone "You ought to water that plant" am I saying anything more than "If you do not water that plant it will not flourish"? Clearly I am not, and the inference from what is the case to what ought to be done is unproblematic; whether or not the plant's owner wants it to flourish will be the deciding factor in whether or not the plant is watered, but that is a consideration which is beyond the scope of the prudential ought. But if I say to someone "You ought to spend more time with that child or he will not flourish" am I saying anything more than "If you do not spend more time with that child he will not flourish"? Well, yes and no: no, because I am not introducing any more factual information; yes, because I am introducing an element of the psychological pressure with which "ought" is invested when used to convey obligation. We are not obliged to water our plants, only wise to do so if we want them to flourish; "ought" in this context is an invitation to take reasonable action, with the "wanting" giving a justification for

the derivation of a statement about what ought to be done from a statement about what is the case. Implicit in the notion of wanting something is the willingness to take whatever (reasonable) steps are necessary to achieve that end. This, after all, is what "wanting" means: if I say that I want to pass my examinations but at the same time refuse to do any work for them, then it is certainly pertinent to ask whether I really do want to pass my exams. This is assuming, of course, that I have a properly integrated personality, but given this background of purposefulness and rationality, "ought" in its non-moral sense functions very smoothly, and indeed we would be at a loss without it.

The moral "ought" is different, though as with the prudential "ought" we use it as a kind of shorthand; however, what it is shorthand for is rather more complicated. When I suggest to someone that they water their plant I am merely making a recommendation, that is, passing on information - that plants need water if they are to flourish - and spurring them on to act at the same time. When I suggest to someone that he should treat his children differently - in a way which, in my view, is better - then, not only am I making a recommendation but I am also, as G. E. M. Anscombe says, giving a verdict on the behaviour of this person according to whether or not it is in line with the recommendation I have made.¹ Therein lies the psychological force of the moral "ought" which is also its distinguishing feature.

Both Iris Murdoch and Elizabeth Anscombe believe that this force - if it is truly a force for the good - must arise out of some state of affairs, and not simply be an extension of our own will. To this extent they are both naturalists. Miss Anscombe's thesis is that this force derives from the divine law conception of ethics and that in the hands of those who no longer subscribe

to this conception it is potentially corrupting. It was Hume who publicised the problem of passing from "is" to "morally ought" and discovered the situation in which the notion of obligation survived, and the notion "ought" was invested with "that peculiar force having which it is said to be used in a 'moral' sense, although the belief in divine law had long since been abandoned ..."² Anscombe agrees with Hume that the concept of moral obligation has outlived the system of thought within which it made sense. Her radical conclusion is that the notion "morally ought" has no real content in a society which has ceased to believe in God as a law-giver, and that we should try to do without it. (Iris Murdoch is similarly worried by the empty, formal character of the moral "ought" which she seeks to revive by relating it to belief in a transcendental good.) She believes that it can only be retained at a price which is dangerously high, and that modern moral philosophy has paid that price. In other words the judgements "morally right" and "morally wrong" have been cut off from their roots which lie in the Hebrew-Christian ethic, and are now functioning as free-floating labels which can be pinned at will to any description of a course of action considered by the individual to warrant this mark of approval or disapproval; and this decision must be made according to an estimation of the likely consequences of an action, there being no other criterion left to us. Now, a consequentialist theory of ethics requires a clear definition of intention and Anscombe believes that one such has been provided which has proved very influential. She states it thus: "it does not make any difference to a man's responsibility for an effect of his action which he can foresee, that he does not intend it".⁴ That is to say, we are excused blame for the bad consequences of actions which we expected would have good consequences, and therefore deemed "morally right", provided we make clear that we did not foresee them;

conversely, we can take no credit for the good but unforeseen consequences of our actions. This all seems very austere, which is probably why we have the impression remarked on by Miss Anscombe of being edified - a false impression in her opinion. It is this very stress on human rationality and autonomy which she believes to be potentially corrupting. She notes that "it is pretty well taken for obvious among them all [English academic moral philosophers since Sidgwick] that a prohibition such as that on murder does not operate in the face of some consequences. But of course the strictness of the prohibition has as its point that you are not to be tempted by fear or hope of consequences".⁵ The temptation is to take the law into our own hands, that is, and it is to this temptation says Elizabeth Anscombe that the "liberation" of the concept of being morally obliged has allowed us to succumb.

If asked, then, to state the distinguishing feature of a moral dilemma we must answer by referring to the "something else" which is not present in any situation of conflict which can be resolved by finding out a sufficient number of facts, be they "hard" facts about the behaviour of concrete objects in the world, "soft" facts about the way people feel, or truths which can be known a priori. This does not seem to be a very helpful discovery, but perhaps it is important to know what moral dilemmas are not about. It is important to Iris Murdoch and Elizabeth Anscombe, both of whom think that the mundane approach of modern moral philosophers is made inevitable by the use of a conceptual scheme in which there is no place for that "something else". I think that their arguments are to some extent complementary and this is a point I should like to explore. At any rate, they share a point of departure: a deep dissatisfaction with the present state of moral philosophy. In her paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" Miss Anscombe has argued that it is impossible that

an ethical proposition can be really understood in terms of facts alone, and that by retaining the moral "ought" when they do not in fact attribute any content to it, modern moral philosophers confuse the issue, to say the least.

Linguistic analysis can do much to sort out this confusion simply by revealing its own inability to encompass the moral scene; both Anscombe and Murdoch comment on the shallowness of their opponents' views: of particular importance is Miss Anscombe's assessment that "... it has in fact been the mark of all these philosophers that they have been extremely conventional; they have nothing in them by which to revolt against the conventional standards of their sort of people; it is impossible that they should be profound. But the chance that a whole range of conventional standards will be decent is small".⁶ Unfortunately, what has happened is that linguistic analysis has become a substitute for the discussion of ethics rather than a mere tool, if an important one, for making that discussion better informed. And this substitution has been carried out in an underhand kind of way, with moral philosophers reluctant to admit that something has been lost in the process. (Iris Murdoch notes how many of G. E. Moore's philosophical beliefs would be considered unstatable by his successors (SoG 63). This reluctance is evident in the kind of cheating whereby moral philosophers try to have their cake and eat it: they deny that there is anything special about moral propositions qua propositions while expecting them to have a special kind of effect on the listener, the kind of effect that a proposition containing a prudential "ought" could never have. At any rate this is Miss Anscombe's view:

"I should judge that Hume and our present-day ethicists had done a considerable service by showing that no content could be found

in the notion 'morally ought'; if it were not that the latter philosophers try to find an alternative (very fishy) content and to retain the psychological force of the term ... It would be a great improvement, if, instead of 'morally wrong', one always named a genus as 'untruthful', 'unchaste', 'unjust'. We should no longer ask whether doing something was 'wrong', passing from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust; and the answer would sometimes be clear at once."⁷

Both these points find an echo in the work of Iris Murdoch; that is, modern moral philosophy is shallow because it offers an analysis of ordinary mediocre behaviour instead of addressing itself to its true task of investigating how we can become better; it is dishonest because its supposed neutrality is no such thing:

"Linguistic analysis claims simply to give a philosophical description of the human phenomenon of morality, without making any moral judgements. In fact the resulting picture of human conduct has a clear moral bias. The merits of linguistic analytical man are freedom (in the sense of detachment, rationality), responsibility, self-awareness, sincerity, and a lot of utilitarian common sense." (SoG 49)

Like Miss Anscombe, Iris Murdoch is suspicious of blanket moral terms like "right" and "wrong" which she sees being used as indicators of personal preference - movable labels which exist for the convenience of the individual understood as a moral being by virtue of his ability to act. They tell us nothing about, on the one hand, the facts of the situation in which the judgement about

how it is right to act must be made, and on the other, the workings of the agent's mind which culminated, or perhaps did not, in action. To the question, "Do these things matter?" Iris Murdoch replies emphatically, "Yes". It is because they matter so much that we need to cultivate a rich normative vocabulary with which to talk about them. She agrees with Anscombe that we could very well do without those moral words with no descriptive content:

"Since the existentialist-behaviourist view wished to conceive of will as pure movement separated from reason and to deprive reason of the use of normative words (since it was to be 'objective'), the moral agent so envisaged could get along, was indeed almost forced to get along, with only the most empty and general moral terms such as 'good' and 'right' ... On my view it might be said that, per contra, the primary general words could be dispensed with entirely and all moral work could be done by the secondary specialised words. If we picture the agent as compelled by obedience to the reality he can see, he will not be saying 'This is right', i.e. 'I choose to do this', he will be saying 'This is A B C D' (normative ~~descriptive~~ words), and action will follow naturally." (SoG 42)

Both Anscombe and Murdoch find Kantian ethics at the root of the trouble, with its introduction of the notion of man as legislator: the Kantian man must even decide for himself whether to adopt Christ as an example of moral perfection and this he does by testing Christ against a paradigm case of moral rectitude with which he is supplied by his own powers of reason. However, there is no reason on earth why I should not override my own authority; I may in moments of lucidity form

guiding principles with the intention of regulating my future conduct in accordance with them, but if I decide to modify or altogether abandon a principle there can be no comeback. In this atmosphere of self-determination it is easy to understand the existentialist insistence that it is what actually happens in the world that matters, not the mental adjustments which precede events. Mental events such as the framing of a principle and subsequently abandoning it may take place without so much as the smallest disturbance to the physical world, so if they are not translated into action are we to allow them any significance? The existentialist, (I think it is fair to call Kantian man an existentialist) not only denies purely mental events significance, he denies them existence. That is, values only come into existence with the making of choices, and the inner life takes what reality it has from its outer manifestations. This is consistent with the notion that we cannot be bound by our own legislation, or to put it another way, that there can be no pre-existing model on which to base behaviour. This is of course the case if we are not prepared to accept either a divine law theory of ethics or a quasi-Aristotelian 'golden mean' theory dependent on the belief that we have a nature - or a variation on one of these. It follows from this that the chief existentialist good is the exercise of freedom, a coming fresh to every point of decision untrammelled by considerations, which if taken seriously, might compromise the purity of my decision. Not that I do not consider the facts before I act, for failure to do so would result only in displays of irresponsibility. The point is rather that I - the agent - can stand back and from a vantage point outside the world in which my action is going to take effect, take stock and make my choice from a position of logical independence of the factors which will have to be taken into consideration if I am to be seen to be acting responsibly. Again, the

gulf between what is the case and what ought to be the case is shown to be unbridgeable by logic; but I do not think either Miss Anscombe or Iris Murdoch would argue with this. Their thesis is that although logic has something to do with moral reasoning, it certainly has not got everything to do with it.

1. G. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", 220.
2. *ibid*, 218.
3. *ibid*, 222.
4. *ibid*, 223.
5. *ibid*, 223.
6. *ibid*, 226.
7. *ibid*, 220.

II Moral dilemmas and freedom

I would like at this point to say something about the notion of freedom, which seems to be crucial. The existentialist, Anglo-Saxon tradition in moral philosophy understands freedom as the absence of physical and psychological impediments to action; I am free in the ideal sense when I am fully aware of all my options and of what I am doing and why. Now paradoxically the exercise of free choice is conditional upon the existence of a tight network of secondary causes; for example, the absence of any necessary link between thought and action can reduce man to a state of slavery. So Simone Weil points out that

" a fisherman who battles against the tides and the wind in his little boat, even though he suffers from cold, from fatigue, from lack of leisure and even of sleep, from danger, from a primitive standard of living, has a more enviable fate than the worker at the conveyor belt who is nonetheless better off on all three scores. The point is that his work resembles far more the work of a free man" (OL 112).

Despite her critique of Cartesianism, here is one interesting point of connection between Simone Weil and Mary Midgley.

Simone Weil was troubled by what she considered the very grave problem of workers' alienation from modern industrial production methods which denied them the satisfaction of conceiving and carrying through to its fulfilment a plan of action. Such is the industrial worker's sense of estrangement from his labour, she

says, that "In general, the rapport between the work accomplished and the money received is so difficult to grasp that it seems almost contingent, with the result that the work seems like slavery, the money like a favour " (OL 154). A free society is not a society in which things happen at random, unexplained and unconnected; nor is a man who makes decisions by flipping a coin, free. The true exercise of freedom is dependent on at least a degree of knowledge about the context in which the choice is being made, the higher the degree the better. I do not think it is misleading to think of knowledge as revealing the interconnectedness of everything, a mapping out of territory in which each point stands in a certain relation to every other point. This territory is our home and the more deeply rooted we are in it through the exercise of all our human capacities the more knowledge we can be said to have of it and ourselves. This interaction of man with his fellows and his environment is bound to create a culture, the existence of which Mary Midgley argues is essential to freedom:

"We are capable of far more than we can fit into even the richest individual life-span. We have to choose. It is this enormous enriching of our capacities that gives rise to free will. Since there is much more on the table than we could possibly eat, we have to choose, in a sense in which other species do not. Much of our choosing, however, is communal rather than individual. Some of it has to be done for us by our parents and their generation, before we are in any position to advise them. To look at it another way, we have to choose for our children as well as for ourselves, and also, since we can influence others, in part for those around us too.

Romantic individualism is wrong if it suggests that we can choose alone. To choose at all (rather than just flipping a coin), we need intelligible alternatives. And they can be provided only by a culture, that is, by an unseen host of collaborators. Culture is necessary to make rational choice possible. It is the condition of freedom.¹

Though Iris Murdoch has set herself up as a critic of the existentialist approach to moral philosophy, she can never, as a Platonist, be as thorough-going in her condemnation as Mary Midgley, who does not subscribe in the slightest degree to that tradition which distinguishes the ghost from the machine. But it is easy to see that in a philosophical structure which isolates the moment of choice from the background against which that choice is made, and accords it a special hardness and reality, the self comes to be identified with the will.

There are two reasons why this view is so appealing. Firstly, because it dispenses with the need for the problematical entities which Iris Murdoch calls "introspectabilia" to be taken into account when the moral balance sheet is being drawn up; mental concepts are related to overt actions in a way that is shadowy and parasitic, with no more claim to independent assessment than the wrong side of a tapestry. Iris Murdoch traces this line of reasoning to its source in Wittgenstein's argument against a private language. Let us say that I experience a certain sensation S1 which is new to me and which I cannot identify; six months later I experience a certain sensation S2 which I am inclined to identify with S1. But how can I be sure that they are the same when there is no public criterion according to which I can place S1 and S2 in

a context which would allow comparison one with the other? I may think that SI and S2 are identical but I can never know because I can never check; knowledge, so runs the theory, is only worthy of the name by virtue of its being publicly verifiable, therefore we cannot have knowledge of private states of mind. And hence the difficulty of recognising sensation SI: the objectivity which the concept of recognition demands simply is not there. It follows from this that the real me is the one that appears on the public stage, for in a sense no other self exists. Language and behaviour are inextricably bound up with each other: I demonstrate my grasp of the meaning of a word by using it in situations to which its use is appropriate, and if cannot use a word correctly in a consistent way (by a fluke I might get it right once or twice) then I do not know what it means, for that is the **ultimate** test. As a language user, and by implication a reasonable being, I stand or fall by my public performance. It is in this sense that the public performing person is the real self because this is the only person we can know anything about, the one that is activated by force of will. And there is a second reason for favouring the identification of the self with the will: we admire people who have the courage of their convictions, and accuse those who do not of a failure to be resolute. Fine feelings are all very well, we say, but it is action that counts. If my abhorrence of apartheid is genuine, what am I doing buying South African goods? I can of course argue my case and perhaps win, but the onus is on me to square my beliefs with my overt behaviour, about which, at least, there can be no doubt.

Courage to go wherever our convictions may take us, lack of hypocrisy which might prevent us from giving a true representation of ourselves, and above all rationality to enable us to extend the field of our responsibility as widely as possible - these are the

marks of the Kantian man and his existentialist descendent, and the most striking features of that picture of human personality which Iris Murdoch deplores. In her essay "The Idea of Perfection" (contained in SoG) she argues the case for standing the existentialist way of looking at things ^{on its head}; we move from the position where private sensations are nothing more than the shadow of a public action to one in which public actions pale in significance against the stream of moral consciousness which is the necessary precondition of their ever taking shape.

At this point it might be a good idea to try to clarify the relative positions of Iris Murdoch and her adversaries by looking at the kind of question to which they have addressed themselves and found such very different answers. A fundamental one must surely be: Does goodness have to be knowable? Well, yes it does, replies the existentialist, because there is no distinction which can be made between being good and being seen to be good - this follows as we have seen from the anti-metaphysical stance of the existentialist wing. It is not that the existentialist believes that from time to time we erupt into activity which is alternated with stretches of quasi-unconsciousness, for no one could seriously hold this belief. It is, rather, a question of what matters, or counts, and here the existentialist is unequivocal: doing counts. Again this is rather austere - not for nothing do practising existentialists have to be brave. They create values through their own choices, and alone and without guidance they must do the best they can using the one tool at their disposal, rationality. In a world without God they create their own heaven or hell.

Iris Murdoch, on the other hand, would not consider the question, Does goodness have to be knowable? to be very much to the point, though I think she would

answer "no". Her concern is not with goodness understood - or misunderstood - as the incidental by-product of a certain conjunction of circumstances, but with goodness understood as a state of being which should be the aim of every individual, and which is attainable only through a gradual and deepening understanding of love and its attendant virtues. In reply to the behaviourist-existentialist argument against the possibility of identifying inner events, she would probably concede the point that we make our initial acquaintance with a concept in the public arena - that is how we learn the minimum necessary to recognise concept A as that concept and no other one. And it is also true that conceptual muddle will only be exposed and resolved in a public way. However, that is not to say that having once grasped the public character of a concept we cannot develop our understanding of that concept in a private way, and that while the results of this deepened understanding may find a public expression, they might equally well not. Whether they do or not, says Iris Murdoch, is not all that much to the point because the essentially private activity which the individual is constantly engaged in has a value which is not dependent on its eventual public unveiling in the form of action.

What Iris Murdoch is challenging is the "genetic analysis of mental concepts", which is recognizable by this kind of reasoning:

"This is really red if several people agree about the description, indeed this is what being really red means. He really decided, roughly, if people agree that he kept the rules of the concept 'decide'. To decide means to keep these rules and the agent is not the only judge. Actions are 'moving things about in the public world', and what these movements are objective observers

are actually and potentially at hand to decide."
(SoG 24)

Now, not only is this not the whole story, she argues, but in being less than the truth it is a serious distortion of it, because it leaves us with a picture of human nature which is not compatible with the exercise of moral competence as Iris Murdoch understands it.

We can now look more closely at that understanding, having seen that it is born out of a belief that the moral agent cannot live entirely in a hard, impersonal world bounded by rules of logic. For one thing, there is no place in this world for an individual's history, and it surely cannot be denied that what decides our moral actions, and what in Iris Murdoch's view makes them moral, (her "something else") - is not only the way in which the facts in that hard, impersonal world are arrayed, but the kind of people we are. And the kind of people we are is to some extent at least, a function of our individual histories.

Now once the historical individual is "let in" a number of things have to be said with a difference. The idea of "objective reality", for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to "the world described by science", but in relation to the progressing life of a person. The active "reassessing" and "redefining" which is a main characteristic of live personality, often suggests and demands a checking procedure which is a function of an individual history. Repentance may mean something different to an individual at different times in his life, and what it fully means is a part of this life and cannot be understood except in context (SoG 26). In other words, the genetic analysis of meaning does not work for value concepts because "Knowledge of a value concept is something to be understood, as it were,

in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal network " (SoG 29).

The link between virtue and knowledge is therefore a strong theme in Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy and it runs counter to the democratic existentialist view that good behaviour is easily within everybody's capability. Introduce the idea of perfection and good behaviour becomes something that is always beyond our reach while being immeasurably worth striving for. Iris Murdoch believes that the key moral concept is love, which the existentialists do not talk about, and that in a moral context, love manifests itself in a quality of attention whose linguistic face is a normative vocabulary of increasing richness and subtlety. To look with love is to perceive and acknowledge fine distinctions. Here she is very close to Simone Weil and she specifically states this in her essay "The Idea of Perfection" (SoG 34). Simone Weil's theory of attention is discussed on Page 64 but I shall mention here what I think has attracted Iris Murdoch to it, that is, the idea of pure attention as revealing things as they really are and not as we, in our weakness, would have them be. Thus morality is removed from the realm of the personal and, by implication, from the realm of corruption. In the example Iris Murdoch gives of the mother and daughter-in-law (see page 101), this respect for the truth, for that is what she claims loving attention is, proceeds by way of a more discerning use of concepts: for example, vulgarity gives way to simplicity, lack of dignity to spontaneity etc. Of course no one can guarantee the correctness of these individual acts of reappraisal, but that does not alter the fact that the subject is engaged in an effort to be just. This picture of moral activity presents a challenge to the belief in a sharp distinction between the hard impersonal world of facts, knowable by the intellect, and the hazy shadow world of the emotions

which is supposedly subservient to it. For it shows that a degree of subjectivity or inwardness is essential to any real understanding of that world of facts: there is no objectivity without subjectivity - discerning the truth about things makes heavy personal demands which could not be met by a being cast entirely in the existentialist mould. He simply would not have the resources.

Having outlined Iris Murdoch's objections to the existentialist tradition (and the Anglo-Saxon one with which it has so much in common) we note that like Elizabeth Anscombe, she finds it not simply amoral but immoral. This she makes perfectly clear when she ends her passage on the distinguishing characteristics of the Kantian man with these words: "In fact Kant's man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer " (SoG 80). The difference between Iris Murdoch's objections and those of Miss Anscombe seem to centre on the kind of person the existentialist believes the moral agent to be, while Miss Anscombe's objections are directed against a philosophical system. Of course the two things are connected: the Kantian man is devilish because he may on occasion allow the end to justify the means. As we saw, insofar as expediency is concerned, the end does provide a complete justification of the means - provided of course that they are within the law - because by definition he who wills the end wills the means. This is a logical point which does not apply in the case of moral decisions, i.e., those decisions which concern ends which can only be achieved at some human cost, whether actual or possible. Now Iris Murdoch appears to believe that we can, so to speak, be good from the inside out and here she is very close to Simone Weil on the kind of spontaneity which characterises good behaviour assuming it to be possible. This is of course consistent with

a debunking of the theory that personhood resides ultimately in the will expressed as "The agent, thin as a needle, appears in the quick flash of the choosing will " (SoG 53).

If we are to accept that the moral choices we make are far more dependent on the state of our substantial selves than the existentialist would have us believe, it is important that we should look for an answer to the question which Iris Murdoch puts thus: "Are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly " (SoG 54)!. As the answer to this question emerges it will become clear to what extent, unlike Simone Weil, she is advocating a theism without God. I think that Elizabeth Anscombe's position is more straightforward: like Iris Murdoch she is troubled by the disappearance of moral absolutes which she believes originated in divine law - and are to be found nowhere else. If we are to dispense with the absolutes we should be honest and dispense with moral principles altogether, rather than attempt to base them on the results of half-baked juggling with expected consequences. Iris Murdoch is not so uncompromising; she believes that the transcendence of the good can be salvaged by an appeal to something like our spirituality. It could be said that she is engaged in a reductionist account of Simone Weil, from whom she has taken the idea of the self and its demands as obstacles to purity, but whose theological system she implicitly rejects.

1. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 317.

PART THREE

I Moral philosophy and spirituality: "decreation"

Before examining the techniques by which Iris Murdoch believes we can purify and reorientate this selfish energy we possess, we should perhaps look more closely at the Weilian idea of "decreation", which is self-forgetfulness taken to an extreme point, and at its implications. The decreeted man is detached "from everything which is good and everything which constitutes our reason for living" (SG 85) because attachment "is a creator of illusions and whoever seeks reality must be detached" (PG 20). This detachment is hard to distinguish from indifference or impartiality and is a form of mental hygiene designed to make us open to grace. The danger of attachment is that it allows us to substitute temporal goods for eternal ones; Hilary Ottensmeyer says that we create illusions about the things around us by giving them a value which should only be accorded to the absolute good, which is God. It is, he says, a question of calling things by their true names.¹ This is right; we should not worship false gods. But the idea that we can get back to first principles emotionally as we can attempt to do intellectually seems to me suspect. We are naturally attached and suffer from not being able to form attachments. I think this is an example of Simone Weil's asceticism - certainly not a bad thing in itself (quite the reverse for certain people in certain circumstances) provided the subject is fully aware of the implications. I think what Mary Midgley has to say about asceticism is relevant here:

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There evidently are many people of Existentialist leanings around who think the ability to stand alone is an

absolutely central part of human dignity. They value individuality so highly that they want to do away with any institution that tends to entangle us with each other, to make us say 'we' rather than 'I'. Thus they regard family life as self-indulgent and would like to get rid of it. The first thing to say about this position is that the genuine form of it must be distinguished from a confidence trick often played in its name, whereby people who are frightened of human contact, and cannot deal with it, denounce it as self-indulgent and congratulate themselves on their ability to live without it. That said, however, no doubt some real neo-Stoics remain. And their position is this: they are proposing an ascetic way of life, a renunciation of things commonly wished for and taken as part of the human bargain..... There is nothing unnatural about such asceticism - nothing we need object to - provided that no lies are told about it. The cost must be admitted as a real cost, and nobody should be asked to join in without full and informed understanding of this fact.²

I do not know if Simone Weil would have agreed that there was any such price to pay, but I do think that she was proposing the kind of existentialist asceticism which Mary Midgley is talking about and I think that in Simone's case it was linked with a certain intellectual rigour which prevented her from taking anything on trust. The most obvious example of this was her attitude to her own baptism into the Catholic church: "Christ is happy that we should prefer to know the truth rather than him because before being Christ he is the truth. If we turn away from him to go towards the truth we will not go far without falling into his arms" (AD 46). Jean de la Croix Kaelin does not think that Simone Weil is right to play with the idea of a hypothetical conflict between Christ and the truth; he challenges the notion of intellectual freedom carried to this point.³ Perhaps we do deceive ourselves in thinking that the intellectual

capacities we possess can be isolated from our other human traits, and that "The spirit is not obliged to believe in the existence of anything (subjectivism.....). This is why the only organ of contact with existence is acceptance, love. This is why beauty and reality are identical. This is why joy and the feeling of reality are identical " (PG 82).

There is plenty of evidence for this subjectivism in Simone Weil's writing; firstly in her syncretism which pays no attention to Christian orthodoxy while showing a wide knowledge of comparative religion. So Moeller has remarked on her syncretism: "Religious truth is for her the synthesis of every religious truth. Christianity, being Catholic, should integrate everything in itself, even those traditions such as Manicheanism accused of heresy. All religions are good; it is impossible to class them in order of worth. They are the translation in different languages, by different people, of the Great Revelation."⁴ Secondly, we find her subjectivism in her refusal to accept baptism because, after much soulsearching, she was not able to say with certainty that she had received the order from God to receive baptism - and absolute obedience was what she wanted most. For her it was not enough to know that representatives of the Church very much wanted her to be baptised, nor was she prepared to take one step on her own initiative in a direction in which she did not feel that she was being irresistibly pushed. A third symptom of her subjectivism, or perhaps, more accurately, a cause of it, was her inability to grip on to reality, in this instance the reality of the resurrection of Christ, and hence the uniqueness of Christianity. Charles Moeller says that Simone Weil was unable to accept the appearance of God in history,⁵ hence her distaste for Judaism and loyalty to Platonic idealism. If Victor

Gollancz accuses Simone of personalising God too much it is because she was unable to personalise Christ. In this way what would seem at first sight to be liberating rationalism turned out in the case of Simone Weil to entail a kind of mental enslavement which left her at the mercy of her own, often mistaken, intuitions. This is not to say that intuition has no place, only that it should be open to modification; in this instance that need might have been met if Simone Weil had had a serious spiritual training which, as Pierre Blanchard points out, would have allowed her to value the human face of the church,⁶ as well as to see beyond it. Miklos Veto¹¹ interprets Simone as believing that intelligence is the function par excellence, and thus the best representative, of the decremented man,⁷ whom he defines as one who has renounced what is our principal demand on the universe, that is, assurance of our own permanence and the continuation of our personality.⁸

Moreover, she draws a sharp distinction between intelligence, and imagination which she understands not as the discovery or invention of things which are potentially real but the debasement of what is already real.⁹ Imagination distorts; intelligence keeps its distance and allows us to see things as they really are. So she urges us to "Try to love without imagining. Love the appearance itself without interpretation. Then what one loves is truly God" (PG 70). Here Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch are at odds, for as a novelist Iris Murdoch is very aware of the value of imagination to the artist who is trying through his work to reveal some truth about the world. I shall come back to this point about the distinction between fantasy, which is self-indulgent, and imagination, which when used intelligently is so very enriching (see page **93**). Ideally, then, the intelligence should be a spectator rather than a participant, the mark of the man who lives

not in time but beyond it. In this way Simone Weil severs the connection between thinking and doing so as to place the springs of our actions outside ourselves. Hence the emphasis on the impotence of the will and desirability of non-acting action (being irresistably pushed). Simone Weil believed that the disembodied intelligence - let us assume for the time being that we can talk meaningfully of disembodied intelligences - is purified through passivity. It can be acted upon, that is to say, the body with which it is associated (which comprises as well the psychic matter of the soul) can be acted upon and will react in conformity with certain laws concerning the behaviour of people and things. Yet the possibility of assertion is denied it. Simone Weil says that we have free will by virtue of our intelligence and that the best use we can make of that autonomy is to decide to surrender it: our existence is nothing but God's waiting for us to consent not to exist (PG 41). Something is therefore demanded of us, indeed we have to make the first move, but this move is not a kind which is typical of our normal interaction with the world. It is purely mental and above all passive - the non-acting action to which Simone Weil attached so much spiritual significance.

It was one of her most firmly-held precepts that it is God who comes to seek out man and not the other way round: "The idea of a quest by God for man is of an unfathomable depth and splendour. It is decadence to replace it by the idea of a quest for God by man" (LR 75). She believed that we corrupt in our imaginations whatever has become for us an object of desire - this is our natural tendency - so that anything we approached in the name of God would not be God at all but merely a projection of our earthbound needs and desires, a form of auto-consolation. This is of course the major pitfall of religious subjectivism, that God is trapped inside a system of needs, imagination and wish-fulfillment

which allows misconceptions to abound unchecked. We have seen how Simone Weil could not accept the church (and consequently the truth of the Christian revelation as taught by the church) as an external check on her feelings about religion. She may have thought that by depriving the self of all initiative, of the capacity for acting before it is convinced it has no choice, she was - amongst other things - preventing the kind of accidental muddled thinking and wilful self-deception to which we are certainly prone if we are not given guidance or do not acknowledge any external check on our fantasises.

The passive action required of the decremented self can perhaps best be likened to an abandonment of territory occupied by the self to make room for the action of grace: "We must give up from love of God the illusory power which he gives us to say 'I am' " (CS 31). We must be open to God and the key to this openness is attention, better understood as waiting with an element of longing, than as a kind of strained concentration. The problem with this seems to me to be that it is very difficult counsel to follow. Simone Weil is demanding more than that we should face up to a few home truths about ourselves; Miklos Vetö understands decrementation as nothing more nor less than self-knowledge¹⁰ but for this definition to fit, self-knowledge must be given a new meaning. It must be understood not as insight into the workings of our nature but as acceptance of its incidental and fleeting quality. Simone Weil was obsessed with the fragility and insecurity of human life to the point of stating that we should never think of those we love who are absent from us without bearing in mind the possibility that they may be dead. The problems raised by a division of the world into matter and spirit have already been touched on (the major one being that it is fundamentally mistaken). The question now arises of how a man who has destroyed his links

with the temporal sphere can be active in it as a force for the good. Does not indifference to one's own fate result in indifference to the fate of everyone else? Simone Weil was convinced that this is not so, and that indeed indifference to one's own fate is the key to the real world of moral perfection:

"We are in unreality, in a dream state. To give up our imaginary situation at the centre of things, not only with our minds but also in the imaginative part of our souls, is to wake up to the real, to the eternal, to see the real light, hear the real silence. A transformation takes place at the very root of our sensitivity, in the way in which we immediately receive sense impressions and psychological impressions. A transformation analogous to that which occurs when in the evening on a road at the spot where we thought we had seen a crouching man we suddenly make out a tree ... We see the same colours, we hear the same sounds, but not in the same way." (AD 148)

Simone Weil's theory of decreation is extreme, and, because it is meant to be understood literally, smacks of fanaticism. The idea of the moral worth of self-forgetfulness is certainly present in Iris Murdoch's work, but not the distaste for self which is such a feature of Simone Weil's own.

1. H. Ottensmeyer, Le thème de l'amour dans l'oeuvre de Simone Weil, 77.
2. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 328.
3. K. Kaelin, "Simone Weil en face de l'Eglise", 142.
4. P. Blanchard, Sainteté aujourd'hui, 139.
5. C. Moeller, Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme, 237.
6. P. Blanchard, Sainteté aujourd'hui, 143.
7. M. Vetö, La métaphysique religieuse de Simone Weil, 35.
8. *ibid*, 112.
9. *ibid*, 27.
10. *ibid*, 32.

II Moral philosophy and spirituality: "attention"

Once again the now familiar picture emerges of a tiny core of integrity imprisoned in a mesh of selfish fantasy. We are irreconcilably at odds with ourselves. The breakdown of trust between the two parts of our being is so profound that we must admit the hollowness of our human attempts to be good and so to speak hand over the reins to God. The problem of how the decremented (in human terms impotent) man can act in the world is solved if he can be completely identified with God, which is in the opinion of Simone Weil our supreme calling (AD 14). Choice, conflict, desire, temptation - indeed any stimuli which may cause us to examine ourselves and weigh up the relative importance of things, and challenges which make new demands on us - are thus relieved of their potentially harmful nature (and many would argue, their potentially beneficial nature), for with God acting through us we are beyond the possibility of choosing evil, in the most literal sense. Simone Weil wrote that to her, the most beautiful life possible had always seemed to be that in which all is determined either by force of circumstance, or by impulsions of such power that they are clearly not to be resisted, and where there is no room for any choice (AD 38). In such a context the ideals of personal growth and self-fulfilment seem out of place. So to use Simone Weil to illuminate the idea of moral progress is problematical, unless one bears in mind that progress in her eyes is a stripping - away of the personal preferences which might distract us from the truth that in any moral dilemma there is only one possible course of action.

This reversion of the soul to God is not a quick, once and for all business but a gradual process in which

the will and the understanding have a part to play, if only a passive one of being attentive. Attention as understood by Simone Weil is a complex attitude of mind which presupposes faith and love while rejecting at the same time any hope of future reward for present goodness - indeed any kind of attachment which causes our state of openness and vulnerability to be less than absolutely pure. Attention is voluntary, though the fruits of attention must not be thought of as something we have produced by our own efforts, but as a gift. However, it should not be a strain. Any kind of staring concentration will be selfdefeating - we only succeed in thinking about thinking about nothing:

"Most often we confuse attention with a sort of muscular effort. If we say to children: 'Now you are going to pay attention', we see them frowning, holding their breath, contracting their muscles. If ~~a~~ after two minutes we ask them what they've been paying attention to they cannot reply. They have not been paying attention to anything. They have not been paying attention. They have only been contracting their muscles." (AD 90)

As Simone Weil quite rightly says this kind of attention is sterile. Real attention is so closely linked with interest (or desire as Simone would prefer to call it) that when we are really paying attention we are not aware of it; as Miklos Vetö¹ says of intelligence, it is "quelque chose qui s'efface par le fait qu'elle s'exerce".¹ Screwing up our courage to do things can work for certain kinds of activity. Simone gives as an example manual work and this seems to me the obvious one; but at another level she believes it can be positively harmful for the road to hell is paved with good intentions (AD 91). The spirit in which we do things matters. This is a crucial point, and I think that to understand its significance we need to look again at the faculties of reason and will.

Mary Midgley reminds us of what it is easy to forget, that reason is not only a logical tool which enables us to solve highly specific problems, say in the field of mathematics, and which can, so to speak, be brought out and put away again when it has served its purpose. A broad grasp of the relative importance of things is also dependent on its right functioning, with the corollary that reason is not a faculty apart but an ingredient of the whole man. A rational man can judge the value as well as calculate the price.² In other words rationality is a faculty which hinges on to something else, and Mary Midgley believes that that something else is the intrinsic worth of human life, of which the sane man is always conscious. Here she differs from Simone Weil to whom the intelligence is the only objective trait in our personality, hence its value as a tool with which we can lever ourselves from the temporal sphere of subjectivity into union with God, the eternal. We care about ourselves and the way our lives are taking shape, and we experience this concern on behalf of others too; we know that by making a wrong choice we could do ourselves harm, that the possibility of doing violence to oneself is real. Thus understood, rationality has not got a great deal to do with intelligence: "'Reason' is not the name of a character in a drama. It is the name for organising oneself. When there is a conflict, one desire must be restrained to make way for the other. It is the process of choosing which that is rightly called reasoning."³

This view is in direct opposition to that of those modern moral philosophers who, in the interests of freedom, would isolate the personal choosing will from the impersonal thinking machine and deny any suggestion of compulsion, a view of intelligence which is as sterile as Simone Weil's own. As we have seen, she held the most beautiful life possible to be that in which

compulsion is present to such an extent that we find we have no options; choice from being everything becomes nothing. The importance of the will understood as standing alone is diminished. In complete contrast Mary Midgley defines the will as reason in action and stresses its personal character: "It is a set of highly varied mental capacities, practical and theoretical, which are separable and unevenly distributed among human beings, and are shaped in specific ways by their lives".⁴ According to Mary Midgley reason and will are in practice inseparable one from the other; and in this she is following Bishop Butler who points out the necessary connection between thought and action. Iris Murdoch agrees:

"The place of choice is certainly a different one if we think in terms of a **world** which is compulsively present to the will, and the discernment and exploration of which is a slow business. Moral change and moral achievement are slow; we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by. In a way, explicit choice seems now less important: less decisive (since much of the 'decision' lies elsewhere) and less obviously something to be 'cultivated'. If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at. This is in a way the reverse of [Stuart] Hampshire's picture, where our efforts are supposed to be directed to increasing our freedom by conceptualising as many different possibilities of action as possible: having as many goods as possible in the shop. The ideal picture, on the contrary, is rather to be represented as a kind of 'necessity'. This is something of which saints speak and which any artist will readily understand. The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded

movement but as something very much more like 'obedience!'"
(SoG 39 - 40)

Iris Murdoch has gone further than Mary Midgley by introducing an almost supernatural element - "the right thing to do in any given situation". Here she is very close to Simone Weil who says that all good is transcendental, though they have reached this conclusion by different routes. For Iris Murdoch, having the grace to do the right thing is not a spiritual state in the way it is for Simone Weil, who sees grace as coming only from God. But there is joint agreement on this much, that not only does the spirit in which we do things matter but that that spirit is an inseparable part of the doing; our acts are shaped and defined by the spirit in which they are performed. In this context the kind of unselfconscious attention which Simone Weil speaks of as being the root of a good action can be understood. She cites the example of the good Samaritan: "One person stops and pays attention. The acts which follow are only the automatic effect of this moment of attention. This attention is creative" (AD 133). Simone Weil says that the opposite of attention is scorn (AD 141), from which it follows that attention, when it is real, is necessarily kindly. We are moving away from the image of the detached observer - and the neutral stance - which is so dear to the existentialist and the behaviourist, towards a view of man as "darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational" (SoG 43) and consequently, more open to the divine grace which presupposes a faith which could not by definition be part of the make-up of an ideally rational man, though this is a point which Simone Weil failed to see. However, we should not forget the prescriptive nature of reflection, including moral reflection. Mary Midgley thinks that Bishop Butler can throw light on this problem of accountability:

"Butler's idea is that if we reflect on our own nature, if we attend to our neglected outlying motives and relate them to the center, we shall be able to judge them - because the reflective center of our personality has a natural authority, is in a position to judge ... What rules us is our own center. It is indeed a 'governor', but not an alien, colonial one. It is our own sense of how our nature works ... By reflecting, Butler says, we stumble on the moral law, because that is the law of our own nature. 'Your obligation to obey this law is, its being the law of your nature.' It is not imposed from without ... He repeatedly points out that it does not depend on any religious sanctions, because it is more fundamental than they. It is as binding on pagans and unbelievers as it is on Christians."⁴

On this point Butler and Simone Weil are in accord: Christianity does not rely for the force of its moral laws on mere convention. Yet what Butler and his interpreter Mary Midgley offer us - and which Simone Weil's model of the decremented (fragmented) self does not - is an intelligible and convincing account of that force:

"People are alarmed when Butler speaks of the "absolute authority" of conscience or reflection over other motives, because they smell political despotism ... But he means reflection itself. In a full discussion of self-deception, he makes it clear how wrong it is to distort the term conscience by using it to set up any such private oracle ... What Butler intends is quite different. He is pointing out that reflection demands action."⁵

Simone Weil believes that there is a close link between will and attention but not the obvious one of attention

being the product of will. As we have seen, Simone Weil believed this kind of attention to be thoroughly self-defeating and worthless. On the contrary, the connection is indirect for it is only when we have suspended thought, leaving the mind empty and expectant, that we can receive, in its truth, the object that is to penetrate it: "Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity will not make up for a lack of this kind of attention through which alone one can receive into oneself the being that one is looking at, 'just as he is, in all his truth'. Weil goes so far as to demand that it 'be publicly and officially recognised that religion is nothing else but a looking' a curiously strident insistence for one who holds religion to be waiting, openness, and receptivity."⁶

The sole function of the will is to maintain this attitude of having no attitude and the sole function of the intelligence is to keep man alert to the wretchedness of the created state, his own powerlessness and his complete dependence on God for salvation: "The will can only do one thing: look at the beautiful being without throwing itself upon him. The rest happens despite the will" (SG 111). It is worth noting here that it is a tenet of the Gnostic tradition that man should be aware of his situation, and that he is called to return to God. We find Simone Weil writing: "Thus every human being, without exception, including the most degraded of slaves, has a soul which comes from the world situated above the skies, that is to say from God, and which is called to return there. The sign of this origin and this vocation is the aptitude for forming general ideas - an aptitude which every human being possesses ..." (SG 106).

Although she might appear to be advocating total objectivity, Simone Weil is not really, because we cannot be expected to have objective knowledge of the inherent

falseness of the human condition. Our feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction, however acute, will not necessarily lead us to adopt the attitude of attentive desire which she is prescribing, for though it has undoubted emotional and intellectual appeal, and contains more than a little truth, it is not an attitude which is natural. We would have to strive to adopt it - Simone never suggests otherwise; but, for this striving to be made possible, we would have to know more than we are meant to know. Maurice Friedman detects this kind of internal contradiction in Simone Weil's own attitude of waiting:

" There is something paradoxical indeed in the humility that leads Weil to a complete denial of self in favour of objectivity and at the same time makes possible the most dogmatic and intolerant pronouncements on every subject. She was herself, like the saint she calls for, a genius, and she was anything but humble concerning her own intellectual accomplishments. She wished to destroy her 'I' and attain the plane of truth and pure objectivity. But there is another 'I' which she identified with this plane, and so far from denying it, she set it no practical limits. She found her 'I' by denying it, found it, in fact, in a much more absolute way than would be possible to one who admitted that his own subjectivity entered into his relation to the truth that he possessed."⁷

Simone believes that if we can still the selfish fantasy machine of our own minds, and in the ensuing calm, quiet emptiness let our existence be whittled down until it is nothing but a waiting on God - then, and only then, can God respond by filling the space that we have made within ourselves, the void that we have suffered. As I have said this is likely to be a gradual process, but the point is that our questing must precede God's

answer. This is the operation of grace, which enters the soul in the form of compulsion: "God rewards the soul that thinks of him with attention and love and he rewards it by exercising over it a constraint which is rigorously, mathematically proportional to this attention and love" (AD 13). As our spirit is emptied of self-interest so the objective reality of what we encounter in the outside world is increased.

Simone Weil failed to see the distinction between pure intelligence, and reason understood as something much closer to sanity. Not that she failed to appreciate the limitations of the intelligence - she would have been the first to point out that there is a world of difference between intellectual and loving recognition of the existence of others. What Simone is saying is that this intellectual recognition is all that we as human beings are capable of, and that our intelligence does not extend beyond it, into the field of values which is such an important concern of reason when considered as a faculty, that is as a function which derives its force and purposefulness from being part of a human whole. Intelligence as understood by Simone Weil is an impersonal tool; it is so by definition, for were it to reflect individual experience (and thus inevitably human aspiration), it would cease to be intelligence and become imagination. Thus all recognition of truths about values as opposed to truths about facts (as we shall see this is in itself a suspect distinction) is to be accredited to God's acting through us, because the "human intelligence, by its natural limitations, is incapable of knowing anything beyond the material actualities of the physical world in which it lives",⁸ a view which Simone Weil shares with those who seek to "neutralise" moral philosophy. This, says Frénaud, is where she really goes wrong: "Only God present in us can really think of the wretched as human beings, look at them truly, other than in the way that one looks

at objects, listen truly to their voices as one listens to speech " (AD 137).

The trouble is that Simone Weil really means what she says, which is much more than that it is beautiful and good, and what we should be aiming at, not just to look but to look lovingly. She will insist that this demands a renunciation, a diminution of self like an echo of the diminution of himself which God supposedly made in the act of creation. Inevitably grace comes to be understood as a separate super-human faculty solely responsible for acts of divine charity. But as Hilary Ottensmeyer says, grace is not a new faculty but a new life, and divine charity is not a virtue apart but a natural one raised to a new level.⁹

1. M. Vetö, La métaphysique religieuse de Simone Weil, 28.
2. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 211-13.
3. *ibid*, 258.
4. *ibid*, 212.
5. *ibid*, 267-68.
6. M. Friedman, To Deny our Nothingness, 138.
7. *ibid*, 138.
8. G. Frénaud, "Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology", 367.
9. H. Ottensmeyer, Le thème de l'amour dans l'oeuvre de Simone Weil, 83.

III Moral philosophy and spontaneity: the moral agent and the supernatural

There is something a little suspect in Simone Weil's understanding of attention as originally divorced from what it is attention to, as suspended thought (as we have seen Simone identifies all thought which is not on the level of logical analysis with self-interest) which is transformed into waiting by the knowledge that the "nothingness of God in this world" is the bridge to his presence in another world. My objection is twofold: I do not think that this kind of unfocussed attention is practically possible for us, nor is it an ideal at which we should be aiming. It is not difficult to trace the source of its attractiveness to Simone Weil to her belief that man is essentially base, that with the best will in the world man by his own unaided efforts can do nothing to save himself. Any good in man is directly attributable to God: "All good which is absolutely pure is completely independent of the will. Good is transcendent. God is the good " PG59.

It is worth noting that implied by this is the existentialist identification of the self with the will; but where the existentialist finds personal autonomy Simone can only see slavery. Man can only receive the truth: "We cannot take a single step towards him. One doesn't walk vertically. We can only look at him. There is no need to search for him; all that is required of us is that we look in another direction. It is up to him to look for us " (AD215). By implication, all the rest is vanity.

In the state of waiting as pictured by Simone Weil we are incomplete: by the process of decreation the temporal,

corrupt part of us is perishing and what is left is neither good nor bad but simply neutral potential which can only be realised by God. We are blank paper, and the grace of God lies in this, that what will be written will be the truth. Now surely it is a mistake to believe (leaving aside the question of whether we might ever have been, at an earlier stage of our development, blank paper) that any conscious adult with a share of the self-knowledge which, to a greater or lesser extent, we all **possess**, could work this kind of trick on himself. For to achieve the objectivity to which Simone Weil believes we should aspire we must have enough knowledge of our own psychology to know where to hide from our nature. Simone believes that we can take refuge in passive receptiveness, but that attitude, like any other we should care to adopt, represents a personal decision. I am not attacking the idea of the directing of a loving regard on the world making certain actions, in a sense, inevitable, while others become impossible - far from it. But it seems to me unnecessary and disingenuous to maintain that we have no control over what is going on. Grace is mysterious but not completely so, for as Hilary Ottensmeyer says, we can go half way to meet it: the efforts of the soul count for a lot in God's distribution of supernatural grace.²

Georges Frénaud reminds us that "the love of God is always an act of our souls - or rather, of our will reinforced by divine grace and the infused virtue of charity"³. Loving attention to what surrounds us is not to be achieved by coupling divine charity on to human indifference: firstly, because such a state of indifference can have no genuine correlate in experience and, secondly, because grace is in part at least a response to what we do. Not only does the spiritⁱⁿ which we do things matter - what matters too is that I should be performing a certain act rather than someone else. That is not to say that actions taken by themselves

cannot be seen as important, but that this way of looking at things being possible and often very practical should not obscure the fact that public acts have a private history. What breaks the surface and becomes action may be considered more or less significant than what remains below it, depending on the criteria in use, but it is continuous with it. And the reverse is of course true: thought and action are interwoven, one firing the other. It is this need for continuity which Simone Weil fails to account for in her theory of attention. It does not allow us to be ourselves.

Simone Weil was a reductionist of a kind. She believed that part of the soul is *élite*: "The mysteries of the faith are not an object for the intelligence taken as a faculty whose function is to affirm or deny. They do not rank as truths but above truth. The only part of the human soul which is capable of a real contact with them is the faculty of supernatural love, and consequently it is only the faculty of supernatural love which is capable of adhering to them" (LR60). It is perhaps significant, too, that Simone Weil should speak of God and the supernatural as "hidden and without form in the universe. It is good that they should be hidden and nameless in the soul. Otherwise there is a risk that what we have under the name of God is something imaginary (those who fed and clothed Christ did not know that it was Christ)... Christianity (Catholics and Protestants) talks too much about sacred things" (PG73). We have an essence, and an elusive one at that; that it should always be just beyond our grasp is a condition of its authenticity. We corrupt everything we touch with our rapacious imaginations (except beauty). Thus the only straight and true line that can be drawn between the faculty of supernatural love, hidden in some deep recess of our being, and an overt action is that representing obedience, because only an act of obedience - performed in a world "which

is compulsively present to the will" - can be innocent of self interest: "Obedience is the only pure motive, the only one which does not to any extent contain a recompense for the action, and which leaves the father who is hidden to deal with the recompense." (CII18).

We can identify here another point of what Iris Murdoch has found attractive in Simone Weil's writing; for Iris Murdoch says, and she is surely right, that "Will continually influences belief, for better or worse, and is ideally able to influence it through a sustained attention to reality." She adds:

"This is what Simone Weil means when she says that 'will is obedience not resolution'. As moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection. Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision." (SoG40)

I agree with this, but I think that Mary Midgley has gone much further than either Simone Weil or Iris Murdoch towards rounding out the character of this moral agent and making him less two-dimensional; for as she says "he cannot jump off his feet".⁴ Iris Murdoch points out that we desire in accordance with what we see; Bernard Williams says much the same thing in his argument against utilitarianism when he draws attention to the rapport between what we want and what we think we can get, the first being a function of the second. Mary Midgley goes further - "an individual depends for his satisfaction on the repertory of tastes native to his species",⁵ and in doing so opens out immeasurably the "good behaviour" debate. In her introduction to Beast and Man she speaks

of the "tiny arid garden" cultivated under the name of British Moral Philosophy; by her writing she shows that moral philosophy does not have to be dry and boring.

Morality involves the whole man; necessarily, because there is no other kind of man, though we may be tricked because of our reasoning powers into thinking there is, as we may be tricked into other misconceptions:

"What is special about people is their power of understanding what is going on, and using that understanding to regulate it. Imagination and conceptual thought intensify all the conflicts by multiplying the options, by letting us form all manner of incompatible schemes and allowing us to know what we are missing, and also by greatly increasing our powers of self-deception. As against that, they can give us self-knowledge, which is our strongest card in the attempt to sort conflicts out."⁶

Of course this does not square with the ideal held up by Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil that we should arrive at that purified state of being which in itself dictates our moral choices. But this saintly spontaneity may not always be as immediate and pure as we would like to think. Mary Midgley's advice that we should know ourselves seems our best guard against the spiritual pretentiousness and self - deception that Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil seem to be inviting.

Simone Weil says that obedience is the fruit of attention by way of constraint exercised on us by God, and the only pure motive. If this image is attractive it is at least partly because it takes the chance out of morality by confirming its absolute nature. The burden of responsibility is thus lifted from our shoulders, and the way to perfection opened. But if the essential man is a myth we need to ask ourselves if there is any

room left still for the idea of moral perfectibility: for "It is perfect liberty which we should force ourselves to picture clearly, in the hope of attaining a liberty less imperfect than our present condition. For the better is only conceivable in relation to the perfect. We can only direct ourselves towards an ideal. The ideal is just as unrealisable as a dream but unlike a dream it has a rapport with reality " (OL85).

When Simone Weil says that we can only direct ourselves towards an ideal, she is not making an empirical observation about human behaviour. She is making a judgement about value - we should always aim at an ideal, indeed it is only the belief in perfection which throws any light on the path of moral progress. And I think there is the implication that though there are an infinite number of ways in which to be better, there is only one way of being perfect and only one perfect good:

"The certainty that any idea which is incompatible with motives which are really pure is itself tainted with error is the first article of faith. Faith is above all the certainty that good is one. It is believing that there are several goods, distinct and mutually independent, such as truth, beauty, morality, which constitutes the sin of polytheism, not letting the imagination play with Apollo and Diana." (AD214)

All this tends to undermine the value of human individuality for its own sake, rather than as potential to be realised through the attainment of some rather mysterious goal. Personality is thus a means not an end: "Judgement is nothing more than the expression of what each person really is. Bad actions are only important because of the scars they leave on the soul..." (SG85). Again it is as if some sort of sifting process were being carried out to separate the essential from

the incidental elements of existence, or at least to isolate that part of us that exists by right in a world beyond this apparent one, and to which it is called to return. There is much evidence in Simone Weil's writing of the idealism which subordinates matter to spirit, and it would be fair to say that she identifies the first with evil and the second with good: "Good is essentially different from evil. Evil is multiple and fragmentary, good is one; evil is apparent, good is mysterious; evil consists of actions, good of non-action or of non-acting action..." (CI257). By substituting "spirit" and "matter" for "good" and "evil" we do not pervert the sense. Moral perfection is therefore an impossibility for the created man; necessarily, for the "possible is the territory of the imagination and consequently of degradation" (PG228). Decreation and passivity alone provide the means of achieving supernatural love of our fellow men, for in the state of perfection it is as impossible for us not to help the person in need as it is for a stone not to obey the laws of gravity. "Activity" is thus banished from the realm of the supernatural as well as individuality, diversity, taste, style and it would seem, merit. Simone Weil offers us a ray of hope lest we feel that such a sacrifice is beyond us: "It is vital that we should know that love is an orientation and not a state of the soul " (AD120). The ideal is unrealisable but we can only know God in relation to it.

It seems that in the writing of Simone Weil the idea of perfection is inextricably mixed up with a theology which celebrates death - death of the self through suffering which is acknowledged and borne without false consolation, death on the Cross made all the more noble by there being no hope of resurrection. The end of all moral striving, the attainment of moral perfection, is in union with God through sharing absolutely in his

impotence and hopelessness. Simone Weil's formulation of the problem of suffering appears to have a kind of honesty in that she does nothing to defend herself from the full horror of human affliction: she says that beauty is contemplating what cannot be contemplated (other people's affliction) without fleeing (CS16). She not only does not flee from affliction but seems positively to embrace it, or at least to contemplate it with a fixedness which could in itself be considered unnatural. Although her experience of affliction may have been genuine the conclusion she draws from it is based on falsehood: important distinctions are blurred including that between good and evil. As Susan Taubes says: "her mystical atheism offers a religion to the afflicted only at the price of blindfolding one's self to the fact of those who profit from their affliction and consequently serving their ends."⁷

Iris Murdoch finds Simone Weil inspiring, which, because of the force of her writing and her evident sincerity, she certainly is. But she uses her very selectively. She approves of her theory of attention in so far as it expresses "the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality"^(S. 634). Like Simone Weil she believes that this is what moral activity should ideally be, and that nothing more is required of us than that we should perfect this technique - far from easy. But there the resemblance between the two ends, with Iris Murdoch's version of the argument foundering on the chimerical quality of her conception of the Good, while Simone Weil commits the double error of thinking that our personalities can be put aside as if they did not belong to us in the fullest sense, and that this would allow us better to pay attention. Iris Murdoch does not fall into this trap; she is pessimistic about human nature but not to the point where she despairs of it altogether. More importantly, she believes that being good is a form of self - expression (see page 111).

1. S. Taubes, "The Absent God", 107.
2. H. Ottensmeyer, Le thème de l'amour dans l'oeuvre de Simone Weil, 83.
3. G. Frénaud, "Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology", 367.
4. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 282.
5. *ibid*, 282.
6. *ibid*, 282.
7. S. Taubes, "The Absent God", 118.

PART FOUR

I Human and transcendent value

Simone Weil believes that we each have our own moral level: "We should only perform those acts of goodness which we cannot stop ourselves from doing, those which we cannot not do; but we should all the time be increasing by means of well-directed attention the number of acts we cannot not do " (PG57). "We should not take one step, even in the direction of good, further than we are irresistibly pushed by God... But we should be ready to let him push us anywhere, right to the limit (the cross...) " (PG58).

Thus understood goodness is like blinking - a reflex action. It ought to be beyond our control; this is its guarantee of purity. Nothing could be further from Mary Midgley's characterisation of moral activity as resolving conflicts through the exercise of conscience (conscience being understood as "the man himself in his capacity as decider")¹ in which control is of the essence; each act we perform is stamped with the mark of our personality. Though public, our acts belong to us in the sense that they are an expression of ourselves: "How like him to do that", we often say. Consistency, especially when displayed in the way we treat people of differing status and react in very varying circumstances, is more often the mark of a good man than a bad man. Having a well-integrated personality is being the same all the way through; it implies knowledge of self (though this knowledge need not be in the forefront of our minds), a well defined set of priorities and a proper sense of personal worth.

Well-integrated people do not wait to be irresistibly pushed. Their own reflexions on moral problems should

provide a sufficient spur to action. Simone Weil on the other hand would depersonalise good completely - in the interest of what Susan Taubes calls her obsession with purity. But in so doing I believe she demonstrates not only a streak of perversity but also a blunted appreciation of the fact that if human life matters at all, it matters first and foremost for its own sake. It is an end in itself and the crucial nature of moral decisions derives exclusively from this. Morality is not the icing on the cake but, quite literally, a matter of life and death. By her theory of passive action Simone Weil sets herself at a remove from the world: the resulting emptiness she believes is an opening for the supernatural action of grace: "Not to use all the power which one has in one's possession is to endure emptiness. This is contrary to all the laws of nature; it can be achieved only by grace." The personality abhors a vacuum, says Simone Weil - this is why we are constitutionally unable to know ourselves as we really are. Blows to our pride, which we should be disciplined and humble enough to admit as simply revealing our true level, are parried by fantasy rushing in to fill the void: "...anything which diminishes or destroys our social prestige, our right to consideration, seems to alter or destroy our very essence, such is the extent to which we replace substance with illusion " (PCAD109). While this mechanism of self-compensation operates there can be no room for grace, and any apparently charitable act which we perform when untouched by grace will necessarily be tainted by impure motives such as the desire for gratitude, or social approbation, or the need to boost our own egos - or very likely all of these. Simone Weil was very conscious of the politics of power and domination: she believed that we naturally hate the afflicted and tend to turn on them as hens turn on one of their number who is injured, though Victor Gollancz, more of an optimist about human nature, challenged not only this but her whole theory of gravity.

Her argument was that natural human charity necessarily carried with it a degree of humiliation for its object. Thus she remarks that "It is not surprising that a man who has some bread should give a piece of it to someone who is starving. What is surprising is that he should be able to do this in a way different from that in which one buys an object. Charity when it is not supernatural is similar to the making of a purchase. The afflicted person is bought " (AD133).

Simone Weil believed that the only way one is able to respond to the afflicted, not as objects but as real people, is to invest them with one's own selfhood at the cost of one's own destruction - and in so doing imitate God's act of creation and redemption. Instead of affirming our own existence - and righteousness - through an act of charity, we should be sacrificing those very things through an act of renunciation, that is, reducing ourselves to a state of voluntary impotence as God has done before us. But as Susan Taubes says: "The alternative to domination is not impotence but the elimination of domination. Impotence is only one side of the power relation and presupposes the relation of man's domination over man."² The surrender of power by an individual merely places that power in somebody else's possession; it is an act of self-affirmation disguised under another name, whereas supernatural charity is an act of self-denial: "The person who does good in Christ's name when in the presence of someone in distress feels no distance between that person and himself; he transfers all his being into the other person; from that point the act of giving food is as instinctive and immediate as the act of eating when we ourselves are hungry " (PCAD117).

Is this kind of spontaneity the mark of a good action? In order to answer such a question we should try to isolate Simone Weil's moral psychology from its sometimes

rather bizarre theological context; I think this is what Iris Murdoch has done with the idea of attention for which she acknowledges her debt to Simone Weil. Iris Murdoch is in sympathy with Simone Weil's thought when understood in its "soft", as opposed to its intended, sense. Her conclusion that the only genuine way to be good is to be good "for nothing" is not so very far from Simone's experience of renunciation and emptiness. Like Simone she glimpses a reality beyond that which is immediately present to the senses:

"If a scientifically-minded empiricism is not to swallow up the study of ethics completely, philosophers must try to invent a terminology which shows how our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range. It seems to me that the platonic metaphor of the idea of the Good provides a suitable picture here. With this picture must of course be joined a realistic conception of natural psychology (about which almost all philosophers seem to me to have been too optimistic) and also an acceptance of the utter lack of finality in human life. The good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. 'All is vanity' is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing' in the midst of a scene where every 'natural' thing, including one's own mind, is subject to chance, that is, to necessity. That 'for nothing' is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable

blankness of the idea of Good itself."

(SoG71)

Iris Murdoch rightly dismisses utilitarian theories of ethics as crude - when is the payoff to come and can the end always justify the means? She wants to banish ends from discussions of morality. Like Simone Weil she rejects any suggestion of compensation, as prejudicial to the accomplishment of a right action. Thus such actions become inspired leaps in the dark, though not from the dark; Iris Murdoch believes in a substantial soul whose constant patient ground-work of loving attention to reality should ideally have made the action taken inevitable. It is the absence of security, in the form of knowledge that what we are doing will be personally rewarding, that guarantees the reality of our love. Both Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch think that unselfish acts are personally rewarding in that they are openings for grace, but this is not a reward - it works on our vision and not on our good conceit of ourselves. This is a rather inspiring view of morals, I think because it allows one to sacrifice oneself for an ideal - the good.

Where do we look for the good? We must remember that Simone Weil visualised a point at which all goods in their highest form converge; this point is the person of God. To this extent Elizabeth Anscombe and she are in agreement, and together they challenge Iris Murdoch's view that good can be at once transcendent and impersonal. The view that the good is one she believes to be necessarily theistic, for were there no God there would be no justification for not maintaining the distinction between the virtues: "To know the divinity only as power and not as good is idolatry, and if this is the state of things it matters little whether there is one or several. It is only because Good is one that we should recognise one God " (PCAD48). (She attacks the

God of Israel as a God of power, a projection of the social ambition of a certain race of people.) The good is like a seamless web of reality displaying "the unity and interdependence of the moral world";³ indeed, the moral world and reality are one and the same. It is modern science that is responsible for the fallacy that truth is neutral. Richard Rees argues that it cannot be so:

"...the spirit of truth is the energy of truth, it is truth as an active force. And this active force is pure love. It is therefore impossible that a science which claims to be beyond good and evil and to pursue truth for truth's sake and fact for fact's sake should be inspired by the spirit of truth. For it to be so inspired, the scientist would need to have a conception of the object of his studies which contained something he could love, that is to say, some aspect of the good. But in facts, in force, in matter, when considered in isolation, in themselves, without reference to anything else, there is nothing that a human mind can love."⁴

The concepts of value and love, and the supremacy of the latter, cannot be contained by science, so the argument goes, but bear witness to the existence of another world, the reality of which is only knowable through love. This is the world of things as they really are, of which the world of things as they seem is a distorted image. We do not create this world of reality out of our own love. It is not "some imaginary concoction out of our idea of our own character - but...something so external and so remote that we can only now and then

get a distant hint of it".⁵ It is knowledge which must be striven for. There is much support for this philosophical view in Simone Weil's work:

"Love of the truth is an improper expression. The truth is not an object of love. It is not an object. What we love is something which exists, which we believe and which can consequently be an occasion for truth or error. A truth is always the truth of something. The truth is the glow of reality. The object of love is not truth but reality. To desire the truth is to desire direct contact with reality. To desire direct contact with something real is to love it. We only want to know the truth so that we can love truly. We want to know the truth about what we love. Instead of talking about love of the truth we would do better to talk about a spirit of truth in love."(E215)

Simone believed that this love is supernatural and that we can only receive it, that our sole obligation is to hold ourselves in an attitude of receptivity. "We must detach our desire from everything which is good and wait. Experience proves that this wait is rewarded. It is thus that we touch the absolute good" (PG18). What we have immediate knowledge of is not the real world but a distorted version of that world; both Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch cast the self in the role of determined egotist, and see it as the main, indeed the only, obstacle to realism: "The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is outside

one" (50659) Simone's view was more extreme; she did not believe this kind of escapism to be merely a common human failing, but the very mark of created man, his essential characteristic.

1. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 267.
2. S. Taubes, "The Absent God", 119.
3. I. Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 70.
4. R. Rees, Simone Weil : A Sketch for a Portrait, 118.
5. I. Murdoch, The Bell, 131.

II Spirituality and value

The distinction between imagination and fantasy is important here. Iris Murdoch believes fantasy is wholly bad because it is always egotistical and has no regard for truth. On the other hand imagination, being the faculty of sympathy, the ability to put ourselves in other peoples shoes, is good. Good literature is imaginative, bad literature - and I think Iris Murdoch (who is particularly critical of the medium) would add, many television programmes - are fantastic; good literature deals with what is external and independent, bad literature with projections of the self disguised as objective reality. In her judgement of fantasy, where, incidentally, she follows Simone Weil and may have been influenced by her, I think Iris Murdoch is too harsh, and over simple: the distinction between imagination and fantasy is by no means complete and it may even be true that those people with the most active fantasy lives are also those with the readiest sympathy for the plight of others. It would be very difficult to demonstrate satisfactorily any such thing, but it is surely true that highly imaginative people will be prone to fantasising, at least through some period of their lives. I do not think fantasy can be judged good or bad in itself, but only in relation to the part it plays in life. Walter Mitty and Billy Liar are not merely comic and tragic but highly grotesque, and to suggest that sane people, i.e. the great majority of us, are compulsive fantasisers who manage to keep the habit secret for the sake of respectability, and would have retreated long ago into a dream world if it were not for the fact that we keep barking our shins on hard objects thrown up by chance and necessity, is equally absurd. Children are positively encouraged to be imaginative and to fantasise, and in much of the best children's literature (by 'best' I mean most

enjoyable) the distinguishing line between the imaginative and the fantastic is hard to draw. And the eight-year-old devouring school stories of absolutely no literary merit may ten years later ^{be} reading Henry James with the same enthusiasm, not in spite of but because of that early flirtation with the rubbishy. All writers of fiction are after all in the same business, and to call Jane Austen sublime and Barbara Cartland ridiculous is to miss the point that the enjoyment of reading, or going to the cinema or watching television, lies not in the opportunity to escape horrid reality - not that easily escaped - but in the satisfaction of the urge to hear about other people and other worlds. We do not love stories about other people only because we want to forget our own. Of course there is rubbish and rubbish: libertarian arguments which defend pornographic video films on the grounds that what we do within our own four walls concerns no one but ourselves are, quite simply, totally incorrect. A's twisted pleasure can only be obtained at B's expense, and victims have rights too.

It is however true that Jane Austen and Barbara Cartland make different demands on their readers. Our response to literature is largely one of recognition - "oft thought but ne'er so well expressed" - and there is something very pleasant about the familiar, probably because of its power to assure us that the privacy of our thoughts is physical rather than logical, and that our personal experience is held in the common currency of human experience. Thus our appreciation of literature is a function of the way our minds have been furnished, and what strikes a chord with some will be lost on others. Good literature does more than tell us what we already know, it presents this knowledge in a particularly striking way so as to deepen our understanding of concepts over which we already have some hold. Iris Murdoch writes:

"Art is a special discerning exercise of intelligence in relation to the real; and although aesthetic form has essential elements of trickery and magic, yet form in art, as form in philosophy, is designed to communicate and reveal. In the shock of joy in response to good art, an essential ingredient is a sense of the revelation of reality, of the really real...the world as we were never able so clearly to see it before."¹

So the appreciation of good literature can make us more adequate moral agents by helping to develop the inner resources on which good moral judgement depends. As Josef Pieper expresses it, "the greater the power of establishing relations the greater the degree of inwardness... The more embracing the power with which to relate oneself to objective being, the more deeply that power needs to be anchored in the inner self of the subject so as to counter-balance the step it takes outside."²

Enjoying good books and paintings increases the degree of inwardness, or to put it more philosophically, substantiality of the self. But "good" is the operative word here, and art is only as good as it is true: as Iris Murdoch points out, "Most derogatory critical terms impute some kind of falsehood"³ - for example "fake", "self-indulgent", "pretentious", "sentimental", "meretricious" etc. and fantasy may be all of these but it is certainly self-indulgent. The value of art lies in its perception of the world as it really is, not as we would like it to be. She shares Plato's suspicion of art which is merely a projection of our

wishes, "where the veiled something which is sought and found is no more than a shadow out of the private store-room of the personal subconscious."⁴

Iris Murdoch's chief demand of art and moral philosophy is the same; that they should offer a convincing picture of the human personality. This she believes the modern "crystalline" novel fails to do because in stripping away the social and moral packaging of man which so preoccupied the great nineteenth century novelists she much admires, twentieth century writers of fiction have misrepresented him and told a lie about life. Dorothy Emmet, arguing against a completely autonomous ethical system, makes this same point that we are best to be understood as having not only a location in time and space, but as extended and contiguous beings: "Facts can be relevant because they are seen in relation to people's purposes, needs, interests, happiness, ideals. Ethics may find its place in this value-laden context of human interests and purposes, especially as these are pursued in social relationships with other people."⁵ And she points out that we "are too much members one of another to be able to detect just where other people's influence ends and our own efforts begin."⁶ Like Mary Midgley, Dorothy Emmet appreciates the importance of human drives, whereas Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch picture personality as essentially contemplative, and so fail to make sufficient allowance for the dynamism which is a strong feature of mental health. In her own writing Iris Murdoch tries to show how great is the part of the contingent in our lives and how superficial our understanding of our own and other people's motives. I should think it is her sense of the mystery of existence which attracts her to the Christian mythology "as a mode of understanding", but she cannot believe in an omnipotent God; for her "The image of a morally perfect but not all-powerful Goodness seems...better to express some ultimate (inexpressible) truth about our condition".⁷

Simone Weil might well have agreed with her had Iris Murdoch been prepared to identify this Goodness with God, for Simone Weil's theodicy demands that God, through the act of creation, give up his omnipotence, though not his absolute goodness.

1. I. Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, 78.
2. J. Pieper, Leisure the Basis of Culture, 94.
3. I. Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, 83.
4. ibid, 47.
5. D. Emmet, Rules, Roles and Relations, 73.
6. ibid, 73.
7. The Times, April 25, 1983.

III Values and moral progress

Iris Murdoch maintains that the contemplation of beauty does us good by clearing our minds of selfish care, and that with our consciousness thus purified we are better placed, when the moment of choice comes, to choose the good. Indeed, she is almost providing us with a definition of the good - that to which the "unselfed" being is attracted: "The defeat of illusion requires moral effort. The instructed and morally purified mind sees reality clearly and indeed (in an important sense) provides us with the concept".¹ One is inclined to think: If only it were that simple, if only I could reach a state of being which guaranteed the goodness of my actions. And it does seem very likely that saintliness is something like this, but surely the need for guidelines remains an urgent one for ordinary mortals, and I think it less vague and more helpful in some contexts to talk about impartiality rather than unselfishness. So Dorothy Emmet says, "... we must be able to pass judgement on our own conduct as we would on that of another person and vice versa".² This does not mean to say that our detachment requires that we be desensitised, for "Sympathy can ... go along with the capacity to put oneself imaginatively into the role of the impartial spectator. It means not the same as approval, but the capacity to feel passions and motives while at the same time looking at them with the detachment proper to this new role."³ Dorothy Emmet makes these recommendations in the context of a discussion on the theory of an Ideal Observer, whom she says "might judge better if he were sympathetic, angry, or even excited, since these emotions might arouse and sustain his concern. But nevertheless, I think we should hold that he should have 'freedom of spirit' in being able to detach these emotions from his personal preferences and interests".⁴

This detachment should further the cause of consistency in our moral judgements. Of course we can be consistent and mistaken, nor is it any excuse for our own poor conduct that we would accept such behaviour in other people. To the formal criterion of consistency Dorothy Emmet adds the non-formal factor of relevance. If the universalizability principle is to be properly applied we must be able to defend the relevance of reasons given for making a distinction between one case and another, for the purpose of treating the two cases differently. Thus defined, universalizability, though clearly not a sufficient condition of just action, provides necessary stiffening to the ideal held up by Iris Murdoch of instinctive goodness. Appealing though this ideal is, the need lingers on for some checking procedure which allows us to frame such questions as, "How do I know that I have done right?" Iris Murdoch stresses the importance of aiming at goodness rather than right action - pointing out that to copy a right action is not always enough, that the possibility of letting oneself down is always there. Invoking the Ideal Observer seems an obvious move to make when trying to account for the distorting effect that personal involvement may have on the way we view a situation. As Dorothy Emmet points, "... an Ideal Observer who knew all the facts and the consequences of all possible alternatives and was completely impartial could only be God".⁵ And it is hard when discussing morality to forget that the eye of God may be upon us, and that moral decisions are the kind of decisions on which it is important that there should be a measure of consensus, i.e. "what God thinks". Dorothy Emmet quotes Firth as saying that the Ideal Observer need not exist, the only requirement being that we should be able to say how such a one would have reacted.⁶

If this consensus is to be achieved we must be able to give reasons for our moral views and actions; and



we should want to convert other people to our point of view. Moral relativism, understood as the belief that all moral stances, being context dependent, are immune from the criticism which could only be fuelled by measurement against standards deemed absolute, is not compatible with the truth that some moral judgements are better than others. And insofar as Iris Murdoch is saying that moral judgement is an area in which we can make progress she is surely correct. Our moral judgement like all skills can be improved with practice, especially through being used in difficult situations which require us to expand our set of moral concepts. However, no degree of selflessness will guarantee that when the moment of choice comes our instinctive reaction (and Iris Murdoch believes that moral decisions are ideally immediate) will embody a moral judgement which could not be improved upon by reference to any publicly identifiable criteria such as the principle of universalizability or disinterestedness in the formal guise of the Ideal Observer.

At this point it might be helpful to quote the example taken from The Sovereignty of Good to which I referred earlier (**see page 52**):

" A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a goodhearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement ... M feels that her son has married beneath him ... However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrowminded. I may be snobbish. I am

certainly jealous. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D's behaviour but in M's mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on." (SoG 17)

Iris Murdoch's idea is that when M looks at D with love, she sees her as she really is, where before she had only seen a false image of D. This idea of self as a barrier obscuring reality is present throughout Simone Weil's work, as when she asks that the "veil of unreality be drawn back so that we may see what is thus given to us" (PG 30). So far so good - we can all understand what M is doing and approve of it. Yet while Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil stress the "selfless" side of M's activity - the focussing of "purified" attention on D - there is another way of looking at the situation. M is putting her own house in order and she is able to do this because she knows what a well-ordered human personality is like and where she is falling short. This self-knowledge is an essential prerequisite of her being able, and willing, to sort out her attitude to D. Mary Midgley's idea (and in this she admits to following Bishop Butler) is that our moral sense is tuned to the balance of our own nature. She has argued most effectively that we do have innate tendencies, and that it is characteristic of these tendencies that each one should have what Bishop Butler calls its "natural stint and bound"; that is to say, there is a balance. If we accept this it becomes obvious that some sort of standard of behaviour is emerging which is closely related to this natural balance:

" Thus the notion of every passion having its stint and bound, which is well borne out by the behaviour of other species, makes sense of the paradox of nature and allows us a clear understanding of evil. What is evil must in a way be part of our nature, since what stands right outside it could be no temptation to us, would even be beyond our power. It has to be something possible for us, something for which we are equipped and to which we are drawn - but outrageous, damaging to the proper arrangement of the whole. If it prevails, it does so at a monstrous price, destroying what is more central. And perhaps the deliberate policy that it should prevail is what we mean by evil itself."

It follows that what is good must also be part of our nature since were it alien to that nature it would hold no attraction for us. It follows too that goodness is possible for us, indeed possible because we have a nature, and not in spite of that nature, as Simone Weil would have us believe. On the level of experience this rings true; it is difficult to reconcile goodness and inadequacy when they are present in the same person. Simone Weil's concern for the suffering was real and admirable but its value is somehow compromised, I feel, by evidence of the self-destructive cycle of deep unease and sacrifice in which she was caught up. Virtue should make us fulfilled, not set us at odds with ourselves. In such a context personal growth and self-fulfilment are not to be seen as peripheral aims, but as at the very heart of the matter.

1. I. Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, 47.
2. D. Emmet, Rules, Roles and Relations, 75.
3. *ibid*, 76.
4. *ibid*, 76.
5. *ibid*, 53.
6. *ibid*, 122.
7. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 185.

IV Moral progress and the unattainable

It is part of the mystique of the Good as understood by Iris Murdoch that we should never have a ladder quite long enough to reach it:

"Good is the focus of attention when an intent to be virtuous co-exists (as perhaps it almost always does) with some unclarity of vision. Here, as I have said earlier, beauty appears as the visible and accessible aspect of the Good. The Good itself is not visible ... While it seems proper to represent the Good as a centre or focus of attention, yet it cannot quite be thought of as a 'visible' one in that it cannot be experienced or represented or defined." (SoG 70)

The same thought is in Simone Weil's mind when she writes that "A good action is accomplished while keeping the attention and intention totally orientated towards the good, pure and impossible, without disguising with any lie the attraction or the impossibility of pure good" (PG 129). The good is external, elusive, inspirational and above all mysterious, for its origin is not clear to us, only its absolute authority. If we are unselfish and look out at the world with an open, loving regard we will be rewarded with knowledge of reality; the alternative is that we remain in the prison of the self, in a very real and terrifying sense. "We must make a new effort at each step and if we cease to make an effort before we have got out, even if we are almost there, we will never get out. The last steps are the hardest" (SG 93).

As Iris Murdoch rightly says, our knowledge of the individual is never complete - "M confronted with D has an endless task" (SoG 28). But to situate goodness

at the never-to-be-attained limit of this knowledge is surely to tantalise us to no useful end. Goodness is to be found, if it is to be found at all, as a movable point around which our attempts to solve conflicts such as the one M is facing may turn. Mary Midgley rightly points out that when

"we wonder whether, or why, or how far something is good, we are not connecting it externally with an abstract property called goodness. We are not asking for evidence of its goodness in the sense of an extra fact, as we might cite a man's being seen with a bloody knife as evidence for his having committed a murder. We are asking for specification, the point of which will be to connect it with a particular want."¹

There must always be an answer to the question, "In what way is this particular thing good?", and that answer is likely to be an enlargement on the way in which that thing meets a human need. Someone might object to this on the grounds that allowance is not made for the inspirational quality of the concept of goodness, its being something at which we can aim. However, ceasing to believe in goodness as an external property need not lead us to embrace a wishy-washy moral relativism, because the moral law is not being jettisoned, simply given its proper place as complementary to our human nature. Self-knowledge is our key to understanding this nature, and the central importance of love to morality is found to be the reflection of the crucial character of our human need to give and receive affection.

For Iris Murdoch, beauty has no moral message. If it is connected with goodness it is not as an educational tool for purifying the soul - which is Simone Weil's idea - but as a feature of the world which good souls

inhabit. Good art is different because it has a message and literature is the ultimate message-carrying art form:

" Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril. It is totally misleading to speak, for instance of 'two cultures', one literary-humane and the other scientific, as if these were of equal status. There is only one culture, of which science, so interesting and so dangerous, is now an important part. But the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in words." (SoG 34)

The purpose of good art is to tell the truth, not by mirroring real life, which would produce uninteresting graphic art and unreadable books, but by interpreting it. Not even bad art is purely representational; indeed, it is likely to carry the most strident and highly-coloured messages in the whole field of creativity. Of course we are all like artists in that we are constantly interpreting and evaluating; the distinction between facts and the interpretation we put on them is a false one because experience does not exist in a raw, natural state, waiting to be shaped into coherence. The state of mind of pure receptivity is a myth for there can be no distinction between knowing a fact and making something of it. This is the case even with those supposedly most objective of facts, scientific ones. For Iris Murdoch, the distinction between fact

and value is by no means a clear one, and the distinction which she would rather talk about is that between appearance and reality. For one thing it is the starting point for philosophical enquiry; for example, the stick which is straight appears to be bent because of the effect of refraction. In this case the bridge between appearance and reality is knowledge, and Iris Murdoch believes that, likewise, the gap between what is apparent and what is good can be bridged by knowledge of value concepts. That is, we need not simply knowledge of the conventions governing the meaningful use of a certain word, but knowledge gained through acquaintance with the experience of that concept, and acquaintance which will probably be first hand but filled out to a greater or lesser extent by the experience, real or imagined, of others. First hand experience of a value concept is likely to come through relationships with other people. Iris Murdoch says that "the practice of personal relations is the fundamental school of virtue. The spiritual revelations involved in dealing with people are in an evident sense more important than those available through art, though they tend to be less clear."² It is one of the functions of literature to provide us with these revelations in an easily digestible form, allowing us to transcend our own, necessarily very limited, experience and make more rapid progress towards moral maturity than we could have done otherwise. However, the very ease with which messages in literature can be assimilated poses a threat to truth. The writer is tempted to be glib and use his God-like authority over his characters to resolve problems which have no solution, or make sense out of what is really senseless, for instance, to offer hope and consolation where there is none. Iris Murdoch follows Simone Weil in despising consolation in art as the latter despises consolation in religion, for cosiness, the belief that all will be well, leads us nowhere, certainly not out of the cave and into the light of the sun.

1. M. Midgley, Beast and Man, 80.
2. I. Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, 77.

PART FIVE

I Values and moral dilemmas in correction of Simone Weil

At this point I should like to think again about the "something else" which characterises a moral dilemma and which a "non-naturalistic" view of ethics cannot encompass. In her article "Is 'Moral' a Dirty Word?"¹ Mary Midgley refers to Philippa Foot's suggestion that the distinguishing marks of the moral are: (1) a particular content, namely human good and harm, and (2) seriousness. Obviously (2) derives from (1), in that human good and harm is a serious business, and this seriousness is rooted in the way things are and not in an individual's decision to take human good and harm seriously. For we do not actually believe that those who do not value human well-being are in this position because of a moral choice which they have made. We think, rather, that something very vital in their make-up is lacking, as in the case of the psychopath. It cannot simply be the case that a man's moral principles are nothing more nor less than those universal principles he acts on, for as Philippa Foot pointed out, "not-treading-on-the-lines-of-the-paving-stones" would not be a moral principle even if someone always did it and expected other people to do it". That special content, that something else which characterises the moral, is missing. The formal requirements of universalisability and consistency can and should be met by a moral principle, but it is not by these marks that we recognise it as such.

Contrary to Simone Weil's idea, our sociability is an all-important feature of our moral landscape, because the fact of our being social beings has a direct bearing on our human needs and desires. Though we may be trained to be existentialists at a conscious level we should

not let this circumstance trick us into denying the forces that have shaped and move us, for we should ensure that we all exist as human beings only in so far as we acknowledge our interdependence. Of course we are all individuals and this individualism is to be highly valued, so to meet someone with a truly original point of view is refreshing and can be a delight. And when Iris Murdoch writes, "I also feel in the long run that one must be good in a way peculiar to oneself, that one must be in some sense characteristic in one's goodness, so that that whole area of life is concerned with understanding one's own personality and building a sort of picture of oneself ...",² she is surely right to link virtue with personal fulfilment, and both these things with self-knowledge, in complete contrast to Simone Weil. We exercise our individuality within certain limits which constrain us all, otherwise our reaction to an original point of view, or indeed any point of view other than our own, would be blank non-comprehension. In fact, this is very seldom the case and when it is we are puzzled, certainly, and frequently disturbed when we fail to communicate. It may be one mark of good writing that it deals with a universal theme as well as the particular topic, so that we say of a serious novel that it is about, let us suppose, the adventures of a group of schoolboys who find themselves alone and autonomous on an otherwise deserted island, and about the anarchic, destructive side of human nature. We can easily assimilate what is new and unfamiliar when it is to be found in the world of particular things where choice, variety and novelty are considered to be virtues, but the world of feeling is small and necessarily circumscribed, and from an early age we know our way around it, are rarely if ever taken completely by surprise there, and, above all, need to feel that we are not alone there and that our emotions conform to a familiar human pattern. The themes of serious art are relatively few because we are so

homogeneous. The analysis and classification of human behaviour is such a popular activity because: (i) we are all pretty well-qualified to do it, and (ii) we have a strong personal interest in bringing the seemingly most bizarre and idiosyncratic conduct within the limits of our understanding.

Though there remains the chicken and egg question of whether we are alike because we are sociable or sociable because we are alike, that we all inhabit a common world is a circumstance which goes a long way towards explaining both our sociability and our similar emotional make-up, especially when we remember that our own bodies and other peoples' are a part of this common world. It is not through chance that we have the nature that we do but through needing to relate to the world and, by implication, to our fellow human beings. In her article, "Towards a New Understanding of Human Nature: The Limits of Individualism" Mary Midgley criticizes individualist ethics for failing to take account of the dependence of human beings on their background, for once this is appreciated"... it must emerge that a whole set of communal aspects of life, which used to be despised and attributed to the corrupting influence of religion, now appear to be necessary and understandable in terms of the sciences. They are not just instruments of political oppression but essential conditions of life."³

An obvious example would be family life and the special ties that this institution creates. The individualist (who is characterised by the attributes of stoicism and self-sufficiency), and Simone Weil is one, is free to slough off his role as a family member, provided only that he is prepared to bear life's burden alone. As Iris Murdoch notes, this character is beloved by novelists as much as by moral philosophers (SoG 80). There is a disproportionately high number of orphans

and one-parent families in children's stories because authors are freer to make exciting things happen to their heroes and heroines once they have been removed from the constraints imposed by a normal family life. This is quite acceptable and makes for enjoyable fantasy so long as the conventions of the genre demand a happy ending, and because, even when things are at their worst, real horror, as in a vintage 1930s detective story, is kept at bay. For isolated adults the picture is less hopeful, for though the loner, almost always male, is seen especially by film-makers in recent years as a romantic, even heroic figure (likely to be played by a handsome, virile actor in the Clint Eastwood mould), his isolation is really a pathological state, and the strength of will which is so much a part of this character, a strange fruit for such barren soil. It is good to be self-reliant in the practical sense of being able to draw on one's own resources, but having the confidence to do this, that is, to act independently of others for change in the objective world, is an ability which is rooted in our sense of self. I have already quoted Josef Pieper on the need for our relations with objective being to be powered from an inner life, so that any outward step is balanced by a corresponding deepening in our understanding. He goes on to say that

"where this step attains a world that is in principle complete (with totality as its aim) the reflective self, characteristic of spirit, is also reached. The two together constitute spirit: not only the capacity to relate oneself to the whole of reality, to the whole world, but an unlimited capacity of living in oneself, the gift of self-reliance and independence that, in the philosophical tradition of Europe, have always been regarded as the attributes of the human person, of being a person."⁴

Before we can feel this inwardness we must have accepted our discontinuity with the rest of creation and the uniqueness of our own perception of reality. Pieper rightly stresses the potential richness of consciousness and the way in which our outer and inner lives are mutually dependent and complement each other; so far from having to choose which is real and which is illusory we find that one informs the other. Thus, our private world which no one else can really share should be a source of strength, giving us the power to act freely and independently, and not a cause of neurotic anxiety. The point is that each individual consciousness is a response to the same, or almost the same, public world.

This is why exchanging views with other people is so necessary and rewarding. Far from being uncommunicable, our perceptions of reality are eminently suited to being given public exposure, and though this process will not make them in any sense more or less real, it should sharpen and refine them, showing up as fantastic some notions while giving due weight to others. Without doubt there is a collective consciousness which is in a continual state of change with the need to absorb new ways of looking at things, but the traffic is two way; we are deeply affected by the views of others, to the extent that it is not possible to say that any individual world picture is our own other than in the sense that we have chosen to adopt it as our own.

It is of prime importance to our mental health and well-being that we should furnish our lives, not just for the sake of distraction but so as to have a life at all and not just a mere existence. For although we must find our own identity through the realisation of our apartness from other people, we become aware at the same time of the depth and solidity of other lives and their consequent claim on our attention; because each of us has a unique point of view we are all of

value to each other. Thus we furnish our lives with other people out of a deep-rooted need for companionship and so that we can in cooperating with others attempt to control the environment which we all share. For though we have the capacity for having an inner life which allows us to live really in a world which is much wider and richer than the confines of our immediate environment would otherwise allow, and this is what makes us spiritual rather than merely animal beings, nevertheless, we are embodied, and as whole people and not just phantoms we care very much about the material world which surrounds us and which we inhabit. Some people are more aesthetically sensitive than others but whether or not we care about beauty, and if we do we are lucky because it is one of the pleasures of life, our physical surroundings are intimately related to ourselves and we to them. Not only is it very hard to make any sense of the notion of disembodied existence, it is also hard to make any sense of the notion of a life lived other than in a particular environment; this is simply a fact about human nature. And environmental influences help to form our culture by shaping our human needs and interests, which are no less our own for being in part a response to external conditions. This is to speak in very general terms but it is in practice possible to map out this area of inter-relating forces, that is, to make a study of human nature which takes into account the effects of environment, as well as our deeply-rooted need to be involved with other people. Of course no such study could ever be completed, such is the complexity of human experience, but certain basic traits would be found to cross all cultural barriers, suggesting that some, at least, of our driving forces come from within.

The urge to survive through the means of a constant process of adaptation is a very general, blanket description of the innate force which is in us all,

and of the message it conveys. This is an oversimplification, of course, because natural selection in the case of man, a social being, has produced in us an emotional constitution such that we value a great many things besides our own preservation, and some more than our own preservation. As Mary Midgley says, "Once a species becomes social at all, its continued prosperity does not depend only on traits of behaviour likely to produce an individual's own survival, but also, and quite as much, on those favouring the survival of kin and group".⁵ She stresses the stultifying effect which attempts to reduce human motivation to the pursuit of one particular end are bound to have because they make concepts such as power or self-preservation all-embracing and consequently meaningless. If we can accept that a lot of different things are good for different reasons life becomes very much more interesting, because diversity always is more interesting than uniformity, and because we let in the reality of conflict. Here we have the "is", the "something else" from which moral "oughts" must be derived without reference to God or the "Good" because of the sheer necessity of working out a way of resolving conflicts. We cannot avoid making decisions, some of which will be moral ones because they will involve weighing up conflicting goods or choosing the lesser evil; and guiding us when we make decisions should be our knowledge and experience gained as members of families and communities which are anchored in a particular physical environment. Rather than practise a Cartesian-like stripping down process we should try to develop our own powers of relating to objective reality so that morality need not be a hit or miss affair but an extension of our sympathy with our fellow human beings, which, if anything, is likely to be broadened the more we are capable of exercising our imaginations. If we isolate ourselves from others and do not pay any attention to nature we only prevent ourselves from finding out about life. Iris Murdoch, we recall, says that virtue

and knowledge are connected, and we do not want to diminish ourselves emotionally pace Simone Weil. This is the message of naturalism, and it accords well with the Christian view that goodness is as much to do with being as doing.

1. M. Midgley, Heart and Mind, 104.
2. I. Murdoch, "Good, Evil and Morality", 19.
3. M. Midgley, "Towards a New Understanding of Human Nature : The limits of Individualism", 521.
4. J. Pieper, Leisure the Basis of Culture, 94.
5. M. Midgley, "Towards a New Understanding of Human Nature : The limits of Individualism", 530.

II Simone Weil's failure and success

"I am convinced that affliction on the one hand and on the other hand joy, understood as pure and total adherence to perfect beauty, implying as they do the loss of personal existence, are the two keys by which one enters the pure land, the land of reality " (PCAD83). Simone Weil ^{Diagnosed} with unfailing accuracy the malaise of the factory workers of her time, but she was unable to offer a human solution to the human problem she felt so acutely. Perversely, she places God beyond the limit of hope and in the same breath asks us as a lesson in detachment to appreciate the beauty of the blind necessity which is our cross. This theology fashioned out of divine indifference contrasts oddly with her practical concern about the inhuman scale on which factory production is organised, with its reduction of the worker to the status of a means to an end which is completely alien to him. She criticizes Marx for not seeing that a change in the relationship between the classes will remain a pure illusion if it is not accompanied by a technical revolution which will be crystallised in new machinery (E56). For under present factory conditions the worker, condemned to repeat the same mechanical gesture, day in, day out, is unable to satisfy the human need to make a plan and carry it out, to build on the past and to exercise some control over the future, to make sense of his life, in other words. As only a tiny part of a whole, of whose overall complexity he cannot conceive, the worker becomes alienated from a society in which he appears more like a slave than a free man. In her political writings Simone Weil sets a high value on human individuality, which she argues would be best served by being rooted in a society which recognised the human need for finality, for it is this lack of finality which reduces us to the status of slaves whose only end is keeping on being able to do what they are doing.

She offers a transcendental solution, and this is how Miklos Vetö explains it:

"Desire is a 'direction', 'a beginning towards something', so it implies the future. The only case when desire aims at the present is in that of the contemplation of beauty. When the future is not involved in our life, the manifestations of finality or of particular ends are not present either. Particular ends are irremediably absent from the worker's life, but finality itself, a finality without ends, might be present. The finality without ends is God, the end of ends, or the essence of ends. Everything which makes man think of God, find God in his work and in his life, fills his existence with finality. Beauty has a sacramental value by enabling us to enter the path leading to God."¹

It is by way of beauty, says Miklos Vetö, that man does his apprenticeship in detachment, because beauty as an object of desire is unique. Simone Weil writes that "Beauty is a carnal attraction which keeps its distance and involves a renunciation, including the most intimate renunciation, that of the imagination. We want to eat every other object of desire. Beauty is what we desire without wanting to eat. We only want it to be " (PG196). In this way beauty can be a lever which tears us away from the imaginary into the real, and from time into eternity, if only our natural hunger for finality can be transformed into love of the order of the world, whose radiance we call beauty.

There is indeed a very real sense in which beauty can do us good, but it is not quite the sense that Simone had in mind. It takes us out of ourselves, as common wisdom would express it - that is, it teaches us our

proper place in the world. When Simone Weil says that we should lose ourselves in pure and total adherence to perfect beauty, she means just that, but what she is really offering is escape, a refusal of the human condition. An appreciation of beauty can enhance our lives beyond measure, in a way that is surely perfectly familiar to most of us. Yet if this is the effect of beauty on us, it is not its function; both Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch remind us that it is the complete otherness of beauty, what Simone Weil would call its necessity, which "does us good."

"In fact I do not think that any of the great romantics really believed that we receive but what we give and in our life alone does nature live, although the lesser ones tended to follow Kant's lead and use nature as an occasion for exalted self-feeling. The great romantics, including the one I have just quoted, transcended 'romanticism'. A self-directed enjoyment of nature seems to me to be something forced. More naturally, as well as more properly, we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless existence of animals, birds, stones and trees. 'Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical'." (SoG 85)

One final point about beauty as something to be contemplated with the object of purifying the soul: as Janet Radcliffe Richards points out though in a different context, "beauty is not a matter of what you are, it is a matter of what you look like. The idea that beauty is truth, however deeply entrenched in the romantic mind, is just nonsense."² The idea that beauty is truth is one to which Simone Weil is deeply attached because of her belief that beauty is the only face of the real that we as fallen people are able to love, and so of special value. This identification is implied

by Iris Murdoch also; if beauty existed only in the eye of the beholder, she would not attribute to it the power for changing personality which she does. It is obviously a good thing to appreciate beauty and work to develop one's taste because this capacity can bring enormous pleasure, but to link moral development closely with aesthetic development is perhaps fanciful. I think that when she talks about the transformation of selfish energy Iris Murdoch comes uncomfortably close to the Weilian ideal of self-negation, but about the beneficial effects of good art, and especially literature, she is on surer ground.

1. M. Vetö, Uprootedness and Alienation in Simone Weil, 394.
2. J. Radcliffe Richards, The Sceptical Feminist, 239.

III Conclusion

Together, Iris Murdoch, G.E.M. Anscombe and Mary Midgley show us convincingly that there is something wrong with modern moral philosophy. Miss Anscombe says that the expectation of some sort of future gain is no kind of basis on which to found a moral principle, and suggests that consideration of the concept of virtue is the jumping off point for a study of ethics. This is what Iris Murdoch is attempting, and she sees virtue as the fruit of a certain state of mind, emptied of self and looking towards the good and the real which are "out there" and absolute. I think this old-fashioned idea of character building is very important, though this notion, with its élitist overtones, is bound to be unpopular amongst the fiercely egalitarian. However, a fuller justification must be found for it than can be given by invoking Goodness as a quasi-Platonic form. Iris Murdoch's argument is really only consistent with theism. As Basil Mitchell says, "The Good, as Iris Murdoch conceives it, really does look like a severely attenuated God (a sort of Cheshire Cat's smile) ...".¹ Simone Weil, that other Platonist, also looked for the good beyond the self, sometimes with strange results:

"The image of the mystic body of Christ is very attractive. But I see the importance which is today accorded to this image as one of the gravest signs of our moral decay. For our true dignity does not lie in being part of a body, be it mystic, be it that of Christ. It lies in this, that in the state of perfection which is the vocation of each one of us we live no longer in ourselves but Christ lives in us; so that through this state Christ in his wholeness, in his indivisible unity, becomes in a sense each one of us ...!"(AD 59)

Once again Simone Weil's thought seems to have been formed by a mistrust of what is human in us, in this

case our instinct for sociability, our collective feelings and our need to form part of something which is greater than our isolated selves. She implies that the Church is as likely as any secular party or association to bring out the unattractive human traits which can be dormant in the individual but which so often rear their heads in company. She cites abuses of power by the Church such as the Inquisition, and suggests that the Church champions the cause of the individual against the tyranny of the state and freedom of opinion, not from a genuine conviction of their worth but because these are the causes traditionally espoused by groups in a position of comparative weakness (AD 60). "The flesh pushes us to say 'I' and the devil pushes us to say 'we'; or to say, as do dictators, 'I' with a collective meaning " (AD 25). Collective feeling is therefore bad because it is another case of self-deception, that is, in very general terms, of substituting the devil for God: "And, in accordance with his own mission, the devil produces a false imitation of the divine, a substitute for the divine " (AD 25). In this instance our need to form part of something greater than ourselves makes us vulnerable to the evil of totalitarianism.

The danger Simone Weil is warning us of is real and must have seemed especially so to someone who was witnessing the rise of Hitler. In her political writings she attacks the nation state and champions the cause of the individual against the collective. In her religious thought she seems to have gone a step further, for as the individual cannot be an end in himself and will look for "food", something to live by and for, in the world outside himself, he is always vulnerable. His dissatisfaction and his need to progress, his craving for self-justification, affection and approval all combine to make man dynamic and goal-orientated: "The hunger for finality constitutes the being of every man" (CS

265) and the source of all his energy beyond what is needed for mere survival. Simone Weil would have us divert this energy from the task of self-preservation and self-expansion and destroy it, and thinks we can achieve this by ceasing to orientate ourselves towards the future.. As Miklos Vetö puts it, she urges us to renounce the illusion that we govern the future, that thirst gives us the right to a drink and hunger the right to a meal,² and by so doing accept the past (see page 17 above). The desire which is born out of this renunciation is pure; that is to say that it has no object or direction other than to follow the will of God. At this point it can be said that we live no longer in our selves but Christ lives in us, because our will is completely identifiable with the will of God, which is evident in everything which has happened up until this point in time (including all the evil and suffering): "... we must feel the reality and the presence of God through all exterior things without exception as clearly as a hand feels the consistency of the paper through the pen holder and the pen " (AD 14).

Georges Frénaud traces the root of error here to Simone Weil's false interpretation of the creation, which he says she sees as "a sort of pantheistic emanation".³ The divide between God and his creation, which should be bridged by a loving relationship, becomes an obstacle to God in his attempt to love God, to be overcome as we have seen by the creature's surrender of his autonomy and his assimilation into the divine scheme in a sense so literal that he becomes God himself. Charles Moeller sets the record straight:

"No, Christ in us is not a parasite; our soul is not this utterly passive container. God is not this cancer which devours us. Instead of a loving dialogue between the soul and God, instead of the 'adult' man, adoptive son, joint heir with

Christ, there is nothing left in the system of Simone Weil but monsters, thieves of liberty, and slaves who have only to be massacred."⁴

In The Need for Roots Simone Weil writes: "The first study to make is of the needs which are to the life of the soul what the need for food, sleep and warmth are to the life of the body " (E14). She lists them: order, liberty, responsibility, equality, hierarchy, honour, punishment, freedom of opinion, security, risk, private property, public property, truth, and gives a warning: we must never confuse them with desires, caprices, fantasies or vices, which, unlike needs, know no bound (E 16). These needs are the basic requirements on whose fulfilment our humanity depends, but their fulfilment is not sufficient to assure our own for we need something more if we are to live rather than merely exist, namely the unconditional love of others which alone can teach us what charity is. This item is missing from Simone's list not because she did not value the virtue of charity, which she most certainly did, but because she believed it to be supernatural. She stripped it of its human under-pinning and characterised it as connected, through grace, with our mere existence, in that state of decreation which lesser beings know as depression. This kind of austerity may have worked for Simone Weil, but it would not work for most of us.

I think that the fundamental link between Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil is their conviction that the state of our being not merely effects the moral level of our actions, but is perfectly reflected in that moral level. This way of looking at things causes the distinction between inner and outer, private and public, being and doing to be blurred, and the gap which was previously bridged by an effort of will closes. Iris Murdoch believes one of Simone Weil's keenest insights to be her insistence that we should not perform those acts

of charity which we do not feel compelled to perform, and she contrasts contrived and natural goodness in the central characters of her novel The Bell, Michael and Dora. The one, seemingly "thought-out", can create only confusion and disaster, while Dora, though muddle-headed, instinctively does the thing which heals. Iris Murdoch is telling us to beware of moral pretentiousness, for in the end it will surely catch us out.

Thus far Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil are in agreement with each other and with Mary Midgley who also thinks that our moral field of vision has personal bounds, and, that it follows from this that goodness begins close to home and not in an intellectual attempt to increase our range of potential courses of action. Mary Midgley believes we should try to understand our own nature and that the key lies in our adjusting to the material world. By contrast Simone Weil is equally radical: we should work towards annihilation of the self. Iris Murdoch has a foot in both camps. Like Simone Weil she thinks that the self is an obstacle to moral progress because it prevents us from seeing things as they really are, but unlike Simone Weil she does not despair of it. Indeed, she believes that goodness to be real must have a personal face: "I also feel in the long run that one must be good in a way peculiar to oneself, that one must be in some sense characteristic in one's goodness, so that the whole area of life is concerned with understanding one's own personality and with building a sort of picture of oneself....".⁵ I find this view both attractive and profound, but I believe that Iris Murdoch's picture of the personality remains a reductionist one as of course is Simone Weil's - and that because of this, her Good will always be out of reach and we shall remain trapped in a cycle of striving and failure.

The reason why Iris Murdoch cannot lead us out of this trap is that she does not, as a Platonist, believe that

virtue can arise naturally out of the system of needs and drives which constitutes a human personality. For her, as for others in the tradition to which Cartesianism and existentialism belong, virtue is non-natural, and set apart from our strictly human traits. It is Mary Midgley who, by taking a view of human nature which is completely opposed to the reductionist one, shows us how the seeds of virtue are already planted deep inside us, and how, by taking a critical attitude towards our own conduct and making conscious efforts to discipline our hearts and control our actions, we can grow into goodness. And this goodness is not an ideal which inspires but ultimately eludes us, but the actual and attainable fruit of personal integrity.

1. B. Mitchell, Morality : Religious and Secular, 78.
2. M. Veto, La metaphysique religieuse de Simone Weil,
110.
3. G. Frénaud, "Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the
light of Catholic Theology", 370.
4. C. Moeller, Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme,
255.
5. I. Murdoch, "Good, Evil and Morality", 19.

POSTSCRIPT

I have set out to show the strengths and weaknesses of Simone Weil's understanding of the concept of virtue, firstly by looking in a general way at the disparity between her theological scheme and orthodox Christian belief, and then by relating these differences to strands in the work of some British moral philosophers. I have tried to compare the thought of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, while drawing on G.E.M. Anscombe, Dorothy Emmet and Mary Midgley as commentators.

The sincerity of Simone Weil's concern for the disadvantaged is not in doubt, nor is the justice of her appreciation of the contemplative spirit. The problem is that she was not able to set her celebrated attitude of waiting into a wider context. One effect of this is that, while on closer study admiration gives way to a suspicion that something vital is being left out of the picture, superficial contact with Simone Weil's work leaves the impression that one has been edified and inspired. Self-sacrifice, taking the form of a loosening, and eventual letting go of our hold on the things which are commonly held to make life worth living, is at the heart of Simone Weil's thought, and this is worrying because self-denial is not good in itself but only as a means to an end, and it is no part of Christianity to teach otherwise. However, it is this aspect of Simone Weil's work which, I think, has attracted Iris Murdoch, who is concerned by what she believes to be the increasingly pragmatic tone of much modern moral philosophy. Here she has a powerful ally in G.E.M. Anscombe who argues strongly for the absolute nature of moral commands, and against any consideration of practical consequences, as potentially corrupting. It is this disregard of consequences, this disinterestedness of which, for Simone Weil and Iris

Murdoch at least, a contempt for consolation in any form is such an important part, which links these three and which gives their conception of virtue its rather inhuman character. Simone Weil's insight into the good man as one who cannot help but do the right thing is correct insofar as it draws attention to the fact that virtue lies not in fleeting action but in a disposition with which our character is stamped through and through. But a too-rigorous disassociation of the seat of goodness, and more importantly, goodness itself, from the world - and the Platonism of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch tends to lead them in this direction - is as sterile as the existentialism to which they would want to offer an alternative.

I have tried to show how Mary Midgley provides an escape from this impasse by her detailed working-out of the interdependence, which is as much conceptual as it is practical, of the human being and his physical environment, which some moral philosophers have tended to treat as incidental. Following Bishop Butler, she locates virtue, not in the realm of the ideal and the unrealisable, but much closer to home, and conceives it as definable in exclusively human terms. Paradoxically, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch with their wide use of the vocabulary of religious, and specifically Christian, belief, are unable to present a picture of virtue which accords nearly as well with the Christian view of personal fulfillment as that of Mary Midgley, who is silent on the question of faith.

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