

Iris Murdoch, Spiritual Exercises, and Anselm's *Proslogion* and Prayers

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In a number of philosophical essays, the novelist Iris Murdoch argued that modern ethics had become an abstract and arid affair, detached from a) the concrete conditions of human action, b) any overarching conception of the good, and c) from the sort of spiritual exercises that make moral transformation possible. In this essay, I argue that Anselm's writings provide a neglected resource for recovering what Murdoch thinks contemporary ethics has lost. It is not surprising that Anselm situates all human reasoning within an overarching account of the good, but what has been less obvious to readers is the way, not just in his prayers but even in his speculative writings, he never loses sight of the concrete conditions of the individual human soul, its virtues and vices. In Anselm's writings, we can discern patterns or practices that amount to spiritual exercises designed to bring about the moral transformation of the reader.

At one point in the film *Iris* (2001), which details the effects of Alzheimer's on Iris Murdoch, one of the 20th century's most-celebrated novelists, Murdoch utters the puzzled words, words that hover between the declarative and the interrogative, "I wrote books." Best known for her fiction, Murdoch was also a philosopher of some note. In both fields, she defended, in a contemporary language, old-fashioned notions of the primacy of character, of the reality of goodness and love, and of the struggles of individuals to achieve truthful visions of themselves and others. "Love," she once wrote, "is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real." The film is at its philosophical best in its subtle depiction of the mystery of personhood, of the complex ways in which we originally ascribe and continue to ascribe personal identity to others and to ourselves.

The film operates through a sustained juxtaposition of early and late periods in Murdoch's life; this heightens our awareness of the scale of the destruction wrought by Alzheimer's. Yet, even as her full presence gradually recedes, there are residual traces and momentary recoveries. One sequence of past and present illustrates this point. The young John Bayley, eventually Iris's husband, compares the young Iris to a creature from a fairy tale who retreats to her "secret world" but "always comes back." Then, the older Bayley admits that "Iris' past is now a closed book. But," he adds emphatically, "it's there."¹ Instead of diminishing our duty, deprivation increases it. If the balance in Murdoch's life shifts steadily from presence to absence, the film makes clear that this is but a variation in a balance that always exists in all of us. Each of us is to varying degrees dependent and none of us is anything more than temporarily able.

¹ In the film at least, Bayley embodies the film's humanity, a humanity that sees in the severe deprivations of the friend, lover, and spouse a call toward an overcoming of self out of love of the other. For a fuller treatment of the film, see my review of the film, "The Good Pursuit," on *National Review Online*, February 16, 2002. The film depicts Bayley in rather positive, if not saintly, terms, but his treatment of Iris, especially his willingness to make public the sordid details of her declining health, has come under fire in some quarters.

The film attempts to weave the central themes from her novels and philosophical writings into the plot. The most explicit way of doing this is to show Iris lecturing. Early in the film, Murdoch explains one of the cornerstones of her philosophy, articulated in the influential essay, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts": "We are moved to good by a faint memory" of a previous encounter with pure forms of goodness.² This is one pole in her thought, the Platonic theme of the ideals of goodness, beauty, and truth. The other pole derives from Wittgenstein's emphasis on human beings as speaking animals. In a flashback scene, Murdoch explains her love of words by observing that we could not "think without words."³ In Murdoch, there are intimate links between language and thought and between both of these and the good, links that harken back to a pre-modern tradition of philosophy and literature.

In the middle of the 20th century and in anticipation of much what would be argued later by virtue ethicists, Murdoch noted that contemporary philosophy presents us with a "stripped and empty scene." Morality is depicted "without any transcendent background. It is depicted simply in terms of exhortations and choices defended by reference to facts."⁴ Vague and all-consuming notions of freedom and sincerity threaten both ethics and popular discourse. "We need," Murdoch urges, to abandon the "self-centred concept of sincerity" in favor of "the other-centred concept of truth." We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but "benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy." Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons.⁵ As a corrective to our temptation to narcissism, Murdoch recommended "spiritual exercises," to "check" our "selfishness in the interest of seeing the real." Not just religion, but art, fiction and poetry can serve as occasions for such spiritual exercises or practices of unselfing.

Murdoch is among the most important 20th century philosophers to have offered a sustained critique of modernity and among the first to have highlighted a connection between pre-modern moral philosophy and literature. The ancient conception of human life as a quest for the good remains alive in literature, in the works of Shakespeare, for example, after it had been banished from mainstream philosophy. Even in literature and aesthetics, however, there is eventually an erosion of the appreciation of the good, under the influence of 19th century romanticism, which opposed passionate feeling to enlightenment reason. The modernist poet T.S. Eliot described the result of this opposition as a "dissociation of sensibility," a separation of thought from sense and imagination. Prior to the modern revolution, poets offered a "direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling."⁶

² "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 363-385.

³ Of course, both poles are present in each thinker; Wittgenstein had his mystical side and Plato remains the most poetic of philosophers.

⁴ *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 292.

⁵ *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 293.

⁶ T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Prose* (Harvest Books, 1975), p. 63.

Eliot looked to the metaphysical poets, John Donne and George Herbert, and, before them, to Dante, for an alternative poetic tradition. A neglected figure in this pre-modern tradition is St. Anselm, the 12th century Benedictine monk, famous for the so-called ontological argument for the existence of God, an argument about which Murdoch offered interesting, if misguided reflections. The life and writings of St. Anselm constitute an important moment in this alternative, pre-modern conception of the link between language and the good, between thought and passion, and between intellectual inquiry and spiritual exercises, practices designed to move the individual to self-knowledge and to a greater participation in the Good. Anselm is of interest in part because he writes as a pupil of the Platonic tradition, of which Murdoch is a contemporary representative, and in part because he is an example of a thinker and writer who cannot easily be categorized exclusively as a theologian or a philosopher or a poet. We find in Anselm no romantic opposition of sensation to intellect or of imagination to the rational capacities of human beings; likewise there is no gulf between thought and life.

Anselm wrote many of his prayers at the same time that he was articulating his famous argument for the existence of God, the so-called ontological argument, which begins from the description of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Since Anselm claims that the argument is based in purely rational considerations and yet formulates it as part of a sustained prayer, interpreters have opted for quite extreme and diametrically opposed positions. Some have argued that Anselm works exclusively within the context of faith, while others hold that he anticipates modern rationalism and its excessive reliance on reason alone.⁷ More moderate readings propose that Anselm had two ends in mind for the single argument: to convince the non-believer and to help the believer attain understanding.⁸

Often omitted from 20th century considerations of the argument is its reciprocal insistence on the intelligibility of the good and the goodness of truth. Anselm describes the rational power as the ability to distinguish the “good from the not-good, the greater from the lesser good.” Anselm’s terse and fertile description of wisdom pursued within the ambit of the Christian faith, *fides quarens intellectum*, entails both that faith involves a passionate quest and that the quest aims for contemplative wisdom or understanding. Anselm’s robust conception of reason enables him to make sense both of its capacities and its limitations. The delicate balance allows him to avoid both rationalism and fideism.⁹

⁷ For the accusation of rationalism, see Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner’s, 1951); for the position that Anselm uses reason only to defeat the reasoning of the atheist, see Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum*, translated by W. Robertson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960).

⁸ See Katherine Rogers, “Can Christianity be Proven? St. Anselm of Canterbury on Faith and Reason,” *Anselm Studies* 2 (1998).

⁹ As a reaction against modern forms of rationalism, fideism remains grave threat in theology. As Denys Turner notes, in his recent book, *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), the contemporary danger is that the negative or apophatic element in speculative theology is “recast as lying in the simple deficiency of reason” and as an unlearned ignorance, an *ignorantia indocta*, rather than a “knowing unknowing.” Speaking of Aquinas but in words that equally apply to Anselm, Turner holds that the “delicately constructed tension” between the positive and negative “within both reason and faith has been readjusted into a polarity between the negative possibilities of reason and the positive possibilities of faith” (p. 79).

Anselm's texts reflect a delicately balanced conception of human reason and of the practices, both natural and supernatural, necessary for its perfection. Like Augustine before him, Anselm is heir to twin traditions of spiritual practice, one Platonic and philosophic, the other monastic and religious. His texts both mirror and provide occasions for spiritual exercises that shape the habits of the soul. In recent years, the notion that philosophy, understood in its etymological sense as a love or pursuit of wisdom, should be construed primarily as a way of life, centered in certain practices, has come to the fore. In his book, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Pierre Hadot notes that entrance into the philosophical schools of antiquity involved the "choice of a certain way of life," an "existential option" requiring a "conversion of one's entire being, and ultimately a willingness to be and live in a certain way."¹⁰ Anselm's understanding of his own vocation supports Hadot's thesis. In his prayer to St. Benedict, founder of the religious order to which he belonged, Anselm states, "I profess to lead a life/of continual turning to God,/as I promised by taking the name and habit of a monk."¹¹

Although he admits that the notion of wisdom as a way of life endured in the monastic schools, Hadot is skeptical about the later medieval period. He asserts that in the Middle Ages, "philosophy is no longer a way of life"; instead, it becomes a "purely theoretical and abstract activity."¹² What Hadot means is that philosophy becomes an academic subject, one in which the emphasis is on a set of propositions. If by philosophy as a way of life, we mean the joining of a philosophical school whose aim is the training in the good life or the taking of philosophical discourse as the supreme authority on the good life, then no medieval Christian could have adopted philosophy as a way of life. Philosophy is decisively subordinated to the proclamation of the Gospel. But, as Hadot also notes, spiritual exercises aiming at a life of wisdom are integral to the monastic tradition. In words Anselm would affirm, Aquinas speaks of the religious life as a "certain kind of training where one aims by practice at the perfection of charity."¹³ The love of wisdom, which is after all the very meaning of the term "philosophy," remains the originating motive and ultimate goal of the religious life. Anselm is in fact responsible for the most terse and most fertile expression of this quest for wisdom in the context of religious belief: faith seeking understanding.

For broadly Platonic thinkers such as Anselm and Murdoch, our experience of goodness involves the logic of image and exemplar, of forgetfulness and remembering. Precisely because we ascend through likenesses to a source that escapes our vision, we have nowhere to rest. As John Sallis puts it in commenting on the role of images in Plato: "The 'seeing' of an image always involves a tension, an instability," which drives us "beyond the image to the original."¹⁴ Just as much as Murdoch and other Platonists, Anselm assumes what Louis Mackey calls "faith

¹⁰ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Vitam namque sanctae conversationis, quam promisi nomine et habitu monachi, profiteor.* Translations of *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm* are from the Penguin Classics edition, translated with an introduction by Sister Benedicta Ward, S.L.G. and with a foreword by R.W. Southern (Penguin Books, 1973). For background sources of Anselm's prayers and meditations and analysis of his style, see Ward's "Introduction."

¹² *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited by I.A. Davidson and translated by M. Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

¹³ *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 188, 1.

¹⁴ John Sallis, *Being and Logos: The Way of the Platonic Dialogue* (Humanities Press International, 1989), p. 422.

in the logic of hierarchy.”¹⁵ Of course, this logic is neither adventitious nor abstruse; instead, it is built into the ordinary human practice of making distinctions between the useful and the useless, between good and evil, and between better and worse. As Stanley Rosen observes, “Platonism stands or falls on the rationality of taking one’s bearings by our ability to distinguish between better and worse decisions in everyday life.”¹⁶ Anselm makes this point in response to his chief critic, Gaunilo:

Any lesser good is good by virtue of being similar to a greater good. Hence it is apparent to reason that by ascending from lesser goods to greater..., we can make certain judgments about that good nothing greater than which can be conceived.¹⁷

In both her diagnosis of what ails modern ethics and her recommendation of what might alleviate our condition, Murdoch is a great defender of the perspective of the ordinary human being, the agent uncorrupted by modern philosophy. Why, Murdoch asks, “can morality not be thought as attached to the substance of the world? Surely many people who are not philosophers and who cannot be accused of using faulty arguments since they use no arguments, do think of their morality in just this way?” On this alternative and historically dominant view—a view shared by “Thomists, Hegelians, and Marxists” (we should add, Anselmians)—

the individual is seen as held in a framework which transcends him, where what is important and valuable is the framework....To discover what is morally good is to discover that reality, and to become good is to integrate himself with it. He is ruled by laws that he can only partly understand. He is not fully conscious of what he is. His freedom is not an open freedom of choice in a clear situation; it lies rather in an increasing knowledge of his own real being, and in the conduct which naturally springs from such knowledge.¹⁸

The intimate connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of the real order of being pervades Anselm’s writings. The artistry of Anselm’s writings aims to be utterly transparent, to transport the reader from detached mulling of words to active engagement and ultimately to prayer. The goal is to move the reader from the distant encounter with the text of an author to adopting the place of the author, as suppliant, sinner, pilgrim and so forth. Anselm’s texts thus involve mimetic practice, the active participation of the reader, which especially in the prayers and meditations takes the form of an imitation of the lives and virtues of the saints. Moreover, by accusing himself at nearly every turn in his writings, Anselm provides an example for the reader, a self-monitoring check on where one stands with regard to the virtues

¹⁵ Mackey, *Pergrinations of the Word* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 80.

¹⁶ Rosen, *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 74. For a quite different attempt at a contemporary revival of the Platonic link between ethics and metaphysics, see John Rist, *Real Ethics: Rethinking the Foundations of Morality* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Quoniam namque omne minus bonum in tantum est simile maiori bono in quantum est bonum: patet cuilibet rationabili menti, quia de bonis minoribus ad maiora conscendendo..., multum possumus conicere illud quo nihil potest maius cogitari. Translations from the *Proslogion* are my own.

¹⁸ *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 292.

promoted and reflected in the text. Without such self-conscious reflection, the reader is apt to become a *hypocrite lecteur* (“hypocrite reader”), in the words T.S. Eliot would later borrow from Baudelaire (*The Waste Land*). Like Eliot, Anselm seeks a kind of community with his readers, who are not just hypocrites but *mon semblable* and *mon frere* (“my likeness” and “my friend”).

In this context, fruitful questioning is much more than a skill that can be purchased and deployed as a set of steps or rules leading to knowledge. Its artistry involves the transformation of the knower; it presupposes that one is already genuinely committed to the search for truth and that one is willing to enter into open-ended conversation with others. The art of questioning thus involves a host of virtues: the humble acknowledgment of what one does and does not understand; courage in the overcoming of obstacles to knowledge; temperance in the restraining of passions that can derail one’s pursuit of knowledge; justice in a mutual accountability for what each interlocutor takes to be true; and an appreciation of the pursuit of knowledge as a common good shared by the interlocutors. As Gadamer puts it, “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”¹⁹

The *Proslogion* commences in a thoroughly dialogical fashion, in words that echo the opening of Augustine’s Confessions:

Come then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how it may seek You, where and how it may find You. Lord if you are not here, where shall I seek You in your absence? If, however, You are everywhere why then do I not see You near at hand? Surely You dwell in light inaccessible.²⁰

Anselm thanks God for giving understanding to faith and then articulates his argument. God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. It is one thing, he admits, for an object to exist in the understanding and another for it to exist as a thing independent of the intellect. But it is certainly better or greater for something to exist actually than for it to exist merely in the mind. It follows that that than which nothing greater can be conceived must exist in reality and not merely in the understanding. Indeed, such a being as God must necessarily exist as it cannot be thought not to exist.

Possessing existence to the highest degree and distinguished from all other beings by the mark of excessive perfection, that is, by being greater than whatever else can be conceived, God consequently is “just, truthful, happy and whatever it is better to be than not to be.”²¹ The rapid listing of attributes slows considerably when Anselm poses the question of how God can be both

¹⁹ *Truth and Method*, p. 379.

²⁰ Eia nunc ergo tu, domine deus meus, doce cor meum ubi et quomodo te quaerat, ubi et quomodo te inueniat. Domine, si hic non es, ubi te quaeram absentem? Si autem ubique es, cur non video praesentem? Sed certe habitas ‘lucem inaccessibilem’.

²¹ Tu es itaque iustus, verax, beatus, et quidquid melius est esse quam non esse. Melius namque est esse iustum quam non iustum, beatum quam non beatum.

just and merciful, the centrality of which dilemma demonstrates how thoroughly Anselm's rational investigation of God is informed by Judeo-Christian revelation. In contemplating divine mercy, Anselm's quest for understanding turns to wonder, as he marvels that the One who "entirely just and lacking in nothing, should bestow good things on those who are evil."²² When Anselm concludes "that alone is just which you will," one might suppose that his pursuit of understanding has unraveled, that divine voluntarism or arbitrariness has stymied human intelligence. The teaching does befuddle the intellect, not by failing to meet the standards of reason but by exceeding them: "Oh, immeasurable goodness, who exceeds all understanding."²³ He returns to the opening image of "inaccessible light" and describes the divine "goodness," which "surpasses all understanding," as "hidden in inaccessible light."

After a brief discussion of divine eternity, Anselm examines how and why it is that God is both seen and not seen by those seeking Him. He shifts once again to the interrogative: "Have you, my soul, found what you sought? ...If you have found him, why do you not experience what you have found?"²⁴ The achievement of the "one argument" establishing God's existence has not delivered a vision of God, who remains "remote from sight."²⁵ Nor has it quelled or satiated the longing of the human heart, "the needy heart, experienced in suffering." Instead, it exacerbates or inflames desire all the more. As Aidan Nichols notes, Anselm supplies here a logic of prayer, which must "never be content with its current images but must transcend them towards a reality that is *semper maior*."²⁶ God, who alone is supremely and indivisibly identical to what he is, cannot be seen "all at once." To the initial description of God as that than which nothing can be conceived, Anselm now adds the clarifying statement that God is "not only that than which a greater cannot be thought but also something greater than can be thought."²⁷

From the heights of contemplation, Anselm falls back upon himself and laments the distance that separates him from his joy. "Again behold exasperation, once again sorrow and lamentation stand athwart the path of the one seeking joy and delight."²⁸ One of the most striking features of metaphysical discourse in Anselm is his pervasive use of aesthetic and erotic language. In contrast to the confidence in the human mind's ability to make itself divine through a process of natural knowledge, erotic language always appeals to a lack, an as yet unsatisfied desire or longing. And eros is not merely aimless desire or the sense of lack; it is not "negative excitation"; nor is it a "projection outward" from the intellect or will; rather, it is, as Stanley Rosen describes it, a "force from above and outside the soul that comes down into it and raises it to the heavens."²⁹ Even the *unum argumentum* fails to supply a simple and final ascent to God.

²² Illud certe penitus est mirandum, cur tu totus iustus et nullo egens malis et reis tuis bona tribuas. O altitudo bonitatis tuae, deus!

²³ O immensa bonitas, quae sic omnem intellectum excedis.

²⁴ An invenisti, anima mea, quod quaerabas? Quaerabas deum, et invenisti eum esse quiddam summum omnium, quo nihil melius cogitari potest.... Nam si non invenisti deum tuum: quomodo est ille hoc quod invenisti, et quod illum tam certa veritate et vera certitudine intellexisti? Si vero invenisti: quid est, quod non sentis quod invenisti?

²⁵ Quam remota es a conspectu meo.

²⁶ "Anselm of Canterbury and the Language of Perfection," *Downside Review* 103 (1985), p. 207.

²⁷ Ergo domine, non solum es quo maius cogitari nequit, sed es quiddam maius quam cogitari posit.

²⁸ Et iterum ecce turbatio, ecce iterum obviat maeror et luctus quaerenti gaudium et laetitiam.

²⁹ *The Question of Being*, p. 159.

The *Proslogion* involves a pattern of ascending and descending and then ascending again. Anselm urges his soul to rouse and lift itself to an understanding of the supreme good. He does so through a complicated dialectic that begins from goods that we experience in ordinary daily life—beauty, strength, health, melody, friendship, peace, power, honors, and riches. These are but pale imitations of the divine good, the source of every good and the goal of every desire of the human heart.

Anselm gives precise meaning and metaphysical foundation to Murdoch's assertion that we are moved to the good by a "faint memory" of goodness. He addresses God,

You have created Your image in me, so that I may recall and think of You, and love You. But the image is so obliterated by the erosion of vice, so obscured by the smoky fumes of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it.³⁰

The Platonic logic of image and exemplar is here recast in a complicated narrative of creation, deformation through sin, and recreation through grace.

The sense of the good as that which draws us forward and then recedes as we make progress is also at the heart of Murdoch's philosophy. We experience "both the reality of perfection and its distance away, and this leads us to place our idea of it outside the world of existent being as something of a different unique and special sort."³¹ It is not surprising, then, that Murdoch was interested in Anselm's famous proof. In contrast to those who might see the argument as mere logical trickery or an abstruse rumination, Murdoch sees the argument as rooted in the universal experience of degrees of goodness. She writes,

... as we can recognise and identify goodness and degrees of good, we are able to have the idea of the greatest conceivable good. The definition of God, as non-contingent, non-accidental, is given body by that general perception and experience of the fundamental, authoritative (uniquely necessary) nature of moral value, that if God exists, he exists necessarily, we conceive of him by noticing degrees of goodness, which we see in ourselves and in all the world which is a shadow of God. These are aspects of the Proof wherein the definition of God as non-contingent is given body by our most general perceptions and experience of the fundamental and omnipresent (uniquely necessary) nature of moral value, thought in a Christian context as God.³²

As much as she may commend Anselm's logic and his anchoring of the notion of God in the common experience of ordinary human beings, she voices certain objections to the precise formulation of the conclusion. We can sense her distance from Anselm in her choppy syntax and

³⁰ *Creasti in me hanc imaginem tuam, ut tui memor te cogitem, te amem. Sed sic est abolita attritione vitiorum, sic est offuscata fumo peccatorum, ut non possit facere ad quod facta est, nisi renoves et reformes eam.*

³¹ *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Viking Penguin, 1992), p. 508.

³² *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 396.

convoluted mode of expression, which lack Anselm's elegant precision, and in her final, tentative statement, "thought in a Christian context as God."

What Murdoch resists is the identification of the Good with God. Her version of Anselm's argument entails that "no existing thing could be what we have meant by God. Any existing God would be less than God. An existent God would be an idol or demon." The point here seems to be that no singular being can, by the very fact of its singularity, embody all that we mean by perfection; conversely, our judgment that "this being is God" would seem to presuppose the independence and transcendence of a notion of perfection in light of which we appraise this particular being as divine. Aside from reflecting a crude notion of God as singular being in the midst of other singular beings, Murdoch's account instructively inverts Anselm's understanding of the relationship between God and perfection, the latter of which is especially susceptible to idolatrous misunderstanding and abuse. For Anselm as for all the great Christian thinkers from Augustine to Aquinas, the identification of the divine with a set of perfections constitutes a more sophisticated, and therefore more dangerous, form of idolatry than that found in the confusion of the divine with sensible objects and images. How so?

Most human beings are prone to idolatry in the form of conflating God with the sensible images they have of him, as an avuncular bearded figure or as some evanescent substance coursing through all material things. The overcoming of this materialistic representation of the divine does not promise refuge from idolatry, however. Another form of idolatry, one to which philosophers are prone, comes from identifying God with the content of propositions signifying perfections, such as "God is good" or "God is goodness." Murdoch has her own way of dealing with this by underscoring the distance between human persons and the Good. What she does not see is that Anselm deploys similar strategies to forestall the possibility that we might latch onto any finite human image or concept as if it were God himself. This is particularly evident in Anselm's insistence that God is not only that than which no greater can be conceived but also greater than can be conceived. Conversely, Anselm's practice in both his speculative writings and his meditations of fostering self-accusation aims to correct any prideful assertion that an individual, no matter how holy, has attained God by his own powers.

On Anselm's view, the deepening of understanding involves spiritual exercises; indeed, these are constitutive of the religious life to which Anselm had vowed his life. Anselm's prayer to Benedict is less a celebration of Anselm's own life than a sustained confession of his failures. "My blind and distorted soul is swift and prompt/to throw itself into vices and wallow in them,/but how slowly and with what difficulty/do I even call to mind the virtues."³³ He asks Benedict, "see how much progress your pupil is making in your school." What Benedict will see is not a successful soldier for Christ, but a "false monk."³⁴ "My life," he says, "argues that I am a liar." Anselm's builds self-accusation into the very structure of his spiritual exercises.

³³ *Obcaecata et distorta anima mea ad praecipitandum et volutandum se in vitiis facilis est et prompta, ad saltem reminiscendum virtutes difficilis et pigra.*

³⁴ *Ecce quam efficaciter proficit hic tuus discipulus in tua schola... Immo ecce falsum monachum...*

The hardest and most revealing truths concern the way in which we have set up obstacles within our souls to the perception and pursuit of the good (*Tendebam in deum, et offendi in me ipsum*). Another of Anselm's writings, *Meditation 1*, begins with the abrupt and unsettling statement: "I am afraid of my life; for when I examine carefully the state of my soul, it seems to me that my whole life is either sinful or sterile."³⁵ Even more disconcerting than the disorder of sin, and what Anselm identifies as perhaps its most severe punishment, is our indifference to our own good and our insouciance toward what we know about our souls. "What is chiefly to be wondered at is that my soul does not grieve at what it knows about itself; instead, it sleeps in security."³⁶ Something is deeply awry in the human condition, that we should, as Pascal would later remark, so magnify small things and so trivialize great matters, that we could be indifferent to our very selves.³⁷

But Anselm does not leave us in despair or torture us with a debilitating self-knowledge. Instead, the poetry of his prayers aims to convert us to the word incarnate, the healing grace of Christ. In this relative respect, the mode of discourse appropriate to poetry is superior to that of philosophy or history, as both Murdoch and Eliot urge. The classic formulation of this position can be had in Sir Phillip Sydney's *Defense of Poetry*. Sydney states that poetry offers a speaking picture to entertain and delight, to instruct and to move. Sydney comments on the perfective art of moving,

And that moving is of a higher degree than teaching, it may by this appear, that it is well nigh both the cause and effect of teaching. For who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught? And what so much good does that teaching bring forth, (I speak still of moral doctrine) as that it moves one to do that which it does teach. For as Aristotle says, it is not knowledge (*gnosis*) but practice (*praxis*) must be the fruit: and how practice (*praxis*) can be without being moved to practice, it is no hard matter to consider.

In the order of practice, particulars have more effect than universals and hortatory speech accomplishes more than demonstration. Beyond philosophical description and argument, the poet "yields to the powers of the mind an image" to "strike, pierce, and possess" his readers.

The poetic strategies articulated by Sydney overlap to some extent with the methods of meditation in St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*.³⁸ But neither Sydney nor Ignatius was an innovator in this respect. Neither was Anselm, but he remains one of the most striking representatives of this philosophical or pedagogical conception of poetic speech. Anselm describes the purpose of his prayers and meditations to "stir the mind of the reader to love or fear

³⁵ Terret me vita mea. Namque diligenter discussa apparet mihi aut peccatum aut sterilitas fere tota vita mea.

³⁶ Sed est in hoc quoque anima mea miserabiliter mirabilis et mirabiliter miserabilis, quia non tantum dolet quantum se noscit, sed sic secura torpet, velut quid patiatur ignoret. The translation here does not capture this nicely paradoxical doubling of Anselm's opening "miserabiliter mirabilis et mirabiliter miserabilis."

³⁷ Pascal, *Pensees*, Krailsheimer edition (Penguin Classics, 1995), # 427.

³⁸ On the links between traditions of meditation and early modern religious poetry, see Barbara Lewalski *Protestant Poetics and the 17th Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton University Press, 1984).

of God.”³⁹ No less an authority than R.W. Southern observes that the prayers have a “visual quality” like an El Greco painting.⁴⁰ Anselm’s meditative poetry begins with a composition of place, the setting of the scene in imagination through detailed attention to the sensible realities of the Gospel narrative; it then turns to dialogue, self-scrutiny, and the arousing of appropriate passions in the soul; and it ends with petition and resolve. In his prayer to Christ, he laments his physical absence from Christ’s passion and crucifixion. The regret that he was not present to experience the events gives way to the desire to be there in imagination. His “Prayer to the Holy Cross,” begins with a direct address to the Cross, “Which calls to mind the cross/Whereon our Lord Jesus Christ died.”⁴¹ In another prayer to Christ, the realities of Christ’s passion and death prompt confusion which he captures in a series of questions:

What shall I say? What shall I do? Whither shall I go?
Where shall I seek him? Where and when shall I find him?
Whom shall I ask? Who will tell me of my beloved?
For I am sick with love.⁴²

As is clear from this passage, the dominant grammatical mood is not that of the indicative or even the petitionary but the interrogative. In the more speculative and more philosophical *Proslogion*, he deploys the same rhetorical strategy: “What have I done? What have I accomplished? Where was I going? Where have I arrived? To what did I aspire? For what do I sigh? I sought goodness and behold there is confusion.”⁴³

For Anselm, as for Murdoch, human beings are “benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy.” But all is not lost. Anselm’s ability to articulate questions, to express in rich detail the precise sources of his frustrations, and to mark out the ways in which he has gone astray from his hoped-for goal—all this presupposes that benighted humans have a continual hold on some notion of the good. Of course, Anselm’s account of how we come to recognize the good, understand our disordered apprehension of it, and begin to make progress in rectified desire and perception entails certain truth claims about Christian revelation, claims that Murdoch thinks are untenable.

Yet, Murdoch cannot let go of the images and narratives of the great world religions. In an odd way, Murdoch’s project prefigures much of what is currently happening in continental philosophy of religion. Murdoch wants to have religious practices without religious doctrines or obligatory moral codes or even conviction about the truthfulness of certain narratives. Murdoch

³⁹ Ad excitandum legentis mentem ad Dei amorem vel timorem.

⁴⁰ See Southern’s Foreword to *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, p. 10.

⁴¹ Sancta crux, per quam nobis ad memoriam crux illa reducitur, in qua Dominus noster Iesus Christus nos per mortem suam a morte aeterna...ad vitam aeternam...recusitavit.

⁴² Quid dicam? Quid faciam? Quo vadam? Ubi eum quaeram? Ubi vel quando inveniam? Quem rogabo? Quis nuntiabit dilecto quia amore languo?

⁴³ Quid incepti, quid effeci? Quo tendebam, quo deveni? Ad quid aspirabam, in quibus suspiro? ‘Quaesivi bona’ ‘et ecce turbatio’? Tendebam in deum, et offendi in me ipsum.

urges that “metaphysics” can be a “guide for morals” but her metaphysics is pretty thin, as is the specific narrative account of the good on offer in her writings. She has only a sort of second-order interest in religious narratives and doctrines. In addition to suggesting that Christianity itself “can continue without a personal God or a risen Christ, without beliefs in supernatural places and happenings,...but retaining the mystical figure of Christ,” she urges that the non-existence of God “does not affect what is mystical. The loss of prayer, through the loss of belief in God, is a great loss. However, a general answer is a practice of meditation; a withdrawal, through some disciplined quietness, into the great chamber of the soul.”⁴⁴

Such a move is not unusual in contemporary philosophy of religion, a revival of which has been evident in both analytic and continental circles. In their introduction to a volume of essays entitled *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, John Caputo and Michael Scanlan note the recent upturn of interest in religion and theology among contemporary continental philosophers. The deconstructionist fascination with what the Enlightenment had “declared off limits” has finally opened up the possibility of reflection about religion. “This was not,” Caputo and Scanlan explain, “the way it was supposed to turn out... on the point of religion,” at least not according to “deconstruction’s more secularizing ...admirers,” who “expected not the loosening up of the Enlightenment but the fulfillment and completion...of Enlightenment secularism.”⁴⁵

Now, how things will turn out regarding God and religion in contemporary continental thought is not at all clear. As Scanlan and Caputo describe it, the religion of deconstruction has no particular content; instead, it replicates the general structure of religion and its form of hope. There is a certain irony involved in deconstruction’s escape from the alleged conceptual abstractions of metaphysics only to find itself advocating a set of religious abstractions and formalisms, derived, but quite distant from, concrete traditions of faith. There is a serious question here as to whether such views are not parasitic upon that residue of religious symbolism from which they derive whatever vitality they possess.

A similar sort of question can be raised with regard to Murdoch’s theory of the good. One can ask whether her mystical practices do not derive their own steadily decreasing vitality from the religious symbols and practices from which they derive their original inspiration. One can also ask whether her account of the Good can make sense of her own practice. In a revealing habit, Murdoch moves back and forth between a Platonic notion of the Good as an impersonal power of attraction and a more Augustinian and Psalmist conception of the Good as a personal voice that beckons alluringly. The Good is not just, as Murdoch puts it, a magnetic centre to which we are drawn; it is also a gift, or rather, it is the source of and beyond every gift we receive, the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

⁴⁴ *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, pp. 419 and 73.

⁴⁵ *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. by John Caputo and Michael Scanlan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 4-5.

A Giver of Gifts is not part of Murdoch's philosophy of the Good. She repudiates the notion that there is some point to the universe independent of it, some transcendent telos that would give meaning to finite, contingent acts and lives. Instead, she acknowledges the sheer pointlessness of virtue. Commenting on Murdoch's position here, Stanley Hauerwas urges that the Christian task is to "see the contingent as 'gift' whose purpose is to praise the creator. Such a task does not mean the otherness of the contingent is obliterated by its place in a larger purpose, but that its contingency can be enjoyed because God so enjoys God's creation."⁴⁶ This, Hauerwas continues, is a

telos of hope that gives us the confidence to believe that we are not fated by our collective or individual pasts. We know that we cannot avoid being creatures of history, but that way of putting the matter presumes we should desire, if possible, an alternative. Such a desire cannot help but appear to the Christian as a sinful attempt to escape our creatureliness. Our only alternative is not a salvation that mystically frees us from history, from our past, but rather an alternative history made possible by a community of people across time who maintain a memory of God's hope for us and for the world.⁴⁷

An appreciation of the encounter with the Good in and through the contingencies of temporal life is prominent both in Murdoch and Anselm. The final words, both of the film *Iris* and of Murdoch's most ambitious philosophical book, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, reiterate her sense of our need, the human need, for the divine, but without recourse to God or revealed religion. In words that unintentionally expose the weakest point in her philosophy of the good, she concludes:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit, whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there, if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

The preponderance of "thy's" and "thou's" in the words of *Psalms 139* bespeaks a personal presence that haunts, thwarts, cajoles, entices, guides, and comforts us. But, as Murdoch herself was well aware, the Good cannot pursue, but only be pursued. Much more than Plato, the Psalms and the writings of Anselm portray love as a devotion to individuals in what Murdoch calls their "unutterable particularity." Murdoch is well aware that we cannot but attempt to articulate or utter the particularity; she is appreciative of the interplay of silence and speech. What she does not see is how this operates in Anselm's discourse about the most unutterable of particulars, God. The inexhaustibility of the good is especially evident in language about God. In our striving toward God, there is an endless number of starting points; Anselm's writings are

⁴⁶ "Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get Through Them If God Does Not Exist?," Hauerwas, in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 204-205.

⁴⁷ "Murdochian Muddles," p. 206.

initiations into the practice of the holy conversation between human and divine. In the multiple ascents and descents between image and exemplar, the contemplation of the mystery of God only deepens our awareness of the mystery of the human person, created to the image and likeness of God. Into this twofold mystery, Anselm immerses us.