Violence and the Language of Virtue:
Political violence, ethical discourse, and moral transformation

By

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon
Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Division of Religion
Ethics and Society

_____
Elizabeth Bounds, Ph.D.
Advisor

_____
Pamela Hall, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Ellen Ott Marshall, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Steven Tipton, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____
Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____
Date

Violence and the Language of Virtue:
Political violence, ethical discourse, and moral transformation

by

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon
M.Div., Harvard University, 2003

Elizabeth M. Bounds, Ph.D., Advisor

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Religion

Atlanta, GA
2015

Abstract

Violence and the Language of Virtue:
Political violence, ethical discourse, and moral transformation

by

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon

Some who survive mass violence feel they have done so only by committing acts previously thought to be immoral. This can leave a lasting change in one's moral subjectivity, so much so that survivors often wonder if they can ever be "good" again. This is an issue for many who pass through violence feeling that they are no longer able to live in society, or even that society or the world can no longer be seen as a place where goodness is possible, however goodness is defined. Political violence can undermine the moral intelligibility of one's world, leaving a residue of doubt and even despair about the possibility of a restored moral ability and a world capable of supporting a meaningful moral life.

This work focuses on ways that we can better understand experiences where political violence and upheaval transform the self as well as society. New vocabularies are needed to articulate what matters most for those caught in contemporary violent conflicts, as current frames do not capture the high moral stakes involved for individuals. Specifically, we need to draw on the moral languages and philosophical anthropologies found in religious ethics and moral philosophy if we are to do justice to these experiences and the high stakes that are involved. I argue that the language of the virtues, in particular, can help us create a thick representation of the self not just as a subject in the world but primarily as a moral subject for whom experience is best understood as moral development through continuous transformation of one's moral subjectivity. Such a resource is not currently available in most discussions of political violence. Virtue discourse, as I will refer to it, will provide the vocabulary and understanding of the self needed to account for and articulate the experience of political violence. Using Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy, and specifically her representation of moral subjectivity as a "field of tension" and a search for the "Good," I create a critical, interpretive framework to better articulate and account for the felt sense of having lost moral ability through the experience of political violence.

Violence and the Language of Virtue:
Political violence, ethical discourse, and moral transformation

by

Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon
M.Div., Harvard University, 2003

Elizabeth M. Bounds, Ph.D., Advisor

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Religion

Atlanta, GA
2015

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the endless help I received as I thought of and then wrote this work. Laney Graduate School at Emory University provided funds to present some of its content at academic conferences, and the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory, its staff and teachers, provided the best home that a doctoral student could ask for. I am grateful to all at Emory University that supported me, who kept the lights on, who changed the lights and swept the floors, and created a space to teach, to explore, and to learn.

I will always wonder how I was blessed with the cohort of colleagues and fellow students in the religion program. I am grateful to them for our conversations and for the comedic breaks. My students, in Emory's Department of Religion, Candler School of Theology, and where I taught at The University of the South gave my writing meaning, whether they knew it or not. Although grateful to all of the faculty, I am especially indebted to Bobbi Patterson, Tara Doyle, Don Seeman, Sara McClintock, and Timothy Jackson for listening to my questions and ideas and providing much appreciated advice. Tara, especially, was generous to me beyond what I think I deserve and first taught me how to engage undergraduate students in learning. And Bobbi is simply a gift to any life that is lucky enough to have welcomed her in. She helped remind me that I am a human and a being with something we might call a soul. The help and care from those who are farther along the path can make all the difference in seeing your journey through.

Before and during my doctoral program, I heard horror stories about programs and dissertation committees. Every day I was aware of how fortunate I was to have the

drinks and food, and kept laughter a central part of life. And, they reminded me of what is truly important and helped me see the world better.

I think of those who are no longer here to share in this, particularly my mother and father, without whom I would not have thought so highly of education. To my brother Tim, with whom I have shared so much, and for his endless encouragement. To Sharon Lydon, the first Lydon doctor, who is an amazing sister-in-law (really, a sister), and a cheerleader whenever I needed one. I can no longer watch *The Sound of Music* and not think of her nor be uplifted.

And to David, my husband, my closest friend, and the love of my life. I waited for you long enough. Let's go.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"...in evil times, life for most people is, or threatens to be, nasty, brutish, and short and *eudaimonia* is something that will be impossible until better times."

Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*

"The concepts of the virtues, and the familiar words which name them, are important since they help to make certain potentially nebulous areas of experience more open to inspection."

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*

Introduction: Violence, Self, and Virtue

> *The rifle butt in the back, and the truck ride to the camp, cause a*
> *distress that cannot be forgotten. That rifle butt shatters everything*
> *civilization has ever accomplished, removes all finer human*
> *sentiments, and wipes out any sense of justice, compassion, and*
> *forgiveness.*[1]

> Zlatko Dizdarević, *Sarajevo: A War Journal*

The above passage is from the diary of Zlatko Dizdarević, an editor of the daily

Sarajevan newspaper, *Oslobodjenje*. This paper was a critical source of news for besieged

Sarajevans during the war in Bosnia-Hercegovina in the 1990s.[2] The quote itself is

specific to that conflict and to the experience of siege and genocide. Yet, it also captures

the more general experience of those who come through political violence only to find

that they and their world - or at least their moral perception of their world - have changed

in important, fundamental ways.

As Dizdarević and others have attested, some who survive mass violence feel they

have done so only by committing acts previously thought to be immoral. This can leave a

lasting change in one's moral subjectivity, so much so that survivors often wonder if they

---

[1] Dizdarević, *Sarajevo*, 54. This quote is taken from a collection of diary entries Dizdarević wrote during the war. Early on in the conflict, rising nationalist leaders took control of media outlets, restricting alternative journalistic sources and feeding propaganda to their people. The siege of Sarajevo, the capital of the newly independent Bosnia-Hercegovina, destroyed much of the civil society infrastructure, including that needed for journalism and news dissemination. *Oslobodjenje* was a rare and important source of information about what was happening both within the city and without. (Wesselingh and Arnaud, *Raw Memory,* 38-39; Besirevic-Regan, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka," 72; Rieff, *Slaughterhouse,* 58) For more on the role of media during the conflict, see Kolsto, Pal, *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflicts.*

[2] For *Oslobodjenje's* role in Sarajevo's resistance to the siege, see Kurspahi, *As Long as Sarajevo Exists.* Dizdarević's diary was eventually published as a record of his work and reflections during the multi-year siege. See Dizdarević, *Sarajevo: A War Journal*.

can ever be "good" again.[3] This is an issue for many who pass through violence feeling

that they are no longer able to live in society, or even that society or the world can no

longer be seen as a place where goodness is possible, however goodness is defined.

Through one's actions or the actions of others, political violence can undermine the moral

intelligibility of one's world, leaving a residue of doubt and even despair about the

possibility of a restored moral ability and a world capable of supporting a meaningful

moral life.

These experiences from survivors of political violence raise serious questions.

What happens when violence changes an individual's moral architecture so dramatically?

What is it that is affected? And how can we talk about such moral transformation in a

way that can illuminate the relationships between violence and subjectivity, of society

and the individual, and our understanding of moral experience and character? These

questions are important not just to survivors and researchers but to society more broadly.

Without an understanding of this aspect of violent conflict, our accounts and real world

practices based on those accounts will misconstrue the enduring challenges confronting

any work that deals with violence, lessening the likelihood of effective interventions and

policies. Indeed, how can such work succeed if we do not fully understand and take into

account the ways in which violence has transformed the very subjectivity and even

intersubjectivity of the individuals and local communities that such work targets?

The moral transformation described affects the ways that individuals perceive

themselves and their world, which in turn affects decision making and the ability to

---

[3] This is a question that arises specifically from Ivana Maček's ethnography of those caught in the wartime siege of Sarajevo. It reflects her articulation of the concern she found among her informants. (Maček, *Siege of Sarajevo*, 6)

imagine new and different futures, thus complexifing post-conflict peacebuilding work. And, further, the experience of survivors who despair of goodness as a potential in themselves or others challenges our own assumptions about society and culture. It can challenge our lived conceptions of character as something that is revealed, not eroded; question what the most profound effects of political violence are for individuals and communities; interrogate our assumptions of what we mean by the *self* and *subjectivity*; and call for a renewed emphasis on the *ethical* or *moral* in our methodologies and inquiries concerning political and social conflict and upheaval.[4]

In the following pages, we will investigate these issues, focusing on ways that we can better understand, as well as better articulate, experiences where political violence and upheaval transform the self as well as society. What I will argue is that we need new vocabularies to articulate what matters most for those caught in contemporary violent conflicts, as current frames do not capture the high moral stakes involved for individuals. Specifically, we need to draw on the moral languages and philosophical anthropologies found in religious and social ethics and moral philosophy if we are to do justice to these experiences and the high stakes that are involved. I argue that the language of the virtues, in particular, can help us create a thick representation of the self not just as a subject in the world but primarily as a *moral* subject for whom experience is best understood as moral development through continuous transformation of one's moral subjectivity. Such a resource is not currently available in most discussions of political violence. Virtue

---

[4] In terms of character, there is already a lively body of literature, involving ethicists and psychologist, arguing whether character in fact even exists. A readily available resource for this conversation is available at Wake Forest University's "The Study of Character" website (www.studyofcharacter.com).

discourse, as I will refer to it, will provide the vocabulary and understanding of the self

needed to account for and articulate the experience of political violence.

Violence and subjectivity

Although concern over how the individual experiences political and social change

is not new to social scientific inquiry, the last several decades have seen an expansion of

studies dedicated to violence, both structural and episodic, as well as the ways in which

violence can transform individuals in negative ways.[5] Terms such as *psychological*

trauma and more recently *moral injury* signal the creation of a vocabulary reflecting

experiences that, undoubtedly quite old, are nevertheless receiving concerted attention

from government, civil society, and academic inquiry. Although the present study does

not investigate the experience of soldiers and veterans, changes in terminology regarding

psychological combat trauma, seen for example in the change from *a soldier's heart* and

combat hysteria in the nineteenth century to *war neurosis* and *shell shock* before and after

World War I respectively to *post-traumatic stress disorder* during the Vietnam War and

after, evince, if nothing else, cultural debates over the effects of policies and narratives on

an individual's ability to cope as a peaceful moral subject within society, once the context

of explicit violence, such as war, has officially ended.[6]

---

[5] For example, the very term "structural violence" was only coined in 1969 and studies into the violence inherent in institutionality found in Foucault and Bourdieu occurred only in the second half of the twentieth century. (Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research") Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which has almost become a colloquial designation, was only added to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1980. (Trimble, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," 5, 12)

[6] Post-traumatic stress disorder was itself a replacement for *post-traumatic neurosis*, which shows not only a move in psychiatry away from the dominance of Freudian psychoanalysis but also to an understanding of such illnesses being caused not from character weakness but from outside events. (Trimble, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," 5-7) Frederick Walker Mott coined *shell shock* in 1919, soon after the end of World War I. (Mott, *War Neuroses and Shell Shock*) *Traumatic neuroses* seems to have been first used around 1884 to describe non-physical symptoms caused by workplace accidents. (Crocq, "From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to PTSD,"

Indeed, the search for vocabulary to reflect the ways that experience of violence

can transform the self has not been limited to veteran experience, however.[7] If we have

learned anything from the social sciences and the evening news over these last many

decades, it is the pervasiveness of violence in society. Terms once created to describe the

experience of war have been employed beyond the battlefield; they have been adopted to

articulate more broadly individual experience with varying forms of violence and the

accompanying violation that can alter one's fear response and view of the world. We can

see this happening, for example, with a term such as *moral injury*, which although coined

only two decades ago, is already expanding beyond its original combat context to

describe issues of structural violence and even everyday moral dilemmas within

professional institutions such as hospitals.[8]

This search for a vocabulary to adequately express and detail the consequences of

violence on the moral and psychic makeup of an individual is an implicit

acknowledgement that we both need and lack such a vocabulary. Again, we can see this

in the example of moral injury, a term which arose in the last two decades to capture the

moral dimension of one's involvement in war, a dimension not adequately captured by

---

[7] Discussions of what we would now call trauma came not only from bloody combat, such as the American Civil War, but also from natural and human-made disasters, such as the increase in train accidents with the rise of the railroad in the nineteenth century, as well as fires and mining accidents. The history of these terms, then, have from their beginning been broader than the experience of the veteran, although they remain intertwined with that experience. (Trimble, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," 5-9)

[8] For examples of how this has been used in other fields extending moral injury beyond wartime and the experience of soldiers, see Dombo, et al., "The Trauma of Moral Injury: Beyond the Battlefield," for an example in social work; for moral injury used describe issues in the nursing profession see Jameton, *Nursing Practice*.

the explanatory power of a term such as *trauma* or *PTSD*.[9] These terms each arise from a

sense that we have neither an adequate vocabulary nor thick enough understandings of

the individual as a dynamically moral being to more fully capture, articulate, and explain

the ways that individuals change and how their moral worldview and self-regard

transform through the experience of political violence.

The search for such terms has largely come from within the social sciences, and

researchers and theorists have used existing frames and concepts within their disciplines

to try to analyze and provide terminology able to illuminate what is happening to

individuals who claim such moral-subjective change. Psychology and psychiatry, for

example, have been central in this, providing the terms cited above, such as trauma, post-

traumatic stress disorder, and now, moral injury.[10] There is, however, a growing sense that

the existing methods and vocabularies from within these fields may not be fully adequate

to accurately reflect and articulate the experience of those who have been transformed by

political violence. Current approaches, then, may be missing a critical aspect of violence,

its dynamics, and its lasting consequences. In particular, there is a growing focus on the

moral dimension of such violence, which terms such as moral injury, moral taint, and in

philosophy, moral remainder illustrate. There is at the same time a question about

---

[9] As the purported coiner of the term writes regarding his rationale for pushing for an understanding of *moral injury*, "For years I have agitated against the diagnostic jargon, Post-Traumatic Stress *Disorder* [italics his], because transparently we are dealing with an injury, not an illness, malady, disease, sickness, or disorder." (Shay, "Casualties," 181)

[10] The term seems to have been coined by psychiatrist Jonathan Shay in his work at the U.S. Veterans Administration, starting with his work with Vietnam veterans. Two seminal works where he develops his understanding include *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*.

whether individual disciplines have the resources available to engage this dimension that informants, such as Dizdarević, claim are so central.

Within psychology, for example, researchers have expressed the worry, shared they say by some therapists, that within the discipline there are few resources for engaging the moral dimension of violence and trauma and that several factors, including training and clinical methodology, obscure attention to the moral dimension of violent experience.[11] Within anthropology, for example, a movement to have a *moral anthropology* or *anthropology of morality* has arisen to make moral terms and norms a more central subject of study.[12] And within sociology, there have been calls to take the normative consequences of research more seriously and even for scholars to embrace such consequences.[13] These are broad trends and the interests and concerns of individual researchers are not all aligned. They do, however, gesture generally toward a common

---

[11] For example, Brett Litz and his co-authors expressed concern, in their writing on moral injury, that issues of moral import and harm are not being sufficiently addressed clinically. They claim that "clinicians and researchers who work with service members and veterans focus most of their attention on the impact of life-threat trauma, failing to pay sufficient attention to the impact of events with moral and ethical implications; events that provoke shame and guilt may not be assessed or targeted sufficiently." This would seem to point to a lacuna in the methodology that obscures moral issues and concerns. They also write, "clinicians who observe moral injury and are motivated to target these problems are at a loss because existing evidence-based strategies fail to provide sufficient guidance." (Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair," 696) This would point to the power of training that also obscures important dimensions.

[12] Anthropologists have had many names for a proposed new subfield dealing with morality. These include moral anthropology (Fassin, "Introduction"), anthropology of virtue (Widlock, "Virtue"), and anthropology of morality (Zigon, *Morality*, "Moral Breakdown"), including those who say there should be no subfield but, instead, there should be a transformed anthropology in general that refocuses on virtue and freedom (Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue*, 1). For a list of anthropologists engaged in this discussion, see Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue,*15. Laidlaw seems to reiterate Andrew Sayer's argument that social theory does not adequately reflect the centrality of concern and evaluation as it is in everyday life. (Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*) While Sayer argues for an approach generally applicable to the social sciences bringing together neo-Aristotelian ethics with a capacities approach and Adam Smith's theory of morality, Laidlaw argues for a renewal specifically of anthropology that place concepts such as freedom, virtue, and responsibility at its heart. This differs from the present project, as with Sayer's, in its lack of a focus on a thick conception of the moral subject and moral development. For a recent overview of these nascent fields, see Heim and Monius, "Recent Work on Moral Anthropology."

[13] Gorski, "Recovered Goods;" Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*. There are traditions already existing in sociology that have already argued for such an approach, including those influenced by sociologist Robert Bellah.

appreciation that something is missing from, or has at least been elided within, social scientific inquiry that is central to human life as experienced.

We can see a specific example in sociologist Andrew Sayer, who has observed that current approaches in the social sciences broadly understood seem to ignore issues of value and morality as irrelevant to inquiry. This comes, he argues, from a "wariness of normative or evaluative discourse" found in ethics and the humanities that "can easily prevent it from understanding what is most important to people."[14] Citing an example of war, Sayer argues that "the scene of the bombed-out village might be described as 'collateral damage,' but that would also fail to describe the enormity of what happened."[15] Such an example stresses the importance of a moral vocabulary, in addition to other lexicons, to articulate what is at stake for human beings in an extremely violent situation and to push back against simplistic assertions of methodological objectivity that can obscure why an event is worthy of attention in the first place.[16] There is currently a widespread disconnect, Sayer argues, between the ways that researchers approach human behavior - as something to be explained - and how most people, including researchers, look at their own actions as something to justify in relationship to other individuals, who are also evaluating our actions and lives.[17] It is worth quoting Sayer at length in this regard:

> ...we are beings whose relation to the world is one of concern. Yet social
> science often ignores this relation and hence fails to acknowledge what is

---

[14] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 3, 6.

[15] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 7.

[16] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 11.

[17] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 13.

most important to people. Concepts such as 'preferences,' 'self-interest,' and 'values' fail to do justice to such matters, particularly with regard to their social character and connection to events and social relations, and their emotional force. Similarly, concepts such as convention, habit, discourses, socialization, reciprocity, exchange, discipline, power, and a host of others are useful for external description but can easily allow us to miss people's first person evaluative relation to the world and the force of their evaluations. When social science disregards this concern, as if it were merely an incidental, subjective accompaniment to what happens, it can produce an alienated and alienating view of social life.[18]

In response to this perceived tendency, Sayer argues for a reorientation of social science methodology and goals so we can find better ways to reflect that central reality of social being, and further, that researchers can do so without compromising their critical point of view.[19] Newer approaches, then, should be able to emphasize the importance of vulnerability and suffering on human life understood as an intersubjective field wherein things matter to individuals and communities.

Sayer is not being categorical, however. Not every social scientist falls within his critique, yet this does not mean that his basic point is invalid.[20] There appear to be structural tendencies in methodology and research practice that steer the researcher away

---

[18] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 2. There is, however, a growing number of sociologists who argue along these lines. Those influenced by Robert Bellah, including the authors of *Habits of the Heart*, have been influential in trying to bring out the important moral traditions in national life, particularly life in the United States. More recently, sociologist Philip Gorski by illustrating the Aristotelian moral discourse inherent in Emile Durkheim's work and its close kinship to modern virtue ethics and ideas of *eudaimonia* to argue through new readings of classical social scientific texts that sociology can and should be concerned with investigating what "the good" is. (Gorski, "Recovered Goods," 78) See also the recent edited volume exploring the importance of virtue ethics to sociology (Flanagan and Jupp, *Virtue Ethics and Sociology*). It is interesting to note that all the works listed here engage these issues while also engaging in questions of religion and often secularity. There seems to be, then, a retrieval of both a concern with what is good as well as with religion at the same time and even in the same movement, two areas that central trends in social inquiry have sidelined. Tavory, not unlike Widlok in anthropology, is looking at moral action, and particularly understandings of virtue, to be able to compare moral action across "sociohistorical cases." (Tavory, "The Question of Moral Action," 273)

[19] As we will see, this is very similar to anthropologist Arthur Kleinman's sense of *moral* and how it works in his work. (Kleinman, "'Everything that Really Matters;'" "Experience and its Moral Modes")

[20] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 9-10.

from examining the ways in which the moral life - however a particular culture or individual defines it - and in particular, the integrity of such a moral life, is central to the stakes involved in political violence for those who experience such violence. The concern that Sayer gestures toward, however, is even more urgent in that he defines the problem not only in terms of potential blind spots in the social sciences but also raises the question about whether these disciplines currently have the resources to respond effectively to their critiques.

We can begin to see this issue in more concrete detail by returning to the example of the Bosnian war. Much has been written on this conflict and on the related conflicts associated with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Such work has focused on the economic aspects of the war and its causes. Other examples of such research have looked at the history of the region, while still others have focused on the struggle for political power before and during the war, as well as the ways in which political and state institutions tended certain outcomes over others.[21] If we turn to Dizdarević's quote, however, we can see he is not describing the stakes of the conflicts in such terms.

According to Dizdarević, the values or practices that make social life possible, such as *compassion* and *forgiveness*, have been destroyed. That which one can be proud of in their community has been eliminated. The causes of such moral and relational devastation can, of course, be seen as having economic causes at their root, as there was a

---

[21] A selection includes: Malcolm, *Bosnia: A History*; Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*; Waller, *Becoming Evil;* Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia;* Vulliamy, *Seasons in Hell*; Perica, *Balkan Idols*; Ali and Lifschultz, eds., *Why Bosnia?*; Ramet, *Balkan Babel*; Ramet, *Social Currents in Eastern Europe;* Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism*; Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*; Norman, *Genocide in Bosnia*; Mojzes, ed., *Religion and the War in Bosnia*; Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed;* Allen, *Rape Warfare*; Campbell, "Violence, Justice, and Identity in the Bosnian Conflict."

great deal of economic decline that helped precipitate the conflicts.[22] We can also see in this causal, historical elements, as the push and pull between large empires in the region helped create cleavages that would open up under the pressures Yugoslavia experienced at the end of the Cold War. And the way Yugoslavia was set up - where the central state power argued for a larger, Yugoslav identity, and yet organized its constituent states along the lines of nationalities - can be seen from a sociological and political science viewpoint as central to the ways that such nationalities were able to rebut the supranational Yugoslav identity and, in the end, succeed in creating nation states out of the multinational Yugoslavia.[23]

Yet Dizdarević, a celebrated journalist aware of such conditions and causations, decries in moral terms what has been lost, turning to morally significant concepts and vocabulary to express what is at stake in the war, instead of using social science discourse and explanations such as those above. The language he uses is moral, appealing to important virtues and values now lost. "Justice, compassion and forgiveness" - these are virtues that were sacrificed, virtues that were plundered, in the course of the war,

---

[22] Perica, *Balkans Ghosts*, 308-9; Ramet, *Social Currents in Eastern Europe*, 374, 414.

[23] Brubaker compares the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia to detail just how ethnicity figured in the legal and political structures of those states. Both were multiethnic states that institutionalized, so to speak, national identity in regional political bodies, all the while pushing for a larger, meta-identity above nationhood. Titoist Yugoslavia advocated for a countrywide "South Slav" ethnic identity to unite the different ethnic groups, but the codification and institutionalization of ethnic identity in the constitution and the regional government undermined this effort. Brubaker argues that for both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, this approach to ethnicity within its political structure created the form of the conflict and the manner of the their respective breakup. After the dissolution of each country, the ethnically-defined constituent republics constituted the form of the new, successor nations. Smaller ethnic groups that were not institutionalized and given their own constituent republics during the Yugoslav and Soviet eras did not have the institutions necessary to contest, at least in the near term, the new national boundaries that emerged after the two countries broke up. Brubaker states, however, that these institutional and organizational formations did not necessarily cause the conflict; they simply prescribed the form of that breakup and the new political structures. Also, the Soveit identitiy, unlike that of the Yugslav identity, was political, not ethnic. (See Brubaker 1996, 64-65, 70, 73).

sacrificed in the very acts of trying to survive. There is a feeling here of betrayal and anger but also mourning, itself an inherently moral stance toward experience and the world.

We can see this even more powerfully in the concluding lines of the journal passage I quoted. Dizdarević ends his journal entry with a grim prediction: "Whatever the ultimate fate of several thousand uprooted Sarajevans turns out to be, their deportation has extinguished all gentle and humanitarian feelings in tens of thousands of their fellow citizens. Evil has multiplied in the worst way."[24] The author is talking about a loss not only in economic productivity, and not even just in lives. He speaks of the loss of the ability to embody moral values - virtues - necessary for social cohesion, for a community to be a community. He describes the dissolution of hope, and in particular, the hope of expressing kindness and having that expression returned, kindly, and in kind. It is the loss of a moral world, and in some extreme cases, even the loss of the possibility of a moral world.

The power of Dizdarević's analysis does not lie in his objectivity nor his ability to stand back from the experience of war. Instead, the power comes from his felt experience of the conflict and how it has affected his society. It is a profoundly moral analysis, if we understand moral in Sayer's sense of what matters deeply to a person. Dizdarević is able to begin showing others why economics and social and political peace are important, as they enable the interpersonal experience that Dizdarević now mourns as lost. Such macro

---

[24] Dizdarević, *Sarajevo*, 54. For example, both the Croatian foreign ministry and the government of Herceg-Bosna,which was a breakaway region in southern Bosnia-Hercegovina, attempted to deport more than 10,000 Muslim men in 1992. Within one summer, 45,000-50,000 Muslims had been "cleansed" from the Mostar area alone. (Vulliamy, *Seasons in Hell,* 323)

analyses, then, are important not so much in themselves but because they show how disruptions in economics and politics and society affect the lived experience of individuals and communities and what is of most concern to them. Dizdarević is able to illustrate what some of the central stakes were for those surviving the political violence through moral terminology, stakes that would have been missed through analyses using different languages.

Another example that can illuminate the importance of moral vocabulary, also from the Bosnian war, is from the ethnographic work of anthropologist Ivana Maček, who conducted fieldwork in Sarajevo during the war in the 1990s. Maček argues that many Sarajevans besieged in the capital during the war were afraid not just for their lives or loved ones but were fearful of how the violence and conditions imposed by the war were transforming their moral being. Maček writes:

> The preoccupation with normality reflected Sarajevans' utmost fear and their utmost shame: that in coping with the inhumane conditions of war, they had also become dehumanized and that they might be surviving only by means they would previously have rejected as immoral. Had they become psychologically, socially, and culturally unfit to live among decent people?[25]

What Maček heard in the midst of the violence was a concern not just over survival, as important as that was, but over the quality of that survival. There was a fear among her informants that they were losing touch with who they once were. They were changing, and in doing so, they were losing contact with the ability not just to live in a certain way but to be a certain type of person. This concern, expressed in terms of anxiety with *normality,* articulates a concern with the loss of a world, a world in which certain

---

[25] Maček, *Sarajevo under Siege*, 6.

cherished norms and ideals and visions of the human are possible. In the midst of violence, one of the key stakes was not just survival but the survival of the possibility of living into certain norms and visions of the human being - in other words, one's own survival as a being capable of being moral in a certain way.

Both Dizdarević and Maček are helpful here because they present, first, the stakes of violence as many of those who experience such violence understand them, as well as the importance of a moral language and analysis for bringing them forward. They help us see in a more graphic way the critiques of the social sciences by Sayer and others, providing real-life examples in methodological discussions that can become too abstract. And, they help in that they demonstrate the concerns of survivors, which should prompt researchers to make sure such concerns are reflected in their work and affect their methodologies, and if not, to explore the reasons for such an omission.

Again, this is not a categorical critique. On the contrary, I would suggest that there are specific groups of scholars actively interested in broadening methodology and inquiry to reflect these concerns and issues. A particular subfield in anthropology has made significant progress not just in discussing issues of morality but in making the experience of subjects caught in transformation central to social scientific inquiry. Although representing a loose grouping of scholars and projects, the focus on violence and subjectivity nevertheless gestures toward a family of shared concerns among several scholars that aims to better understand the ways that violence, understood broadly to include structural and more everyday forms, can transform subjectivities. The work of anthropologists such as Joan and Arthur Kleinman, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Philippe

Bourgois, Begoña Aretxaga, Veena Das, and others, have investigated ways that violence in its various forms help constitute and transform subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Their work finds cognates in other fields, such as feminist and post-colonial studies, as well as post-structuralism, and these researchers draw on various methods and fields, from psychoanalytic theory to analytic philosophy, to help illuminate these phenomena.[26]

Such work is important, as these researchers have helped delineate an all too common form of suffering and have begun to provide methodologies that can better reflect the change to character and identity that has occurred. In anthropology, especially, work in violence and subjectivity has resulted in an approach that helps us better inquire into the issues we have so far sketched. Important elements of this approach include an emphasis on local networks and communities; on everyday experience, sometimes referred to as *the ordinary,* as that which one lives day to day and through which all of the larger, more global events and trends are mediated; the inherent vulnerability of being a social being; and advocating for the central importance of experience to social scientific inquiry. What has been key to these writers in aggregate, then, is that the embodied individual is impacted by violence as a dynamic subject, one already shot through with social structure and histories and cultural narratives, and where new events and violence

---

[26] A seminal scholar in this regard is, of course, Michel Foucault, and his works such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish* study how institutional practices affect the construction of subjectivity. Others who have been influenced by such work include post-colonial authors who seek to show the ways in which colonialism and imperialism are in very significant ways projects of the creation of colonial *subjects*. We can see this in Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* and work by Gayatri Spivak. Franz Fanon's main works interestingly predate and anticipate Foucault, and had an impact on French philosophers, such as Jean Paul Sartre. His *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* explore the creation of colonial subjects, looking in *The Wretched of the Earth* how settler colonialism created intersubjectivities between settlers and colonized whose history and composition, based on violence, thus necessitated, according to Fanon, a violent decolonization. Others, such as Elaine Scarry, have researched the ways in which specific experiences of violence, such as torture, can transform subjectivity. (Scarry, *The Body in Pain*) This is only a selection of authors that point to a broader interest of the relationships of violence and the constitution of the self.

transform not only one's psyche, as it were, but also the social foundations of one's self found in community, institutions, practices, etc. They take seriously the imbedded nature of the embodied self as a nexus of complex events and forces that make up who we are from moment to moment and day to day. And so, they also take seriously how radical changes to culture, society, and politics through violence can alter one's very makeup through the alteration of the makeup of one's surroundings.

These approaches, then, necessitate the use of terms such as *subject* and *subjectivity* to describe the human individual and her experience, as opposed to terms such as *self* or *being* or *ego*. Subjectivity includes in its definition an understanding of the self, if you will, as highly conditioned by history, culture, politics, and social structure to a greater extent than the histories other terms such as *self* and *being*. Further, the structural and social context inherent in subjectivity's definition and history make it important to a study of violence and subjectivity. Such a study requires an understanding of the human individual as highly conditioned as we are discussing how violent changes in those conditions transform the subject. And this is an understanding that the frame of *subject* and *subjectivity* can provide. As we will see in later chapters, subjectivity is so conceived as to accommodate such an understanding of the human individual, and so, is a helpful frame for investigating such issues as the intersection of violence and the self, as the anthropologists above attest. Subjectivity, then, for these reasons and for many of the above researchers, is seen as the frame that can best reflect the lived experience of violence.

This anthropological research, then, emphasizes the inherently moral dimension of ethnography as it engages human life, relationships, and organization. Like Sayer, they are concerned with what matters to people, as well as how what matters comes to matter to people.[27] In other words, at the heart of these projects is an account of the moral life.

Although not necessarily employing terms such as *moral* or *good*, or any other first or second order ethical language, these works attempt to make sense of human life as lived together, including how people grow, how they learn, their hatred, anger, love, as well as the limits of what is acceptable and what is not. What they gesture toward in advocating for an emphasis in social science on experience and on local networks is that even for researchers and projects that intentionally reject all talk of the moral or ethics, such work remains inherently moral because what they are describing are lives, arrangements, and data that are experienced by informants themselves as generally first and foremost morally significant. And for these reasons such inquiries will always have strong, if not central, moral significance for those whose lives are the object of study.

Limitations of current approaches

Given this focus on the moral life, it is appropriate to ask whether these works provide an adequate account to capture the subjective moral dimension of political violence. I suggest that a problem arises when the inherent moral dimension of such work is elided. Such elision can be quite unintentional, coming from the methodological assumptions and approaches employed and the potential for such approaches to identify, frame, and articulate the moral dimension of violent experience. Even so, such lacunae

---

[27] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*.

can limit the success of understanding the way that violence affects subjectivity and

displaces the centrality of those actually experiencing the effects of political violence.

An important example, Arthur Kleinman, has been particularly seminal in work

on violence and subjectivity, both in bringing together likeminded researchers as well as

developing such concepts as the *local*, concepts that we will engage constructively in the

following chapters.[28] For Kleinman, humans live on the local level of social existence,

but as we will see, this local level is not just geographic but is generatively normative. He

refers specifically to *local moral worlds* to stress that it is within these networks of

relationships where our ideals and moral worldviews are developed. It is the

phenomenological level where experience occurs, making for Kleinman a necessary

connection between experience and the moral. Indeed, it is not just a connection, but an

intertwining and even an understanding of the local as the place where experience

(understood as the subjective, embodied (felt) interaction with and between self and

world, mediated through already existing memories, histories, cultural narratives, and

social structures that creates an always transforming and transformative worldview and

ethos) and moral codetermine one another.[29] As Kleinman argues, "Experience (including

its sociosomatic interconnections) is innately moral, because it is in local worlds that the

---

[28] Das et al., *Remaking a World*; Das et al., *Violence and Subjectivity;* Kleinman et al., *Social Suffering*; Kleinman et al., *Deep China*.

[29] This is similar to Kleinman's own definition: "Experience may, on theoretical grounds, be thought of as the intersubjective medium of social interactions in local moral worlds. It is the outcome of cultural categories and social structures interacting with the psychophysiological process such that a mediating world is constituted. Experience is the felt flow of that intersubjective medium." (Kleinman, *Writing at the Margins*, 97)

relational elements of social existence in which people have the greatest stake are played out."[30]

One can get a sense from this description how central Kleinman has been in the effort to reorient ethnographies to attend to the inherent moral dimension of experience. Yet even with Kleinman, there is a limit to how well his framework can actually give voice to those experiencing violence and can help us understand exactly what is occurring when a survivor of violence claims they have lost the ability to be "good." Even though he appeals to the term *moral* and focuses on experience as inherently moral, he lacks the vocabulary - we might specifically say the second-order vocabulary - to build on this and actually flesh out what such experience is like.

These limits become apparent when Kleinman discusses specific cases. For example, in laying out his idea of experience in his article, "Everything that Really Matters," he draws on research conducted with his wife and collaborator Joan Kleinman on the psycho-somatic illness of Chinese individuals who had survived the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. The Kleinmans draw on their informants's specific bodily complaints to better illustrate to the reader how symptoms and emotions that may seem straightforwardly medical in nature, such as dizziness and exhaustion, can actually be evidence of intersubjective dynamics and be a response to political realities and pressures. His informants, traumatized by the Cultural Revolution, were not permitted by the Communist Party or the state to criticize that period of history, and so, they could not express the profound trauma of those times on their lives and the lives of their loved

---

[30] Kleinman, "Everything that Really Matters," 327.

ones. The Kleinmans describe times when some of these individuals came together in small groups and, instead of politically critiquing the state from the basis of their experience, their individual traumas would manifest themselves as a shared, medical trauma. On a broader scale, the Kleinmans argue that suppression of expression turned to physical ailments, which in their aggregate affected society at large, showing how unjust silence could lead to social malaise.

For example, one such informant might be severely depressed from the fact that she could not express what they had experienced and felt, a suppressed suffering that would manifest as *dizziness* and *exhaustion.* As the Cultural Revolution affected the entirety of the country, such feelings had a collective effect and manifested in the body politic, resulting in the "devitalization of social institutions and networks."[31] The Kleinmans argue, then, that such symptoms may reflect medical needs, but more importantly, they also reflect political upheavals, the experience of which such individuals could not talk about easily in the open due to the authoritarian nature of their government.[32]

This is a fascinating read on symptomatology and its connection to political life, yet in a work looking at the importance of the local and the moral - and of the frame, *local moral worlds* - Kleinman does not directly discuss such symptoms as possible indicators of changed moral subjectivity or ability. His theoretical vocabulary, so good at illustrating how different areas of human life and experience are interconnected, as well

---

[31] Kleinman, "Everything that Really Matters," 325.

[32] Kleinman, "Everything that Really Matters," 325. See also "How Bodies Remember." See also a work focusing on moral subjectivity and modern transitions, which Kleinman helped edit, called *Deep China.*

as the somatic effects of political upheaval, lacks terms that could bring out the moral

contours of that experience.[33] Kleinman has at his disposal terms such as *moral* and

concern but he is lacking the more elaborate and elaborated upon vocabulary found in

ethics or philosophy referring to types of morality, to moral development, ends, justice,

teleology, character, habit, disposition, and goods. Indeed, we have a description of one's

experience as dizzying, exhausting, devitalizing, but how was this affecting one morally?

When the individuals come together within a local moral world, how was the sense of

their own morality changed? How did the Cultural Revolution change their sense of

goodness and their relationship to it? And if they changed, what in them changed that

resulted in a transformed moral self?

I am tempted to say that these questions are simply not Kleinman's and that

putting them critically to his article is not only less than charitable but a misread of a

researcher's intentions. I resist that temptation, however, because of the stress that

Kleinman himself has placed on the "inherently moral" nature of political experience.

Indeed, in the article just discussed, Kleinman describes his informants' experiences as

relational in nature, occurring in "a family, a network, a neighborhood, a community."[34]

Such relationships are at the heart of what makes one's morality and are the elements that

constitute one's *local moral worlds*. Participation in the life of family, of community, is to

participate in and eventually internalize the creation, negotiation, and contestation of

---

[33] For Kleinman, morality is largely an emotional affair. He talks about "what really matters," and in giving examples, he talks about people who feel better during an illness ("moral regeneration") as well as the uplifting feel of listening to a piece of classical music. It can also be connected with an experience of suffering during disease where change is not welcome but is a harbinger of increased pain. (Kleinman, "'Everything that Really Matters,'" 330)

[34] Kleinman, "'Everything that Really Matters,'" 326.

values and what matters in life. Yet, the moral dimension of this experience is left
unexplored and unarticulated.

Such a gap is not limited to Kleinman, however. Ivana Maček, whom I discussed
concerning the issue of normality among the besieged in Sarajevo, also raises related
questions with similar limitations. One worry that Maček often heard was the individual's
concern at having lost her old life. This worry, Maček writes, was usually articulated in a
colloquial discourse of *normality*. She heard the concern about normality from her
informants often and witnessed it throughout the city. Maček, for example, includes a
picture in her work of graffiti sprayed on a wall in Sarajevo that reads, "Nobody here is
normal."[35] Some of her informants called the *imitation of life* the experience of living
under siege, how it seemed so strange from the vantage point of their pre-war lives as to
be not real but a simulacrum of a once experienced reality.[36] The loss of normality her
informants describe did not just mean loss of employment or even residence, however. It
represented a loss in moral ability and moral status as a good person and citizen,
something that Maček is keen to recognize and explain.[37] *Normal* carried a "moral
charge" and "pertained not only to the way of life people felt they had lost but also to a
moral framework that might guide their actions. Normality not only communicated the
social norms held by the person using it but also indicated her or his ideological
position."[38]

_____

[35] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 6.

[36] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 9.

[37] Maček, *Sarajevo under Siege*, 5-6.

[38] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 5.

This experience of normality and, by extension, abnormality was an experience articulated by many during and after the war.[39] Such experience could be so extreme as to seem absurd to those going through it. In one grim episode, underscoring the unwelcome irony of the siege, a busy market was bombed in Sarajevo on the tenth anniversary of the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics. As the bodies were buried in an Olympic practice field next to an Olympic hall, the newest games were celebrating their opening ceremonies in Lillehammer, Norway, watchable on television.[40] For a city that considered itself European and cosmopolitan, a pride embodied in being an Olympic city, such an irony became a symbol of lost pride, the loss of those characteristics that had made them who they were.[41]

Yet, in trying to explain the experiences of her informants, and in trying to articulate its meaning, Maček's account also suffers from a lack of moral language that could fully give voice not only to these experiences but also account for what exactly changed for individuals. She is no doubt right that violence does disturb norms as it can also sharpen the need to fight for them. And she describes brilliantly the precariousness

---

[39] Maček is not the only one to encounter such expressions. Journalist Barbara Demick, who also lived in Sarajevo for large stretches during the war, reported that people she met were very eager to show her pictures of vacations in Europe and the nice clothes they had. They were intent on showing that they had not always lived holed away and scrounging for their daily existence. They wanted to demonstrate that how they appeared during the war, and how they acted, was not who they really were. (Demick, *Lugovina Street*, xxxi.)

[40] Demick, *Logavina Street*, xxxii. I spoke with survivors informally who said how some people had thought, at the beginning of the war, that window drapes could block or slow bullets in their flight, only to discover that the snipers' bullets could pass through the very walls of the apartment. The walls, once so real, became as solid as thin air. This example also shows the drastically changed worlds - pre-war and during the war - that people inhabited, where before some knew next to nothing about weapons, and where later, people could recognize the type of weapon being fired by the sound alone.

[41] The remains of the Olympic structures are now in ruins, harmed by the war and left untended. This is graphically displayed in recent photographs of the sites. See Lipman, Ryan. "Is this the fate that awaits Sochi?" *Daily Mail Online.* February 27, 2014. Web. July 30, 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2568978/Decaying-rotting-Just-30-years-Sarajevo-hosted-Winter-Olympic-Games-remains-bullet-sprayed-ruins-overrun-weeds-covered-graffiti-years-war.html>

that such violence creates in the foundations of one's faith in the moral coherence of the world, as well as its potential for meaning. There is, however, no vocabulary presented, no understanding of the human, to explain sufficiently how exactly this comes to be and what exactly about the individual changes.[42]

This may not have been Maček's goal, and her work has been important for me in thinking through the work contained in these pages. Indeed, Maček's writing, as well as other research on the war in Bosnia, was the impetus for my interest in violence and moral transformation, as it is a conflict that produced a great deal of analyses and reflections that allude to the loss of moral being and ability. The importance of moral experience and the loss of cherished norms that made the world meaningful, leaving individuals and communities to scramble to try to scratch together new meaning, is clearly central to Maček's study. Her informants talk about a loss of being able to be good people, an issue that, again, is foundational for her work.[43]

In particular, Maček describes how her informants tried to make sense of the war, and yet, how just as often they would fail in their attempts.[44] To help make sense of this,

---

[42] Maček makes this search of language for the experience of the war central to her work, which she frames in terms of "limit situations." "The problem of describing a 'limit situation,' of finding words for the incomprehensible and inexplicable situations that Sarajevans encountered in daily life, followed our work from the start." (Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 30) To provide more theoretical explication for her informant's experiences, Maček brings to it terms from Holocaust research and writings, such as Primo Levi's grey zone, and talks about the humiliation of having no power over one's life. (Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 66-70) She also documents the ways the besieged resisted indignities by trying to hold on to the aesthetics and routines of prewar life, through the use of humor, and the creation of pride by overcoming wartime obstacles. And Maček compiles this evidence to argue for violence as the key source of the dissolution of ethical systems as opposed to, say, competition. (Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 6-7, 88-89) But this method does not include a further frame based on a moral language to explicate the moral dimensions of *normality*, which is an inherently moral term.

[43] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 6.

[44] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 4.

she describes three "different modes of perceiving the war."[45] Each mode is based on the ways in which individuals during the war dealt with the loss of meaning that came with the collapse of social norms that they had once taken for granted. These were the "civilian," a form of denial where individuals "had thought impossible that the social norms they had thought secure collapse." There is a lag, in other words, between the collapse of a world and one's ability to acknowledge it, let alone live into this new knowledge. The second mode was the "soldier mode." The individual in this mode would turn to one of the "warring sides," which would provide them not only with protection but also help one achieve some modicum of meaning by filling the absence of meaning with an ideology or a moral account of the war. "The soldier mode," she writes, "offers a moral rationale for conflict, making the destruction and killing seem necessary and even acceptable." The last mode is that of the "deserter," where one refutes the dividing lines and ideologies of the war and try to find "some small measure of humanity" within the war by trying to be a responsible individual doing one's moral best within a situation that is worst humanity has to offer.[46]

These modalities form an interesting framework for naming different ways that individuals dealt with the fundamental shake up of their society and worldview. It helps make clearer the multiple ways in which individuals would act, but even more, named different stances that could change or that could overlap, helping to demonstrate how a person could perceive the war one way in the morning and perhaps in a very different

---

[45] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 4-5.

[46] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 5.

way in the afternoon.[47] This analysis, however, does not include an explicit psychology or understanding of the human that would allow a thicker understanding of what is happening to persons caught in such devastation and absence of meaning. What is it about moral development and character that allows for such quick changes during wartime? Character and identity imply a degree of stability that Maček's characterization problematizes. How is that alleged stability disrupted? Maček's terms, although not without utility, do not in the end say much about the mechanics of how subjectivity changes in the face of violence. Maček does argue that violence changes social norms, which makes meaning making difficult for individuals.[48] What it is about the human that changes, and which gives rise to the modalities she describes, is not, however, addressed.

This is explained by the fact that a central thesis of Maček's work is to show that individuals at the start of the war adopted nationalist identities and ideologies out of fear and the threat of violence, only to slowly relinquish such identities over the course of the war as their personal experiences lessened the power such identities originally had.[49] Her three modalities help to track this dynamic as they can show how one could change from confusion, to the false consolation of ethnonationalism, to a more personal, responsible take on what the war was really about. This is a normative arch that favors the "deserter" modality as one that more accurately reflected the experience of violence. As far as the project to focus on "constructing an account of what happened to people on the ground because this is the basic knowledge that we generally lack," Maček's work is helpful, as

---

[47] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 5.

[48] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 6-7.

[49] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 213.

is Kleinman's, in laying certain foundations.[50] It is not able, however, to deepen this account of "what happened to people on the ground" in order to discuss what about the human being is being lost and what is it that such experience so detrimentally affects in the individual. This is not just a critique but the delineating of a point from which further inquiry can be fruitfully engaged. It raises an important question, that is, how can we speak of such experiences and their consequences in ways that build on the important work like Maček's so we can better understand the lasting injuries of violence and its possible longterm effects on the future of societies?

Maček and Kleinman are examples of works that explicitly inquire into the way that violence changes the self, particularly the moral self, and yet lack a robust moral vocabulary - including second-order terms and first order terms alongside concepts such as *normality* - that could provide such content and give a more robust account of what it is like to transform, quite rapidly, as a moral subject in the midst of violence. With such a vocabulary, one could add more substance to terms such as *local moral worlds* and *normality*, thus grounding them in understandings of the human person that remain unexplored. Although exceptional in most respects, these works nevertheless still lack the important account of the individual as a moral subject to make such an account viable as a critical interpretive frame that could more fully bring out the moral dimension of and stakes involved in the war's violence. Without a rich understanding of moral subjectivity and a vocabulary to describe such subjectivity, these studies lack, in the midst of their successes, a deeper account of the experience of moral *abnormality* and experiences of

---

[50] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, xi-xii.

local moral worlds when such worlds turn horrific. And without understanding the phenomenology of what is lost, we cannot fully understand that loss and the stakes and dynamics of conflict on the local level. We end up, instead, speaking of individuals without a fuller moral philosophical anthropology, and so, without the resources to conceptualize them more deeply as moral subjects who are suffering from the loss of an ability to be "good."

Virtue and the experience of violence

Why, however, is such an account so important? The answer has to do largely with methodology, and as a result, the work that will follow in these pages is primarily methodological in purpose. If we are to look at political violence and truly understand what is at stake and how such violence will affect societal futures, we need understand not only the economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions, causes, and consequences of such violent conflicts. We also need to understand how individuals experience such violence and how it transforms individual subjects. As we have already seen, these are inherently moral issues, and so, we need to understand the moral dimensions of such violence, in particular. Without this, we are missing an entire level, and a fundamental one, of social action and phenomena, of what is valued and how those values change, which will skew our understanding of events and our expectations of the future.

Further, such a level is inaccessible without the testimony of those who have experienced political violence. This is important, because survivors embody such experience and, whether through words or through bodily physiology and phenomenological or epistemic symptomatology, are the only bearers of such experience.

Such experiences are tantamount to information about the nature of violence, the experience of violence, and what it is like for violence to transform one to the core. They represent, then, the potential for something critical to say about political violence and its effect on one's moral selfhood. As a result, such individuals have an inherent epistemic privilege. As bearers of this experience, they are in a unique place to tell others what the highest stakes involved in political violence and contention are.[51]

This does not mean, however, that such a privilege translates into an authoritative expression or mastery. The experience of political violence is often unspoken for differing reasons. As we have seen from Kleinman's work in post-Cultural Revolution China, this can include trauma and continuing political violence that threatens those who speak. Instead, survivors can articulate their histories of violence, either consciously or unconsciously, in terms of trauma, illness, and other symptoms, and when they express their experience verbally, they may not have a vocabulary to fully represent the depth of the moral stakes involved.[52]

We can see an example of what I mean by returning to Ivana Maček's work on the Bosnian War. Maček's informants themselves were struggling to find the words to fully articulate the stakes involved in what they were sensing as a loss of something central to

---

[51] I am indebted here to feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* writers who have collectively argued that experience be an important ground for scholarship. Such names include, in theological ethics and religious studies, Ada María Isasi-Diaz, Beverly Harrison, Katie Cannon, Emily Townes, as well as many others.

[52] As discussed previously, illness can be implicit, though subtle and politically safe, political critique of the regime and its policies, what Kleinman and Kleinman call the "sociosomatics of resistance and delegitimation." (Kleinman and Kleinman, "How Bodies Remember") Pain is also an example of the different ways that the experience of political violence can be expressed, in addition to verbal articulation. See also Kleinman, et. al., *Deep China*.

who they were.[53] Key here is Maček's account of the concern for *normality.* Individuals

did not have a vocabulary to fully explicate this concern, but they were nevertheless

motivated and even driven by emotions such as shame, worry, fear, maybe resentment, all

communicating that they had fallen from something called normality. Something

important was lost that needed to be recovered, and much of life during the siege, as

Maček recounts it, was taken up with activity related to being "normal."

This normality is essentially a word to refer to an idealized world that was lost, as

well as the anxiety that one no longer was able to live in that world. Normal was life in

pre-conflict Bosnia with its routines, standards of dress and behavior, but also

importantly a life where one felt that they could live as basically good persons. It was, in

other words, a world that made sense on multiple levels. The feeling that one is no longer

normal or a good person is felt deeply, yet it is not necessarily something that can be put

easily into words. One can experience it more as a sensation, a mood, a loss of motivation

or trajectory, a location, an inhabitation, a haunting. The survivor can continue with life,

unable to express to someone outside that experience that a profound change has

occurred. What they do have are the bodily feelings and cognitively-tied emotions that

make one's self and one's world feel quite different than before. It is largely the emotions

that tell one something is wrong, even if such knowledge needs to be interpreted further.

Another of Maček's passages further reflects the difficulty of those who

experienced the violence to give an account of that very experience:

> People who could easily give me a sophisticate political analysis one day
> would the very next day express bewilderment and ask me to explain to

---

[53] Maček writes specifically of Sarajevans's "repeated, though often futile, efforts to make sense of the disturbing and irrational situations in which they found themselves." (Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 4)

them why all this was happening. Something that had made sense could suddenly become meaningless; what had momentarily seemed normal could crumble into nothingness.[54]

This is important, as Maček is calling attention to a central aspect of the loss of goodness and moral ability to which her informants and others going through violence have testified. Something about this experience is deteriorative to meaning, to norms, to the comprehensibility of one's life, and seems to exceed one's common vocabulary for grasping it.

With such experience, there remains only potential articulation without the words to reflect the importance of what one has witnessed, seen, and felt. As we can see from Maček's example, we are not always, and perhaps rarely, transparent to ourselves. Kleinman's informants, as well, turned to a vocabulary of physical trauma in an effort to express what they could not express and very well may not have fully understood, as a result. We may well, and may often, struggle to find a vocabulary to express new experiences, particularly ones that feel rupturing and that alienate one from their own world, as in political violence. And in this process, we are not only interpreting our experience to others but making sense of it to ourselves, becoming a process of self-knowledge.

We are dealing, then, with difficult matters, a difficulty that is felt by both researchers and informants. What we require, then, is an understanding of the individual as primarily a moral subject for whom events and experience are first and foremost moral matters, that is, that their impact is felt in that they affect one's worldview and moral

---

[54] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 9.

development. The vocabulary needed, then, needs to be capable of reflecting such experience and articulating the meaning of experience in moral terms. Moral here means not just issues of right and wrong but, as Charles Taylor might articulate it, more robustly as an orientation to what makes life worth living.[55] I would expand on this somewhat and describe moral as understood as orientation toward goodness, however that is understood, and the development that enables one to live a life aimed at goodness, embodied in particular images of the human and other horizons, and directed away from the vicious and vicious, unvirtuous images of the human. It reflects, as Bernard Williams has said about Socrates, the primary concern of individuals over who they are, whom they want to be, and how to be in the world and toward others.[56] It is an understanding of the moral dimension of experience, what is often called the *moral life*, that is not reduced to a code or rules but focuses on orientation, images and symbols, narratives, horizons, gestures, meaning, and embodied practice that create a life and one's understanding of their life and its meaning.

This is of particular concern to the social sciences and related methodology because such an important dimension of human life will be obscured, and even when recognized, very difficult to conceptualize and engage effectively without an appropriate frame. Without appropriate terms and images that reflect the above criteria, researchers will try to hit a target with the wrong instrument and may not even appreciate the target's existence. Would a sociologist, for example, be expected to account for the rise of nongovernmental organizations without a vocabulary of institutions, politics, and social

---

[55] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 4.

[56] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 1.

development? Would we expect a medical researcher to account for changes in physiology without a rich, specialized vocabulary that arises from many centuries of medical discussion, debate, inquiry, and refinement that was focused on the body? These examples illustrate that it makes no sense to investigate issues of moral concern - of concern to individuals and their intimate relationships - without a vocabulary and understanding of the self designed to speak to such a dimension of experience and social life. And they also illustrate that, without the availability of such frames, an aspect of violence and subjectivity that survivors claim is central is in danger of being marginalized, devalued, or elided in the midst of good faith work.

Luckily, there are such vocabularies and conceptions, although we need to look to philosophical and religious ethical traditions to find them. Such traditions have over centuries and millennia debated issues of the human subject and how one should be and act in the world. They are, then, a likely source, and rich ones at that, for helping fill the methodological gap identified. And it is one such frame, that of virtue, that I will argue for and develop throughout this inquiry.

Andrew Sayer adopts many of the features of a neo-Aristotelian understanding of *ethical being*, which focuses on practical reasoning and an understanding of values as

grounded in dispositions.[57] The main point for Sayer is "understanding ethics or morals in everyday life" and to create a framework that can illuminate social life beyond a rationalist account to one that is, instead, grounded in an understanding of human action and motivation that is primarily concerned with well-being and significance.[58] Indeed, we can see in this well-being a form of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. In the end, however, Sayer is trying to contribute specifically to modern discussions of justice and liberal democracy, and he wants to show that the social sciences can critique policies, if they adopt understandings of wellbeing against which policies can be evaluated. His project, then, is practical, and toward the end he advocates for the capacities approach of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen against discourse ethics as a way to spell out "the identification of avoidable suffering and forms of wellbeing," and so, ground his more prescriptive goal.[59]

---

[57] Other scholars have also been interested in virtue. Most recently, anthropologist James Laidlaw has argued in his *The Subject of Virtue* that anthropologists need not just to create a subfield devoted to morality but need to transform the discipline so better reflect experiences and dynamics better captured with concepts such as *freedom* and *virtue*. Laidlaw's critique is that social theory overly emphasizes structure at the expense of individual experience that does not necessarily resonate with such theories, eliminating important dimensions such as freedom from theoretical understandings of human life. In a key article on this topic, Laidlaw wrote," my claim will be that in order to do so we shall need a way of describing the possibilities of human freedom: of describing, that is, how freedom is exercised in different social contexts and cultural traditions." (Laidlaw, "For an anthropology of ethics and freedom," 311) He is certainly helpful in pointing out the continued danger of analyzing society and human behavior in a way that is patronizing to human beings, where individuals do not understand the reality behind their actions (as opposed to the researcher, who has privileged access to the truth). Such a lesson is always worth another go. As others have argued, however, such frames as *freedom* themselves invite a Western bias that Laidlaw would seem to want to reject. (Mattingly, "Two virtue ethics," 162; Robbins, "Between reproduction and freedom," 295)

At the same time, Laidlaw makes these claims through a critical appraisal of practice theory, including that of Sherry Ortner, in a way that may elide the continued importance of such approaches. Although Laidlaw's critique is one that we should always keep in mind, there is still the potential as looking at agency and structure not so much as a binary but exhibiting the tension in which human beings experience themselves and the world. An understanding of freedom and responsibility could be understood as being part of this tension. Laidlaw, in this conception, would be a reminder in our analyses not to too quickly collapse that tension, and so erase agency.

[58] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 144, 141.

[59] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 221.

Sayer draws upon virtue ethics, if only indirectly. Aristotelian ethics are important to his method, yet other frames, such as the capacities approach, the ethics of care, and Adam Smith's ethics in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* are also crucial.[60] Virtue is understood, says Sayer, as one of twelve *elements of ethical being*, whose interactions can help us better understand the moral significance of human life.[61] In this light, *virtue* is better understood in Sayer's context as one part of a much larger frame emphasizing wellbeing. Further, this is all part of a type of ethics with which he wants social science to engage.

What Sayer provides us is a critique of social science regarding the ethical dimension of life, as well as an argument for a thicker understanding of human nature in social scientific inquiry. Sayer argues that humans do not try to avoid "thick ethical descriptions" of their lives, and it is artificial for researchers to try to do so. That would result only in a researcher who is blind to her own assumptions. Instead, Sayer argues, "Although the task might be referred to as 'descriptive ethics,' lay ethics is of course itself normative in that it involves ideas about what is good and how we should live, and both influences and is influenced by more academic normative ideas about ethics."[62] He lays a foundation, then, for exploring resources in ethics and philosophy that will help place a focus on human existence as a field in which individuals interact over objects of concern in search of wellbeing.

---

[60] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 14.

[61] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 145. These elements include moral emotions/sentiments, socialization/formation of ethical sensibilities, virtue and character, norms, ethical reflection, story, dilemma, exemplars, generalizing tendency of morals, judgment of others, responsibility and blame, and shame.

[62] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 144.

Sayer's approach, then, clears a foundation for this present work, but it is not fully adequate to engage the moral transformation wrought by political violence. Sayer, for example, assumes a neo-Aristotelian understanding of the self, or more precisely, adopts particular concepts associated with the neo-Aristotelian subjectivity, such as practical reasoning, virtue, and flourishing. The philosophical anthropology of an Aristotelian-based ethic, however, is not fully sketched. Sayer argues for certain aspects of such an anthropology but does not engage in a thicker psychology in making his argument. Such a theory may not have been necessary for his purposes, which are to help evaluate economic schemes and contribute to debates about social justice and the composition of liberal democratic regimes.[63] Yet it is necessary to address the questions of the impact of violence.

Life, including shared social life, is morally significant at nearly every turn. Both major life events and the more mundane dilemmas and decisions that we are hardly aware of and do not even remember all create in their aggregate one's identity, personality, worldview, and moral ability. Moral development, then, should be central to any account of the experience of being a moral subject, but this is even more critical when discussing the ways that violence can transform moral subjectivity. As Maček and Dizdarević demonstrated, this framework can be transformed radically and immediately by intense violence. Describing and accounting for such change requires an understanding of moral development to show how this occurs and in what ways the individual is transformed. Specifically, to fully account for what happens to an individual under conditions of

---

[63] Sayer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 220-221, 249.

violence requires a representation of the individual as a moral subject, a subject in the midst of constant development, that can help articulate the experience of such change, as well as dynamics and consequences for the individual and community.

Sayer, however, is lacking a strong account of moral development. He employs concepts such as habit, virtue, and character but not within a frame of moral development. For example, in his *building blocks of ethical being*, the arch of moral development that brings such elements together, and that make them significant, is curiously missing. Again, this may be a matter of emphasis, but as Sayer points out, *emphasis* is itself a methodologically significant term. And as moral development is for the present project central for understanding moral-subjective transformation, the way that Sayer is engaging such Aristotelian concepts is not transferable here.

I could continue on with an engagement of Sayer's work, which is an important argument for bringing philosophy and ethics into more substantive conversation with the social sciences. The above discussion, however, should be enough to delineate a lacuna in certain social scientific disciplines and to demonstrate a need for the application of further resources. Anthropologists such as Arthur and Joan Kleinman and sociologists such as Andrew Sayer help move us forward considerably in better addressing these needs. Sayer helps in arguing that an understanding of human nature is inescapable in inquiry and that traditions of virtue are an untapped resource for the social sciences. Kleinman, as well as others, insist that any such work must focus on ordinary, everyday experience taking place in local moral worlds where meaning, care, and concern are created and contested. They also highlight the vulnerability of one's moral being and the

importance of a robust understanding of subjectivity. I will use such work as a foundation

to push further and address the issues that Maček and Dizdarević detail.[64]

At this point, I want to turn to the resources of moral philosophy and religious

ethics, particularly resources concerning virtue. *Religious ethics* is an interesting if

somewhat awkward term that seeks to create a field of study that fits under a wide

umbrella various projects and subjects often referred to as theological ethics, Christian

ethics, but also comparative religious ethics, ethics of other religious traditions, as well as

more historical and social scientific studies that aim to understand morality through

attention to a religious tradition's or community's ethics. It comes from the shift in

academic disciplines from Christian or theological ethics to encompass a larger array of

interests beyond that of Protestant moral-philosophical work.[65] The term remains

awkward, as one would expect, as it is grounded in a move toward seeming value-

neutrality from out of a theological frame, while retaining theological ethics within it and

the divinity school as an important institutional location of much of its work. When I

speak of religious ethics, I gesture toward this body of work, which already overlaps with

other disciplines, such as philosophical ethics. I refer to both, because I want an

inclusivity of methods and approaches, an inclusivity that is hampered by the arbitrary

delineations between philosophy and more theological or religious-ethical approaches. I

---

[64] Again, both Sayer and others have engaged virtue as a way to reorient methodology, but such usage looks more at virtue as a category to be used in ethnographic analysis or as the basis of a way to make social science more politically engaged. These various approaches are worthwhile. As we have seen, however, less attention is paid to understandings of the human implicit in such theories nor to understandings of moral development and how individuals experience themselves as morally changing subjects. To attend to this, we will need to turn to other sources to provide a way to better understand and articulate what happens to individuals who are morally transformed by violence.

[65] Stout, "Commitment and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics."

will draw mainly from persons such as Iris Murdoch, but Murdoch herself drew from theological inquirers and theological concepts.

These are fields that, to greater and lesser degrees, engage with issues of ethics and morality with an unmatched depth and nuance and that have vocabularies developed over time to engage normative issues. The approaches and concerns within these fields are diverse, yet they contain moral languages developed to speak intelligently and in a sophisticated way about moral development, what matters to people, and how values and morally invested worldviews orient human lives and even societies. In particular, virtue ethics, or more specifically, the language of the virtues that many virtue ethicists have systematized in efforts to ground their understandings of the moral life and the moral dimensions of being a human being in community, is uniquely poised to provide the resources needed to better articulate and account for the experience of political violence and related moral transformation.

Virtue discourse, more so than current approaches in political violence and subjectivity, can better capture the nature of selves and their formation, thus accounting for how violence can unmake an individual's moral architecture. The many writers and traditions that fit under its umbrella have developed thick descriptions of the human, of morality and moral development, as well as the social and even institutional contexts in which the moral life is lived. This will provide a firm basis on which to develop an understanding of subjectivity that privileges the experience of the individual as a moral subject and of society and culture as domains where value and moral subjects are made, maintained, and transformed. In other words, virtue language and theories can provide a

firm basis for a vocabulary and conception of the self that can best account for and articulate the experience of political violence captured in such testimony as that of Dizdarević, as well as others that we will see in the following pages.

This does not mean, however, that other moral languages and modalities are not useful. There may be good reasons why a neo-Kantian or utilitarian vocabulary could be developed and employed, particularly if one's goals differ from that of the present inquiry. To try and compare and contrast different moral philosophical languages would take a volume in itself, however. The goal of this work is not to arbitrate between these options but, instead, to use a specific resource - virtue - to show both that virtue can be applied in a critical, analytical way to questions of violence and subjectivity in a way that current methods violence and subjectivity do not. Comparisons between a virtue hermeneutic of moral subjectivity and other hermeneutics are welcome but will need to be saved for future works and conversations.

My argument is based on the claims that virtue theories and ethics presuppose a political and metaphysical background with a particular philosophical anthropology that accounts for the many ways in which the self relates to society and the broader world. Included are understandings of how communities and societies form the moral architecture of the individual making virtue. The focus is on the individual, then, and potentially individual experience, but specifically an individual fully imbedded in the social, cultural, and political. Theories and vocabularies of virtue are well placed, then, to conceive of the self as first and foremost a moral subject for whom her experiences are laden with moral import and for whom experience is best described as moral

development. I will use, then, virtue language as the foundation of an approach that can

fill such lacunae and better account for the moral dimension of violence, experience, and

subjectivity. There are several, specific reasons I can delineate for engaging the language

of the virtues. From its beginning in southeastern Europe, virtue ethics, at least in the

form derived from ancient Attic philosophy, sought to explain the point of human life in

constant reference to the goals of human life that is shared, that is, politics.[66] Although

Aristotle did not have the language of modern institutional analysis, he famously

understood that humans are *political* animals, and explored in his *Politics* institutions

such as the family, the state, slavery, as well as others, as the contexts within which we

develop morally. Plato was also highly concerned with political relationships and

institutions, dedicating two of the most influential works in philosophy, *The Republic* and

The Laws, to discussions of moral development, institutionality, and political philosophy.

Although virtue ethics is best understood as an umbrella term for a great variety of

thought concerning ethics and moral development, there remains in certain modern

thinkers, most notably Alasdair MacIntyre, and in a different way, Martha Nussbaum, a

focus on the communal and the political.[67]

---

[66] Scholars over the last few decades have argued that virtue ethics have arose in other locations, arguing for virtue ethics in Buddhism and Confucianism, to use two examples. (Tu, *Confucian Thought*; McKeown, "Buddhism and Ecology;" *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*; Bary and Tu, *Confucianism and Human Rights*) I will focus, however, on virtue ethics in so-called "Western philosophy," meaning those understandings of virtue rooted in the philosophy of Attic Greek nation states in the last millennium "Before the Common Era."

[67] MacIntyre, *After Virtue.* Nussbaum is more difficult to discuss in terms of virtue ethics, as she sees to have created a critical distance between her thought and that category, moving to develop instead, along with Amartya Sen, a capabilities approach grounded in a liberal, Rawlsian political philosophy. (Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*; *Women and Human Development*) She has contributed to virtue ethics, however, and has an eye for how virtue effects life and institutions.

In addition to this attention to the political and social context of one's moral development, virtue ethics also gives us a philosophical anthropology. Indeed, Elizabeth Anscombe's call for renewal in moral philosophy at the middle of the twentieth century, a call now seen as the beginning of a attention to virtue in modern philosophy, specifically argued for the development of new moral psychologies, what Anscombe called *philosophical psychologies*.[68] These psychologies account for how one is to develop morally, what one needs to do so, and how the individual is constituted. This constitution includes emotion, purpose, cognition, which provides an account not just of *what* morality and virtue are but of *how* one is to be and become virtuous. Such theories usually assume or reference, if not describe, practices necessary for moral development along with related ends and goals. By showing what is necessary for moral development, they also show in what ways human moral trajectories are vulnerable, which is critical for any study such as this one that aims to show how individuals feel moral loss through violence.[69]

Virtue discourses, then, supply us with a metaphysics, a psychology, and a sociology that are bound up with political theories and understandings of practices to account for the development of the human person. They look at human lives as robust, inquiring into the effects on moral development of art, music, poetry, sport, social organization, and political systems. This includes not only cognition but imagination, emotion, and even understandings of embodiment are included, or at the very least, exist as potentials. Virtue discourses provide, then, resources for frames that can account for

---

[68] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."

[69] cf., Williams, "Moral Luck."

individuals socially and culturally embedded, as well as embodied, providing a very robust, detailed, "thick" representation of the human.

The vocabulary used in virtue discourse is also a strength, as it is what we might call *morally saturated* or *invested*. The terms used were created over time to expound upon and help answer questions about human life, questions of meaning, how one should act in the world, and understandings of the best and best possible societies. These are very normative issues, moral issues, concerning that which matters most to people, what makes life worth living, what contributes to a good life shared in common, and what is necessary developmentally on the individual and social level for this to occur. Such language, of course, is not neutral, yet this is the point. It was developed in the process of prescribing certain ways of life and how to grow as a "good" person, and so, has the conceptual sophistication to describe related issues.

Although one could argue that colloquial uses of virtue language are more common, I appeal to such ethics to draw out the language and descriptive scaffolding used to construct their ethics. This is not meant to privilege the formal over the everyday or the academy over the street. Those who have most thoroughly systematized virtue discourse are those involved in moral philosophy. Here we can find more readily available languages. I look to virtue ethics, as well, due to the goals of this study. A major goal is to demonstrate that virtue can be used in creating and interpretive framework that can make better sense of an experience of violence, subjectivity, and change that survivors have said is important. It is important to investigate the different moral discourses that people use coming from contexts other than the orthodox, elite, or

scholarly. Indeed, it is an exciting prospect to think of such a discourse being articulated

and then used to articulate and account for experiences found in that locale. Yet, there is

still something to be said for including more formal accounts, as they too have had broad

influence. More importantly, part of my argument is that we can adopt moral languages

and employ them as a critical interpretive frame used in other ethnographic projects and

related inquiries. In developing my argument here, my focus is to show that such a frame

can be applied successfully, which does not require the development of an

ethnographically derived discourse. Although the ethnographic method I argue would be

important in diversifying our understanding of virtue discourse by including cultures,

communities, concepts, and voices not presently included in formal academic ethics, such

work will have to wait for a future time.

In summary, then, there are four main reasons I turn to virtue discourse as

developed through the history of virtue ethics to explore the effects of violence on

subjectivity. First, such language draws from centuries of philosophical discussion

concerning the nature and ends of the human being. This represents, then, a rich reservoir

from which we can draw to discuss and analyze the moral dimensions of social and

political experience. Further, virtue theories and ethics presuppose a political and

metaphysical background that include accounts of how the self relates to society and the

broader world.[70] The focus is on the individual, then, but specifically the individual who

is fully imbedded in the social, cultural, and political and one who is acting constantly

---

[70] Although I am not engaging metaphysical questions here, it is safe to say that metaphysics has been critical for most traditional virtue ethics, although a biology to ground one's understanding of virtue can also be emphasized, such as in Aristotle's ethics, who developed not only personal ethics but political philosophies and biologies. One of the most prominent neo-Aristotelians (and Thomists, for that matter), Alasdair MacIntyre, wrote his *Dependent Rational Animals* after *After Virtue* in order to provide a missing biological grounding of his moral philosophy. (MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, x)

within culture and social institutions as a norm-making, norm-contesting, and norm-following being - a moral subject. Third, theories of virtue ethics have a philosophical anthropology. They account for how one is to develop morally, what one needs to do so, and how the individual is constituted, including emotion, purpose, cognition. This provides an account not just of what morality and virtue are but of how one is to be and become virtuous. A fourth and related reason is that such theories usually assume, if not describe, practices necessary for moral development along with related ends and goals. Such discussions of development often include an account of how vulnerable one's moral being is and the ways it may be undermined. All of this is important for this study, which focuses on the individual transformed through political and social upheaval.

There are several caveats needed, however, if we are to engage virtue in this way, as notions of virtue and virtue ethics more specifically have been at the center of various debates within philosophy and theology since the middle of the twentieth-century.[71] First, the field of virtue ethics and the use of virtue discourse has, for the most part, been concerned with questions within the discipline of philosophy, including meta-ethical questions about the concepts and methods of ethics, itself.[72] In the last half century, it has

---

[71] I am speaking here specifically about modern moral philosophy. This includes arguments over fact-value distinctions, the relationships between normativity and descriptiveness, interiority and exteriority and behaviorism, understandings of the legacy of neo-Kantian and utilitarian ethics, among others. There are even debates about whether *virtue ethics* is in the end an intelligible term at all. See, Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?")

[72] There are, of course, exceptions. Again, Alasdair MacIntyre engages in virtue ethics to critique Western society as a whole, the project of the Enlightenment, political liberalism, and to create the foundation for a course correction in history. Even here, however, MacIntyre's is very much a prescriptive project, perhaps the most ambitious use of virtue in the last century. Lisa Tessman and Christine Swanton have been among the first to try to expand the application of virtue beyond its more recent concerns. There have also been other virtue ethicists trying to explore its application in other fields, including those in the edited volume, *Working Virtue*. (Walker and Ivanhoe, *Working Virtue*) This is a further, helpful extension of virtue ethics, though unlike the present study, they do not attempt to use virtue discourse to help analyze experience and the social repercussions of violence and social change, more generally.

been drawn upon in Christian, mostly Catholic, theology, as an alternative to philosophies focused on means, duty, utility, or outcomes. These projects are not just normative but prescriptive; they describe in order to propose and even to persuade. I make no arguments for or against virtue approaches to ethics, nor do I propose a prescriptive ethic, myself. Instead, virtue discourse is here engaged as a way to give a norm-laden voice to particular experiences, their conditions, formation, and genesis.

This work, then, is not an ethic. Indeed, the language of the virtues is used in a significantly different way in this study than in standard philosophical arguments. *Ethic* implies a prescriptive quality that is not intended in my use. *Discourse*, on the other hand, implies a shared way of speaking of certain issues among a certain group with shared norms. The present work is concerned with finding better ways of talking about the experience of violence and how it affects the individual's moral architecture and sense of self. To do so, I make use of what we could refer to as virtue discourse or language. Although always normative, virtue is used not only in ethics and philosophy but is also colloquial, used in society at large, as well as specific communities, such as theological

communities and with regard to religious practices. *Virtue discourse* speaks, then, to a wider category than *virtue ethics* indicates.[73]

The key assumption that undergirds this distinction is that those engaged in ethics, particularly certain virtue ethicists, in order to make certain claims about the nature of humans and their development within society employ languages that they inherit, change, and engage that enable them to speak about these issues with a level of sophistication concerning the moral dimension of human life not found in other discourses. These languages have a strong descriptive element that is used to make such claims, an element that we should be able to use for multiple purposes, not just those of a prescriptive ethic. Indeed, we should be able to apply these languages and their understanding of human individuals and communities without needing to adopt ethical agendas and goals. They can help us to better understand what people have experienced as moral subjects. Virtue discourse is most commonly used in scholarly discussions, and even in more colloquial, every day uses, to argue for how the world is, how people should be, all based on an account of the world and human nature. In other words, it is the articulation of what anthropologists like Clifford Geertz call a worldview and ethos, which includes

---

[73] Virtue is also used in moral philosophical modes and by moral philosophers who do not fall under "virtue ethics." And *virtue ethics* itself is a contested category. Martha Nussbaum, who was part of the spread of virtue ethics in the late 1970s through the end of the 1980s, herself questioned the salience of such a concept, arguing that it makes little sense to define a category of ethics called *virtue ethics* when thinkers representing other categories, such as Kantians and Utilitarians, also use virtue. Even the Attic philosophers of first millenium BCE are too disparate in goal and method to unite into a virtue ethics category. Nussbaum argues, instead, to call thinkers in virtue ethics by what they are arguing against (such as "anti-Kantians") or the philosopher they draw on ("Neo-Humeans" or "Neo-Aristotelians"). (Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?," 200-1) There is much to be said about this, although labeling any person's thought "anti-" assumes a hollowness of thought and marks the philosopher as not having anything positive to contribute. Virtue ethics was and has been conceived not just as a push against dominant ethical modes but as a positive retrieval. The "Neo-" prefix is not ideal either, as one's thought is then reduced to that of another, opening one up to dismissal. The fact that many virtue ethicists see a closer relationship to each other's projects than that of others should also be taken into account. In this way, I acknowledge the problems with the category, yet also affirm that there is a substantial and fruitful discourse that the umbrella, *virtue ethics*, allows.

assumptions of how we and the world are, as well as a connected evaluation of how we should be in the world and even at times how the world or society should be.[74]

I have argued that virtue language has a strong descriptive capacity, owing to the need of virtue ethicists over the centuries to account in detail for the elements that make up the moral life and society seen as a moral body. It can supply a way for persons to analyze particular phenomena, as well as to articulate experience and to name what was at stake, what was lost, and what has to be gained. It should, optimally, provide a way for survivors or others involved in political violence to more precisely speak of their experience, and for such subjects to advocate for their own understanding of the good has been and now is in their lives. The fact that such vocabulary is normative from the perspective of the subjects, as well as descriptive, means that it can provide a fuller account and even help give those who have survived words to articulate difficult thoughts and feelings.[75]

Applying Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy

While there are, of course, many traditions and understandings of virtue, I will look specifically to philosopher Iris Murdoch's post-Christian virtue language. Murdoch is an important figure in twentieth century virtue ethics, working to reclaim not only concepts from classical Greek thought but also from Christianity and even Zen Buddhism. Some may argue that Murdoch is not really a virtue ethicist. She is, after all, distinct in her turn to Plato, while the major trend in virtue ethics in the twentieth century

---

[74] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 87-141.

[75] My intent here is not ontological, as I am not concerned in arguing for certain features of the human psyche. Rather, I hope to make sense of the experience of violence and how it transforms identity as articulated by survivors of extreme violence.

has been Aristotelean.[76] Her work is also not an ethic, strictly speaking.[77] It is a

metaphysic and a moral psychology, perhaps a philosophical anthropology, as well as a

type of phenomenology. Murdoch writes in support of this, "I offer frankly a sketch of a

metaphysical theory, a kind of inconclusive non-dogmatic naturalism..."[78] Her

philosophy is more accurately understood as the basis for an ethic that pays keen

attention to virtue and virtue language, although it is more expansive than virtue. For

example, she incorporates notions of duty in her later *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

in a way not reflected in her earlier work, *The Sovereignty of Good*, the two books

representing her moral philosophical corpus. I place Murdoch in the virtue ethics trend,

however, as the virtues remain important to her work and as she helped clear the way that

made much of virtue ethics possible for figures such as John McDowell, Alasdair

MacIntyre, and Martha Nussbaum in philosophy, and Stanley Hauerwas in Christian

ethics.

Importantly, she presents the possibility of a model of the self as primarily a

moral subject in an very explicit and detailed manner. I draw upon, in particular, her

---

[76] Michael Slote engages both Martineau and ethics of care (Slote, *Morals from Motives*). Christine Swanton has engaged both Nietzsche and Heidegger to explore different virtue ethics and different related concepts, such as the possibility of universal love within an Aristotelian virtue ethics that privileges intellectual virtue (Swanton, "Outline of a Nietzschean Virtue Ethics;" "A Challenge to Intellectual Virtue from Moral Virtue: The Case of Universal Love"). Julia Driver also looks to consequentialism to develop a virtue ethics that pushes back on the traditional emphasis on inner virtuous states to make something virtuous by arguing for the importance of certain actions done regardless of the development of one's inner qualities (Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*). And Rosalind Hursthouse has investigated using David Hume in an attempt to use Aristotelean ethics, which lack a "liberal concept of rights," to square such a virtue ethics with more modern, liberal values such as equality and justice based on rights (Hursthouse, "After Hume's Justice"). For a good, recent overview of some of these thinkers, particularly Slote, Hursthouse and Philippa Foot, see Copp and Sobel, "Morality and Virtue."

[77] Broackes, "Introduction," 10.

[78] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 41. I use moral psychology here not in reference to the established field of study but referring to the cognitive dynamics as they relate to the moral life. In this way, *philosophical anthropology* may be more exact, as it refers to the an understanding of the human more generally and as a whole, which is more in keeping with the present study.

understanding of the self as a "field of tension" between competing loyalties and goods.[79] She also has a conception of the self as primarily a moral subject, with moral issues as foundational not only to one's actions but to knowledge as well.[80] There is, then, a well-developed vocabulary in her work to pull from. Murdoch also argues for the importance of interiority and the authority of experience in moral philosophy which makes her relevant to a study concerned with effects of violent experience, particularly its phenomenological aspects, on moral subjectivity and the bonds of community. This emphasis on interiority exhibits Murdoch as a phenomenologist of sorts, as she provides concepts, terms, and examples of an inner life. Such an emphasis is something that is missing from current usages of virtue in the social sciences, but it is important, as the experience of violence as well as the experience of being negatively transformed and re-formed requires some understanding of the inner life and vocabulary that can reflect the experience of those so transformed. Murdoch, then, provides resources to reflect more dimensions of human experience, deepening our understanding of the dynamics of moral harm.

In Murdoch's understanding of the self as a "field of tension," the individual is pulled by different fields, communities, institutions, loyalties, and spheres of value, all with different obligations, often incommensurate or in competition, and all providing different yet worthwhile, even necessary, goods. Being in competition, this field and its different modalities - *axiom* (political), *Eros* (personal desire), *duty* (beyond virtue), and *void* (experiences that challenge moral intelligibility - as well as the goods they supply,

---

[79] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge.*

[80] Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, 63.

necessitate a constant evaluation and negotiation that makes up the moral life and the

activities that constitute our moral development. This understanding, which pulls together

in one representation the nature of the self as moral subject, will form the basis of this

study's representation of moral subjectivity that we can use to better articulate and

account for changes in moral architecture and development through violent experience.

There is also in her work a concept of striving to be a more ideal moral subject,

reaching toward horizons to embody, or try to embody, certain ideals and images through

practices and within institutions. Morality here is an understanding of constant effort, a

conception that resonates with an understanding of subjectivity as tension, that is, of

constant negotiation, of aspiration and, again, of effort, a term Murdoch often employs.

Some of the terms, such as *horizons,* that I use to describe Murdoch's thought I take from

philosopher Charles Taylor, a pupil of Murdoch. Taylor, who shares Murdoch's universal

conception of *goodness,* along with a sense of its content as broad and culturally relative,

describes moral *horizons* as the moral ideals toward which individuals strive. And

Taylor's notion of horizons can help further underscore what is central for Murdoch in

her framing of the self as a field of tension: the importance of striving toward the

horizons embodied in the different modalities that make up that tensile field. I will

sometimes refer to Taylor to bring out aspects of Murdoch's thought but in ways

articulated in ways that may be more helpful in adapting Murdoch's thought to a more

engaged, analytical application.[81]

I use Murdoch, along with Taylor, in order to create a representation of the human

as first and foremost a moral subject. Murdoch shows as a subject embodying tensions

among competing loyalties, incommensurate goods, and differing identities. Her fourfold

representation of subjectivity - of *axiom, Eros, duty,* and *void* – enables us to chart and

track changes in moral experience. Within this representation, the most important

modality for our inquiry, and the one that we will mostly use, is Murdoch's concept of

void. In certain extreme situations of violence, it can become impossible to honor

adequately one's responsibilities and loyalties, attend to all and everything one loves and

cares for. The value-filled world becomes endangered, yet one does not have the

resources to respond with care to all "areas of account", as H. Richard Niebuhr would put

it.[82] The inability to respond equally and with care to these different modalities can lead

one to despair. The impossibility of living into these competing horizons may lead one to

---

[81] (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 437) Taylor's understanding of morality as a category of life and action is narrower than Murdoch's. Murdoch sees morality centered on an individual drama between one's selfishness and her striving for a higher attention to reality as it is and a loving attention to others. Taylor restricts this term to more traditional understandings in philosophy, such as one's obligations to other people, what we could see as duty (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 14) He reserves the term *spirituality* to refer to "what makes life worth living,". In this way, his understanding of spirituality and morality fit under Murdoch's much larger umbrella of morality that covers almost all of human experience (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 495).. It is important to say that Taylor's philosophy is also more straightforwardly a teleology, whereas Murdoch does not have a teleology in the Aristotelean sense. If virtue is truly good for nothing, as she says, an understanding that other virtue ethicists, such as MacIntyre, agree with, it can become difficult to square this with the concomitant claim that the teleological *eudaimonia* requires virtue. (Annas, "Virtue and Eudaimonism") Murdoch turns to Platonic idealism, where we are never quite able to realize such ideals. Such a *telos* or ends, then, motivate one to be good, yet also represent the fact that we will never be fully virtuous. Murdoch's framing of virtue is more about motivations than realizations.

[82] Niebuhr writes, "We live as responsive beings not only in the social but also in the natural world where we interpret the natural events that affect us - heat and cold, storm and fair weather, earthquake and tidal wave, health and sickness, animal and plate - as living-giving and death-giving." (Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 63)

feel that morality as a project of constant development and constant mediation between competing goods, loyalties, and horizons is no longer possible. The task may not be worth it or the subject may not be capable of the work. The tension can grow limp or snap, leaving only the pull of void, which then draws one's moral subjectivity toward despair and meaninglessness.

Void, then, is the negation of the moral life, and being pulled toward this modality shifts one's moral subjectivity toward meaninglessness, where the promise of goodness is either lost or a lie. A moral subjectivity dominated by void can lead to a deep existential bitterness and the feeling that one can no longer be "good" again or that, perhaps, talk of the "good" had always been just a sham, after all. If this state is deep and long lasting, one can feel they are no longer able to reach toward the horizons embodied in the other modalities, or that such horizons do not exist and may never have existed. This experience of void or great loss we could call a *moral affliction*, Murdoch's term, taken from Simone Weil's *malheur*. Such loss can, indeed, be experienced as an inability to orient oneself to the good, where such a teleological capacity is felt to be weakened or diminished beyond the hope of repair.

Murdoch provides both a vocabulary and an image of the self as moral subject that can be used to analyze experience and provide an account of such experience. This vocabulary and model can enable both survivors and scholars to articulate the experience of overwhelming violence. And it can create the foundation for arguments that can make such experience more central to discussions of political violence and its aftermath. These forms of phenomenological harm reflect changed societies and altered subjectivities, the

very locations in which post-conflict work is conducted. Without accounting for such experience, decisions and policies affecting whole populations cannot reflect adequately the needs and challenges on the ground. Murdoch provides us with the capacity to talk about subjectivity unmade.

Virtue discourse, in general and Murdoch's work in particular then, provides an account of the vulnerability of virtue. Under certain social conditions, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to not only live a good life but to realize a standard of biological and existential flourishing. This is a crucial aspect to any approach that seeks to better understand and articulate the way that violence affects moral subjectivity. There must be at the heart of such an approach an understanding of how extreme violence undermines one's moral ability, how it overturns one's world.[83] For those who express such loss, their experience is more than an incapacity to tell right from wrong. Instead, they are no longer able to aspire toward the horizons that give their life meaning and that supply in part the content to their worldview and ethos, how the world is and how persons should exist in it.[84] The ways we see ourselves living in particular ways in particular worlds are major constituents of our primary identities.[85] The loss of these ways is a major upheaval to one's life as entirety that strikes to one's very core.

In spite of the large amount of scholarship on Murdoch, her understanding of the self as a field of tension has received relatively little attention. Even *void* is dealt with as

---

[83] Philosopher Lawrence Blum notes that moral philosophy has rarely asked what inhibits the creation of virtue, something that Murdoch puts at the center. Blum, "Visual Metaphors," 319.

[84] This is, of course, a more modern reformulation by Clifford Geertz of Socrates/Plato's question meant to articulate the problematic at the heart of the moral and political life, that is, who should I be and how should I act? (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 126; Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* 1)

[85] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ch 1.

more of an aside or engaged to understand some other aspect of Murdoch's thought. Those who do look at void - such as the ethicist Maria Antonaccio and philosophers Stephen Mulhall and David Robjant - do so to examine Murdoch's notion of the Good, goodness, and more general interpretive questions.[86] What I propose to do with *void*, is to apply it as a way to interpret specific experiences of extreme violence.[87] The main goal, however, will be to draw on Murdoch's virtue-grounded metaphysics, particularly from the final chapters of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, to develop a critical interpretive frame drawing on virtue discourse - a virtue hermeneutic – to be used to account for and articulate the moral dimension of experiences of violence and subjectivity.

The present study, then, uses virtue discourse, specifically the discourse and imagery that Iris Murdoch formulates, to create an understanding of moral subjectivity, a virtue hermeneutic, so that we can speak of what happens to someone when they have survived political violence only to feel they can never be good again. It will empower us to speak of this in a way that forefronts the moral dimension of experience and the self as a moral subject embedded in a larger world that conditions moral subjectivity to a large extent. A virtue hermeneutic provides us with concepts, a vocabulary, but most importantly a model of the self that privileges experience, particularly its moral aspects.

---

[86] Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 43, 182-184; Antonaccio, "A Response to Nora Hämäläinen and David Robjant;" Mulhall, "'All the World Must be Religious;'" Robjant, "How Miserable we Are, How Wicked."

[87] This argument, however, should not be confused as a critique of these writers. On the contrary, these foci are legitimate, as debates around Murdoch's influence and what her writing means for philosophy more generally are still new. The ground, if cleared, is only just so, and we are all busy erecting our towers. In addition, This move to application in Murdoch's is something that Maria Antonaccio has called for, and so, a secondary goal of this work is to show a way to use Murdoch's metaphysics and philosophical anthropology/phenomenology in an applied manner. Maria Antonaccio's *A Philosophy to Live By* is also largely a foundation to apply Murdoch's thought to contemporary issues, particularly in use of liberal political approaches.

What this frame interprets is *moral subjectivity*, providing the concrete language and concepts to describe the experience of being a moral subject that I argued is lacking in current work on violence and subjectivity. We return at the end of this chapter, then, to the emphasis on subjectivity I discussed earlier. Moral subjectivity, we can tentatively define, is the experience of being a moral subject, one who is constantly orienting oneself toward and away from culturally constructed and internalized images of the human person, working toward certain goods and negotiating between various locations of account, obligation, and responsibility. The formation of the self is understood as aspiring toward what is good, however that is understood. What is at stake are the ways in which such aspirations can be sometimes strengthened, sometimes challenged, and often reinterpreted, reconstituted, and sometimes even overthrown.[88]

Moral subjectivity, then, is an interpretive frame that will ground our inquiries in such a way that the moral dimension of experience, particularly the experience of political violence, is paramount. Such subjectivity includes evaluation and concern and is not simply the categorizing of the world into good and bad, right and wrong, the straightforward creating of and application of value-oriented rules, nor particular instances of judgement, deliberation, and choice. It is meant to capture, instead, a more holistic sense of selfhood as life lived among others defined primarily in terms of moral development and transformation. This is a subject, however, in existential motion where moral development is a central concept for understanding such subjectivity. Every moment, action, thought, and decision accrues to such development and alters one's

---

[88] This understanding is derived both from Charles Taylor and Iris Murdoch, particularly in *Sources of the Self* and *The Sovereignty of Good*. As we delve more into Murdoch's philosophy in later chapters, we will build on this notion of the moral.

subjectivity, just as changes in one's environment and in one's networks also alter that subjectivity.

Murdoch will help us bring out this dynamic aspect by articulating the experience of moral subjectivity as one of tension, where one's loyalties are often in conflict and where one often has to attend to one obligation or love at the expense of another. The change and tension at the heart of being a moral subject, then, not only propels one's development as a moral subject but is also the condition and ground of one's tension snapping or slacking, enabling a form of despair or feeling of moral loss, where one's very identity can be at stake.[89]

I will supplement Murdoch's representation of the moral subject with some of the anthropological concepts gleaned from Kleinman and others - such as the *everyday* and *local moral worlds.* These concepts will help us locate more precisely the social and cultural position of the moral subject experiencing violence, opening Murdoch's resources, which are more individually and phenomenologically focused, to consider the ways in which social structure, institutions, and the interactions between various levels of social identity, action, and value condition the moral life and subjectivity. We can then use this representation of the moral subject to see how and in what way one comes to feel they have lost their ability to orient themselves toward the *good* by using Murdoch's modalities and conception of the moral self to analyze accounts of moral harm.

---

[89] We have discussed the connection between morality and identity but not fully enough. We will do this more in the following chapters. Philosopher Charles Taylor has already asserted the relationship by stating that our identity is informed by whatever our understanding of good is. (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27)

Map of the present work

The following chapters explore a particular way to articulate and account for the experience of a moral subject in the midst of violence and how violence can deteriorate one's felt sense of moral ability and orientation toward the good. Throughout I will continue to refer to the case of the Bosnian War to provide examples and cases. The study starts with a broader scope and then narrows at it progresses through each chapter.

I begin looking at subjectivity. A much used but rarely defined term, the second chapter explores an understanding of subjectivity with the potential to capture the experience of political violence survivors. Drawing on anthropologist Sherry Ortner's definition of subjectivity, I will present an understanding of subjectivity that, instead of emphasizing will or reason, emphasizes emotion, even imagination, as well as the influence that culture and institutions have on one's selfhood. Ortner's understanding of subjectivity will provide a foundation, yet I will argue that her conception will not be sufficient for the purposes of this project. As Sayer has argued, and as I illustrated through Kleinman's and Maček's works, too easily the moral dimension of experience can be elided without an already posited methodological emphasis on the moral.

For this reason, I will argue for a frame that is a *moral* subjectivity, one that embodies an understanding of experience as first and foremost moral. This understanding of moral subjectivity, in addition to other characteristics, will make moral development a central characteristic of being a moral subject. Moments in life, then, will be seen not as neutral but each as having moral consequences. Further, such moral development takes place in particular contexts. I will draw on other anthropologists already mentioned who

work on violence and subjectivity, such as Kleinman and Scheper-Hughes. From their

work I will define moral subjectivity as grounded in *everyday, local* experience and that

is also fragile, conditioned by social relationships and various cultural narratives and

social structures, one that is inherently embodied. This will create a general frame and

approach to moral subjectivity, one intended to frame inquiries around the moral

experience of the individual or close community.

Even so, moral subjectivity understood this way is still limited in its descriptive

ability. In the remaining four chapters I will argue that the categories and elements of a

general frame of moral subjectivity requires an understanding of how one develops as a

moral subject, as well as how the local and everyday interacts with larger social events

and with the individual moral subject to transform one's character. This means any such

approach needs an already well developed moral language and account of the human.

Beginning with the third chapter, I develop a virtue hermeneutic that fills in such

details. Through these remaining chapters, I move from a discussion of Murdoch's

thought more generally to specific resources she provides. Chapter three examines

Murdoch's philosophical anthropology, her account of moral development, and her

metaphysics and how these three categories are related. I do this to better understand the

structure of moral subjectivity in order to illustrate how that structure can leave us

vulnerable to sudden political violence and change. Specifically, I will argue how one can

feel a sense of responsibility that comes from such vulnerability, even if objectively the

individual had no power over the situation at hand. This can help explain why moral

persons can feel moral responsibility, and eventually moral inability, even when acting ethically in difficult situations.

Chapter four focuses on the self as a field of moral tension, or the tensile moral self. The different modalities of ethical being that Murdoch describes - *axiom, duty, Eros,* and, *void* - provide a representation of moral experience and the way individuals create value. Bringing in Kleinman's understanding of *local moral worlds,* we will be able to see how this conception resonates with Murdoch's understanding of moral subjectivity, with local moral worlds describing the dynamic context in which moral life is lived, and with Murdoch providing a more detailed account of how one changes in such worlds, as well as vocabulary to articulate such experience. An engagement between Kleinman and Murdoch also shows another example of how a virtue philosopher can augment anthropological and social scientific concepts, deepening their descriptive and explanatory potential.

This schema is central in understanding how one internalizes obligations, loyalties, and the values of different communities and places of account. It is, in other words, a representation of the dynamic experience of engaging in the moral life. As these different places of account, each arguing for different ideal images of the human as well as different images that should be rejected, are not always compatible, one can feel failure when one modality is attended to at the expense of another. During times of violence, this can become exacerbated until, experiencing too many situations with no good choices, one may come to feel either that moral effort is useless or that one lacks an ability to be good in such situations.

Chapter five focuses still more, looking specifically at void. Much of the chapter investigates what Murdoch means by *void*, specifically as she spends only a few pages discussing this topic. I argue for an understanding of void that reflects extreme political violence, and so, can help us better understand the experience of moral life that survivors attest to. This leads into chapter six, which looks at moral subjectivities that are so dominated by void, describing ways in which experience can be so toxic that it can lead to the undermining of the intelligibility of one's worldview. This includes an account of how Murdoch's emphasis on moral vision explains further vulnerabilities in the moral life. I will conclude in chapter seven with some comments on the road just travelled and some ideas for the future.

.

Chapter Two: Subjectivity to Moral Subjectivity

To engage the experience of violence and its influence on the individual, we need to form an understanding of the self that can reflect the complexity of such fraught experience. I argued in the last chapter that subjectivity can provide such a frame, and so in the following, I will propose the elements of such a subjectivity. I draw from different theorists within anthropology to do this, particularly Sherry Ortner and Tanya Luhrmann. I turn primarily to Ortner as she develops her theory as a corrective to psychologies that emphasize the will and reason as the seat of selfhood at the expense of other faculties and characteristics, such as emotion. Ortner pushes back against these subjectivities, which are too narrowly conceived to adequately reflect the robust experience of being an individual. She argues instead for subjectivities that stress lived experience and that include other dimensions of selfhood, such as emotion and desire.

Further, the emphasis on desire and emotion, which Tanya Luhrmann brings out in Ortner's work, indicates an understanding of the self that includes notions of the inner life. This is important. An understanding of subjectivity that includes notions of the inner life and the centrality of emotion to being a subject in the world can better reflect how it feels to be a moral subject, particularly the experience of being a moral subject whose characteristics and identity changes through time. This is important to the present study as we can take this approach to subjectivity and, building on it, help articulate the felt experience and what Ortner calls the "inner processes" of what it is like to be a subject morally transformed by violence.

I emphasize that I will build on Ortner's theory, because, in the end, even her definition of subjectivity is insufficient for my purposes. Despite the focus on emotion and desire, and the opening this provides us to present a dynamic picture of the self, such categories do not necessarily emphasize the moral. As we saw in the last chapter, the moral dimension of experience and the inherent moral issues of an ethnography are all too quickly elided, even for projects that attempt to engage the moral aspects of social life. I will argue, then, that in order to adequately articulate and account for the testimony of survivors of violence, subjectivity is important but not sufficient. What is required is, instead, a robust yet particular understanding of subjectivity as *moral* subjectivity. A theory of moral subjectivity is an interpretive frame of experience and phenomenological change that presents the individual as first and foremost a moral subject for whom life is seen primarily as moral development.[90] A more explicit representation of the human as primarily a moral subject is required, then, to make sure this dimension, which survivors themselves emphasize, is addressed. My understanding of moral subjectivity, which I will expand upon throughout this chapter, will serve as a broader framework to interpret the experience of survivors of political violence. It will not be sufficient in itself, as I will turn to virtue in later chapters to provide a thicker account of moral selfhood. It will serve, however, to provide the basis for a methodology that opens toward accounts emphasizing the moral dimension of experience that, although not exclusive of other aspects of experience, is nevertheless primary.

---

[90] I will discuss more fully what I mean by moral development when I discuss Iris Murdoch's philosophy, from which I draw my understanding of this term.

The subject of subjectivity

Much of the philosophy and social scientific reflection in modern and postmodern thought, at least in those traditions we label *Western*, have at their center this question of the self.[91] Whether we look at the therapeutic self of Freud, the more aspirational subject of Nietzsche, or the discursively constructed self of post-structural and post-modern thinkers, the self has been a pervasive focus.[92] This is true even for those who declare the *death of the subject* and who push back against these trends, as they are still defining themselves against the *self*.[93]

Words that reflect an individual's point of view and history, such as *self*, *agency*, *being*, and even *consciousness* themselves have histories. Each reflects attempts to capture aspects of existence and the experience of being emotional, aware, and animated.

[91] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 1. The conception of "Western" culture and "Western" thought I find awkward, at best, essentializing and misleading, at worst. Yet, I am drawing here on debates concerning the self that were framed largely through particular thinkers, as well as the histories of particular cultures. It would, then, also be a mistake not to specify, as best we can, the contours of those traditions from which we pull. "Western," then, is here mostly reflective of that philosophical discourse that understands itself as descending from Attic Greek culture and thought, as well as particular questions and discussions that come after. "Western culture" is generally refers to the Americas and Europe. This is not meant to essentialize what has been an oppressive concept, but instead, to acknowledge that the debates referenced in these pages do not exhaust the ways that different cultures and thinkers conceive of the self, if in fact, such a formulation of the issue is even relevant. Although I am privileging certain virtue and subjectivity discourses, I also want to decenter what I have made central in this text, at least ultimately, by saying such discourses are not universal, and other approaches may work better for different people at different times and different locations.

[92] Some would even go back to Augustine's introspective self, filled with anxiety and hope, as a pre-modern model of these trains of thought, although Augustine was not interested in the self in itself but what it pointed to. (Oksenberg Rorty, "The Vanishing Subject," 37) We could also look at the rise of the novel in Europe as part of this tradition.

[93] This can include those who draw from post-structural and post-modern thinkers. As this is a study that looks at experience, it is necessary, however, to engage with the self and to provide a way to better understand that self and the way it relates to particular social and political events and pressures. For this reason, I will not spend much time looking at "death of the subject" arguments or postmodern/poststructural arguments against the self. At the same time, it must be understood that we are talking here at the level of experience, the subjective. One can always look at the conditions that make up subjectivity and argue about the ultimate nature of that self on a deeper level, looking at the self as an epiphenomenon of deeper structures, whether it be economic forces or language. This study, however, does not look at this level, and so leaves that inquiry to others.

Or at the very least, the various interpretations of these words attempt to do so. I could

employ any one of these terms in the present work, yet my concern with each is that if

overemphasized, they lead away from the moral experiences just discussed. *Agency* can

emphasize too much one's ability to act. Although agency is a part of wartime experience,

the lack of ability and agency in wartime is also important, particularly for the present

study. *Self* reflects more psychological understandings of the person, as does

consciousness with its strong emphasis on interiority. *Being* has a long history with much

baggage, and each - *being*, *self*, *consciousness*, *agency* - seem to conjure the individual as

an essence, which muddies attempts to talk about transformation and change.

Again, there are ways to use each term that leap the fences I have just placed

around them, yet there are other ways available to capture more directly the tensile nature

of moral experience. *Subjectivity* is one such term, yet it too is not unproblematic.

Subjectivity is a difficult word to define, and different writers use it in different ways for

different purposes. Often they do so without explaining their intentions or defining what

they mean.[94] Philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty illustrates these diverse strands that

run through the history of Western philosophy, and looking at thinkers as diverse as

Aristotle, Ignatius of Loyola, Freud, and Sartre, she argues that there are at least six

different modalities in talking about subject. These include individuated understandings,

---

[94] Jarrett Zigon has recently engaged moral subjectivity to conduct fascinating research into "love" as a concept used to understand the striving of individuals in rehab. There, persons were struggling to change their subjectivities from addicts to recovering addicts through love. Nevertheless, moral subjectivity, and subjectivity, are not explicitly defined, although Zigon's contextual discussion gives the reader an impression of what it could mean more theoretically. Questions remain, however. When an informant refers to "my new moral subjectivity as a former drug user," does this refer to social or religious evaluations of their moral character (this happens in the context of Orthodoxy in Russia)? Does it reflect the informant's own understanding? Or, does it point to an understanding that is more abstract? (Zigon, "On Love," 206)

first person subjectivity, and self-referential subjectivity, among others.[95] Some

understandings focus more on the conditioned nature of subjectivity and give little

attention to agency, while others attempt to retain the insight of how culture and human

interaction condition the nature of the self, pushing back against a deterministic reading

to provide enough room where we can acknowledge a certain degree of agency.[96] Such

usages are employed in various theoretical projects and in different disciplines, where

subjectivity as a conceptual term takes on various meanings and uses, making its

deployment complex.

Subjectivity, then, is used in complex and differing ways, and we will need to gain

definitional clarity on how it is to be used in this inquiry. Yet, it is the complexity that

authors hope the term will capture - what could be called the project of subjectivity - that

makes it so important, despite the heterogeneous ways in which it has been used. As

cultural theorist Nick Mansfield puts it, "The 'I' is thus a meeting-point between the most

formal and highly abstract concepts and the most immediate and intense emotions. This

focus on the self as the centre both of lived experience and of discernible meaning has

become one of the—if not the—defining issues of modern and postmodern cultures."[97]

---

[95] Oksenberg Rorty, "The Vanishing Subject," 44. "Our history reveals several distinctive strands in conceptions of subjectivity: it was constituted as a (1) first-person, (2) individuated, (3) self-referential, (4) authoritative veridical report (or expression) of an (5) occurrent (6) mental state (sensa- tion, emotion, thought)."

[96] There are, again, different strands of subjectivity. Some emphasize the self as epiphenomenal and largely unaware of how it is constituted by history and culture. This is, perhaps, a Freudian reading, if one looks to the unconscious as the substratum that gives rise to consciousness, or Marx's understanding of base and superstructure, although one can provide different interpretations of both. Critical theory and the Frankfurt School draw on both to create a notion of subjectivity that pushes back against the autonomous reasoning, naturally given self.

[97] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 1.

The concept of subjectivity attempts to reflect the experience of our lives as highly

conditioned by extremely complex and interwoven structures and events.

In particular, this complexity refers to the unique context within which subjects

develop, a context created by modernity's rapid social transformation and the growth of

institutions associated with the state and the economy. We are speaking here of the

experience of being a "cog in the machine" and overwhelmed by conditionality. Changes

through industrialization, creation of more centralized states, as well as the nation state

model, mechanized warfare and genocide, and the rationalization of various areas of

social and cultural life, to put it in Max Weber's terms, required notions of the self that

accounted for the power of the *social* over the outcome of the soul. What this history of

subjectivity signifies, then, is that the discussion of subjectivity, at least in the past

several decades, if not the last century, has been bound up in issues of power, conflict,

and even overt violence, but certainly structural violence.[98]

Indeed, subjectivity was, so to speak, created in debates over the nature of society

and the individual, particularly concerning issues of power, conflict, and domination. It

attempts to embody, then, the complexity of how the individual is related to the larger

society. And, it does so in such a way that, while not denying one's agency, still

acknowledges how radically such agency is structured and conditioned by society and

---

[98] The disciplines that use subjectivity have had a role in the subjugation of people, making it part of creating dominated and dominating subjectivities in the past few hundred years. On the other hand, they have also been involved in showing how subjects resists such subjugation, as well as providing accounts of how the subjugation of subjects occurs as a way to help in liberatory actions and thought. This subject as "subjugate," then, is central to the way in which subjectivity has developed in the past century, or at the very least, one important way that it has developed, as it remains a diversified concept. Scheper-Hughes article, "The Primacy of the Ethical," attempts to work out how anthropology can be not just normative but prescriptive, with "what forms a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology might take" (409). This can also be seen in the American Anthropological Association's policy and advocacy work. See http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/.

events. Subjectivity, then, embodies a nuanced position between unencumbered individual freedom on the one hand and social determination on the other.

Elements of subjectivity

What specifically, then, do I mean by subjectivity in the context of this inquiry? Although I have suggested the limits of *agency* as a way to frame experience, it still remains an important concept within the context of subjectivity. Agency deemphasizes the conditionality of selfhood and affirms, when employed within a theory of subjectivity, how individuals regularly experience themselves as driving instead of being driven. We *feel* like moral subjects, not just objects that are acted upon. Agency is important because it is a term that helps express this experience of being a moral subject, as opposed to one that structures and events simply determine. At the same time, individuals are not autonomous, and so the conditioned emphasis that remains a part of subjectivity pushes back against the Western cultural narrative of personal independence.

I take this understanding of agency from anthropologist Sherry Ortner's discussion of subjectivity. For Ortner, agency is a part of subjectivity, with subjectivity providing the basis of agency. This framing underscores what Ortner means by agency, specifically, that it is not a reference to some rational "originary will" traditionally understood. That is, the will is not the seat of personhood, decision, and action as is sometimes claimed. It is not an independent ground of ethical being unencumbered by histories and nomothetic structures such as race and gender, and outside forces. Instead, agency refers to an understanding of action coming from "desires and intentions" and

arising from "within a matrix of subjectivity."[99] This allows a conception of action and

agency that is neither fully determined nor self-originary, one that arises as an

experiential aspect of being a subject in the world.

Further, this tension and confluence of agency and subjectivity is an innately

political one. Ortner's understanding of the self is a "subject caught up in a world of

violence, state authority, and pain, the subject's distress under the authority of another."[100]

It reflects that history of subjectivity already mentioned, one formed in negotiations and

conflicts over power. We can include within this understanding of the political issues of

political violence, the collapse of state authority, contestation of authority, and the

strategies employed to do so, all of which makes Ortner's understanding of subjectivity

relevant to the present study.

We can see from Ortner, then, and the conversation above, that subjectivity is

highly complex. This is welcome, however, as this reflects the complexity of individual

experience. What happens to an individual, whether through extraordinary violence or

everyday events, cannot be understood without understanding the way that being an

individual is highly conditioned. Without a sense of agency, however, the emphasis on

conditionality can become a simplistic, inaccurate determinism. Both are needed.

However, these different aspects of being a subject area are not easily identified or

understood in practice. An individual can feel responsibility for (having agency over) an

---

[99] Ortner, "Subjectivity and Cultural Critique," 34. Her choice of "desires and intentions" is reminiscent of Geertz's "moods and motivations."

[100] This is important to my goals in this work, although the emphasis on the political does not start with Ortner. As Tanya Luhrmann writes in her recent work on subjectivity, anthropologists, when referring to subjectivity, usually assume a political subject, particularly one that is caught in violent or oppressive environments. Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 345.

event or outcome, while a less involved party might observe the situation and argue that in fact the individual really had no power to influence events. Likewise, one could throw their hands up and claim impotence, when it might be plain to all of those around her that she was the only one with power to change events. This gets at an important distinction in this discussion: the experience of being a subject is a different viewpoint than the frame of an observer, analyst or researcher. Thus, when I claim that being a subject entails both agency and conditionality, that does not mean that one experiences her circumstances in a way reflective of my and Ortner's schema. Instead, such schemas can help both a researcher studying violence and the individual experiencing violence better understand the ways in which events and social upheaval has affected the individual. It should help survivors put words and concepts in dialogue with their feelings, impressions, reflections, etc., to create an account of their experience that is not necessarily less complex simply because an account has been given. Instead, it may bring into greater relief how complex the constituents of one's experience truly are, and in so doing, put one's own agency into better perspective.

Subjectivity is a way, then, to begin approaching another's experience, and with the tools and concepts that we will later develop from Murdoch, provide an account of that experience. And any such an account should be revealing both for the observer and the individual whose experience it is.

Second, and in addition to agency, we need to see subjectivity as a way of describing experience more generally, as well as the conditions that give rise to

experience.[101] In addition to accounting for the dimensions of agency and condition, subjectivity is meant to capture the sense of being a center of thought, sensation, feeling, emotion, and value, among others. It reflects the impressions of a being that interacts with the world and organized human life, both influencing and being influenced by that world.

We can see this approach to felt experience in Ortner's writing on emotion and the inner life. She writes, "By subjectivity I will always mean a specifically cultural and historical consciousness. In using the word consciousness I do not mean to exclude various unconscious dynamics as seen, for example, in a Freudian unconscious or a Bourdieusian *habitus*. But I do mean that subjectivity is always more than those things..."[102] Ortner is gesturing toward two points about subjectivity that are important for the present project. First, when she states that subjectivity always means something "more than those things," she is referring not only to "inner feelings" but also the more Durkheimian collective consciousness that she reads as the result of shared cultural formations. Using a more psychoanalytic frame, she is expressing the fact that subjectivity is based not only on those aspects of ourselves and our lives of which we are aware. We are also part of communities that influence us in ways that are profound, subtle, and that often operate below our awareness. Her reference to Bourdieu's *habitus* indicates this concern for this kind of social determinism, as Bourdieu intends for this concept to describe the ways that social fields and structured environments give rise to one's selfhood, personality, agency, and dispositions in a manner of which we are often

---

[101] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 6.

[102] Ortner, "Subjectivity and Cultural Critique," 34.

not aware. A human individual can be considered quite rightly as a whole, as a subject who has a unique point of worldview. Yet this whole is also a part of a larger whole, wherein there are other distinct but overlapping worlds and subject that affect the make up of our life and worldview.

The other implication of Ortner's passage is that there is an inner world that we should take note of. Intersubjectivity needs to be affirmed, but her understanding of subjectivity is always "more" than that. It includes some understanding of the inner world that cannot be reduced simply as an extension of some externalized reality. Ortner resists a simplistic behaviorism that would claim anything worth knowing about experience is transparent to external observation and that there really is no inner world to speak of. This internal dimension is not secret, essential aspect of being that is an unimpeachable authority of one's experience, making the subject's statements concerning herself impervious to engagement or critique.[103] Rather, Ortner is insisting that the complexity and nuance of human experience that exceeds simplistic notions of *inner* or *outer*.

Ortner's use of emotion helps affirm the qualitative existence of an *inner life*, or at the very least, that a phrase such as *inner life* captures aspects of experience that evade other categorical descriptions which emphasize behavior and bodily reactions. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, in particular, emphasizes the emotional aspect of Ortner's subjectivity, and argues that subjectivity should largely be understood as the

---

[103] As Luhrmann writes, "We know that our feelings are private, but we read them off each other's faces. We know that we know what we feel better than any observer, and yet we know that observers can see on our faces emotions we did not feel. We go to therapists to learn about the unacknowledged feelings that trip us up, and we believe in an honest, authentic emotional life." (Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 349)

emotional life of the subject.[104] Luhrmann picks up on Ortner's reference to Raymond

Williams's definition of subjectivity as "structures of feeling" to argue that Ortner's take

of subjectivity is largely synonymous with this emotional life. She does this to argue

more generally for the salience of psychology as a way to create a clearer definition of

subjectivity for anthropologists, a project that differs from mine here.[105] Yet, this

understanding of subjectivity as necessarily grounded in emotions creates an opening not

just to a deeper understanding of subjectivity but to the experience of *being* a subject.

Bringing in emotion and sensation adds another level, as well as a vocabulary, to help one

articulate what it feels like to be a subject at the nexus of conditionality and agency, what

it is like sometimes to transcend that dualism, and what it can feel like to be more

determined at times, and at times, more profoundly empowered and responsible.

Emotion is itself complex and we should not understand it simply as sensation

opposed to cognition, of feeling versus thought, however. As Martha Nussbaum has

argued, emotions need to be understood as forms of knowledge that tell us about

ourselves, our world, and situations in which we are involved.[106] "To grasp either love or

tragedy by intellect," she argues, "is not sufficient for having real human knowledge of

---

[104] Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 345. Luhrmann also views emotions in a more behaviorist way, though it would be unfair to push this point to strongly. She focuses on emotions as largely that of bodily expression, although she also seems to affirm that there is an aspect of privacy to emotions, even as there is a strong aspect of transparency. (Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 349)

[105] Ortner, "Subjectivity and Cultural Critique," 31, 34; Luhrmann writes that as Ortner "writes about Geertz, it is clear that her focus is something like emotional 'style' - she returns to Williams' 'structure of feeling' as a touchstone throughout the essay (in fact, in the abstract she defines subjectivity as Williams's complex 'structures of feeling')." (Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 347) Luhrmann writes in the abstract of her article, "Anthropologists use the word 'subjectivity' loosely, often to refer to the emotional life of the political subject. In this article I argue that a psychological model of emotion helps us to create a clearer anthropological theory of subjectivity, and in the process helps us to make sense of some of the anthropological quarrels about emotion as well." (Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 345)

[106] See, for example, Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire* for more extended discussions.

it."[107] Referring to compassion, for example, Nussbaum argues that this emotion is itself

a "certain sort of reasoning." It is more powerful because it is not only evaluative but has

the force of emotional urgency.[108] Emotions help us in appraisal and always come with

content that tells us something about our engagement with the world. Emotions such as

guilt and regret, frustration and despair, as well as hope, gratitude, relief, and elation have

the potential to be self-revealing and tells us something about our world and our

engagement with it.

      We can think of emotions, then, as knowledge or sensational responses with

epistemic import. They are felt, are bodily, and bring a more holistic vision of knowledge

located not just in the mind but throughout one's physical organism. We can even go

further and, with Arthur Kleinman, think of the body, and so also emotions, as the

interface between what we experience as interior and what we experience as outer,

creating greater emphasis on the role of the emotions, affect, and embodiment in moral

transformation.[109] Kleinman's work, indeed, further emphasizes emotion as signifying a

dimension of inner life, as emotion reflects the confluence of various phenomena that we

often categorize as inner or outer. This makes the emotional life central to our

understanding of subjectivity, affirming the subject as complex nexus of agency and

---

[107] Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 45.

[108] Nussbaum, "Compassion," 28. Her discussion of compassion takes place within an argument about the role of emotions in discourses on liberalism and justice. Nussbuam sees compassion as a key aspect of justice and any liberal attempts to create more just societies. Her understanding of compassion she takes from what she calls the "pity tradition" grounded in certain classical Greek thinkers.

[109] Kleinman, "How Bodies Remember." This understanding of the body is the key social interface is anticipated by Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as a subject through which the world is made meaningful. (Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 75-99)

conditionality, inner and outer, and provides a rich take on cognition, knowledge, and relationality.

This understanding of emotion, desire, and other facets of the inner life is something that we will take up again in the following chapters when we discuss Iris Murdoch's metaphysics and psychology. For now, such an approach can help us sketch a definition of subjectivity that is complex, rich, and one with depth that extends far into the world and deep into the body. It is a conception that Ortner sums up in this way, "By subjectivity I will mean the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But I always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, though, and so on."[110] This account represents, then, the human person as a lived, felt phenomenon whose agency is real yet shot through with social, cultural, and political influences.

Such a discussion of subjectivity - its history and the approach I am in the midst of arguing for here - makes it highly relevant for a project like this one that hopes to account for the way violent political upheavals transform the individual. The emotional aspect that Ortner emphasizes, for example, as further developed by Luhrmann, allows us to view the emotions that can arise from moral harm - such as anger, fear, guilt, shame, lack of empathy, and despair - as communicative. When we apply such notions of emotion and subjectivity to situations of political violence, we can understand such emotions to have epistemic content about violence that, upon reflection and with the

---

[110] Ortner, "Subjectivity and Cultural Critique," 31.

proper resources, tell us and survivors of political violence something about the experience of violence and moral development.

We can see this if we look back to Dizdarević's quote that opened this work. Reviewing it, we would be hard pressed to understand his words if we viewed the self as an essentialized or atomized individual. Even if we thought of the self as malleable to an extent, we cannot do justice to Dizdarević's insights if we think of the self as a personality or character that life's trials do not affect to its core. Dizdarević is stating that "civilization" has been completely undone, and with surprising swiftness, by the violation not so much of bodily integrity, though that is represented in his words. It is undone more specifically by the violation of human dignity, of neighbor betraying neighbor, betraying something we could call almost sacred. It is a violation of trust, of community, and of one's moral standing and self-regard through bodily injury. It is a violence that starts with, but ultimately targets something deeper than, the skin.

This is not, then, just the collapse of some abstract concept called civilization. Dizdarević gestures toward a collapse of the individual when he speaks of it in terms of a "distress that cannot be forgotten." It is emotional, visceral, and permanent. It "removes all finer human sentiments," transforming how the individual feels and how she will react through the affections toward another human. And it "wipes out any sense of justice, compassion, and forgiveness." In other words, it transforms the virtues, transforms character - or at least the experience of oneself we call character and virtue - so that the person can no longer respond to others in the same way she did before the transgression.

In a few short lines, Dizdarević's quote witnesses to the way that something as abstract as regional political conflict, itself conditioned by geopolitics (for instance, the collapse of the Cold War, in the case of Yugoslavia), can so affect one's local moral world, transforming relationships between neighbors, whose actions transform the subject. We cannot hope to understand such a situation, and how gestures like being hit by a rifle butt can undo one's worldview, without having a sophisticated understanding of the self that can account for activities on these different levels, as well as how the interaction between such levels conditions the self from moment to moment, breath to breath, year to year. There is more to Dizdarević's quote, after all, than someone being struck with a rifle. There is the context of a fraying society, of institutions and symbols and bodies fought over and thrown down, that give that violent gesture its potent meaning. To quote Nussbaum again, "to grasp either love or tragedy by intellect is not sufficient for having real human knowledge of it."[111] So much more so for extreme violence that tears the

fabric of one's soul as it tears the fabric of one's community.

Limitations of subjectivity

Although Ortner and Luhrmann help us understand the ways in which emotion is a critical aspect of subjectivity, their frameworks are still not able to explore adequately

---

[111] Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 45.

the moral dimensions of violence.[112] Luhrmann argues that "subjectivity implies

emotional experience" and that psychological theories of emotion can add clarity to

anthropological approaches. In the course of her argument, Luhrmann seems to affirm

morality in her schema, yet in effect she ends up reducing it. She references the moral

category toward the end of her argument to make some strong claims on the nature of

emotion and morals. For example, she writes, "And yet that very basic, physiological,

gut-based automatic judgment means that an emotional experience is a moral

judgment...Emotions are our most basic moral reactions."[113] This categorization seems to

make emotions a form of morality, or at least a type categorized under the broader term

of "moral judgement." The seeming consequence of this move is to make morality the

more significant concept, as emotion is defined in terms of moral processes. Indeed,

reading this charitably, Luhrmann's can be seen as a helpful formulation in that it

gestures toward the evaluative aspect of emotion and the emotional dimension of

morality.

The emphasis on emotion in her paper, however, endangers the potential of this

nuanced dynamism. "Moral judgement" in the above quote is associated with "moral

---

[112] Luhrmann writes that subjectivity is "the emotional experience of a political subject," making emotions central and even definitive of subjectivity. (Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 359) She also states that anthropologists when using *subjectivity* do so "to sort out the role of the social in an individual's experience of emotion." (Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 346, 349) Bringing out the affective dimension of Ortner's theory backs Luhrmann's claim for the centrality of emotion to subjectivity, and so, provides her basis to argue for the relevance of psychology in these debates, which is a central goal of her article.

Further, Luhrmann also argues that this is Ortner's understanding, but this is not necessarily true. In support of this argument, Luhrmann quotes Ortner, who wrote that subjectivity is "the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects," in addition to cultural and social conditioning. (Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 346) We can see from this quote, however, that emotion is significant but only part of what comprises the "inner processes" of the subject. Neither *thought* nor *perception* are reducible to emotion. Even *desire* is much more complex a phenomenon than emotion and involves histories and evaluations. Luhrmann would no doubt agree with that, but my larger argument is that she risks reducing the complexity she sees in human life through her overemphasis on emotion.

[113] Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 355.

reactions," making moral judgement seem solely reactive, a result that elides other qualities of moral judgement and morality more generally, such as reflection, contestation, and negotiation in the moral life. Indeed, Luhrmann does not provide a definition of the moral, leaving absent an understanding of exactly how we are to understand it as a "visceral act" and how this connects with any notions of moral reflection and theorizing, which although not the whole of morality, are ubiquitously human. Whereas Luhrmann defines emotion as comprised of six factors, for example, and supports the importance of emotions by a number of psychological studies, the moral dimension is mainly confined to one paragraph and becomes something of an auxiliary characteristic to a subject mainly characterized in political and emotional terms. "If subjectivity is the emotional experience of a political subject," she writes, "then to articulate the psychological structure of the emotion only gives us more evidence to argue that power is inscribed upon our bodies and that moral judgment is a visceral act."[114] Although morality is certainly visceral and often comes from the gut, this formulation does not give an adequately complex understanding of moral experience. Where the moral seems at first to be the broader category, it comes to be defined almost entirely by Luhrmann's understanding of emotion, reducing its complexity.

I do not mean to reduce the role of emotions in moral discernment. As I noted above in reference to Martha Nussbaum's work, emotions are critical to evaluation, and indeed, critical to self-awareness and moral growth. What occurs in Luhrmann's work, however, is a conceptual confusion about morality created in the very process of trying to

---

[114] Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 359.

create clarity around the role of emotion in anthropological approaches to subjectivity. The result is that, as the moral is muddied up with the emotional, the moral dimension is made much less necessary and is in danger of becoming unnecessary. Why even have categories of morality if morality is fully grounded in, created through, and defined by the emotions? In the end, Luhrmann subsumes moral experience and dynamics within the broader, explanatory category of emotion. And in the process of trying to affirm Ortner's move to expand notions of subjectivity to include emotions, Luhrmann ends up narrowing her understanding of subjectivity by reducing the moral to the emotional.[115]

Luhrmann's project is not explicitly one concerning moral development or morality, and it might seem uncharitable to try and place the goals of one inquiry on that of another. This is fair, but my reasons for spending time on Luhrmann's use of Ortner is twofold. The first is to show that an emphasis on other categories, such as emotions and the political, even when these encompass the moral, can too easily reduce the moral as a central dimension of subjectivity. In so doing, the moral dimension can be elided even as it is referenced. This can happen with any category, but as we saw in the introductory chapter, this is a regular lacuna in social scientific and even humanistic inquiries.

Second, issues of subjectivity, including the way that Ortner and Luhrmann frame subjectivity, have important moral aspects that must be kept in sight. Luhrmann defines the subject as a *political* subject, one "caught up in a world of violence, state authority and pain, the subject's distress under the authority of another."[116] These are moral issues

---

[115] In structure, this is a similar move to those who would define the human subject mostly in terms of the will or reason, at the expense of emotion, but in Luhrmann's iteration, it is the moral that is the foil used to affirm the emotional.

[116] Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," 346.

and experiences, however else we may describe them, as they deal with the self immersed in coercive forces affecting one's subjectivity, shaping value, and transforming one's worldview. And if we are to take the testimony of survivors of political violence such as Dizdarević and Maček's informants, we miss something if we do not emphasize the moral stakes that such political subjectivity involves.

The point is not to argue against an understanding of subjectivity that forefronts the emotions. It is to demonstrate, however, that even such a corrective move - one that even references morality - does not ensure that the resulting understanding of subjectivity will deal with the moral dimension of being a subject in a robust, rich manner, one where morality and moral experience - really, the moral life - will not be reduced to other categories. What we require is an understanding of *moral* subjectivity that will frame the experience of being a subject, as well as related complex interactions with the world, in a way that forefronts the moral aspects of such experience.

Subjectivity and everyday, local moral worlds

In addition to Ortner's and Luhrmann's components of subjectivity, we need further components to enrich our understanding of subjectivity developed so far and move forward to a conception of moral subjectivity. In the introduction I briefly referred to a number of anthropologists who have worked on issues of political and quotidian violence and its effects on subjectivity. To create a more robust understanding of subjectivity, its experience and context, it will help to draw on their understanding of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Their work is relevant not only because they have dealt most directly with the ways in which political violence transforms subjectivity, but they

have also made strides toward understanding the moral dimension of being a subject.

What will be considered are important understandings of what it is to be a moral subject,

focusing on the concept of the *everyday*, of experience being inherently *local, and* the

fragility of moral subjectivity. It will be important to highlight the *moral* aspects of these

terms and the realities they gesture toward, in way that go beyond what these authors

themselves say. These writers also emphasize the political and the emotional, but even

more, they emphasize how local worlds and experience are critical to understanding the

dynamics of subjectivity and violence, as well as gesturing toward the moral dimension

of such issues.

The first dimension to consider is an understanding of the *everyday*, a frame

critical to such anthropologists as Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Philip Bourgois, Nancy

Scheper-Hughes, among others. This term is often employed not simply to describe a

certain level of action and interaction, as opposed to more extraordinary events and other

social levels, but to basic forms of violence that are woven into quotidian life. Scheper-

Hughes in her large ethnography on Brazilian *favelas* is perhaps one of the first to

theorize this term explicitly, although looking to the everyday, including everyday forms

of violence, instead of more macro level classifications, certainly predates her work.[117]

Here Scheper-Hughes makes a distinction between more overt state violence and the

---

[117] One could go back to Aristotle's understanding of ethics and even Plato's literary genres that look into
the importance of what could be called more mundane issues and practices for politics more generally. In
terms of violence, and in particular, violence understood as injustice, however, one would most likely have
to look to Marx, or at least, other activists and theorists involved in the effects of rapid industrialization,
colonialism, and empire building in the 19th century (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* comes to mind).
Certainly, certain post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault but even others such as Pierre Bourdieu
concerned themselves with refocusing inquiry from stability to conflict, as well as to the more intimate
nature of institutions, as well as feminist works from the 1960s forward. And as Sherry Ortner has
remarked, the turn to practices that Bourdieu and Foucault both influence also was a more toward an
attention to the daily and everyday. (Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties")

indirect, everyday violence that comes from inequality, corruption, and social and economic, what Johann Galtung first described as *structural violence*. The main difference is that, while Galtung emphasizes the impersonal nature of such violence, where there is no clear actor perpetrating a violation, Scheper-Hughes focuses on the experience of such violence as part of daily life.[118] Such inequalities and policies are not simply perpetrated against one, but can include a "victim's" participation through daily action taken within institutions.[119]

Scheper-Hughes' understanding of everyday violence resonates with the approaches of different theorists and anthropologists, in addition to those just mentioned. Drawing on this understanding of everyday violence, for example, Scheper-Hughes's frequent collaborator, Philippe Bourgois, adapted the concept to theorize different types of violence including *political*, *structural*, *symbolic*, and *everyday*. Everyday conceptions "focus on the individual lived experience that normalizes petty brutalities and terror at the community level and creates a common-sense or ethos of violence."[120]

A second important concept is the *local,* which has been an important formulation as the site in which the phenomena under discussion in these pages occur, abide, and transform. The anthropologists discussed here, in general, focus on political violence and how it transforms the self by]highlighting the effects of violence as experienced on the local level, the privileged site where larger dynamics, structures, and events - regional,

---

[118] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, 170."

[119] Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping,* 216-267 and *passim*.

[120] Bourgois takes *structural violence* from Johann Gaultung's original framing of the term, while *symbolic* comes from Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of symbolic violence as internalized "humiliation" that comes from hierarchies and social relationships that one participates in. (Bourgois, "The Power of Violence in War and Peace," 8)

national, and even geopolitical in scope - are directly experienced and incorporated into society.[121] Anthropologist Arthur Kleinman, in particular, is concerned with the central *moral* dimension of the local, as well as the way macro level dynamics arise from such local networks and yet also affect, in return, everyday life.[122]

Kleinman argues that such violence is situated in *local moral worlds* - networks and communities in which value is created and contested and in which evaluation occurs. Although the local in Kleinman's understanding includes economic relationships and other modalities of human thought, action, and organization, the moral dimension of experience and sociality are held up as key, as informants have related that such dimensions are central to what is truly important to them.[123] This turn to the local as the generative context of value and meaning also means that Kleinman privileges issues of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, experience, and social relationship. Further, local moral worlds are the reservoirs from which more explicit forms of violence, such as war, come out of and to which they are then absorbed. In other words, Kleinman's approach looks to the local to understand violence with a keen eye to the relationship between different levels of social experience and interaction, whose dialectics help generate everyday violence and the subjectivities formed through such violence.

What Kleinman means by *local moral world* is one's immediate community or network. Kleinman writes that "'local worlds' is meant to emphasize the fact that ethnographic descriptions focus on micro-contexts of experience in villages, urban

---

[121] Kleinman, "How Bodies Remember." Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping.*

[122] Kleinman, *Writing at the Margin*, 122-125.

[123] Kleinman, "Pain and Resistance;" Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege.*

neighborhoods, work settings, households, and networks of bounded relationships in communities where everyday life is enacted and transacted."[124] It is moral, however, because such worlds and processes "consist of the contestations and compromises that actualize values both for collectives and for individuals."[125] One's local moral world is the very place of evaluation, care, commitment, and norms, their creation, contestation, adoption, and elimination. Each individual, however, is complex, and has many identities and loyalties that are not reducible to just one identity. This also necessitates that we acknowledge multiple moral worlds in which one lives. This makes *the local* implicitly plural, an umbrella term to the many local worlds one lives in, whether these be the home, school, work, a religious house, or other places that are the context of moral development and action.

Further, Kleinman's assumption is that it is on the local level where the individual and more macro social events and dynamics interact, are mediated, and where they influence each other.[126] Macro-level structures and forces, such as economics and politics, are influential at the level of the local, that is, one's network of concern and care. This is the level where "what is most at stake for persons and families" is actually created, given form, relation, and meaning, and where the "sociosomatic linkage between symbol systems and the body, between ethos and the person" are created from

---

[124] Kleinman, "Experience and Its Moral Modes," 358fn2; see also p. 359.

[125] Kleinman, "Moral Experience and Ethical Reflection," 71.

[126] There is in Kleinman a Durkheimian impulse to see the moral as closely aligned with the social, although Kleinman brings out the importance of the local level, a privileging that seems influenced by feminist theories yet also the epistemological privileging that comes from Marx.

contestation and negotiation.[127] It is also the place where the larger events of the world come into contact with value creation to transform what matters to people. In other words, a local moral world is one's immediately lived network where meaning is not only created but imbibed and embodied. This emphasis makes such networks inherently moral - indeed, the place of morality - in a double sense, as the level where one's values, concerns, goals, and visions of the good are formed and also where they are affected by broader events and trends.[128]

It is interesting to note that Kleinman developed his understanding of local moral worlds in the course of theorizing about chronic pain. The idea that the experience of pain is inescapably local is central to the development of this concept for medical anthropology.[129] Kleinman writes,

> And here, where persons encounter pain, is where we need to center the study of its sources and consequences. Thus, studying chronic pain patients means that each must be situated in a world. That world must be described, and the description must include an account of the experience of pain in the wider context of experience in family, workplace, and community. To understand what chronic pain signifies, what its experience

---

[127] Kleinman, *Writing from the Margin*, 123-124. This is an interesting statement, as the local is doing much the work, as the interface between different levels, as the body does in Merleau-Ponty, an interface between the subject and object.

[128] What Kleinman means by moral, then, is very similar to what Andrew Sawyer means when he discusses what things matter most to people. Moral here is understood not just as evaluation of particular persons, goods, ideas, symbols, narratives, and locations but the emotion, the affection or disgust, toward such things. Moral is affective, evaluative, involving things that will raise and respect, that factor in not only to one's quality of living and one's ability to work toward cherished goals; it can also factor in to one's survival. Sawyer helpfully views values this way:
> I suggest that we should think of values as 'sedimented' valuations that have become attitudes or dispositions, which we come to regard as justified. They merge into emotional dispositions and inform the evaluations we make of particular things, as part f our conceptual and affective apparatus. They are more abstract than the particular concrete evaluations from they derive and which they in turn influence. (Sawyer, *Why Things Matter to People*, 25-26).

[129] Kleinman, "Pain and Resistance," 173. It should be noted that "Pain and Resistance" was included as a chapter in Kleinman's *Writing at the Margin*, from which I draw the above quote. I draw from both sources throughout.

is like, ethnographers must work out a background understanding of local knowledge and daily practices concerning the body and the self, and misfortune, suffering, and aspiration generally. And they must relate this background understanding to episodes of pain, courses of pain, and other aspects of the world of patients, families, and practitioners who are responding to the constraints of pain.[130]

The origin of Kleinman's understanding of local moral worlds in pain makes Kleinman's construction of *local moral worlds* and of the *local* particularly relevant to discussions of subjectivity and political violence, as is demonstrated by the works he himself has done in collaboration on such subjects.[131] It also shows the use of similar concepts, such as *everyday violence* are fundamental to all of these conceptualizations that aim to put experience and more intimate levels of interaction and life at the center of inquiry.

What is shared by each of these writers is an understanding of the fragility not only of the moral but of the social, as well. Veena Das writes how one's "access to context" as she calls it, and which I understand as one's ability to inhabit the geographies in which life and relationships exist, may become hampered or lost.[132] Das argues that trust in the durability of one's own context and relationships may be lost, swept aside by violent political upheaval. Such betrayals can create a loss of the ability to inhabit one's world - including the linguistic resources of that world - lessening abilities and avenues for response, until it can seem that the only response possible, other than violence and

---

[130] Kleinman, *Writing at the Margin*, 124-125.

[131] Das, et al., *Social Suffering*; Das, et al., *Violence and Subjectivity*.

[132] Das's understanding of context shifts in her work and, like other important terms such as *ordinary*, are not explicitly defined. Context does seem to imply one's social context of meaning and orientation, which connects to references of context as *lifeworld*. Das also refers to a "linguistic context," which is important to her work, as she is looking not only at language philosophy but also how articulation is wrapped up in the experience of violence. (Das, *Life and Words*, 9, 65)

blame, exile and escape, is a form of lamentation, where one learns to live through the aftermath of violence by mourning, and so acknowledging, the immensity of the loss.[133]

Specifically, Das emphasizes the important epistemological dimension of this experience of violence. She labels as *poisonous knowledge* the survivor's experience of betrayal by family members and how easily loyalties and obligations that she once took for granted succumbed to the pressures of violent crisis and failed her in her hour of need. This knowledge can lead to frustration, regret, and even a feeling that the givenness of one's worldview can be thrown into doubt. This poisonous knowledge can itself lead to further violence, if not dealt with correctly. It is a powerful epistemological transformation that one must either lament, and so begin moving through to a new worldview, or respond to with violence, in an attempt to refute such knowledge and blame others for the collapse of one's world.[134] Das builds on Kleinman's notion of local moral worlds and the relationship between different social levels with an account, both

---

[133] Das, *Life and Words*, 6-9.

[134] Das, *Life and Words,* 54-55, 77, 240fn29.

epistemological and psychological, that further defines the contours of how violence and social change can transform subjectivity.[135]

Experience, then, is privileged, although it is not the final authority, as reflection and analysis are needed to bring together the differing levels and dynamics at play. These emphases - the everyday, social vulnerability, the location of the moral in the local, and experience - are all methodological assumptions I argue are critical if we are to understand the moral experience that individuals such as Maček's informants claim, and if we are to understand the moral stakes their experience witnesses to. Together, they begin to create an understanding, really an approach, to political violence that is better able to take into account individual moral experience, and so, better hear, if not entirely articulate and account for, the claims that arise from such experience. In the chapters where I engage Iris Murdoch's thought, I will return to some of these concepts and show how Murdoch can help deepen their meaning, as well as show how they can help frame more fully some of Murdoch's concepts about the moral life.

_____

[135] Although Das uses the term *local* she uses *the ordinary* much more often and in a more technical sense in *Life and Words. The ordinary* is just that - life is as it is lived from day to day with its routines and roles and relationships. She emphasizes the ordinary as how life is lived to contrast the *event* - those violent periods (she focuses on riots) that interrupt ordinary life and seem to disperse community and the social. Her question is how one is able to then return to ordinary life, now devastated by life, and to move forward after the devastation. This is very similar to the *everyday* of Scheper-Hughes, although Scheper-Hughes and even Kleinman in his discussion of the local seem to emphasize more the structural violence of the *everyday* in a way that Das does not. This does not mean that Das ignores such a dimension of routine, daily life. Instead, the difference is one of emphasis. It also has to do with the different locations of their ethnographic fieldwork and how the specific cultural textures of each location affects the terminology and the meaning of such terminology in the anthropologist's explication of events. Das's *ordinary* holds the cultural resources for dealing with violent events, and she emphasizes how women in particular live into certain cultural roles as a way to acknowledge their suffering while moving forward in life.

   The ordinary and *local moral worlds*, then, do not exactly overlap, as they have a difference in scale. *The ordinary* seems to be expansive of life, except for violent events, while *local moral worlds* could be said to be the contexts and matrixes of relationships and norms that make up what we experience as *the ordinary*. In effect, however, Das and Kleinman seem to be after the same thing, that is, to account for the way one's life is localized and how what we consider to be violent events or periods interact with our everyday lives, as well as what about such interactions and our local worlds enable continued social life after explicit violence.

This conversation has come back repeatedly to *experience*, a central notion for this work. Up until now, I have used the term generically and relied on the reader's own understanding of this common word and concept. This will not do going forward, and before continuing, it is important to sketch of what I mean be experience, particularly as it relates to the frame I have been developing and how it relates to such concepts as *local moral world*.

Experience is hard to define as it is so fundamental to human existence that it is singular and without a real synonym. In some models of Christian ethics, experience is seen as one of four bases of authority for understanding ethics and theology, making it a basis of interpretation and knowledge.[136] William James, for example, makes religious experience a central trope for understanding religion, yet does not explicitly define experience as such, though he does define religion and refers to a myriad of types of experience from the "mental" to the "mystical" to informants who just describe their experience.[137] And how *experience* is related to *perception*, the *emotions*, *ratiocination*, etc., is further problematic, and the answers to these questions are diverse. Indeed, it is such a fundamental term it does not really have a synonym.

I could go on for quite some time in an attempt to map different conceptions of experience, but this would pull us away from the focus of the present work. I follow Kleinman's understanding of experience to the extent that experience is not just subjective but intersubjective and where one's relations and local context are critical. Kleinman also emphasizes the body, so that experience is embodied and includes

---

[136] Farley, "The Role of Experience in Moral Discernment."

[137] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 31.

sensation and perception, as well as more intellectual activities. As we will see later, in

my discussion of Murdoch, Kleinman's approach will become even more relevant, as

Murdoch focuses on perception and, so to an extent, embodiment, in understanding moral

development and change.

Kleinman defines experience specifically as,

the felt flow of interpersonal communication and engagements. Those
lived engagements take place in a local world. Experience is thoroughly
intersubjective. It involves practices, negotiations, contestations among
others with whom we are connected. It is a medium in which collective
and subjective processes interfuse. We are born into the flow of palpable
experience. Within its symbolic meanings and social interactions our
senses form into a patterned sensibility, our movements meet resistance
and find directions, and our subjectivity emerges, takes shape, and
reflexively shapes our local world.[138]

This definition underscores how experience relates in particular to one's being in a local

moral world, as well as the the perception, feeling, and impressions of being a moral

subject in such local contexts. This is the important aspect of experience for the current

project. My emphasis when speaking of experience is on the moral subject as being a

subject within local moral worlds - networks, communities, institutions, relationships,

and contexts through which other levels, such as the more broadly social, national,

international, etc., are mediated.

In this way, experience is defined as much by what it is not as what it is. That is,

by focusing on experience in these pages, my intention is to emphasize the first-person,

embodied account of violence and the testimony of individuals as to what violence feels

like, what is most at stake to one having come through violence on a visceral level, and

---

[138] Kleinman, "Experience and its Moral Modes," 358-9.

the challenges with which this leaves the person. Here, I emphasize that experience may often be experienced as subjective, even if we can show how it is intersubjective in formation. This understanding is contrasted to other approaches to analyzing violence that might de-emphasize the first-person perspective.

Even more than Kleinman, however, I want to emphasize not only the "felt flow" and experience as a "medium" but also experience as a visceral impression, of memories created and contested, as well as of the socially-formed matrix in which the self comes to see itself as a particular self.[139] Experience is one of the aspects that gives rise to and conditions subjectivity, just as one's subjectivity will condition their experience of self, others, and world going forward. The etymology of experience and its roots in Latin bring forth the idea of "to try, to put to the test."[140] This is apt, as it returns us to the emphasis in these pages on the moral life by underlining the fact that through their experience a person tries to live a good life, be a good person, trying on different ways of being, as well as being challenged by conditions and events. In this way, we can think of experience as an embodied first-person viewpoint, as well as the memories and impressions created from such personal engagement with the world - as an embodied self engaged intersubjectively in local moral worlds in ways that gives the self a felt reality.

Subjectivity to moral subjectivity

What I have done in the last few pages is generalize work that different researchers researching different areas and times and that carry with them different

---

[139] Kleinman seems to see subjectivity as a constituent of experience. Kleinman does not, however, seem interested in systematization, so I argue that such a difference not be taken strictly. (Kleinman, "Everything that Really Matters," 321-2.

[140] "Experience, N." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed May 20, 2015. http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/66520.

assumptions and objectives, despite their similarities. I believe this is legitimate in that they all share, even if such sharing is only a family resemblance, certain assumptions and privilege certain domains that have allowed each to reframe their inquiries onto subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and larger social issues and dynamics while still putting the local and the individual at the center. Whatever its vices, such an approach has the virtue of privileging experience, as well as the local, in our inquiries, yet following Kleinman's example, still requires macro analyses and accounts, without which any study would be woefully incomplete.

What we need now, in order to better ensure that we include the moral in our understanding of the self is a *moral* subjectivity, is a way of understanding human experience that at once forefronts the social nature of being a subject, the political nature, yet also captures the interiority of such experience. What I mean by interiority is that we do not lose sight of the individual's personal world of feeling, thought, and value even as we stress how one's "inner world" is part of a larger fabric running through one's relationships and one's community. This is no easy balance, and both the social sciences and humanities have struggled to represent this complexity that is at the heart of shared human life.

An understanding of subjectivity will be truly *moral* if, further, it succeeds in expressing a vision of the individual as one for whom life is saturated with moral meaning and can be best described as an ongoing process of moral development amongst and in relationship to others. Prior to conceiving of the human as primarily a center of reason, of will, of autonomous choice, a moral subjectivity represents the human as one

for whom, to paraphrase from one virtue tradition, the questions of who am I and whom should I be are existentially central.[141] Identity is central to this formulation of the self, uniting moral aspects of the self with issues of identity, as the question "whom am I?" implies, as is a metaphysics or worldview in which such an identity and the answers to these questions will be comprehensible.[142] The other modalities mentioned (will, etc.) are involved in subjectivity, yet they are methodologically de-emphasized in order to bring the moral dimension of experience forward.

Much like subjectivity itself, *moral subjectivity* is a term that is used yet not often defined. In philosophy, for instance, moral subjectivity can refer to questions that arise around the moral subject. These include issues of moral relativism involving individual moral viewpoints, as well as universals in general, such as a Kantian understanding of impartial reasoning.[143] It can also be defined quite broadly as "a moral position or intellectual space shaped by, but also constituting or shaping, discourse and material practices," making it akin to *habitus*, but more explicitly moral and personal.[144] Uses akin to the latter, range from those that seem to reflect a sense of a fluid, temporary way of being conditioned by larger forces in society and the world, to understandings that involve a program of moral development, such as monastic training.[145]

Through our discussion thus far, we have already discussed the constituents needed to make a subjectivity primarily moral. These are, first, the subjective experience

---

[141] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 1.

[142] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 126-7.

[143] Meyers, *Subjection and Subjectivity*, ch. 1.

[144] Reitan, *Making a Moral Society*, xiv.

[145] Zigon, "On Love;" see also Berkwitz, "History and Gratitude in Theravada Buddhism."

of what matters to one (values) as we saw with Sayer and Kleinman. Such value will differ from person to person, from geography to geography, from culture to culture. Overlap is possible, and possibly common. As each self is a particular center of differing cultures and experiences, however, it will always be somewhat unique. Second are the institutions and structures and their internalization by the individual that condition the moral imagination and what is and is not possible, particularly concerning how one is to be in the world (ethos). Third is one's understanding of how the world and her society are and how the world should be (worldview), making it an area of life that is both evaluative and prescriptive or aspirational. This includes, fourthly, the conditions and practices that make up one's worldview. Ethos and worldview are practiced and internalized through specific acts in differing institutional contexts (school, work, family, etc.).[146] Fifth is moral development, of aspiration and failure, hope and despair, that together with the previous constituents form the moral subject. In addition, six, is an understanding of moral subjectivity rooted in local moral worlds and the maintenance of such worlds. This is the location of experience - the local - and through which more macro events and trends are felt, observed, evaluated, and mediated.

All of these are experienced as deeply intertwined and separated only analytically in order to highlight important influences and constituents of being a moral subject in the

---

[146] This idea of culture as worldview and ethos is not new but goes to the beginnings of anthropology in the United States. Geertz's take on these concepts he lays out in his essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," as well as "Ethos, Worldview, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols." (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 87-141). Geertz emphasizes that such practices and dispositions make worldview and ethos *seem* natural. This emphasis on seemingness or appearance of naturalness is an opening for Ortner, I argue, to insist on the possibility that a Geertzian use of culture can also see culture as ideological and part of domination. Drawing on Raymond Williams, she is able to see culture as Geertzian, comprising "symbols and meanings, ethos and worldview," yet nevertheless also sees that culture is part of forces of domination and ideology. (Ortner, "Subjectivity and Cultural Critique")

midst of other moral subjects and their shared life, institutions, and structures (moral intersubjectivity). They interact and help condition each other. For example, one's ethos and worldview come from practices and interactions and contestations in local moral worlds, and yet such worldviews also have their own power to affect ongoing social life.[147] It is a complex web creating not only meaning but subjectivity itself.[148]

Moving toward virtue

We have these elements of a moral subjectivity, but they remain general. Just as Kleinman could use *moral* and still not give a robust account of that experience, a moral subjectivity requires a firmer grounding in a more specific conception of the self. There are many understandings of moral development and theories of ethics that we could turn to at this point. I turn specifically to help fill out and interpret the different elements of moral subjectivity just listed. And at the same time, some of the anthropological concepts discussed previously will help bring out aspects of Murdoch's thought or augment it to better engage the experience of survivors of political violence.

In the next several chapters I will lay out a virtue hermeneutic of moral subjectivity based on Iris Murdoch's philosophical anthropology and metaphysics. I will draw specifically from her understanding of moral experience as one of tension between different areas of account and loyalty. I understand moral development as a process of learning how to better perceive such places of account, of orienting oneself toward and perceiving the *Good* and developing the capacity to do so, and of learning to displace

---

[147] Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," 280.

[148] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5. This is a spin on Geertz's discussion of culture, where he wrote, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun..." I take this metaphor only so far here. Geertz, I would argue, does not believe in moral facts and signification in terms of the *Good*, as we will see in Murdoch.

one's own self as the center of moral concern by understanding the world as one populated by subjects each worthy of loving attention. This notion of moral development includes an understanding of failure not only in our moral projects but in the very intelligibility of moral subjectivity itself. Through Murdoch's understanding of a tensile moral subjectivity, I will be able to sketch a representation of a moral subject that can help account for and even provide the vocabulary to articulate changes in felt moral ability.

What the anthropological theories discussed so far provide are a better sense of where such work is done, where moral development occurs (and so helps us understand how it occurs), and importantly, a better understanding of the difference between various phenomenological or social levels of interaction. Murdoch, as we will see, had goals that did not necessitate a more robust discussion of the institutional and social structures that condition a social life. Indeed, one could read Murdoch and, in contrast to neo-Aristotelian and Christian virtue ethicists, such as Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, argue that community is utterly absent from Murdoch's account. Consequently, I will use the anthropological concepts of local moral worlds and the everyday to help situate and provide communal context for the representation of moral subjectivity that Murdoch can give us. This is essential, as those who have suffered moral harm from political violence have such experiences in particular places, under certain circumstances, and feel the interaction and conflict between different levels of social interaction. I will provide the details of this in the next chapter to show a thick moral

subjectivity understood through virtue discourse that is able to highlight the moral

dimension of the experience of extreme political violence.

Chapter Three: Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

An important lesson we can draw from the testimony of survivors of political violence is that there are identifiable, and possibly unique, forms of vulnerability and suffering made possible when a moral subject is caught in extreme violence and political upheaval. The moral life - the experience of being a growing and changing moral subject among others over time - is said to enable flourishing. But it also displays vulnerabilities that can frustrate flourishing, as well as our projects, hopes and dreams. Such challenges are not new to formulators of virtue and virtue epistemologies, yet political violence presents forms of moral harm that seem to undermine the very fabric of one's moral subjectivity and felt character. In the next several chapters, then, I will engage a particular notion of virtue to deepen the sketch of moral subjectivity for which I have argued. This will provide a vocabulary and understanding of the self that can describe in more detail what happens when violent devastation creates moral loss, as well as an account of how such change occurs.

I turn now specifically to the philosopher Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy. Murdoch gives us a philosophical anthropology, an account of moral development and transformation, as well as an understanding of the aim of moral development. By providing a rich account of the structure of the experience of moral being, Murdoch necessarily also provides the basis of an account of human vulnerability, of how moral subjectivity can be undone. It is an account, then, of how someone can live relatively successfully into notions of the *Good*, as Murdoch describes the horizon of our moral efforts, at the same time it is an account of how someone can feel such a radical

transformation of their character and moral subjectivity. These are two sides of the same coin.

There is a trajectory to my argument that will span the remaining chapters. I will begin in the next several pages laying out Murdoch's understanding of the moral life focusing first on her philosophical anthropology, moral development, metaphysics, and account of vulnerability. As I move forward, I will focus on specific aspects of Murdoch's thought, starting first with Murdoch's understanding of the moral subject and moving finally to her understanding of void. This will provide us with several levels that can help describe and account for such experience in the midst of devastation. Along the way, I will refer to aspects of the Bosnian War to provide examples that should illustrate how particular aspects of Murdoch's thought are relevant to the experience of political violence. What I will show is that in Murdoch's understanding of the self, understood as a tension between various modes of being moral, it is the ability of be "good" which both makes possible the moral life and its loss. I will explore these vulnerabilities, framed, in particular, through Murdoch's idea of *void* which describes the experience of a moral subject for whom morality is in danger of becoming unintelligible.

Overview of Iris Murdoch's thought

Iris Murdoch's understanding of the moral subject is of a self on pilgrimage through life who is constantly developing capacities of love and attention. These capacities both allow one to see more clearly who they are in relationship to the world and others and also empower one to push back against the innate and ever-present human

inclination toward selfishness.[149] The act of seeing clearly, which is a central moral ability in Murdoch's philosophy, can be understood as imagining and experiencing the world more precisely as it is: as complex and multiple and, importantly, one where one's own ego is de-centered and devalued. It is a form of Copernican inversion of the moral world where one's own sun is revealed as a satellite on the fringe of the moral, existential solar system, a reorientation that allows us to be persons more capable of a caring and loving attention to the world around us and to others. Even so, there remains a constant pull within each of us - a gravitational pull, as Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch after her argues - to see our own little, individual earth as the center of the cosmos.

There is, then, no end to the struggle, and the tension inherent in the moral life, a life understood as constant realignment and effort directed toward perceiving and embodying what it is to be a "good" person. This also means there is no final realization of this pilgrimage, although as we will see, Murdoch strongly advocates that there is a direction toward which we need to orient ourselves. Life, then, is a path with a direction whose destination we never fully inhabit. The moral life, which is nearly synonymous with the human life itself, is lived out within selves and between them, engaged with our constantly changing understanding of goodness, where tension among competing and differing goods and loyalties is the fundamental fabric of morality.[150] We discern what direction our life can take and head in that direction, and ideally, correcting our course as

---

[149] Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 70.

[150] Murdoch's ideal is that one would so develop their moral vision that given a situation they would not need to deliberate but the necessity of what one perceives would make action clear, a goal shared in virtue theories going back to Aristotle. This would imply that there is an ideal where there is no tension, where there is no competition between goods and images of the human. I take this, however, note as a way of being Murdoch thinks will or can actually happen, but an ideal to clarify the nature of the *Good*, as well as an ever receding ideal that we can strive toward. (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 331)

we learn more about ourselves, others, and the world, and as we become wiser and less automatically selfish.

For all of this, the moral life can fail, or at the very least, derail. Events can disorient us and cause us to question and even doubt the very intelligibility of the moral life and our ability to be good. Great bereavement and loss can so overwhelm the moral intelligibility of one's life that being a good person may be seen as meaningless, so much so that one can fall into despair.[151] The aspiration toward being good is not easy and will be painful. Although Murdoch spends most of her major writings focusing on the positive aspects of the moral life, and speaks of great loss as something that most people work through, she nevertheless underscores the fact that no life, and no moral life, is guaranteed a happy, virtuous ending.

Murdoch, then, can help us provide a deeper account of moral *subjectivity,* or so I argue. *Subjectivity* is not a term that Murdoch uses. She uses *being*, yet beyond its derivation from Plato, she never defines her usage explicitly. Indeed, even as she uses *being,* particularly *ethical being*, she emphasizes the processual character of the self, one that is conditioned by competing modalities of desire, political axiom, duty, as well as various goods and loyalties.[152] Her use reflects an understanding of human existence as one of change, suffering, and love.[153] This is not the picture of the self as essential or resistant to an outside world as opposed to one of the interior, however. Indeed, even though Murdoch has been a champion for including notions of interiority as central to

---

[151] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 500.

[152] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 492.

[153] Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good*, 50-52.

moral philosophy, her understanding of one's interior could only be understood as formed, and constantly in formation, by forces outside the self, as well as universal inclinations.

There are ways to read Murdoch, then, that make subjectivity an important, framing concept to bring out aspects, or at least potentials, in Murdoch's thought. Maria Antonaccio, a religious ethicist whose writings on Murdoch's philosophy have been seminal, has argued that Murdoch is best understood when placed within modern debates over moral subjectivity. Murdoch, Antonaccio writes, analyzed a tendency in philosophy to see the self either as too autonomous and solipsistic, which Murdoch called Kantian, or subsumed into a totalizing frame, which she called Hegelian.[154] According to Antonaccio, Murdoch argues for an understanding of the self that mediates this position. The self is an integral being whose subjectivity is nonetheless tied to experiences and conditioning from the wider world.[155] This suggests that subjectivity is not only a helpful concept with which to understand Murdoch, but, according to Antonaccio's reading, a critical piece in understanding the moves Murdoch makes. Murdoch sees the individual as more than a will but as a subject who embodies the tensions of being a location of competing influences and loyalties.[156] Using *subjectivity* to refer to Murdoch's concept of moral experience, then, can help bring out the rich texture of her understanding of what it is to

---

[154] This, of course, reflects the binary of free will versus determinism, which has had many iterations, including the debate in the mid- to late-20th century on objectivism versus subjectivism. (Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* is one offered solution to this later binary.)

[155] Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 6-12.

[156] "Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision, which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action." (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 65)

be a moral subject. For these reasons, I will use moral subjectivity in referring to

Murdoch's understanding of the moral self.

That is Murdoch in brief and perhaps in too neat an outline. I will now unpack

these ideas presentation to see how her thought can help us in the journey of these pages.

Philosophical Anthropology

Maria Antonaccio, a religious ethicist whose writings on Murdoch's philosophy

have been seminal, also describes Murdoch's understanding of human life as a

pilgrimage.[157] It is not, however, a strictly *teleological* understanding of human life, at

least, it is not teleological in the more Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian senses. Aristotle,

after all, believed one could achieve a life of flourishing and completeness, even if one

could never be sure of this until after death, where a life could be safely evaluated as a

whole. There was in his thought, then, a universal understanding of how a human life is

meant to evolve, the ends one is meant to realize, as well as the conditions necessary to

meet them. Alasdair MacIntyre, drawing on Aristotle (as well as Aquinas), also believes

that one can achieve ends appropriate to the human as such, particularly a virtuous

personhood or, as he calls it, an "independent practical reasoner."[158] Even though both

philosophers accept as central to a human life conditions that can prevent flourishing (in

Bernard Williams' terminology, *moral luck*) or even erode such an accomplishment (for

example, MacIntyre's understanding that we will all experience disability at some point

---

[157] Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 70.

[158] MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals,* passim.

in our lives), realizing the pinnacle of moral achievement is possible, even if only for a time.[159]

Murdoch, however, is not as sanguine about human potential and psychology as some other virtue ethicists and moral philosophers. She is more Freudian in her understanding of the challenges humans as human face in trying to be "good." What *telos* humans may have is relevant to our lives not in that we can achieve it but, more in keeping with Reinhold Niebuhr's *impossible possibility*, is an ideal serving as a standard that, although in reality unreachable, draws us toward it.[160] Indeed, Murdoch speaks of the *Good* as "a distant transcendent perfection."[161] It is instrumental not as a potential to be realized but a standard that spurs us onward. It is real but we relate to it practically as a primary source of motivation and aspiration. We can always improve, and so, are never beyond improvement.

---

[159] Williams, "Moral Luck;" MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals,* ch. 1. Murdoch's debt to Plato is fundamental, yet her take on human virtue is much more in keeping with Freud. In Murdoch, then, we have a philosopher critically engaged in Platonism and yet not slavish to its inheritance. As Justin Broackes writes, "...both in the opening characterization of human psychology and in the later parts of the paper, Murdoch talks in terms that echo Freudian psychology - particularly, with the notions of fantasy, form, and reality. And they supply her with a language in which some important Platonic ideas can be given a more evidently *this-worldly* form." (Broackes, "Introduction," 75) For example, her one long-form engagement with Plato, which concerns the role of art and beauty in morality, where *fantasy* is mentioned comes up in relationship to a discussion about Freud. This combination of a retrieval both of Plato and of psychological concepts is one that Lawrence Blum argues is an important contribution of Murdoch, appropriating psychology's strengths within philosophy. (Blum, "Visual Metaphors," 319)

[160] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 19. It should be noted that both Niebuhr and Murdoch share in the central theological concepts learned in youth, particularly elements of Reformed notions of the fall, Niebuhr in his Unionist church and Murdoch in her Anglican, which includes Reformed influences. David Robjant has also argued, drawing from certain passaged of Murdoch's work, that such a pull of the *Good* is not the same for everyone and is not even all that strong for everyone. (Robjant, "How Miserable We Are, How Wicked") I agree with his assessment, as far as Murdoch recognizes particularity. Yet there still seems to be a universal emphasis to her writing, as well. As we will see later, even as she discusses void and the prospect of meaninglessness, she still believes that for most of us most of the time such experiences pass. It is less about those experiences themselves and what they tell us about life than it is about how we handle them.

[161] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 99.

The flip side of understanding the goal of ethics as an *impossible possibility,* to once again employ Reinhold Niebuhr's formulation, is an understanding of the human as *fallen*, a conception she takes as much from Freud as from Christian soteriology.[162] We may be drawn forward by this ever-receding horizon, yet our progress is always hampered by a human nature that weighs us down. Indeed, Murdoch affirms the human capacity to move toward the good even as she asserts a pessimism about our chances, a pessimism that she also seems to adopt from Freud. Murdoch writes,

> What seems to me, for these purposes, true and important in Freudian theory is as follows. Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi- mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of   ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings.[163]

The danger for Murdoch, then, is our selfishness or what she calls the human propensity to *fantasy.* Fantasy is the innate disposition to view oneself as the center of all concerns. Human beings for Murdoch are the beings that see themselves as the primary subjects in the world, marginalizing and objectifying (making into objects) the

---

[162] Murdoch does not make herself Freud's disciple, yet she seems clear about her indebtedness to Freud's work. Indeed, Lawrence Blum has praised Murdoch for her ability to engage with psychological terms. He writes, "Murdoch's idea of the tissue of personal fantasy and, somewhat more generally, the egoistic system of energy that makes it so hard for us to see individual other persons is a vital contribution to the way that philosophy can appropriate a psychological idiom to begin to answer the question how we can morally improve." (Blum, "Visual Metaphors," 319) At the same time, Murdoch quickly limits the consequences of her use of Freud. Murdoch writes, "I am not a 'Freudian' and the truth of this or that particular view of Freud does not concern me, but it seems clear that Freud made an important discovery about the human mind and that he remains still the greatest scientists in the field which he opened." And as for the relevance of psychoanalysis in general, Murdoch is much more circumscribed, cautious, and even critical. Murdoch also argues that there is nothing that requires us to accept psychoanalytic concepts as if they were scientific fact. (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 26) Although important and influential, then, Murdoch argues that psychoanalysis is not the solution to telling us how people can improve morally and be better people, what she argues is the central goal of moral philosophy. (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 76)

[163] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 50.

subjecthood, viewpoints, and even dignity of others. *Fantasy* is a good term as it affects

our imagination and the way we see the world. Viewing all situations from the standpoint

of a limited conception of subjectivity, where there is one main subject as opposed to

many and multiple subjects, means that we do not see the world truly as it is. Our vision,

our worldview, is a fantasy, at least to an extent. Murdoch underscores this with reference

to Plato's "allegory of the cave" to illustrate that what we often see as real is little more

than shadows.[164]

In other words, through our selfish view of the world, we are misreading reality,

so to speak. We see a world significantly different from the one we are really in and

significantly different from how others see it.[165] We embody a Ptolemaic subjectivity

with us at the center when in fact the world and subjectivity is Copernican, even though

we cannot see that we were not only decentered but, in fact, were never central to begin

with.[166] Another way to put this is that the individual faces an ever-present, though not

---

[164] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 93.

[165] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* 342-348.

[166] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 50. On the surface, one could take Murdoch here to be claiming that there is a really real that can be grasped. Discussing too deeply Murdoch's metaphysics will bring us too far afield, as the issue of objective reality and semblance are issues with long histories in Western philosophy.

unmitigateable, obstacle to realizing a more true, more fulfilling moral life.[167] And that

obstacle is the self itself.[168]

Moral development

By definition, such selfishness for Murdoch is the very opposite of goodness, of

virtue, based as it is on a complete misunderstanding of the world and our place in it. Our

needs, our desires, our perspectives we see as normative. Our orientation toward the

world is quite literally a self-centered one creating an epistemological and perspectival

basis that leads to a selfishness in practice. The cure of such a soul involves, then, an

emphasis on aspiration and the constant struggle for perfection.[169] As Murdoch writes,

---

[167] Considering the discussion thus far, it would seem that even pilgrimage is too strong a word in that it may imply that virtue for Murdoch, which we are yet to fully discuss, is a means to a greater end. That is not what Murdoch intends. What Murdoch wants to emphasize is that there are no universal ends, no purpose to being alive. Instead, morality is an attempt to mitigate the negative tendencies of humans to live a more compassionate life. Whatever compassion we develop has little or no purpose, however, other than to make a better life for all. The goal is not to be able to look back on a complete life, or one that has succeeded in meeting universal aims, but to live a less selfish one than we are predisposed to live. She sums this up by stating that virtue has no point, it has no end to which it is directed. One is virtuous to be virtuous, and anything beyond this relativizes virtue.

[168] Heather Widdows is right, I believe, when she says that, although Murdoch argues that one must be good "for nothing," in that there is no higher end for being good other than to be good, Murdoch does believe that being a good person will result in a better life. It will, whatever the problems, most likely be one that is more meaningful. Ignorance, in other words, is not the bliss we think it is. (Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, 84)

This may create something of a contradiction, however. If being good - if virtue - is its own end, then what does that mean, when it seems here to be a means, or at least a constituent, to what appears to be a higher end, that is, a meaningful life? Is this not a teleology? And is it not just another understanding of *eudaimonia*, a different take on flourishing? Religious ethicist Jennifer Herdt has argued, in her discussion of classical virtue ethics, that we can see our way through this. We can acknowledge that virtue is necessary for flourishing. In this way, it is true, it may seem like a means to a greater end. A virtue ethicist, however, would argue that virtue is a good in its own right, even if one never achieves a significant level of flourishing. We would still do well to develop virtues, because they will still make our lives better, even if our life is not fully eudaimonistic. In this way, Herdt argues, virtue is its own end, yet that does not mean it does not contribute to other areas of one's wellbeing. (Herdt, *Putting on Virtue, 32-36*) This may seem a bit too clever, and in reality it still means that virtue is a means to some extent. Is there not slippage here in practice, where one can begin to act like virtue is a means? (I am reminded here of the Zen master saying one must pursue awakening without desiring it.) Although I think that point still stands, at the same time, what Herdt does is show us is a more complex relationship between virtue and wellbeing and a potentially better way to understand what virtue really means to ones life. In this way, it is an important and fascinating argument.

[169] Antonaccio, "Moral Change and the Magnetism of the Good," 144.

echoing Niebuhr's thought as well as Plato's, "Serious reflection is ipso facto moral effort and involves a heightened sense of value and a vision of perfection."[170] Murdoch, then, defines the baseline of human being not so much by what we can achieve. There is certainly that in her thought, as we will see. Instead, what we as moral beings must constantly acknowledge is a propensity to selfishness and delusion that one could call part of human nature.[171]

This brings us to Murdoch's understanding of moral development. Murdoch's notion is based on her critical assessment of human psychology and the disposition toward selfishness ubiquitously present in human selves. From what I have written, Murdoch's more pessimistic view of humanity becomes clear, but what I have yet to emphasize is the reason for Murdoch's writing. Murdoch has an understanding of moral development that, although based in an understanding of human fallenness and selfishness, also provides an account of how humans can come to be more virtuous and good. This does not mean that we will be able to fully transcend our own psychology. There is always hope, however, that we can transform the self, which is the seat of fantasy, into a self that is more caring, lovingly attentive, and that more fully embodies goodness in her interactions with others and the world.

This hope is grounded in the assertion that just as there is a disposition to fantasy in human beings there is also the potential for love. Love is a technical,

---

[170] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 437.

[171] As much as Murdoch talks about love and the *Good,* much of her understanding of the self is based on what must be corrected. Many of her central concepts such as *effort* and *attention* are defined by what is wrong with human nature. For example, "Obsession, prejudice, envy, anxiety, ignorance, greed, neurosis, and so on and so on veil reality. The defeat of illusion requires moral effort." (Murdoch, *Fire and the Sun,* 20) And, "Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion." (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 36)

phenomenological term in Murdoch's thought. It is grounded in a key move Murdoch makes where she frames her philosophy as one of sight as opposed to other philosophies that she sees as framed in terms of action and motion.[172] As a result, she argues that being good is grounded in the ability to have a more accurate moral vision. It is vision, again, understood as the ability to see the world - really, to perceive and even imagine it insightfully - in such an attentive way that it inspires a caring, loving response to others. Indeed, attention is nearly synonymous with love for Murdoch. Caring attention is what eventually dethrones the ego and in its place puts affection for others, even if the ego will always tempt us, waiting Iago-like in the shadows.

Moral development is a reorientation of perception but also of ability, cultivating one's potential to be a better person who does not put their own needs and desires before others. This orientation empowers one to deal more justly toward others and the world. It is an imaginative capacity to change one's worldview and ethos to more accurately reflect the fact that the self is just one subject among a myriad, each thinking erroneously that their concerns and viewpoint are central and of the highest significance compared to others.[173] Imagination can certainly result in a fantastical vision of the world where our ego reigns supreme.[174] But one can also cultivate one's imaginative capacity to better

---

[172] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 4-5.

[173] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 65.

[174] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 334-35.

reflect the reality of the world, a reality in which we are one among many others, each with desires, hopes, and needs as pressing as our own.[175]

We can see, then, how important perception and vision is, as we will see the world only so well as we have been formed as moral perceivers. The basis of this is, again, the extent of our imaginative capacity to push back against our innate, dispositional selfishness to imagine the world as having countless subjects. Seeing this world deflates our self-regard and how we value our own value positions. We learn to do this through practices that hone our attention outward toward others and, cultivating a perception outwardly oriented that is also charitable in character, we create a sympathetic even empathetic view of subjects other than ourselves.[176]

It is important to remember that for Murdoch, *vision* and *attention* are both metaphors yet also refer to actual, physical perception.[177] This is important, as Murdoch, who is not a systematic writer, alternates her uses of key terms throughout her work. Two examples can help illuminate this. The first is her example of suddenly seeing a kestrel. The kestrel's sudden appearance can grab one away from selfish preoccupations and

---

[175] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 88. Murdoch has this understanding of the relationship between fantasy and imagination early on in her writing, even before the individual essays that were compiled to form *The Sovereignty of Good* were written. In "Against Dryness" she writes, "Fantasy operates with shapeless day-dreams (the journalistic story) or with small myths, toys, crystals. Each in his own way produces a sort of "'dream necessity.'" Neither grapples with reality: hence 'fantasy,' not 'imagination.'" (292)

[176] As philosopher Pamela Hall writes, "But it is important to emphasize that such attention is a practice, i.e., something which must be acquired, something which may not be, in an important way, natural. As she says, "It is a task to come to see the world as it is." (Hall, "The Mysteriousness of the Good," 316; Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 91)

[177] Blum identifies five "visual metaphors" in Murdoch, which are "perceiving, looking, seeing, vision, and attention." He argues that they refer to different activities, yet Murdoch does not define their differences. Indeed, she can use them alternatively, and their use is not consistent, as Blum acknowledges. (Blum, "Visual Metaphors," 307, 309) This is another example of the inconsistencies found throughout Murdoch's works. They can be decried, but I prefer to enjoy the various creative interpretations that such inconsistency affords.

outward, away from the self, toward the beauty and truth of the world. She describes how such moments can change one's entire disposition. "I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity had disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel."[178] Seeing something so beautiful can snatch our attention and lead it outward.

     This example stresses the importance of the world as moral environment that demands our attention and asserts its presence upon us. Such moments can call attention - really, grab our attention and make us see how the reality of existence exceeds to an infinite degree the impoverished egocentric assumptions through which we see the world. The world has a moral pull on us, calling us to a *loving attention*, in Murdoch's words. And so we may think of attention as a type of moral perception, a mode or orientation that is itself moral, in that it is the capacity that allows one to pursue the good. Such loving vision draws us toward the *Good* because, at once, it pulls us away from egocentricity toward a focus on the subjectivity of others, lessening tendency to fantasy. The mechanics of loving vision, however, is also grounded more accurately in the moral reality of the world, as we all share these selfish dispositions and must struggle to be good, making compassion toward others not only more realistic but also more rational compared to an egocentric worldview. There is, then, an understanding of physical perception acting within Murdoch's thought. And, as we will see, a magnetic

---

[178] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, xii.

characteristic of the world around us, and a characteristic of the human, that calls our attention to moral truths larger than our daily cares, concerns, and frustrations.

Sight and *vision* are also used as metaphors, however. They are a way to understand moral activity and development that pushes back against the metaphors of action and theories of ethics that stress discrete moments of judgement. For Murdoch, then, the type of moral vision she is thinking of can also be a metaphor for a capacity of the imagination that can allow one to see another as a subject in their own right with their own dignity. Moral vision, in this understanding, describes a modality of imagination as a key moral faculty.

We can see what this might mean in practice by looking at a Murdoch fictional example she puts forward, which is quite well known in moral philosophical circles. It is the story of a mother-in-law (M) who did not think well of her daughter-in-law (D).[179] In her account, D dies before her mother-in-law (M) changes her opinion of her. As time passes and M grows, she thinks of D over the years and begins to think of D in a more loving light. She starts to wonder if she had been too quick to judge her daughter-in-law. Perhaps her judgements were based on her own snobbery and elitism and, so, were neither fair not accurate.[180]

---

[179] The M and D example was largely meant to show that moral activity can occur within one without any outward indications. In this way, it pushes back on different forms of behaviorism, which deny such activity, at least methodologically Maria Antonaccio explains why Murdoch has this emphasis and why it remains important. Consciousness refers "to the inner life of human beings, the sense in which subjectivity has a dimension of privacy, inwardness, and uniqueness that cannot be wholly reduced to its social, historical, and linguistic determinants." (Antonaccio, "Moral Change and the Magnetism of the Good," 146) This conception of the self affirms our condition but counters a view of persons as wholly determined.

[180] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 21-23.

The story shows the result of a change to M's moral imagination that allows her to reconsider her evaluations in the first place, yet it also shows how M continues to change morally beyond this in that she tries to think of D from a perspective other than that of her original more selfish attitude. What occurs is not a transformation of a relationship between two people. One member of the relationship is no longer present for that to happen. Instead, M herself transforms, seeing her former way of relating to her daughter-in-law in a more critical light. In the process, she becomes more caring toward D's memory and more attentive to the possibility that her perspective may have mislead her in evaluating her son's wife.[181] She *sees* D, herself, and the world differently in her mind's eye. She does not do anything differently that anyone can observe, nor does her physical perception alter in any way. Her perception is a metaphor for her critical imaginative capacity that allows M to en*vision* not only D differently but allows her to reevaluate her own assumptions.

Moral development consists of developing capacities and dispositions that can help convert one toward the *Good,* just as Plato argues we need to turn our backs to the shadows and turn toward the sun. What such virtues mean for Murdoch, however, she never explicitly defines. My sense of her understanding of virtue would seem different from a more Aristotelian understanding of *habit*. Murdoch does mention habit as being central to virtue, though she does this in passing and seems to assume such an assertion does not need to be explained.[182] I understand Murdochian virtue as those dispositions and capacities that allow one to orient oneself toward the good, and as part of this,

---

[181] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 21-23.

[182] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.

Murdoch presupposes the many classical virtues such as temperance and courage, as well as more Christian-influenced concepts of love and care. It is important to note that virtue does seem to accumulate for Murdoch. Yet again, Murdoch sees human life as constantly drawn down by Weil's *gravity*, where our default disposition is one of fantasy, vice, selfishness, and egotism. Murdochian virtue, then, corrects and mitigates, but does not seem to ameliorate, what is a key tendency in human moral life. This differs from Aristotle's conception that one may be able to look back at the end of a life and call it excellent. Practice brings virtue, but it is not guaranteed, nor guaranteed to remain. Murdoch, then, uses practices as an orienting concept in her thought without referring to the mechanics of Aristotelian habit.

Murdoch's metaphysics

My discussion of Murdoch's understanding of philosophical anthropology and development assumed a central aspect of Murdoch's work, her understanding of the *Good*. Very little else of Murdoch's work makes sense without an understanding of her metaphysics and what Maria Antonaccio calls Murdoch's *realism* that is based in this metaphysics. For Murdoch, the world insists upon us that there are something like *moral facts* that call for our acknowledgement.[183] This is a key basis for Murdoch's emphasis on sight and vision instead of action and will. The foundation of any ethical action is not a decision made in a specific moment in time. Foregrounding any discreet moral action is the ability to see the world, to see others and ourselves, and our relationships and situations as accurately as possible. One's quality of moral vision, not so much one's

---

[183] Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," 95; Broackes, "Introduction," 1.

purity of will, determines not only one's ability to understand the best courses of action, but much more broadly, the best way to be in the world. This metaphysics, then, points to a broader understanding of what constitutes the moral or ethical. It is not just decision making, nor is it more narrowly moral judgement. Instead, it is the development of the self to be a better person and to respond justly to other subjects.[184]

There is a claim in Murdoch, then, that there are better ways to be in the world based not on a universal reason applicable to all, nor a cost-benefit evaluation of outcomes, but based on responsiveness to the world itself. The moral life is largely understood, in this way, as vision but also as orientation. Returning to the "allegory of the cave," Murdoch draws from this trope the understanding that we need to develop in such a way that we orient ourselves away from the shadows, from fantasy, to the source of light, that sun shining provocatively at our backs. There is a combined emphasis on being able to see and recognize what is good as opposed to what is generated by and through our selfishness and to develop the ability to orient our life, thought, and actions to reflect that *Good.* Growing as a virtuous or good person requires the ability to see this *Good* more clearly and also to orient the structure of one's life in accordance with such perception. The struggle in moral development is our propensity to see ourselves as the measure of all judgements and concerns, instead of seeing others as inhabiting a subjectivity equally deserving of care and dignity. The struggle is to cultivate vision that

---

[184] Indeed, for Murdoch, ideal moments of ethical action will employ little to no use of the will but will arise spontaneously from a near perfected faculty of moral perception that will accurately view what needs to be done in a situation. I would argue that such an ideal is never achievable in Murdoch's understanding, but it is helpful for understanding her thought, in that the work of ethics for an individual is not discrete moments of moral judgement but the background of moral development that makes certain actions necessary when the need arises. It shows Murdoch's emphasis on the work of creating oneself as moral, instead of on moments of moral judgement.

will empower us to see the world in a way that will counter that propensity so that one can orient themselves toward the *Good* so perceived.

The *Good* as a metaphysic, then, represents the ground and justification of morality, yet the content of this *Good* remains obscure.[185] I would argue this has to do with the nature of the *Good* itself. One is constantly growing into it, and Murdoch's job as a philosopher is not to provide a definitive account of its contents. Understanding the *Good,* if "understanding" is even the correct term - perhaps *inhabiting* or even *successfully seeking* is better - comes not through ratiocination alone but through life-long moral development. If Murdoch placed the philosopher in the privileged position as having access to the *Good* as such and in total, it would necessarily result in a philosopher who was somehow inhuman. It would imply that the philosopher had fully grasped and even inhabited the *Good*, and as a result, saw all things clearly and was in need of no further development.

The *Good* is not best understood as a set of prescriptions or a description that we read and enact, then. It is, instead, something we sense as much as intuit, employing organs, such as the eyes, the function of which are not usually thought of as moral in and of themselves. As a result, the conception of orienting oneself toward the world is much more embodied than intellectual, and so it would not be possible for someone to present the content of the *Good* in treatise form without missing a good deal of it, and so,

---

[185] One cannot be expected to perceive the *Good* or the world as it is firsthand. This means that it is then impossible to describe the *Good* in full. This, of course, will make some, perhaps many, frustrated with her formulation. This includes literary theorist and critic, Terry Eagleton: "There is, however, a price to be paid for this breathtaking generosity of vision. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (the title surely parodies *Zen for Business Executives*) is a rambling, repetitive ragbag of a book, the philosophical equivalent of Murdoch's devotion to the loose baggy monster of a novel. It sacrifices rigor of thought to imaginative scope, and some of its more technical sections have a generalized, second-hand feel about them. (Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent*, 259-60)

misleading the reader. Murdoch also argues for the importance of moral development

based on understandings of vision and orientation, and so, the heart of the moral life is to

learn about the *Good* through one's own experience.

From Murdoch's writing, however, we can gather together some elements of the

Good. It seems to involve an appreciation of existence that is as unselfish as possible,

where not just attention to others but a loving and caring regard is necessary, and that is

captured in terms of beauty as much as truth and justice. Although her understanding of

Good remains obscure, we can see that it gestures toward an understanding of existence

that, perhaps paradoxically, is one that emphasizes virtues and characteristics that humans

are capable of but not disposed to.[186]

This does not mean, however, that Murdoch understands the individual to be a

self who freely choses the truth or perceives the *Good* free of history. The world will

make claims on us, as Heather Widdows points out, so that we cannot say that we invent

or imagine value. We use all of our faculties, and particularly imagination, to discern

value that is already there. In this way, we "'discover them.'"[187] We can ignore them, but

this is an emphasis in Murdoch's work that evaluation is not just a matter of

unencumbered choice. Instead, we need a metaphysics that will help stress the fact that

we are already always moral creatures who find ourselves in a world already saturated

---

[186] Murdoch does not discuss how or why such a tension exists. Humanity is fallen, but unlike Augustine and other Christian thinkers, she does not give an account as to why. In this way, her account is more phenomenological and descriptive of human consciousness than it is a conjectural theory of origins.

[187] Human beings perceive the world by bringing together disparate images and concepts, and in so doing, create new relationships, new ideas and fresh horizons. It is fair to infer, then, that the metaphorical is also the movement of the imagination. The imagination is imaginative because it can bring together disparate images dialectically into new, creative syntheses, thus driving our conception of the world. Murdoch is right, then, to say that perception is inspirational and evaluative, because the very act of seeing, in this understanding, involves selection, and so, judgment on what to select, on what to associate and what to see and not to see.

with meaning and value.[188] Indeed, sight and imagination imply that we are engaging

with things already present, instead of willing them or acting upon them, although poor

sight or imagination that wanders into day dreams can perceive the world unclearly. For

this reason, Antonaccio calls Murdoch's philosophy a type of realism in that it stresses

the world to be already full of value, one to be engaged and sensed, not one to be

conjured.[189]

In summary, then, the nature of the *Good,* or more precisely, the nature of human

psychology in relationship to the good is what enables Murdoch's conception of the

moral life as one that is never ending. Despite the metaphors of sight, Murdoch's is not a

philosophy that says one can grasp the really real or, in Kantian terms, the real *as such*.

Central to her understanding of perception is that we see the world through vision and

evaluative capacities already conditioned culturally and socially. The *Good* is not

something one fully comprehends, fully achieves, or achieves union with. It may call

toward us, but our dispositions toward selfishness are never transcended. We can always

come closer, but we will not arrive. One's moral development, then, is never complete. At

least in MacIntyre's earlier formulation of the moral life as a *quest,* there is the sense

inherent in that term that something is achieved.[190] When one finds the Holy Grail, one

has it in their hands and no further search is necessary. With Murdoch, however, the work

---

[188] Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, 65.

[189] Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 139. In particular, she adopts ethicist William Schweiker's *reflexive realism* to describe Murdoch's philosophy. "The point of understanding Murdoch as a reflexive realist is that she understands 'reality' as existing not only outside us...but mediated through consciousness and moral vision. Far from equating realism with the empiricist assumptions of the scientific gaze, Murdoch makes it clear that realism is always keyed to a personal vision."

[190] This may be one reason why *quest* is dropped in his later work, which after *Dependent Rational Animals* emphasizes how we may lose whatever gains we may get through such a quest.

is never done. The *Good* that is our goal is in its very conception something beyond our grasp.

This does not mean, however, that the moral life is pointless. On the contrary, just as our moral projects will never be complete, this understanding means that we can always be better persons. This, indeed, is a comfort for those who feel aggrieved or wretched. It is a form of hope. We can become aware of higher standards simply by our own work in the world, and just as we are primed toward selfishness we are also primed to perceive the *Good* and, if we heed it, to perceive it in an endless range of possibility.

Personal growth and moral development, in this conception consists to a great degree in surpassing one's former ability. In art, for example, development includes being able to do better work than one did in the past. We can surpass our former accomplishments, and from a more mature standpoint, see our past work as lackluster and our new work as superior. This comparative, evaluative aspect of experience reveals to us that there are higher standards of which we are not even aware until we encounter them through action in the world. And by extension, we can extrapolate from this experience not just aesthetic ideals but moral ones that we can posit as real.[191] It is a form of

---

[191] We can see here clearly Murdoch's debt to Plato's notions of semblances and ideals. We can also see similar approaches in the history of Christianity that use contemplation as leading from one level of awareness up toward awareness of God. So where Murdoch uses this philosophy to posit the *Good*, Christian thought drawing from neo-Platonism has already used it to posit *God*. (See Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*) Indeed, Murdoch alludes to this strongly by calling her first major philosophical work *The Sovereignty of Good*, where she replaces *God* with *Good* in both the title and text in an effort to create a post-Christian secular ethic aiming to draw on Christian thought without making a theistic commitment.

abstraction and conjecture that comes from everyday life that, nevertheless, Murdoch says points to higher standards and that indicate the possibility of the *Good*.[192]

In other words, she is not putting forward any applied ethics nor general principles for how one should act. That is not the point of her writing. The point, instead, is to supply a metaphysic that makes a philosophical anthropology and certain forms of ethics possible. Such ethics would be grounded in a phenomenology where consciousness is altered through the alteration of sight and attention, as well as notions of the human as imperfectable and where, no matter the cultivation, we are never completely freed of our selfish propensities, which will always pull against our aspirations toward the bright sun of the "good."[193] It is a moral phenomenology of tension, where one's consciousness - this is Murdoch's preferred frame - is the suspension between the possibility of loving attention and a journey toward the good, on the one hand, and the constant pull of egocentricity, on the other.

This understanding of the *Good* resonates with the way we have been discussing the moral life as Murdoch understands it. The moral life is constituted by a daily transformation that occurs moment to moment in everyday relationships and that is cumulative. We learn through this process, if all goes well, more or less, over the span of

---

[192] Again, Murdoch provides two main arguments in support of the *Good*. The first is perfection, that is, in comparing things, we can see that there are things that are better than others, and so, that there are higher standards. There is in the world notions of higher and lower that are not just imagined or part of a value placed on things but are part of the world. They are more found than created. The other is her unique twist on the ontological argument where, instead of using it to prove the existence of God, she uses it to prove the metaphysical reality of the *Good*. Ultimately, however, experience is the central basis for her argument, as we are supposed to discern the truth of her claims in our everyday life. (Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, 71, 75)

[193] Murdoch never says why we have this selfishness. She gestures toward Freud, yet she does not have the theological anthropology of the Fall to explain this. Instead, she seems to take it as a truism that anyone can see through observation of human behavior.

our lives, what being good consists of and how to be a person that searches for such goodness. There is in Murdoch's metaphysical grounding of morality the necessity of moral life as a search, certainly, but also a struggle, as well as a clarification and intensification, requiring effort that is largely constant throughout one's life.

Accounting for vulnerability

The *Good* is important for the present study as it helps to flesh out an understanding of moral subjectivity that emphasizes constant change. A conception of the self or character that was relatively stable would not be able to account for experiences of one's moral being that have been transformed quickly and radically through violence. Instead, such testimony is a challenge to a more essentialist or even stable notion of character and selfhood. Individuals already have difficulty living in to ideas of goodness, which can make violent situations that already make virtue difficult all the more challenging. Moral subjectivity and the moral life understood as the constant orientation and reorientation toward a perceived *Good*, where that perception itself is changing along with our orientation toward it, creates an understanding of moral subjectivity that is already highly dynamic and yet also vulnerable to challenge and change.

These discussions are important for the present study, because they do not only argue for ways to become a better, more just person, but also suggest, through their account of philosophical anthropology, moral development, and the nature of morality, the vulnerability inherent in the moral life. This is, for example, a cognitive vulnerability, or at least an epistemological one that is structurally central to the metaphysical fabric Murdoch weaves for us. No one ever lands on a safe base in their moral development.

There is, as David Robjant points out, a difference for Murdoch between the *Good* and *the concept of the good.*[194] We are continuously working on what goodness is and how we should be in the world as our experience, personality, and subjectivity change.[195]

Yet, this is ever only an approximation of the *Good*. For Murdoch, the *impossible possibility,* if I can associate her with Niebuhr's formulation, is ever receding, and so, perfection "haunts" one always, as there is always a more perfect way to be, a more perfect moral vision, a more perfect grasp of the *Good.* As Stephen Mulhall writes, "since every attained image of moral unity is haunted by a deeper or more truthful one, it must be regarded as provisional or illusory."[196] We never see fully clearly, and so, will always be acting morally in the world in a way that is insufficient to the complexity that faces us. Central to that subjectivity is this understanding of knowing and perception that, although progressive, is never perfectible, and so, we are made vulnerable by the innate limitations - the finitude - of our ability to understand that horizon of moral wisdom known as the *Good*. Although Murdoch does not discuss these points explicitly, her understanding of metaphysics and psychology, then, provides an account for a vulnerability to the moral life.

---

[194] In one of his critiques of Maria Antonaccio's work, David Robjant argues that there is a difference for Murdoch between the *Good* and the *concept of the good*. I agree with this, as it gets at the point that Murdoch is making between the realist nature of moral knowledge and our ability to grasp it. We will have a *concept of the good* that will be varyingly accurate depending upon our virtuous capacities. At the same time, it is a concept, because we can never fully apprehend the *Good* as such. (Robjant, "As a Buddhist Christian," 997-8)

[195] Experience is an important concept for Murdoch from her very first papers in the early 1950s. We can see experience as a critically central concept for her thought, one that grounds her take on vision, attention, and even the Good. See for example, Murdoch, "Thinking and Language," and "Nostalgia for the Particular."

[196] Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 227.

We not only can never act without being fully virtuous and morally aware, but we always react to certain events out of some degree of ignorance. We may see something that could be hopeful as a source of despair, or thinking we know everything, believe that an outcome is certain. This can create a false pride, if we think our success is inevitable. It can also create hopelessness, if we feel there is no way out of a bad situation or if something horrible is inevitable. Both are misperceptions based on a flawed epistemology and phenomenology, thinking we know when we cannot fully know and thinking we see when our moral sight is always ever partial. This can add vulnerability to the fact of our powerlessness over certain situations, adding poor evaluations to already difficult circumstances, events, and disasters.[197]

The structure of moral perception, which provides the basis for moral development, is also the same ground for what can go wrong in the moral life. Just as imagination and vision are central for moral development, they are also central in selfishness, which is its negation. So, Murdoch is not arguing for separate faculties associated with goodness or selfishness but suggesting that the same faculties which, depending on their development, dispose one in one moral direction or the other. Murdoch is aware of the dangers of fantasy and of imagination being taken to an extreme

---

[197] Our limitations can also be a source of hope. Murdoch's first book was on Sartre, and for a while, she looked to his existentialism as a philosophy to meet the challenges of a post-World War II world. She moved away from this possibility early on, but there are aspects of existentialism still present. One could be the fact that hope for Murdoch might not only be the fact that there is an objective *Good* in the world that we are psychologically and anatomically geared toward perceiving but also that we never fully perceive it. This is a negative understanding of hope, where one can have hope because she can never say she has access to full understanding of the world or goodness. And as we are always changing and never perfected, any situation will change. This can be an important hope for one who feels that the present moment is one of despair, one from which she feels she may never be able to escape. Murdoch's hope in this regard insists that one's current understanding, which might be the basis of despair, is not the final word, opening on to renewed and possibly life-giving possibility.

as an end in itself.[198] This awareness allows her to talk about selfishness versus the good

without her philosophy being reduced to a good-bad binary in the self. They are, instead,

different orientations of the same self.

Indeed, Murdoch has referred to imagination as a form of freedom, and now we

can see why.[199] The concern with freedom is seen in her initial interest in Sartre, and she

continued to have an engagement historicizing different conceptions of freedom.[200]

Murdoch refers to imagination as "a kind of freedom, a renewed ability to perceive and

express truth."[201] She continues to recognize the danger that imagination which supports

an egocentric worldview can cause. She also affirms, however, that a reorientation of

imagination and the way we see is the way to more correction vision. It is a freedom in

the negative sense as a freedom from enslavement, to pull from Augustine, to seeing the

world as it is not. This is one reason, I believe, Maria Antonaccio argues that "it is

imagination rather than vision strictly speaking which is the primary locus of moral

transformation in Murdoch's ethics."[202]

Such an approach to imagination and vision helps us see that, at least implicitly,

we are both responsible for, and vulnerable in, the worlds we make. Such vulnerability

and responsibility go hand in hand and have the same structural origins, both

---

[198] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* 334-35.

[199] "Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision, which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action." (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 65)

[200] See Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 217, where she provides an historical typology of "freedoms."

[201] Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature," 256.

[202] Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 106.

metaphysically and psychologically.[203] Murdoch is quite clear that we find the world already saturated with value. We do not create our ethics nor our decisions in a vacuum, (one of her critiques of existentialism). At the same time, "imagination and attention introduce value into the world which we confront."[204] There is a sense in Murdoch, then, that we act in a world already present with a history and yet also construct a world through our vision and moral development, the quality of which depends on the degree of development of our moral faculties, particularly those of attention and imagination. *World*, then, seems to take on a double meaning as it does for *Good*, designating at times something more objective and at other times another name for our worldview and ethos. This tension - or at least, these poles - show how one can be part of the world in a way that is subjective but in which such perception and vision can always change. There are always possibilities for worldview beyond the horizon of our current subjectivity, which provides a metaphysic that allows for, even requires, moral and phenomenological development.

Murdoch is not consistent on this, and she does not lay out a fully formulated phenomenology. If she did, we would have a better idea exactly how she understands the concept of *world* and how it relates to her ethics of vision, attention, and imagination. She wants to affirm the prior existence of history and the world to avoid solipsism, and yet the emphasis of her metaphysics is on a philosophical anthropology based in subjective

---

[203] To put it another way, "...attention must now be understood as a concept that signals the confluence of vision and will in the imagination of the evaluating moral agent." (Antonaccio, *Picturing the World*, 151) It should also be stressed again that imagination for Murdoch is not synonymous with daydreaming or imagining fictional worlds. They are products of the imagination but do not represent all of it, nor even its most important aspects. Our responsibly developed capacity to imagine is not understood as fantastical but as a movement toward a horizon of realism.

[204] Murdoch, "The Darkness of Practical Reason," 201.

vision. This need not be an impediment to engaging Murdoch, however; it provides an opening where more work can be done. It is also the basis for a Murdochian understanding of responsibility, a term that is not often used explicitly in her philosophical works, and yet, is conceptually relevant, even central. One is, as she writes in one of her earlier pieces, responsible for the world one sees.

This responsibility comes from the fact that the world we see is *our* world born of our imagination and degree of attentive ability. This opens up an interesting understanding of responsibility, as the emphasis is not on one's action in the world, although that is understood as important. Instead, responsibility starts before action. It begins in the worldview and ethos that we have and out of which our motivation for action and the evaluations we make, grounded in such visions of the world, ourselves, and others, come. Responsibility is at the level of imagination, we might even say at the level where one engages a broader social imaginary. So, more than the discrete actions we usually refer to as *ethical*, Murdoch's metaphysics has the capacity to show imagination as the true ground of what we should think of as ethics, out of which our actions arise and are made meaningful.

All of this also provides a foundation for understanding why persons who survive violence feel responsible for their conduct, even if a more objective observer might argue that they were not responsible because there were no better choices. There is a sense that each of us is responsible for our own worlds, the one we see, our worldview and ethos that is envisioned through our imagination, perception, the cultural images and narratives we inherit, the social institutions and structures in which we live, and the reality that

encompasses it all. We partake in our worldview, and even when conditions are caused

wholly by other subjects and are beyond our control, we live in a world of our making, at

least to some extent. In fact, it might be more precise to say that we are complicit in how

we imagine the world. We are, then, invested in our world and this leaves us vulnerable

as the moral nature of such worlds are not totally of our making.

Let me turn back to the example of the Bosnian War to clarify this point. An

example Ivana Maček gives is how much fatalities became a part of one's daily life

during wartime, and how this affected one morally. One informant spoke to her of how

people slowly changed the way they looked at wartime deaths:

> In the very beginning, every person killed was reported in all of the mass
> media. As time passed - it may sound a bit cruel, but it really is so - we
> started getting used to all those victims, and people began to turn into
> mere numbers. It was reported only so and so many killed, so and so many
> hurt....And when we came to a stage when they would for example report:
> ten hurt, and you would say: well, it isn't so many. Two or three killed -
> oh, then it is not so many today. You know. But that is terrible.

Where once one inhabited a world where such events were much rarer, and so, more

morally appalling, they gradually became through their routinization less of an occasion

for shock and moral outrage. In this new world, deaths could actually be seen as a sign of

a good day, if in small enough numbers, which would have been unacceptable in the light

of older norms. Even how one views the morality of life and death, which is seemingly so

basic to one's self-regard and identity as a "good" person, could change without one's

awareness. It is a reality yet remains "terrible."

The gradual tide of "numbness," as Maček describes it, shows how the

transformed circumstances of war changed the way that one viewed even killing and

murder. It marked a profound shift in one's worldview. It also marked a shift in moral development where a certain degree of murders was viewed with relief or even happiness. Once unacceptable levels of murder in prewar years were now the cause for hope and a degree of pleasure during the war, as the entire context of social relationships and possibilities were transformed. This is not to condemn those besieged in Sarajevo. It is, however, an example of how extreme changes to one's context will create changes to one's own moral subjectivity. In this case, the informant demonstrates not only the changing way that people viewed life and death but is also very reflective about how she and others accepted this change.

Macek's informant calls this change "horrible" and "cruel," and yet even if the individual did little or nothing to cause such a situation, one still must participate in the life of the war-torn city. The social relationships, the connection to others, demonstrate and are a part of our contribution to the world we perceive. In the case above, the individual's contribution is perceiving a certain number of murders as not just as acceptable but good. This is "horrible" compared to former, pre-war norms, and the informant suggests that she feels culpability in agreeing to the evaluation of the numbers of deaths.

There is then a felt sense of responsibility reflected in these words, which Murdoch helps us name more clearly. Such responsibility is inherent in the structure of how we envision the world. The informant did not participate in the murders nor did she encourage them. She was, however, part of seeing a world wherein murder was viewed differently than in pre-war times, which in comparison to pre-war norms, was "horrible"

and cruel. The view was her own, shared with others, even if she neither willed it nor liked it. She did not will the war, nor did she will a change in norms and worldviews, but she participated imaginatively in seeing a different world. The informant uses, after all, the first person plural pronoun to talk about the way norms shifted, implying agency. Even if conditions made it nearly impossible to resist such a new vision, it remains her capacities and faculties that executed the new worldview.

An outsider could insist, however, that individuals like this informant were trapped in a terrible situation and that their responses reflect a world transformed by another's hands. At most, the situation is tragic, but surely responsibility for the violence lies elsewhere. I would agree with this. And yet, there are many who still feel responsible for either being a part of that transformation, however unwilling, or for acquiescing by responding to the world in what they see as a less moral way. And this is the experience I set out to account for and describe in this work. Murdoch's account of moral subjectivity that we have seen thus far shows that there is a structural vulnerability to moral development that opens it to such change.

Yet even in the midst of being changed, and without one's willing it, one still remains a subject, and so may feel responsible for the effects of such vulnerability realized through one's imagination and sight. The individual understands that norms have changed, yet not only remembers but senses emotionally and bodily the pull of former standards. This is a tension between what is sensed as more objectively good and what the world now seems to require. It is a tension, however, that is not abstract but located in the subject, the one that still cherishes former norms yet must live in a moral and social

landscape altered radically by war. Such a feeling of responsibility is grounded in the very structure of moral subjectivity, vision, and imagination. That this is so helps give an account why survivors of war can feel responsible for aspects of the war that observers would say is not their fault. It is an account that goes beyond whether or not survivors choose to feel a certain way and beyond questions about the culpability of survivors during wartime. Instead, it emphasizes that the structure of an individual's development as a moral being can make surviving political violence itself a double edge sword. One can survive but with a moral remainder that makes living as a survivor a heavy, and for some, a dangerous challenge.

We can, however, go deeper into this discussion and probe what these tensions are and if we can better articulate them. To do this, I turn now to Murdoch's representation of moral experience as one of tension to further detail this feeling of having lost the ability to be good. Focusing on this aspect of Murdoch's thought will build on my discussions thus far and allow us to bring in the way that political events and social institutions affect the experience of being a moral subject. Bringing in notions such as *local moral worlds*, I will add more nuance to this discussion to better account for experiences of political violence. This will help articulate more fully what happens to one who feels she has lost her ability to be good.

Chapter Four: The tensile moral subject

So far, we have seen an overview of Murdoch's psychology and metaphysics. This provides us with the context to focus in on Murdoch's model of *moral being*, as she calls it, and which I refer to as her *moral subjectivity*. I have already discussed how Murdoch sees the self as embodying a certain degree of existential tension in regard to morality and moral development. What I will now argue is that such tension is central to Murdoch's representation and understanding of subjectivity, and importantly, show over the next two chapters how this notion of tension can help describe more fully the loss of moral ability, or more accurately, the experience of that loss.

Murdoch's writing on the nature of the tension of the self is actually quite short, taking up a chapter of only a few pages at the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.[205] Yet, Murdoch's long work builds up to these last few chapters, where she wants to balance her optimistic picture of morality with an understanding of the moral life as one that is not only in constant tension but also quite vulnerable. Philosopher Stephen Mulhall and religious ethicist Maria Antonaccio both see the discussion of void at the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* as the result of an intentional strategy. Murdoch, the argument goes, placed a discussion of void at the end of the work to check the more positive chapters that preceded it.[206] Specifically, she wanted to balance her insistence on the sovereignty of good with experiences that seem to deny it. Murdoch

---

[205] At the same time, however, her major work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, is as Maria Antonaccio is very much concerned as a whole with tension, including that between empiricism (seeing things as they are) and metaphysics (the emphasis on an approachable yet unattainable Good. (Antonaccio, "The Virtues of Metaphysics," 166) Indeed, Antonaccio goes so far as to say that seeing the transcendental and empirical in what Murdoch says is the best way to interpret her. (*ibid.*, 173)

[206] Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 70; Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 220-1.

does not end on a pessimistic note, but her strategy does serve to create a moment of

doubt in the midst of her constructive project, an interesting way of place an internal

critique within her thought that limits any affirmation from being too absolute.

Murdoch does, however, provide some characteristics that can be used to

construct a fuller image of subjectivity. She argues for the unity of the self against more

fractured conceptions, yet stresses the difficulty of being a moral human being in the

midst of a world of conflict and the temptations to put oneself egotistically at the center

of it.[207] Specifically, Murdoch's conception of the moral self reflects the human

experience of negotiating the various and often competing values and goods that we

negotiate on a daily basis. There are, she believes, numerous locations of account,

responsibility, relationship, and even obligation in one's life.[208] These locations are not

only places but people, institutions, principles, notions of duty, responsibility, and

obligation, our own perceived needs and desires, as well as others. All include goods,

concepts, representations, and practices that can be equally desirable or recommended.

Although some can change in one's estimation depending on situation and time, others

can remain always highly regarded, even higher than one's own life or the safety of

others.

---

[207] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide for Morals*, 492.

[208] These are not exactly Murdoch's terms, although I believe them to reflect what she is after in discussing moral or ethical being. As I will discuss, her reference to moral being was short, occurring in a few pages at the end of *Metaphyics as a Guide to Morals*. For this reason, it requires further explication, if it is to be used. To an extent, then, my understanding of Murdoch is interpreted through H. Richard Niebuhr's responsibility ethic, where responsibility is understood as discerning and then responding to as many places of "account" as possible. His understanding, though theistic, reflects an understanding that the moral life is in constant relationships with everything around it, including factors and people that are beyond one's immediate sight. Murdoch does not use "account," but it is helpful terminology to include to enrich her discussion of moral being, which is quite short. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*. Indeed, a comparison between both of these thinkers, both of whom have a metaphysic grounded in a distant "sovereignty," could be fruitful.

Murdoch reflects this complex moral topography in a representation of moral being that she calls a *field of tension*.[209] This understanding of a tensile moral subjectivity is an important way to describe and understand Murdoch's psychology and idea of moral development that I outlined previously. The push and pull between our disposition toward selfishness and a teleological turn toward the *Good,* already discussed in these pages, is not an abstract matter but is a living tension experienced in the negotiations of daily life. For example, it is easy to see, upon reflection, how complex the nature and number of the goods, loves, and hatreds are in a human life. There is nuance, and what we see as "good" or even desirable is often plural and in competition, where one good is pursued at the expense of another. Indeed, one loyalty can be pursued at the expense of another, potentially alienating an entire community or aspect from one's moral life as a result.

The structure of moral experience, as well as consciousness, is deeply one of tension, then, as tension provides the structure in which moral growth and development, knowledge, and teleology occur and are made possible. It is the push and pull between various places of account, desire, good, and loyalty that make up what I describe here as moral subjectivity.[210] The individual learns not only how to discern and negotiate each moment as morally significant. She also learns how complex the moral life is,

---

[209] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 492. Murdoch refers specifically, though briefly, to "a field of force, a field of tension, between modes of ethical being divided under the headings of axioms, duties, and Eros."

[210] This understanding of the moral life as one of tension is not, of course, new. It is exhibited in certain strands of Christian thought, for example, in H. Richard Niebuhr's and Reinhold Niebuhr's ethics. This includes Reinhold Neibuhr's understanding of a love ethic a highly challenging ideal that constantly spurs us to try harder (Neibuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*). As Murdoch writes, "the idea of perfection haunts all our activity" (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 492). Philosopher Steven Mulhall points out this aspect of Murdoch's thought: "every time we cleave to a new picture of reality, we become at once certain that it cannot be of the ultimate reality, and so cannot be our stopping-place. As finite creatures, we can never lose the sense that our moral perception is capable of further refinement; so the purification of our consciousness can never attain perfection, but neither can it shrug off its demands" (Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Perfection," 226).

experiencing the pull between different loyalties. Moral development, then, is the

transformation of the moral subject immersed in such experience through the day and

throughout life. Such development occurs as one is transformed through engagement with

communities, ideals, and different worlds, always exerting effort to orient oneself toward

the *Good* and trying to understand what that good is, as much as is possible.

Modalities of moral subjectivity

As moral subjects in the world, then, our consciousnesses exist to a great extent as

fields of tension, constantly negotiating tensions between issues of duty, desire, hope,

among others. Murdoch's moral subjectivity reflects these tensions as different modalities

within our experience, modalities that represent different claims on our attention and that

are not easily reduced to one another, modalities with distinct ways of being moral and

relating to others. How she articulates these categories is to take the central categories of

ethics - deontology, consequentialism, and virtue - and use them as elements with which

to construct a model of subjectivity to account for the contested, even fractured

experience of being a subject.

Instead of keeping with this traditional philosophical trinity, however, Murdoch

opts for a quadrilateral to represent the internal diversity of the moral self.[211] Indeed,

Murdoch does not seem to intend to name faculties or some ontological characteristics of

the mind or brain, but instead to create reference points that reflect the way that moral

subjects experience themselves acting in the world and changing as moral subjects. We

register value and its loss, and the experience of such aggregation and loss, through this

---

[211] As Antonaccio points out, Murdoch "does not believe human beings are essentially divided in this fashion." (Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 161) I would argue that her understanding is more representational of the dynamic and complex experience of being a moral subject.

schema. Murdoch takes these ethical categories and builds on them, ultimately arguing

for four modalities: *axioms, duties, Eros*, and *void*. (They correspond roughly to

utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue, with void being the additional mode.) Each

modality represents a different area of human life, loyalty, and relationship, each with its

own goods, obligations, and visions of the human (both good and bad) that are largely

irreducible to one another.[212]

Each modality is critical in both asserting certain ways of being moral in the

world, which includes certain forms of value creation and reflecting one's relationship

with different communities and goods. Axioms, for example, are those aspects of moral

consideration and action that are based on foundational political principles. This can

include utilitarianism and principles, assertions about general social happiness. They also

include human rights, as well as some understandings of justice. Axioms are almost

statements of faith, assumed principles that are not reducible to more foundational

---

[212] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 492-7. This is my interpretation of what the implications are for an understanding of the moral self interpreted through these modalities. Murdoch has claimed that we inhabit images of the human that we have created. Placing that claim in conversation with her understanding of a tensile ethical being, I interpret this ethical being as moving toward those images. Yet, as there are so many areas and spheres of life, value, and action, I make these images plural to reflect the plurality of moral trajectories and experiences represented in these modalities. As Maria Antonaccio has written, "Murdoch understands metaphysics as a form of critical reflection on reality and on the nature of human being through the building of complex images, metaphors and conceptual frameworks." And again, "It is a process of clarifying our existing concepts, and developing new ones, in the course of offering an evaluative description of human moral being." (Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 13) Mulhall, in particular, argues that images are not just metaphorical in this regard but are central objects to the moral life and experience. (Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 222)

assertions.[213] And they involve a strong degree of commitment and passion targeted

toward the social sphere.

Each modality, then, is needed to represent the many ways of being a moral

subject, and to express the moral dimension of certain experiences, which other

modalities do not capture. As Murdoch would argue, however, each modality represents

important elements of moral life, all of which are required. They pull at each other, and

although never reaching an equilibrium, do form a representation of selfhood that reflects

the tension and complexity of moral subjectivity, required to keep one away from

extremism or fantasy, and to keep one oriented toward the *Good*.[214]

Each modality, then, must be kept in tension with the others so that no one

modality dominates one's moral subjectivity. If not, extremism can result. For example, it

is in the nature of fundamental axiomatic principles to be propositions so strongly felt as

---

[213] Axioms also ensure that the human individual is accorded dignity in politics, a concern that Murdoch has with what she calls the Hegelian tendency, which stresses the totality above the individual, losing the individual in the process. (Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 159-60) I should say, a vague reflection of these modalities in Western ethics. As we will discuss, axiom can include utilitarianism. Murdoch writes, "It might be said that utilitarianism, intimately connected with politics, is an axiomatic philosophy...As an axiom the utilitarian idea could be expressed as: 'The question, how will this affect happiness, is *always* relevant to *every* moral decision." She also says that utilitarianism is in "close relation" though "not under the exact same heading" as axiom (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 493). Murdoch also writes that justice and rights are part of axiom, yet later in the same paragraph equivocates, saying that justice would "roughly" fit within axiom. This may be because justice has classically been seen also as a virtue, yet is often used as a social teleology or horizon, or perhaps because of the many ways it is now used - including discourse focusing on social justice - and which could fit into any number of moral categories or modalities. This equivocation could also reflect the fact that, although Murdoch wants to create relatively clean "moral modes" that are "divided against themselves" that such a clean division is not possible within the complexity of the moral life lived with others. (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 492) It may also be that Murdoch is struggling with the fact that such categories are hard, in practice, to maintain, and any detail discussion inevitably leads to connections and overlap. At the very least, this means that any correlation between Murdoch's modalities and the different modes of ethics must be handled lightly and should not interpreted as strictly.

[214] Mulhall writes, "...the moral field of force exists in a kid of tension between a number of poles: the unity seeking impulse of eros must not swamp the independent authority of axioms and duty." (Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 227)

given that they can overshadow class, race, and other considerations.[215] Such axioms,

even an interest in human rights, can always be too sweeping, reductive, and so,

dehumanizing, if they become totalizing to one's worldview and subjectivity. If one's

subjectivity is driven by human rights as axiomatic, for example, and pays little or no

attention to the realities and history of race, the human rights that are achieved stand to

leave behind marginalized persons whose indignities are determined largely by histories

of racism. This, then, is an example of extremism in one of the modes, of tightening this

cord too strongly at the expense of other considerations, other goods. On the other hand,

if the axiomatic modality is slackened too much, one can lose sight of important political

rights that affirm the dignity and worth of individuals. This is similar to Sharon Welch's

understanding of "cultured despair" where giving up on fighting the rights and need of

others is a luxury for those who have supports and resources to fall back on.[216]

I have just discussed axiom, and before continuing, it is important to get a sense

of the other modalities to understand Murdoch's approach. The modality of duty within

moral experience describes what is in some ways self-explanatory, but it reflects a

particular understanding of "duty" in philosophical discourse. Murdoch writes, "Duty

then I take to be formal obligation, relating to occasions where it can be to some extent

clarified...Duty may be easily performed without strain or reflection, but may also prompt

the well-known experience of the frustration of desire together with a sense of necessity

to act, wherein there is a proper place for the concept of will."[217] As one can see, there are

---

[215] Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 222-3.

[216] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk,* 103-22.

[217] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 482.

certainly principles involved here, and any neat separation of these categories ends up looking like something other than how individuals experience life. What is emphasized in this understanding of duty is the importance of the means as opposed to the ends in moral reflection, imagination, and action. Duty emphasizes the pull toward doing what is expected of you, even if that means that such expectations are put before the outcomes of whatever action one takes.

Philosopher Stephen Mulhall has a helpful read of the difference between *duty* and *axiom*. Murdoch defines duty here in a way that is, as Mulhall writes, less involved than a term like axiom that includes a larger, complex political landscape. Mulhall describes duty as inhabiting more personal, everyday experiences, while axiom works more in a political realm. He writes of Murdoch's understanding of duty that, "moral rules [duty] are personal, setting concrete tasks for individuals in everyday life; axioms are public banners flown for complex social reasons that may often be grossly pragmatic."[218] Murdoch limits duty because expanding duty conceptually could "blur" the lines between other modalities of morality. In this way Murdoch is able to acknowledge traditional ethical concepts such as duty and will, which are so central to philosophies that she is critiquing, while limiting their role within her thought.[219]

The danger of duty is that, if too rigidly held, it can also overwhelm other considerations that are also important. For the person of duty, of honor, their duty can

---

[218] Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 223.

[219] We could push back on this understanding of duty and argue instead that political issues do very much concern the everyday. This would be correct, but I believe that Mulhall is right, however, in that Murdoch conceived of these two categories separately so she could capture different levels and modes of moral subjectivity. Differing between duty and axiom categorically allows her to stress the political as understood as one of bedrock principle that intersects more obviously with social dynamics. We could always say this involves duty, but it would not be duty as personal obligation Murdoch understands it.

become everything. Although important, this leaves out obligations to other aspects of being a moral subject, including that contained in axioms. One's subjectivity, dominated by duty and formal obligations, can result in "following a rule without imagining that something more is required."[220] Relationships to others, as well as to other goods and institutions, become translated through this limited understanding of obligation and morality. This, too, can be dehumanizing, as the needs of particular people in particular situations can be subordinated to the principle being followed.

Moving on to the third modality, we come to Eros, a central modality to Murdoch's project.[221] Much of what Murdoch discusses in her philosophical works specifically deals with this area of moral life.[222] Although Eros involves virtue, it is the broader context in which virtue, strictly speaking, is relevant. Eros and the erotic here are not specifically sexual in nature, though this can be a part of it. Instead, Eros is the realm of desire broadly construed and the area of moral experience to which the virtues most readily apply. It is the area of our "appetites," our needs, desires, but also what we find repugnant, disdainful, and where a great deal of our daily energies are spent.[223] It is an emotional and aspirational stance that is a key driver of thought, action, and development, and when we speak of ambition, of love, regret, guilt, shame, hope, despair, desire it is the Erotic modality we are speaking out of.

---

[220] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 494.

[221] Plato is an inspiration for this modality. Murdoch spent much time wrestling with Plato, which can be seen in her early tome, *Fire and Sun*, where she argues, in part, to make room for the arts and literature within a neo-Platonic framework.

[222] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* 497.

[223] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 497.

The last modality is what Murdoch calls "void." This is a term with its own history in European philosophy, but Murdoch seems to draw specifically from Simone Weil's theological account of void.[224] For Weil, void is, in part, that experience of separation from God, which is important to Weil's understanding of spiritual growth.[225] Murdoch uses void, in contrast, to describe the moral experience that comes from loss, bereavement, or having everything important taken away from one, for which one may never receive relief or recompense.[226] It is an experience where we question whether there really is something we could call good. It is profound meaninglessness or its all too present possibility. I will discuss void more fully in the next chapter.

Murdoch keeps these modes separate for a number of reasons. One is to assure the place of certain realms of human experience. Murdoch pushes back on exclusively neo-Kantian and utilitarian approaches, her worry being that human dignity and worth can be lost in such philosophies.[227] Utility can emphasize the greater good but at the expense of minority groups. Neo-Kantian duty and right can focus on universal principles accessible through reason at the expense of the human beings in front of us. Axiom, which is the

---

[224] It could also be that her engagement with Jean Paul Sartre, the subject of her earliest work, influenced her understanding of void, or at least, influenced her to look more deeply into the use of such a concept. For example, in one of her essays, Murdoch defines Weil's void against existential angst. One is a spiritual achievement, the other forced on humans. If this is any indication, the understanding of void could have been influenced by *angst* in that Murdoch's use of void seems to take the affliction that Weil speaks of, yet the imposition and existential confusion embodied in Sartre's term. (Murdoch, "Knowing the Void," 158-9) For an argument that Murdoch is much more of an existentialist than she claims, see philosopher Richard Moran's writing on Murdoch, including Moran, "Iris Murdoch and Existentialism."

[225] Weil, *Waiting for God,* 42.

[226] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* 498-9.

[227] For example, she writes of axiom, "What I earlier called axioms are moral entities whose force must not be overcome by, or dissolved into, other moral streams: a requirement in liberal politics." (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* 483)

realm of politics and power, also provides balance in what way? With her multiple terms, Murdoch pushed back against univocal philosophical conceptions of morality.[228]

The multiplicity of this schema is important because it helps describe the complex experience of being a moral subject, in particular, the experience of a subject whose life is centrally understood as one of moral development. Certainly, each person often lets go of such tension throughout her life, giving up on their obligations or too strenuously advocating a particular position. This representation of moral subjectivity, however, shows both the tensions involved, as well as what happens when the tension is slackened. Every individual is always engaged in the world to an extent that corresponds to the balancing between these modalities. We are never not in the middle of developing as moral beings. Instead, each individual in relationship with others - perhaps aligned with others or even against others - is attempting to inhabit more fully whatever modality is called for in a given situation.

This balancing can prove difficult, as it is not always clear how one should respond or in what way. For Murdoch, this is the place where the development of moral vision and imagination is key, as they provide us with the growth necessary to be attentive to what is called for ethically. This schema, then, is a way to enter Murdoch's thought and to see her other concepts as connected to her understanding of subjectivity. For her, subjectivity can accommodate any number of actions one takes or orientations

---

[228] Although seen as a virtue philosopher, Murdoch clearly does not draw only from theories of virtue. One example is duty. As a central concept in deontological and neo-Kantian philosophies, this has a focal point for criticism by most recent virtue ethicists. In contrst, Murdoch writes that duty "remains with us as a steady moral force" (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 494), affirming the deontology that duty is an irreplaceable part of moral experience. Indeed, Murdoch says that after only happiness, it is probably the most recognized aspect of the moral life (493-494).

one has to certain goods, showing how these moves affect other places of account in one's life.

Ethical modalities and political violence

Returning to the case of the Bosnian War, the moral tensions Murdoch described are evident in the accounts of those involved in the conflict. A fundamental tension for many was whether to leave the country or to stay. Leaving the city was not necessarily an option for everyone, and opportunities could come or go depending on the progress of the war. As Ivana Maček writes, however, the choices to stay or go "were judged by strict moral standards. In the minds of those who stayed, leaving the city seemed like desertion or betrayal..."[229] In such situations, those who stayed disparaged those who left not for "their cowardice, for choosing safer lives and material conditions, or even for betraying the country and its ideology." Instead, they were "condemned for having betrayed the social codes of friendship, the city, its citizens, and the urban life they shared."[230] I heard this during my own time in Sarajevo several years after the conflict, where one woman told me that she had no time for those who left the city. It was their city, and if they left during the siege, leaving it up to the invaders, they did not deserve to be there.

What is resented is not a lack of patriotism, choosing the wrong side, or even cowardice, as Maček writes. The resentment came, instead, from an unarticulated understanding that, by leaving during the war, one was abetting what the mortars and soldiers besieging the city were trying to do: destroy the world in which a multiethnic, multireligious Sarajevo was intelligible. By extension, one was participating in the

---

[229] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege,* 86.

[230] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 116.

destruction of cherished identities that such a worldview empowered and without which would crumble. It was, in other words, part of a larger attack not just on particular identities but whole worldviews, moral subjectivities, and intersubjectivities.

This negation of ways of life had begun with the initial collapse of Yugoslavia. The identity *Yugoslav,* which transcended regionalism and nationalism in favor of multi-ethnicity, no longer made sense without the supporting institutions and practices that gave that identity meaning. Without a Yugoslavia, there were no Yugoslavs.[231] This created a crisis for many who were left in a land devastated more and more by fighting every year yet without the orientation and security that can come from certain key identities, such as national identity. By fleeing, an individual - for example, a Bosnian Serb - contributed to this important form of loss that occurred throughout the war. If diversity was important to a multicultural Bosnia, one's absence decreased such diversity. And one's absence was felt as an implicit argument that either that multicultural worldview was impossible or was not worth defending. Leaving Sarajevo or Bosnia, then, was seen by many as stepping over a line drawn in the sand during the war, a line that threatened not just individual lives but an entire way of being and associated, cherished values. It was a strike against fundamental meaning that enables one to make sense of the world and one's place within it as a moral subject.

Turning back to Murdoch's ethical modalities, Maček's discussion can be seen as illustrating the real and powerful tension between the Erotic, on the one hand, and duty, on the other. In other words, between the desire to leave the city and the death or

---

[231] n Geertz's words, the ethos of Yugoslavism was no longer "intellectually reasonable" compared to the reality of the new worldview created during the war. (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 127)

suffering that it offered, on the one hand, and one's loyalties to neighbors or one's duty, on the other. It could also be seen as a tension within the Erotic, between a desire for another life or for safety and a desire to remain with loved ones. In addition, I could add the tension of strongly felt political commitments in the mix, such as wanting to preserve Sarajevo's multiethnic, multireligious history. If one were to include family obligations, it becomes more complicated still. For example, there may be very good moral reasons to leave, either to secure a future for one's children or family members or even to migrate to another country, leaving one's family behind, in order to work and send that family much needed foreign currency. With a collapsed economy and currency, this could be a matter of life or death.[232] At the very least, finding sources of income was always a pressing concern. In such a situation, however, one's desires, loves, duties, and political and social commitments could clash. Any decision would seemingly result in neglect of other commitments, obligations, and locations of care. In other words, one modality could be attended to at the expense of others, leading one to feel she was somehow morally inadequate.

In a situation such as war, a decision to leave or stay, no matter which one was made, was so consequential that this feeling of reduced moral ability and even character could endure long after the conflict ended. This, however, was only one moral dilemma among many that occurred daily, the aggregate of which could wear away more permanently at one's felt sense of moral integrity and ability. Friendships, according to

---

[232] Ramet, *Social Currents in Eastern Europe*, 414.

Maček, changed quickly during the war. As the stakes were so high, one's daily actions

could readily be conceived as betrayal, whether intended or not.

Maček writes of one young man's experience that she calls "typical." He lived

with his mother, his kidneys were diseased, and his mother was very distressed. His

godmother visited them every day, yet when she gave her money away, she gave it to a

"refugee girl," instead of to the young man. His testimony implies that the godmother

thought the refugee, displaced from her home into the poor safety of the nation's besieged

capital, needed it more. In his disappointment, he said, "It was logical that if we were

close, if we were in some sort of family relation through godmotherhood, that there

should be some priority in terms of who you are going to help." The young man

eventually got the money needed for his medical care from another relation, but the

episode made him question how much he could count on family.[233] Others helped him,

invigorating his faith in other family members and neighbors, but Maček's purpose in this

story is in part to point out the way that the moral ground beneath one's feet shifted

quickly and dramatically during the war, altering relationships, obligations, and moral

expectations.

Although Maček focused on the young man, it may be more insightful for my

purposes here to focus in on the godmother. It is safe to assume given the lean resources

available to all during the war that her funds were also limited. After all, she was not able

to give her money to both her family and to charity. Looking at her experience, we can

see a tension between helping family, which includes Eros (care and desire to help loved

---

[233] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 87.

ones), as well as notions of duty (obligation to certain groups). There is also a strong axiomatic mode present as she gave not to one's own but to the most needy. This move implies that the godmother had a notion of abstract personhood where the individual is understood not only terms of group or kin but as bearing a certain dignity as a human being, as such. This reflects an axiomatic modality, though her decision could also reflect an Erotic modality, if she had been moved by the refugee's plight.

We can expect that there was tension in that choice and an awareness on the godmother's part that she was neglecting one aspect of her moral subjectivity in order to attend to another, let us say axiom at the expense of Eros. At the same time, with so much need, and so little resources, she would not have been able to attend to all locations of accountability to which she felt responsible. The young man and his mother did eventually receive help, but it came from other relatives. This only served as a contrast that further highlighted for the young man his godmother's failure towards him, both in terms of duty and care.

This story is significant because it illuminates the various modalities that were at play and how the very real tension between them can, especially during extreme situations, lead to suffering. For the godmother, there seemed no good action. Someone would have to go without during a time when a lack of charity could be fatal. The godmother could side with family, but that might seem selfish, especially if she saw that the refugee truly had greater need than her own family members. Or she could give to refugees, a move that was noble and perhaps from an objective point of view more just, yet nevertheless also constituted a betrayal against those she knew and loved. The effect

of the godmother's actions on the young man was to throw doubt on his worldview.

Where once he thought he could count on family, he now doubted the relationships in his

lives and whether he could trust anyone in such extreme situations. For both, their

relationships were frayed, and the intersubjective constitution of their local moral worlds,

in which one's ongoing subjectivity and sense of value are constructed, were frayed. This

is only one moment, one decision, but it shows how quickly and powerfully one's world

can change during political violence and gestures toward the way that such tensions can

transform one's local moral world and worldview and contribute to the suffering and loss

of political violence

Local moral worlds

I invoke *local moral worlds* in this context intentionally as this concept can help

further Murdoch's insights by describing the immediate, lived context in which moral

development occurs. In particular, it can provide a stronger accounts of the ways in which

different, overlapping social levels (local, regional, national, etc.) interact to transform

one's experience.[234] Specifically, Kleinman's notion of local moral worlds accounts for

the ways in which intersubjectivity and social structure condition one's moral

subjectivity. At the same time, Murdoch's account of moral vision and moral

development provides vocabulary and concepts that help describe the ways that the self is

---

[234] Such a concept may indeed be helpful in nuancing Alasdair MacIntyre's emphasis on community in
After Virtue. MacIntyre champions the insight that moral development occurs in intimate, small settings.
His sociology, however, is rather poor so that he ends up arguing for political arrangements that put forward
what seems to be village life at odds against nation states and larger social organizational schemes.
Emphasizing not so much *community* as the importance of *local moral worlds* may allow one to embrace
MacIntyre's insight while denying his political philosophy. Kleinman thinks of such worlds as networks,
which is a much more inclusive and flexible frame than MacIntyre's. Indeed, Kleinman speaks of such
worlds in the plural, acknowledging that we inhabit many different worlds that have a stake in our moral
development and that influence our subjectivity.

changed within such worlds and how that change is experienced from the subject's point of view. Together they can enrich the current interpretive frame of moral subjectivity by providing language to describe moral experience and the context in which it occurs and is conditioned.

The moral life for Murdoch is intimate. It occurs between subjects, as her example of M and D illustrates. It lives and grows in precious moments where one engages nature, such as that found in her example of the kestrel. Murdoch does not focus on broader social levels, and the work of the moral life occurs in a space she does not name but which we could conjecture is quite similar to that of a local moral world and its more intimate, or at least direct, intersubjectivity. Murdoch's emphasis on vision is more applicable to smaller groups, particularly the way that Murdoch uses vision as something that, in her examples, occurs in one's immediate vicinity. One learns about the *Good* through the immediacy of nature, through direct engagement with a specific work or art or literary piece. Metaphors of action, on the other hand, can conjure up images of more grand events taking place on a broader social, even geopolitical level. Instead, Murdoch discusses the experience of metaphysics and the actualization of psychology on a local level that precedes and grounds any discrete action.

At the same time, Murdoch can provide a deeper articulation of what occurs in such local moral worlds. Kleinman does discuss in his ethnographies the physical and locally social aspects of suffering. He also discusses the importance of embodiment for such a conception of the local and the moral. At the same time, more detail, and an account of how one develops morally, is missing. Murdoch's account can deepen this,

emphasizing such micro-level activities as gazing, of writing, of reflecting on a deceased family member. Murdoch's ethical vision is quite literally sensual, emphasizing perception and the form and beauty of the world. She is working on her ethics not only on a local level but even more so on a human-eye level and from the perspective of the human body and its senses.

Such an understanding is perhaps even more intimate than Kleinman's concept of *networks* would imply, as one's networks may be close and intimate emotionally but, in an age of the internet, spread broadly in a geographic sense. Kleinman's is more broadly social, relatively speaking, while Murdoch focuses more on the immediately personal. Instead of seeing the two as contradictory, however, there may be a fruitful tension between the two. Kleinman's focus on the local tries to broaden the distance of the human gaze, while Murdoch's conceptions pull our focus inward and into even more particularity. Kleinman, then, brings out the fundamental sociality of local moral worlds, as Murdoch brings out the experience of being formed as a moral subject in such contexts. The levels that they are addressing may not always fully overlap, but the differences between them can be fruitful, helping one trying to understand the effects of moral intersubjectivity on moral subjectivity by having a richer complexity of this "local" context of moral development and how it interacts with perception.

A possible problem arises, however, if one turns to Murdoch's sociology. An institutional emphasis like Kleinman's is not immediately apparent in Murdoch. She is not much interested in the ways that the social interacts with the moral. Murdoch's approach, instead, makes explicit the importance of an account of the inner life, and this

account overshadows any latent sociology that might be in her work. One of Murdoch's goals was to stress that, despite the trends she identifies in analytic philosophy, modern philosophy needs to have a new appreciation for interiority understood as an inner life that is not totally transparent to external observation. By this she did not mean that there is some inner core that refutes scientific explanation. She insisted, however, that human consciousness is more complex than a simplistic behaviorism would imply.

There is not here a naïve, dualistic psychology of an outer world and an inner world but instead an understanding of the self that allows for interiority even as it affirms that one's inner life is shot through with the political, social, and cultural. Murdoch writes "The moral life is not intermittent, or specialized, it is not a peculiar separate area of our existence. It is into ourselves that we must look: advice which may now be felt, in and out of philosophy, to be out of date. The proof that every little thing matters is to be found there. Life is made up of details."[235] Despite her emphasis on the interior, this emphasis on the inner life is more of a corrective move than an absolutist position, however, engaged as she is with certain twentieth-century philosophers. As Maria Antonaccio notes, for Murdoch "morality cannot be reduced to subjective terms."[236] It is always connected to the the reality of the world and an insistence that we work continuously to see the world in a way that challenges a more atomistic subjectivity that comes all to naturally to humans.

---

[235] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide for Morals*, 495; quoted also in Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, 60.

[236] Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 168.

This explains, in part, why Murdoch mentions rarely, if at all, community, institution, and practice. The trends and arguments that she intervenes against do not require her to touch on these subjects.[237] Such a lacuna could suggest that Murdoch is anti-institutional or that her thought does not readily admit of these subjects. In this view, Murdoch's philosophy is focused overly on the individual to an extent that we cannot easily include broader contexts. This reading would make Murdoch an ill fit for this project, relying as it does on an understanding of moral subjectivity that forefronts such aspects of social life.

Murdoch's focus, then, is largely on the individual. Her work is interested in perception and its connection to knowledge and consciousness. Her focus on metaphysics and intervention into modern philosophy did not necessarily require a discussion of the institutional aspects of human life. This does not mean, however, that these subjects are not present nor that they are not assumed. Instead, there are ways of reading Murdoch that open on to ethical discussions that require more robust accounts of institutions and community. For instance, Murdoch draws on writers that do deal with such issues in their work. Simone Weil, for example, is a central resource for Murdoch's work and the source of much of her terminology, including terms such as *attention, affliction/malheur,* and *void*.[238] Despite Weil's noted mysticism, she was a mystic concerned with institutions and practice. Institutions for Weil are the locations in which one practices the attention necessary for the theology she advocates for. She talks of schools, for example, and

---

[237] MacIntyre, in contrast, does deal with institutions and practices, as his is a much more straightforward critique of political philosophy, social arrangements, and philosophical conceptions of the self.

[238] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, passim.

education, as well as the particular location of the school room and the teacher student

relationship, as an important place for attention to be developed.[239] The other great

influence on Murdoch, Plato, is also concerned with practice and social institutions. Key

to Plato's larger works is the great influence of organizational life and institutions have

on moral development, which he sees as in turn critical to the health of a polis.[240] This is

brought out keenly in *The Republic* and even more so in Plato's *Laws*, where he

elaborates a complex and sophisticated array of practices, norms and institutions needed

for his more ideal polity.[241]

Drawing as she does from thinkers stressing institutionality and practice, it would

be surprising if Murdoch did not at least allude to or assume the importance of such

realities. And, if one looks carefully, such allusions can be found. There are, for example,

mentions of the importance of practice, both more contemplative and more social.

Murdoch is not as systematic in her exposition of the role of practice in this process - at

least, not as much as MacIntyre, Aquinas or Aristotle - yet, she suggests its importance

---

[239] I bring up the practices and institutions that Weil engages, but she is not unproblematic here, either. She is critical of "the social," as she puts it. "The trap of traps, the almost inevitable trap, is the social one. Everywhere, always, in everything, the social feeling produces a perfect imitation of faith, that is to say perfectly deceptive" (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 129). She is not systematic about such statements, but she seems to be drawing on the skepticism of the modern focus on the life and dynamics of human groups, which she sees as a powerful attraction - human to human - that endangers the need to focus on God. This becomes a mono-focus as political actors and everyone else should be "looking at God all the time." (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 130) One could read into Murdoch a similar distrust. She speaks of social convention as one of the key obstacles to a right and loving attention. This is an example of social practice and norms inhibiting moral development. (Holland, "Social Convention and Neurosis as Obstacles to Moral Freedom")

[240] Tipton, "Social Differentiation and Moral Pluralism," 15.

[241] Plato not only lays out a city state from scratch, discussing the different executive and administrative positions the city should have; he also pays close attention to the formation of individuals even before they are born (Book 7). He institutes an institution called the "nocturnal council," whose purposes and powers are not totally clear. They could be merely a group of wise individuals who work to safeguard education and moral development, two issues that are of great importance to Plato. It could also be a more powerful executive with powers to intervene in any activities it sees fit (Book 12). It could either be the authority in the city or a supplementary group secondary in importance to the other positions mentioned.

throughout her work. Her main example is using art as a way to open oneself to love and attention, a key place where she breaks from Plato.[242] Art can arrest one's attention in a way similar to Zen *kensho*, as a moment where one breaks from their egotistical view of the world to see perspectives and connections beyond the self.[243] Literature, the art form Murdoch privileges, can also do this, and through its exposition of relationship and moral dilemma, exposes us to moral drama and to seeing the world from a perspective other than one's own. This, of course, is not something Murdoch proves, but she spends many pages advocating literature and art as key practices. Murdoch also mentions other practices, though in passing, such as contemplation, prayer, language acquisition, and study.[244]

Even more, Murdoch's conception of the moral self is, itself, modeled in a way that more explicitly reflects the social reality of human life for an individual. If we look

---

[242] One of her works - *Fire and Sun* - is focused on examining Plato's understanding of art - which includes poetry and drama. Throughout her work, particularly *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, she parts way with Plato understood as anti-art, since she sees art, particularly literature, the main practice for cultivating attention and virtue. She is not, however, dismissive of Plato's concern and develops a distinction between attention and sight, on one hand, and fantasy on another. She then parts from Plato but reflects Plato's concern that art and literature can lead people astray, understanding Plato not so much as iconoclastic but as an artist himself who is wary of art's power.

[243] My invocation of Zen here is not accidental. Through Weil, Murdoch became interested in Buddhist and even Hindu thought. She uses Zen philosopher Katsuki Sekida to critique Husserl, and this exchange between these two philosophers is important in developing her understanding of consciousness and how our consciousness can grow. See Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* 239-43.

[244] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 87, 337, 338. See also Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, parts 5 and 6. Although Murdoch does seem to imply that the love and attention she emphasizes can be created through practice, this should not be taken as being equated with a more neo-Aristotelian understanding of virtue as *habit*. It is not a systematic part of her thought, and she does not have the understanding of narrative, tradition, practice, mentorship, community, and quest that MacIntyre has in *After Virtue* where he contextualizes and more systematically defines what he means by habit. For Murdoch, such sight, such attention, can happen in a Zen-like flash, but more often, it comes over time through practice. It may be more often like a slow awakening, more akin to Plato's allegory of the cave, where one learns to look away from fantastic yet untrue shadows and learns to turn around and see the sun as the real source of light. In this way, the metaphor of the sun and shadow, which is literally conversion (a turning around) are more central for Murdoch's understanding of virtue and moral development than the tropes of narrative and tradition. As Murdoch writes, "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." (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 38)

back on her understanding of the self as a field of tension, one can read those sources of tension as internalizations of external communities and goods to which one is loyal or feels an obligation. One feels duty to others, to organizations, to institutional realities. Axioms reflect fundamental concerns about one's community or country. Even Eros is formed through interaction with others, and at the very least, is connected with external realities. The tension she speaks of comes from social and political relationships. These are learned in many a *habitus,* if we use that term here less technically. The model she creates of *ethical being,* as she calls it, is one defined by social relationships, making the interior experience of being a moral person shot through with the external, collapsing in practice the distinction. Yet, it collapses this distinction not in favor of behaviorism, where the inner life is extrinsic to considerations of human life, as has been done in some philosophical, sociological, and psychological traditions. Instead, it collapses it in favor of interiority but an interiority understood as fundamentally linked to the broader world.

There are other arguments I could add here as well. Margaret Holland, for example, argues that in addition to egotism, "social convention" is a central obstacle to morality for Murdoch. In Murdoch's work "The House of Theory," she discusses how convention can limit one from seeing the inherent complexity of others and even one's self. Social convention can distort moral perception just as a colored lens can change the hue of a landscape. Examples include, "the father figure in his many guises, sexual taboos and restrictions, the subjugation of women."[245] Holland argues that the passage on M and D can also be seen as an example of how social convention, which causes M to

---

[245] Holland, "Social Convention," 259.

judge her daughter-in-law harshly, can interfere with attention.[246] Holland collates

mentions of social convention throughout Murdoch's work, suggesting that , rather than a

sustained argument, it is an issue that bubbles beneath her work, motivating it, and

arising occasionally. If we agree with Holland's argument, then Murdoch's work has not

only a psychology but also a sociology, enabling it to fit with my own concerns for the

influences of certain roles and institutions.

In return, Murdoch can also help nuance Kleinman's understanding of morality.

Kleinman does not have a robust account of moral development, at least not to the extent

that Murdoch does. For him, morality is about what "matters most" to a person. One

could deduce that moral development concerns the creation and negotiation of what

matters to one, how, and to what extent. Murdoch, however, has a stronger, central

emphasis on how one grows as a moral subject. Murdoch's understanding includes an

orientation toward the *Good*. Moral development, then, is understood not just as

commitments, though that is part of it. It also includes orientation, vision, and perception,

which better resonates with Kleinman's own emphasis on embodiment and the body as

that which mediates inner and outer. Together they argue powerfully for locality as a

deeply moral domain of experience and intersubjectivity.

Bringing Kleinman and Murdoch together in this way is an example of how virtue

can augment the methods of other disciplines. Kleinman is very helpful in conceiving of

this phenomenological, interrelational space where moral development occurs, while

Murdoch's approach helps keep a focus on the individual's experience of being a moral

---

[246] Holland, "Social Convention," 260.

subject. The concept of the *local moral world,* then, can be thought of as the space in which the moral vision, development, perception, attention, and the search for the good that Murdoch describes occurs, drawing in the broader contexts beyond the local, such as the national and geopolitical, while emphasizing the importance of everyday life and experience. Murdoch pushes this further by addressing her metaphysics to the individual's moral life, yet we can also zoom out, if you will, from such experience embedded in local moral life to see the broader and complex social, cultural, and political events and dynamics that affect the individual. This is an integrated concept that shows the possibilities of putting ethical and anthropological or social scientific methods and ideas in practical conversation.

Although I argue that Murdoch's philosophy admits of sociology and institutionality, on another level, I am less certain that she makes a sufficient account of the way in which social structure and institutions condition the very foundation of the moral life and perception. Murdoch is not clear if her ontology readily admits an institutionality where our moral desire and effort is pre-conditioned significantly by social location and institutional experience. For example, Murdoch understands the world, if I understand her correctly, as being such that it will grab our attention. At the same time, it is part of human psychology to be receptive, at least up to an certain extent, to such promptings. Although cultural artifacts such as painting and literature serve a purpose in this dynamic, it is unclear how class, gender, and race, which affect access and receptivity of cultural narratives and symbols, affect the promptings not just of art but of nature. Murdoch seems to say that we encounter an already given world, yet also create a

worldview, and understanding of that world. How, though, are social structures and arrangements part of the way in which such a worldview is formed, maintained, and changed?

Such demands for our attention, and for us to be attentive, seem for Murdoch to be extra-social, extra-institutional, even as other examples, such as the way good art can grab our attention, assumes an entire civilization as context.[247] When Murdoch speaks of moral vision and attention, however, the manner of her writing strikes me as describing an individual engaging different practices and objects without reference to social context. This allows her to speak of great art and literature without speaking of class or of the educational access needed to make such practices relevant. The relationship to human ability, instead, seems grounded in an understanding of human nature and of the nature of the world that is uncertainly related to complex social contexts in which Murdoch herself lived.

This is, to be fair, not a level of explanation that Murdoch engages. Murdoch's focus was to push back against understandings of the human in philosophy that seemed to cut out the experience of being human. Such a task took up her philosophical labors, and so, it would not just be uncharitable but also not entirely correct to fault her system for leaving out such issues and areas. I argue that, instead, this issue should be taken up by those interested in furthering Murdoch's philosophy. More work needs to be done, yet for

---

[247] In contrast, someone like Bourdieu, who is also interested in how agency and institutionality play out in how we are formed, argues as he develops his understanding of *habitus* and field that much of our development is influenced by the institution of the family while young and how the family and institutions can influence us even before we are born, in that they create the environment in which we come into being. (Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice) Bourdieu, however, lacks the dynamic representation of moral subjectivity that I argue Murdoch has, and also lacks a way to articulate what it feels like to be such a subject in a Bourdieuian world.

our purposes here, which do not deal with that level, this should not be a damning issue. I argue for a social theory, or the opening for one, in her quadrilateral representation of moral subjectivity and how we internalize in our experience a complex field of moral relationship. As I have argued, Kleinman's understanding of local moral worlds can help bring out and develop the potential for a social theory in Murdoch's thought to a degree that, as we will see in the examples in the remainder of this work, can help us make sense of the way violence harms one's moral subjectivity.

The tensile moral subject in local moral worlds

How, though, can this be used to better understand a particular period of political violence? By turning to an example, such as the Bosnian War that I have been engaging throughout, we can use an understanding of the self as a tensile moral subject whose moral life inhabits local moral worlds to better analyze and describe the ways in which moral subjectivity was undermined by the war's violence.

There is a great deal written about the causes and consequences of this war, and the wars related to it in the region. I can state confidently, however, that the wars of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s, and which gave rise to the Bosnian War in 1992, marked a thorough social crisis in Bosnia-Hercegovina, a fight for new institutions and the transformation of existing institutions[248] The ruling Communist Party has a vision of unifying the different groups in the eastern Balkans under a single, Yugoslav identity. There had been previous political entities that had united these groups, but the latest formation of a communist Yugoslavia attempted to transcend nationalist identities, such

---

[248] Cuk, "Temptations of Transition," 85; Vrcan, "The Religious Factor," 108.

as Serb or Croat, with a multinational identity of Yugoslav, translated as *South Slav*. This project was never entirely successful, and throughout Yugoslavian history nationalist identities remained relevant. Indeed, only 5% of Yugoslavians would claim the identity of *Yugoslav* in the census, preferring instead to claim a national or ethnic identity. Within a decade of the death in 1980 of Marshal Broz Tito, who had founded and ruled the country since the end of World War II, this multinational project collapsed, allowing nationalist organizations, institutions, and symbols to gain strength.[249] This included a contestation of symbols, with ethnonationalist parties putting forward religious symbols to support their own strategies and legitimacy.[250] Rogers Brubaker argues that such nationalism was "remedial," trying to solve the social crisis through the assertion of national institutions, organizations and identities. In the end, the wars that erupted, including that in Bosnia, was, to a certain extent, a conflict between differing institutions, those supporting "Yugoslavism" and those supporting independent national identities, as well as groups vying over the power, meaning, and resources that certain institutions provided, or that new ones could give.[251]

Central to the conflict and to the atrocities with which the war has become synonymous were efforts to push certain identities on the population over others. Bosnia-Hercegovina, out of all of the states that comprised Yugoslavia, was the only one without a national majority. To perhaps oversimplify, Croatia was majority Croat; Serbia was

---

[249] Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnia Way*, 34. "The dissolution of communist party rule had meant the breaking of the taboo issue of nationalism and national loyalties."

[250] Besirevic-Regan, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka," 50; Perica, *Balkan Idoals*, 336; Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed,* 107.

[251] Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed,* 79.

majority Serb.[252] Bosnia-Hercegovina, however, was unique in that it had a plurality of Muslims, followed closely by a large Serbian minority, as well as a sizable Croatian population, among others. In the fight during the 1990s over what states would succeed Yugoslavia and how they would be comprised and defined, identities founded on nationalism and religion became regnant. This was problematic enough in the other states, such as Croatia, with sizable national minorities, but it was even harder in Bosnia-Hercegovina, situated as it was between two new countries, Croatia and Serbia, each with majorities tied to the national minorities within. This gave rise to irredentism with Croatia and Serbia supporting their co-nationals in Bosnia-Hercegovina, a dynamic that threatened to rip the new country in two.[253]

There is much I could discuss about the conflict on a broad level. What I will do now is look at the ways in which one's local moral world and one's moral subjectivity were circumscribed during the war. This will help us see how political violence profoundly affects the dynamics of the local, thereby altering the conditions of one's moral subjectivity.

---

[252] Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian War,* 10; Cohen, 46 These majorities are based on censuses where persons self-identified with particular identities. Yugoslavia had a three levels of political identity prior to the war. The first was that of nation, which included several, constitutionally defined national groups such as Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Madeonians, Montenegrins, and in the early 1970s, Muslims. Muslims were the only nation not to have their own republic. The second level were the nationalities, which "had legal warrant to their own language and cultural assertion," but did not have their own republic. These included Hungarians and Albanians. The third level consisted of ethnic minorities, including Russians, Jews, Roma, Romanians, and even those who identified generically as Yugoslav (Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way,* 25-7). One can see that, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the main nations/ethnicities had the most institutional resources to create new nations out of their constituent republics, with the notable exception of Bosnia.

[253] Brubaker has made the strong case that, in discussing ethnonationalism, it is important not to unwittingly support ethnonationalist assumptions by reifying groups in a way that reflects their division of the world into discrete, unchanging ethnicities. See Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest impact of the Bosnian war was the transforming *local moral worlds*. Larger armies were involved, but much of the atrocities and betrayals were committed by one's neighbors and others that one knew. The actions targeted largely the fabric of such worlds, and so, the moral subjectivities they supported. Such violence touched directly on the bonds between neighbors and even close friends, and so, the integrity of the networks that Kleinman says are so important for moral subjectivity. For example, journalist Barbara Demick recounts a man who noticed many of his Bosnian Serb colleagues leaving town. One such colleague said he was leaving to participate in a hunting class. That same colleague was later caught as a sniper, one of those who terrorized the streets of Sarajevo for years. Esad Boškailo, when he was rounded up with others on their way to a concentration camp, told his captors to speak with a colleague of his, a professor, who though Serb, had been a trusted friend for years. Such a man would certainly help him get free. He was shocked to find out that it was none other than this very colleague and friend who had betrayed him in the first place, turning him in.

These examples show the disillusionment, sometimes deadly, experienced in the war, where trusted neighbors would become informants or even members of militias that took one's home and even killed one's family. This distrust, however, was so pervasive that it could affect relationships even within families where ethnicity and religion did not play so much of a part. Like the example previously of the young man whose godmother did not lend them help, such occasions could damage the trust and civility not only between neighbors but between family members, severing fundamental social ties. When he received help from other family members, who scolded him for not asking sooner, he cried. This seems to have come from the tension of no longer know who could be trusted.

As he says, "'I just sat and listened, and when they were finished I started crying, because we'd known each other earlier and I knew they were good people, but you know, during war people change.'"[254] These examples, then, show how pervasive the war's corrosiveness was, cutting away at the chords that bound together one's local moral worlds. It included not only neighborly relations but relationships even within one's home.

In addition to these intimately relational encounters, there were more concerted, organized efforts that damaged the local. There are many accounts of people raped in front of family members, daughters in front of fathers.[255] Targeted people were made to feel afraid and uncomfortable in public. For example, in Srebrenica before the infamous massacre there, pigs were painted with the initials of the Muslim nationalist party and left to roam through the streets as an affront and threat to Muslim residents. Targeted persons were also reverted to primitive conditions: they were deprived of electricity, food, all means of providing for themselves, and were also used as slave labor.[256] For many, this created experiences, and so memories, of what was once their home that made it difficult to continue inhabiting it.

Half of Sarajevo fled the city during the war, and about 150,000 internally displaced persons fled to Sarajevo from other parts of the country.[257] They fled the violence but they were also fleeing areas that they and possible previous generations had always thought of as theirs and wherein they felt they belonged. These acts created

---

[254] Maček, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka," 87.

[255] Besirevic-Regan, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka," 108.

[256] Besirevic-Regan, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka," 75-78.

[257] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 85.

horrific associations of what was once one's home and that of their families, friends, and their networks. This made it harder to inhabit or return and re-inhabit such spaces, alienating one from the actual material geography that provided the basis for one's moral community.

Indeed, if a local moral world is to have any intelligibility, there must be spaces in which such a world can exist and be maintained. Individuals need to meet and exchange to some degree, and the very fundamental sociality that conditions one's moral subjectivity was damaged during the violence. The inability to simply walk down the street and greet a neighbor destroyed such basic institutions as handshaking and broke down social interaction and bonds. Human Rights Watch witnesses said they were so frightened that they would rarely venture out. This meant they would go for months without seeing a next-door neighbor and could no longer participate in public life.[258] This increased fear, as one did not know the daily events in the city, nor what happened to friends and family.

Samantha Power relates how, in the environs of Banja Luka, a curfew was put into place for the entire night starting at 4pm. Her quote shows how public life was severely curtailed, indeed, eliminated, for Muslim and Croat residents:

> Non-Serbs were forbidden to: meet in cafes, restaurants or other public places; bathe or swim in the rivers; hunt or fish; move to another town without authorization [which usually met giving over everything you have before you left]; carry a weapon; drive or travel by car; gather in groups of more than three men; contact relatives from outside Celinac (all household visits must be reported); use means of communication other than the post office phone; wear uniforms; sell real estate or exchange homes without approval.[259]

---

[258] Human Rights Watch, "War Crimes in Bosnia-Hercegovina," 10.

[259] Power, *The Problem from Hell,* 250.

One could get shot randomly for simply stepping out in front of your house, and families could not even bury a family member at a funeral home or in a local cemetery. Instead, they would have to bury his or her loved ones in the backyard.[260]

In addition to this, the social infrastructure – those material objects and buildings where community happens and is remembered – were destroyed, further undermining the constituents of one's prewar moral subjectivity. Michael Sells, a scholar of Islam and religion, quotes Croat militiaman who articulated well the mindset of cleansers: "'It is not enough to cleanse Mostar of the Muslims,' said a Croat militiaman as his unit worked to destroy the bridge; 'the relics must also be destroyed.'"[261] Mosques, which are at the center of Muslim life, were torn down and dynamited throughout the country. In Prijedor, the mosque was torn down, and the Muslim majority Old Town was shelled with artillery, destroying the distinctive Ottoman-era architecture and streets where Muslims would carry out their lives in public.[262]

Memory, too, was targeted. In place of destroyed Muslim-owned buildings, Orthodox crosses were resurrected in the memory of war victims, not only destroying the evidence of local Islamic culture and community but replacing it with another community's victimization narrative.[263] Tombstones in Medjugorje, a major Catholic pilgrimage site, were destroyed to erase evidence of generations of Orthodox family life in the community. And the first object to be mortared during the siege of Sarajevo was

---

[260] Human Rights Watch, "Bosnia-Hercegovina," 8.

[261] Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed,* 93.

[262] Although I have discussed primarily Muslim targets, as they were targeted at different times by both Croat and Serb nationalist forces, Croats and Serbs were also targets of ethnic cleansing.

[263] Wesselingh and Arnaud, *Raw Memory,* 20.

not a military barracks or even the main mosque, but the national library, containing

priceless and irreplaceable records of Muslim existence in southeastern Europe.

All of this demonstrates the atmosphere created in which the institutions and

relationships on which community was based disappeared. Individuals could survive, but

they could become isolated, and their community lay in ruins. In certain areas space once

filled with greetings, commerce, free movement, religious ritual, laughter and argument

was replaced by new memories and associations including betrayal, high anxiety,

insecurity, blood, torture, and irredeemable distance between one and one's neighbor.

Indeed, the community was tortured, terrorized and slowly squeezed until individuals and

their families finally left. It was a slow dismemberment that homogenized – cultural and

religiously – communities across Bosnia-Hercegovina. And like torture, the scars ran

deep and forever maimed individuals and what community remained to them.

This is enough of a discussion to gesture toward the fact that the many factors that

help sustain one's local moral world in which one's moral subjectivity can survive were

targeted, frayed, and even destroyed. With the collapse of communication and access to

others, one's world became quite small and different than it had been. For many, rumor

was the only source of information.[264] As Ivana Maček writes of the massive population

exchange in Sarajevo caused by residents fleeing away from and refugees fleeing toward

the city, "The massive turnover in the population brought by the war affected social

relations in dramatic...ways, as kinship ties were ruptured, strained, or reinforced..." [265]

Neighbors, new and old, began to distrust one another. And they began to live in to the

---

[264] Palsto, *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Crisis*; Wesselingh and Arnaud, *Raw Memory,* 38-39; Besirevic-Regan, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka," 72; Rieff, *Slaughterhouse,* 58.

[265] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 86.

narrower religio-national identities of Catholic-Croat and Orthodox-Serb of the national ideologies that eventually took over many of the new post-Yugoslav states. Such a simple thing as rumor, then, when it replaces all other outlets for information can increase fear and, after a while, can have an affect on one's perceptions of others. One will even come to see close neighbors with suspicion.[266]

It is difficult to be moral when the constituents and conditions of established morality disappear. What is more, there was a shrinking of the possibilities of the moral life throughout Bosnia-Hercegovina during the war. Where one might have once embraced Sarajevo's tradition of tolerance and pluralism, one might soon find herself xenophobic or distrustful of former friends. Where one once valued a more democratic government, their axiomatic foundations may have changed to something less open. This change in one's context, in social institutions, and even access to the routines of daily life are moral issues. In order to survive, one might not feel the need to commit crimes but one had to see the world wholly differently than before. In the place of civility, there was suspicion. In the place of tolerance, anger. For some, this created a dissonance between the persons they were before the war and the persons they had become, as well as a dissonance between what their world once was and what it had become. The Bosnian poet Semedzin Mehmedinović writes, perhaps with both insight and irony, "How can this happen/ Here, of all places, where we're so humane?"[267] This can lead to feeling that one had lost something profound and important about themselves. They no longer can pursue

---

[266] For a discussion of the way that rumor can incite violence, see Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds.*

[267] Mehmedinović, *Sarajevo Blues,* 193.

the moral life in a way they did before, because that world no longer existed. How, then, can one hope to be good? Where does that leave the individual?

Looking back to previous examples I used, I argued that the political violence of the war also made it difficult, and at times impossible, to live into the various modalities that comprise one's moral subjectivity. Attending to one important principle, as we saw with the godmother, could mean alienating family. Such experiences can, over time, wear away at one's faith, if you will, in the possibility of being able to orient themselves to the good. To invoke Plato's allegory, no matter how one twists and turns, they seem only to see shadow. This undermining of the possibility of the tension that makes up the moral life can be exacerbated and quickened with the destruction of the material, social, and cultural structures, spaces, and institutions that support and inform one's various communities and the goods that they supply. Their destruction can also create conditions where one's moral ideals and horizons are replaced with formerly cruel and horrifying norms, as with those who viewed a good day as one that included a certain number of murders. Even though the individual did not want such a transformation of norms, being a moral subject can include the cruel irony of feeling responsible for worldviews created by violent conditions beyond one's control and reprehensible when compared to former moral worldviews.

Political violence, then, can transform one's local moral worlds, and one's larger society, into new worlds that only admitted of certain subjectivities and ways to understand the self. As Maček's informant stated, one can believe and live into worldviews that are "horrific" and "cruel." The individual can come to see herself as monstrous if the contrast between her past and and present selves are strong enough.

What one must do to live, and what one has become (as well as what their world has become), might have seemed monstrous to their former self. This is a source of suffering but also an indication to one of how much they have changed. The monster is after all, as the root *monere* infers, a *warning* to others not just about the danger it can wreak but the danger we have in our ability to become like the monster.[268] *Monstrosity* is a highly moral, normative term, signaling the threat to self and others that can come from moral harm. It takes not a special evil but enough violence to transform ourselves into beings we do not recognize and that we would have formerly thought monstrous. And life can become truly horrific, even desperate, if one lives into those former evaluations and thinks of oneself in the present as having become a monster.

　　With human psychology such as it is, we cannot live very long thinking we are bad or evil. Much has been written on how persons who seem so objectively cruel and the cause of great evil will see the world, even warp the world, into one where they are righteous. The perceived loss of moral ability, then, caused by extreme violence will spur one to extreme actions to respond to what is an untenable situation: the feeling that one cannot be good or move toward the good. This helps us begin to understand the questions raised in chapter one concerning the relationship of violence, the feeling of not being capable of good, and one's moral subjectivity. The idea of the cyclical nature of violence can perhaps be seen here in moral terms, as the need to orient oneself toward the *Good*, which is necessary for one's very identity and the intelligibility of life and the world, is so central that its contestation and deprivation can drive violence, even as it is caused by

---

[268] "Monster, N., Adv., and Adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed February 16, 2015. http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/121738.

violence. One, then, can become monstrous within actions driven by the (increasingly desperate) need to be good.

The transformation or elimination of the material and social structures that support relationality and intersubjectivity can also eliminate former moral subjectivities, although not their memory. One can continue to feel bound to former norms, even though the devastated society around one will not support them or make it too dangerous to embody certain values, such as love, selflessness, or generosity. It might also strain one's resources, so where it was once easier to be generous to many, for example, one's selflessness may in the context of violence be materially restrained. Any of these situations can create a feeling of having lost something essential.

We can see, then, how Murdoch's concept of the tensile moral self, the importance to the moral subject to strive for the *Good* and the multiple horizons that comprise it, along with Kleinman's local moral worlds as the context of such moral development and being, can help us begin to better understand the ways in which violence can erode a sense of moral ability. Such ability itself is based on a broader array of institutions, symbols, narratives, communities, goods, etc., that support certain subjectivities as possible while making others more difficult. Indeed, some experiences, as we have seen, can support the very feeling of being able to move toward the *Good*, while others, particularly those of extreme violence that can maim society and the context in which one's morality and identities are intelligible, can be detrimental such such feeling. In such situations, trying over and over to be good, only to neglect certain modalities, can leave one feeling they have lost the ability to move toward goodness, or even that goodness is no longer existent. Perhaps, one might even come to feel that moral

effort was always futile and that one's experience is proof that the world is not capable of

virtue. Such change may not even take much time. Instead, the severity of violence can

transform one's world that such feelings of moral loss become precipitate where for

others it might take a long period of extended moral challenge and failure. And this

feeling that one has been changed, perhaps irrevocably, can lead to despair and a feeling

that one can no longer be good. It is a moral subjectivity that is best described with the

modality of *void*.

Chapter Five: Void

Murdoch emphasizes moral development based on vision, attention, and the *Good.* The consequences of her formulation takes on new meaning, however, when we place her understanding of moral subjectivity in the context of extreme political violence.

Art, beauty - these are important for Murdoch's philosophy. Along with certain intellectual disciplines (*technē*), art, particularly literature, is one of the main methods through which we can learn about the moral life and what it is to be good. We experience through art and education how and why some art is better than others. This brings to us an understanding of how hierarchy is a central structure of our life, an awareness that can be reflected in our moral development as well, as we can see that there are some actions and ways of being that are more correct, are better, than others. Murdoch writes, "We recognize and identify goodness and *degrees* of good, and are thus able to have the idea of a greatest conceivable good."[269]

Hers is a philosophy that is unashamedly hierarchical and based on notions of authority, as Murdoch herself attests. And so, "education is moral education" in that we learn to perceive through the various educational programs we engage in throughout life. Indeed, the best formal education, though helpful, may not be entirely necessary, as the world itself will demand such attention from us.[270] Something no more momentous than the appearance of a kestrel, as Murdoch argues, can sharpen one's attention to the beauty

---

[269] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 395. (italics Murdoch's) Specifically, Murdoch is paraphrasing what she takes to be Gaunillo's response to Anselm's original formulation of the ontological proof.

[270] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 175.

of the moment, the same loving attention that allows one to align their worldview more accurately with how things really are.[271]

One may scoff at the idea of apprehending the *really real*, but Murdoch's point is to emphasize the importance of seeing the world, as much as possible, as one where we are not at the center but are, instead, de-centered, giving our attention, time, and concern to other individuals. That we are not the center of the world is, after all, objectively certain, and we may even agree with this viewpoint shared ubiquitously, although it may be hard in practice for one to live this out. What this creates in one ultimately is a wisdom, we could call it, where ideally our vision is unencumbered - or at least, less encumbered - by our innate selfishness, and so we can see people in their own right as subjects, not reductively as the objects of our subjectivity, and treat them more appropriately with the dignity they deserve.[272] This is a compelling vision of the moral life in that, here, moral development is reconceived as perception and sensation, which in contrast to moral theories that emphasize deliberation, seems more accurately to portray the way in which people engage with their context.

But how does Murdoch's highlighting of art, beauty, and the kestrels of the world confront questions of horror, suffering, and terror? What if one's world is not filled with kestrels and art but bombed out museums, libraries, and homes, the trees gone and burned for fuel, the mountains sinister with hidden armaments? As one of Maček's informants describes her experience of a lull in the fighting, "'For me it was much more difficult

---

[271] The example of the kestrel is an important, democratic affirmation, if you will, in Murdoch's writing. Her emphasis on formal art and literature, however, raises the question of whether or not goodness is truly open to all, and raises the specter of elitism, at least in application. Murdoch, with her lack of systematic thought, leaves this question open.

[272] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 54-5.

when the situation got better...I felt terrible! The shooting ceased, but the town was very

ugly looking...All is so destroyed...Only the skeletons of the stores, so much garbage in

the town. A lot of concrete, cement, glass, everything.'"[273]

These are not random questions; they bring us instead back to the original focus

of the present inquiry. They reflect the experience of many in Bosnia during the war in

the 1990s, as well as countless others in countless other conflicts. Such experiences and

others like them raise questions that reveal some of the more sobering ramifications of

understanding the world as revelatory of the *Good*, and thus making imagination and

perception central. What if, for instance, the only images available to our perceptions are

so bleak and terrifying that they seem to demand not a de-centered selfhood, but instead,

make such a subjectivity a source of great, immediate vulnerability? What if what one

sees results in a defensive re-entrenchment, fear of the stranger, or a knowledge of the

world as a dangerous place where loving attention should be given cautiously and

frugally? What if what the world presents us with is potentially hazardous to moral

development understood as rooted in perception and imagination?

These questions reveal important vulnerabilities of the moral life and one's moral

subjectivity. This, however, is not a weakness in Murdoch's thought but an important

asset. Looking at moral development in this way, one can understand how moral loss

results from vulnerabilities in the structure of the experience of being a moral subject,

providing also terms to describe such experiences. In other words, Murdoch offers an

---

[273] Maček, *Sarajevo Under Siege*, 40.

account of vulnerability that can help in articulating how such moral loss occurs through political violence and to help describe these experiences.

make central Murdoch's conception of *void* as a means of understanding the experience of loss of self under conditions of violence. Returning to the concern of Ivana Maček's informants that they may have lost the ability to be good, we will now begin to understand what is happening in that experience by using Murdoch's representation of the self as a field of tension, and of void as a an experience of disruption, or really severe, fundamental disorientation, of that selfhood. We will understand such experience through Murdoch's account of moral subjectivity, specifically one where the individual feels that they lose the ability to navigate the tension inherent in the experience of moral being and, so, falls into void, inhabiting a subjectivity of meaningless, despair, and moral intelligibility. And I will argue how viewing morality as centrally an aspect of perception and orientation in the world shows how one's experience of being a moral subject becomes dominated by the experience of void. I will continue to bring in examples from the Bosnian War so toshow how a rich conception of moral subjectivity can be used to account for and articulate the experience of political violence and its reshaping of one's moral architecture.

In particular, I will look at void as a category referring to experiences of extreme loss within the context of political violence. This is not something actually broached by Murdoch, yet such experiences fit well with some of the ways in which she discusses void. Murdoch witnessed firsthand the aftermath of some of the worst fighting in the 20th

century, and most likely had this in mind when writing about void.[274] When we begin to

look closely at Murdoch's discussion of void, the breadth of experiences that Murdoch

seems to include under void will become apparent. It will be important, then, to perform a

close reading on the section dealing with void not only to understand what Murdoch is

doing in these pages but also to argue for an understanding of void that can reflect the

extreme experiences of political violence that the present inquiry seeks to describe.

Although Murdoch's understanding of void is not limited to such extreme experiences, I

will argue that it is inclusive of them. Limiting void's range to this narrower

understanding will help create a frame and vocabulary to describe the experience of

moral loss attested to by some survivors of moral violence.

My intention in this chapter, however, is not so much to systematize Murdoch's

larger thought. The point of this reading will be to provide a resource for thinking about

extreme experiences of suffering and their moral consequences. The goal is more

practical, even more applied, than discussions of void have been in the works of other

authors. Void has been used to understand the overall structure of *Metaphysics as a Guide

to Morals*, where it is a type of "anti-theory" placed against the "theory" of the rest of

Murdoch's work and thought.[275] It is for other authors an admission within Murdoch's

theory that there is always the possibility in one's life that there is no meaning. In this

way Murdoch puts the anti-matter of void in contact with the matter of the moral life,

---

[274] Murdoch volunteered with the proto-United Nations organization, UNRRA, which helped in post-World War II reconstruction, in Belgium and Austria after the war. Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, xix.

[275] Antonaccio argues against critics that see in Murdoch's discussion of void a nihilistic philosophy that Murdoch, instead, affirms that we must have ways through such experience that does not appeal to a retrenched selfishness but are "truthful consolations." In other words, she provides a way to get through such experiences where we acknowledge the tragedy of life without falling into despair. (Antonaccio, "A Response to Nora Hämäläinen and David Robjant," 6; *A Philosophy to Live By,* 187)

acknowledge a critical challenge to the structure of a philosophy that wants to affirm the moral life as the central way to understand human life in general.[276]

All of these understandings have merit, showing how void and Murdoch's representation of moral subjectivity function within the structure of her philosophy. My reading will focus on the last few chapters of Murdoch's final work. My goal is not to understand Murdoch's entire system, as writers such as Mulhall and Antonaccio do, but to apply a concept analytically to real world experience. I do not depart radically from Murdoch's thought. The move from a work that is trying to establish not an ethic but a background metaphysics and psychology to support understandings of moral transformation and development to taking part of that work and applying it will, however, require a specific, even idiosyncratic reading to make it relevant to the real world experiences in question.[277]

Before continuing, it must be admitted that transcendence in the midst of horror is *possible*, and certainly the "great art" that Murdoch speaks of is not naive. Yet, it also must be admitted, nearly in the same breath, that this possibility should not become the basis of a judgement against those for whom political violence is not the ground of transcendence but instead of an immanence characterized by horror, loss, and despair, or for those whose ground, from which one must transcend, has swept been swept away by violence. Any such truth claims that would insist on such possibility as the bedrock of a too neatly optimistic worldview - and they do exist in the world in the minds of the

---

[276] Laverty, *Iris Murdoch's Ethics*, 42.

[277] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 41. She writes, "I have several times indicated that the image which I am offering should be thought of as a general metaphysical background to moral and not as a formula which can be illuminatingly introduced into any and every moral act."

irresponsibly positive - seems to wither, insubstantial and needy as they are, when we face, without recourse to those over-easy optimisms buttressing our worldview, experiences of fire and ash.

What saves Murdoch's philosophy for me is that we can read her works as reflecting the complexity of these issues. She acknowledges, after hundreds of pages and two works speaking of the *Good* as a real force in the world, that experience and attention can still rend one's world apart. This admission comes most forcefully at the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide for Morals,* in about 10 pages that, though short, are not unlike a *memento mori* for her own philosophy.[278] In one chapter, "Void," which along with her chapter on the self as a field of tension is the shortest chapter in the book, she raises the issue of suffering in its various forms. Murdoch takes suffering seriously in those pages, acknowledging negative life experiences as obstacles to living out the philosophy she had described in the rest of the work.

One might reply that other moral philosophers engaged in virtue ethics, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, also acknowledge obstacles to becoming one who can reason well in moral matters. MacIntyre acknowledges, for example, disability and vulnerability inherent in life, as well as our animality and dependence on others.[279] Murdoch, however, seems to include experiences that do not just limit our process in becoming rational actors that can discern good actions in the world, what MacIntyre calls "independent practical reasoners." Instead, as we will see, she acknowledges experiences that seem to undermine the intelligibility and legitimacy of striving after being such a person in the

---

[278] She even uses *memento mori* in this section. (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide for Morals*, 501)

[279] MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, ch. 1.

first place. Rather than merely being obstacles in reaching such a goal, such experiences call the goal into question. Even if Murdoch eventually wants to affirm the power of her metaphysics and the possibility of some form of healing after such negative experiences, she also affirms that we cannot talk about the moral life and human good without taking seriously the experience of desolation and despair. It is an acknowledgement that the moral life is more fraught than one may have supposed in the preceding pages of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* or even in previous works such as *The Sovereignty of Good*.[280]

Reading Murdoch's *void*

Void is the experience of the possibility of meaninglessness.[281] It is an experience of the fact that we are not ultimately in control of our lives, even that our lives are ultimately defined not just by our birth and existence but by death and the challenge that makes to our pursuits, which may all be vanity.[282] It is an experience of our subjection to chance. Void as a concept accomplishes different goals within Murdoch's thought. For example, it is viewed as a way to acknowledge the potential groundlessness of life within a philosophy that ultimately argues for a way to live meaningfully with experiences that

---

[280] For an argument that Murdoch eventually affirms her metaphysics and notions of the good, see Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human,* 129. In the final chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch quite strongly affirms ways to responsibly deal with experiences of and acknowledgements of void that take such experiences seriously without despairing. She also acknowledges that such experiences are problematic for someone who takes morality seriously, as the potential for falling into fantasy to safeguard one's psyche from looking at the void straight in the face are very real. One could argue that the selfish nature of human beings is at no point more magnetic than during experiences related to void.

[281] Laverty, *Iris Murdoch's Ethics*, 97; Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 238-9.

[282] Hall, "Limits of the Story," 9-10.

threaten meaning altogether.[283] There are philosophers who wonder whether the consolations of philosophy, as Murdoch understands them, really are sufficient to meet the challenges posed by extreme suffering, and whether Murdoch has lost something that Christian theology might still provide for the believer and the sufferer.[284]

Murdoch begins her focused discussion of void by stating that the term denotes a domain that "might seem to have been left out of too optimistic a picture."[285] Murdoch is referring here to the previous 500 pages that argued for her philosophy, which is hopeful though certainly not overly optimistic, where she presents a vision of the human and the moral life grounded in a loving attention to others and the world.[286] We are met in the first line of this chapter with an admission that the picture of the previous 500 pages may be incomplete and, without a discussion of void, it may not be accurate. At the beginning of her discussion of void, then, Murdoch signals that the following discussion is an

---

[283] Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 187. Antonaccio sees the discussion of the self as a field of tension as a summary at the end of the work of the entire Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, and so, a summary of Murdoch's final word on moral philosophy. And Stephen Mulhall sees in it a prompt to continue thinking about Murdoch's thought, a place of continued profit. (Mulhall, "'All the World Must Be "Religious,'" 34; "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 239)

[284] Mulhall, "'All the World Must Be "Religious,'" 34. For a discussion of Mulhall's opinion, where he argues that Murdoch's approach does not provide a reasonable safeguard against void, where Christianity does in its christologies, see Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By*, 182-184.

[285] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498.

[286] It might be better to describe Murdoch's philosophy as hopeful, or at least, a rationale for hope all the while staring unblinkingly at hard historical and psychological truths. She is, then, hopeful, yet not optimistic in the way that Christian ethicist Ellen Ott Marshall critiques certain theologies. (Marshall, *Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom*) There is in Marshall's distinction a very Murdochian current, where hope is grounded in a more honest, truthful perception of the world, while optimism is a vision that is occluded by too cheap consolation, while despair is also inadequate. It resonates with Murdoch's understanding of responsibility versus fantasy. This is one of several ways that H. Richard Neibuhr, which Marshall draws from, and Murdoch align, particularly around emphases on responsibility and history, with the possibility of transcendence. We see here again not only resonances with Freud and others in Murdoch's work but also important concerns and concepts in modern theological and ethical discourses.

important one, leaving the reader, at least initially, to wonder why it was left to the end of the book and receives only a few pages of attention.[287]

As the chapter progresses, and we learn more about void, one of its most striking characteristics is its plurality. There are a variety of experiences and emotions that fit under its umbrella. From the beginning, we are met with diversity, raising the question, what exactly does void - this "region" or "category" - refer to? In the first paragraph of the chapter, void seems to refer to "something extreme: the pain, and the evil, which occasion conditions of desolation such as many or most human beings have met with."[288] Indeed, the first page is filled with terms referring to extremely negative experiences, including "desolation," "despair," "affliction," "dark night," "evil." Further along the same page, Murdoch doubles down on this bleak picture of humanity, claiming that "The average inhabitant of the planet is probably without hope and starving. It is terrible to be human."[289] At this point, Murdoch is not just talking about extreme experiences but is claiming that extreme suffering is a not uncommon experience of human beings, and even more, is definitive of what it means to be a human. It is not just discrete human experience but human life itself that is characterized by suffering, possibly void. This may be surprising to a reader who has absorbed a Murdoch who writes of beauty, literature, art, love, and the Good.

It is possible to read this section as rhetorical, however. She begins the paragraph saying, "Someone may say...", which could indicate a straw person or fictional

---

[287] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498.

[288] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498.

[289] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498.

interlocutor. This reading would distance Murdoch from such extreme statements about humanity and opens up a wider range of possible interpretations for why she is discussing such extreme experiences. It seems, however, that, regardless of whether Murdoch is owning such sentiments or not, she is, as stated at the beginning of the same page, aiming to discuss something extreme and recognize extreme suffering as relevant to her philosophy, and possibly even toxic to her previous claims. A main point of these chapters at the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* is to allow for the possibility of such experience to be acknowledged and considered. Murdoch wants to take seriously the question that can be aimed at her, if one is to bring up empirical evidence of common human suffering: "Can one go on talking about a spiritual source and an absolute good if a majority of human kind is debarred from it?"[290] This is a strong challenge to her philosophy, as Mulhall has noted, that she hurls at herself.[291] At the very least, she argues, such considerations must make one humble, and we can read in these chapters a performance of such a virtue, as Murdoch challenges her own claims with considerations of extreme suffering that would seem to make ridiculous assertions of a *Good*.[292]

We get in this explication an initial answer to the question, why does void receive its own chapter yet comes so late in the work? *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* takes as its aim an argument for an understanding of the human person as one who can be defined as a moral subject, for whom nearly every experience is of import for one's moral development, and the consequences of this vision of morality for philosophy and possibly

---

[290] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 499.

[291] Murdoch, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection."

[292] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 501.

society.[293] Murdoch argues against a broad array of philosophers, from G.E. Moore to Derrida, an indication that she believes that much work needs to be done, and much wood needs to be cleared, for her to establish her philosophy. She is moving against the stream of modern philosophy as she perceives it and needs much space to argue her points. The emphasis is on affirming her work, not providing its negation, as the state of moral philosophy during her life was already opposed to her approach, with some notable exceptions.[294]

Extremity, desolation, are common features of life, as Murdoch seems to argue, and so seemingly, must be dealt with in her philosophy.[295] This is particularly true if one is to affirm that the whole of life is morally significant, including experience that would seem to undermine faith in a moral worldview. Murdoch, however, first creates a strong foundation for her philosophy, before challenging it with deep existential issues, where she is then able to incorporate it in to her philosophy in a way that influences but does not derail her project. In this way, she engages at the end in a type of secular theodicy, where

---

[293] Responding to a fictional interrogator who asks, "'But are you saying that every single second has a moral tag?'", Murdoch's answer is, "Yes, roughly." (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 495) She also argues that morality is continuous in *The Sovereignty of Good,* arguing through her thought experiment of M and D how moral development continues even without external signs or actions. (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 36) Whether Murdoch is truly engaged in society is up for grabs. Antonaccio argues that there is an implicit social consequence to Murdoch's work, providing the missing philosophical anthropology that can explain how one needs to be and what virtues are necessary to participate in liberal democracy. It does seem true, however, that Murdoch is not working on a social and political ethic, and so any such development needs to be done by the interpreter. I believe Antonaccio is right that one can use Murdoch to supply a moral psychology to liberal political theories, such as that of John Rawls. It is not, however, straightforward, as Murdoch's argument, though potentially relevant more broadly, is situated quite intentionally within moral philosophical discussions of the mid- to late-20th century.

[294] Those Murdoch influenced include McDowell, Taylor, Nussbaum, and MacIntyre, among others, all of whom push against the grain of Anglo-American analytical philosophy, while interestingly espousing different political philosophies.

[295] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498. Or, at the very least, she wants to confront claims to such experience.

the challenge to her discussion of *Good* from the fact that people suffer is formally

accounted for in her thought.

Yet, Murdoch also alludes to other experiences that, although profound for the

individual, are not as extreme. We see evidenced a more varied range of what fits the

definition of void, some that seem quite distinct from one another. Murdoch includes, for

example, "black misery, bereavement, remorse, frustrated talent, loneliness, humiliation,

depression, secret woe."[296] Although not unrelated, these terms refer to different

emotional states as well as different life events. Bereavement may include loneliness, but

loneliness need not be occasioned by bereavement. Frustrated talent may be miserable

and depressing, but this is distinct from a successful person losing their spouse. In the

next chapter Murdoch includes still more examples of void, such as "hunger, poverty, and

persecution, remorse or guilt or abandoned loneliness and lack of love."[297] This list

reiterates some categories from the first but adds social conditions and locations, such as

poverty, and the results of such conditions, like hunger, with emotions that can result

from these experiences, but which do not do so necessarily. They are emotions that can

range in severity and duration and, though descriptive, raise more questions for Murdoch,

as "guilt" and "remorse" are never defined in relation to one another. All of this could

reflect extreme experience but some, such as guilt, could just as well represent everyday

experience. Though potentially profound and influential in one's life, everyday guilt is

not necessarily extreme.

---

[296] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498-9.

[297] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 504.

This variegated understanding reflects Murdoch's own claim that she is dealing with "a lot of different states."[298] It raises the question, however, of what exactly void refers to, what her reason is in creating such wide definitional inclusivity, and whether such a broad category can remain coherent or useful. It also raises questions of who exactly falls into void, and why some do while others might not. Or is it more the case that loss, for example, is always void, and so, a universal experience?

I do think that Maria Antonaccio is correct that Murdoch introduces void to illustrate the most responsible ways the individual as a moral subject should deal with extreme suffering. Murdoch's ultimate concern seems to be the power of certain strong, negatively charged experiences and how this connects with our propensity to fantasy, to being self-centered and absorbed. Murdoch ends the chapter on void with the concern, "We have (gravity, necessity) a natural impulse to derealize our world and surround ourselves with fantasy." This is so much so that simply "stopping this, refraining from filling voids with lies and falsity, is progress."[299] We also have here the introduction of *voids* in the plural, seeming to indicate we are not talking of a comprehensive category of void but various experiences that have the quality of a void, a desert, in one's life. We are left uncertain, however, as Murdoch does not more deeply explain the difference between *void* and *voids*. In this way, void seems to be invoked to call attention to the way that our suffering - something we think of as done *to* us and where we may think of ourselves as victims - and more particularly, the way we view and react to our suffering, is an important moral period.

_____

[298] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 500.

[299] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 503.

We return here to an understanding of void, perhaps, as the human condition, something we all need to deal with throughout life: "There is only the working of the spirit in the morass of existence in which it always at every moment finds itself immersed."[300] This concern is central throughout her major works, a concern about how to pursue goodness while being clear eyed about the obstacles inherent in human nature and the nature of events.[301] Here Murdoch returns to her claim that we need to have faith - the best word here, and in keeping with her secularized theological inspirations - that loving attention and honest perception will provide what we need to make it through void and tough times. She even uses the metaphor of *grace*, and as philosopher Justin Broackes argues, there is a parallelism here between the devout's faith in prayer, in which God will give grace to help get us through, and faith in attention that will give us *energy* - really, inspiration, momentum, the impetus to action - to survive suffering.[302]

Murdoch may want to err on the side of inclusiveness and acknowledge the manifold ways in which suffering creates the dangerous occasion, even the impetus, to give in to the ever-present pull to be selfish. Who has not, after feeling some of the above emotions and conditions, felt perfectly entitled to hold back love or material things from others either in retaliation or in the view that one's own self was more in need of comfort

---

[300] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 507.

[301] The possibly earliest uses of *fantasy* in her work include "The Sublime and the Good," 216, originally published in 1959, and "Against Dryness," 292, originally published in 1961.

[302] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 505-6; Broackes, "Introduction," 56, 60. This parallelism, however, might find critique in many theologies, as prayer can be seen here as a form of works righteousness, where prayer is payment for grace. Attention reveals energy needs to continue on under adversity. Are there issues of desert and entitlement possibly in such formulas? What of those who lack such faith? Murdoch seems too sympathetic for her thought to be read as a spiritual elitism in this regard, yet there is still a question about the functional role of faith and grace and prayer metaphor in her more secular framework and what that says about those who do and do not manage loving attention in spite of it all.

than another? In this way, it is in keeping with her developing psychology to want to acknowledge the difficulty of being a good person, which she understands as a selfless person whose attention is directed toward the reality of others.

Such a reading is buoyed by the way she opens the chapter by comparing void to other states. It is counterpoised to happiness but also may "be placed in opposition to 'transcendence,' a word that I have used to mean a good 'going beyond' one's egoistic self..."[303] Here, void is experience that undermines the very search for goodness, understood as this transcendence.[304] She may, then, include the extraordinary, "extreme" examples, but in keeping with her emphasis on morality living in the everyday (including that of the kestrel, her discussions of learning a language, of reading), she may want to include as well the ordinary experiences - the little things, which are hard despite their mundanity - that may in the aggregate possibly be quite toxic toward the moral life and just as influential as dramatic, discrete, episodic suffering.

We have seen, then, an understanding of void that is more inclusive, which is important, but also an emphasis on extreme experience. There is at least a double movement at work, then, emphasizing void as a more circumscribed range and degrees of experiences, while in the same few pages gesturing toward breadth. Throughout, however, Murdoch mentions a number of emotions or states that seem particularly representative of her thoughts on void or voids in one's life. For example, she holds out bereavement as a common source of void, and in her discussion of bereavement, defines

---

[303] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498.

[304] Again, we feel Weil's presence and her understanding of *gravity* and *grace*. Void as anti-transcendence brings us down with the gravitational pull of egotism, making it a kind of negative immanence.

void in more detail. It is accompanied by "a sense of emptiness, a loss of personality, a loss of energy and motivation, a sense of being stripped, the world is utterly charmless and without attraction."[305] This can include the loss of persons in one's life but also the loss of a certain socio-economic or social position, the loss of material advantage, privilege and honor that can transform one's world by making one live, say, as a refugee instead of a doctor (and thus the disorienting experience of living in another local moral world). Murdoch describes nuns and monks who regret their choice for a cloistered life and mourn the lives they could have had.[306] It can also include a form of spiritual loss in the form of a "dark night of the soul," but also "ignominy" and a loss, if you will, of face and respect.[307]

In addition to bereavement, void is associated several times with death and even non-being.[308] The experience of void gestures toward annihilation, oblivion, and the fact of our ultimate vulnerability, and the vulnerability of what we hold dear. It brings us down to the basic sources of existential dread possible in any life. It raises the question that we stand on no ground at all. This is the fear that our lives, as well as our ideals and pursuits - our joys and hates - may be meaningless. They lead to nothing and have no

---

[305] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 500.

[306] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 501. Murdoch actually writes, "People locked in closed religious houses think longingly of the fruitful happy lives they might have had, and which they have given up *for nothing*. This is, it must be, a familiar phenomenon." (italics Murdoch's) This is a curious statement. Murdoch seems to suggest that such religious lives are not based in reality and that one is sacrificing their lives and other joys for no good reason. This would be keeping with her atheism, which runs throughout her works, just as her interest in religion is also quite marked. It is, either way, a strong critique of the cloistered religious life and the rationale for it.

[307] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 501, 502. Even with bereavement, then, Murdoch moves again to include a variety of experiences, of various spiritual import and concerning relationships of various sorts, categories, and materiality, and so, expands once again what can be included in void, even as she is being specific.

[308] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 500, 501.

ultimate consequence. Everything, in other words, is vanity and revealed as grounded in

nothing. It is easy to see how easily this could lead to despair. Murdoch writes, again in

her extreme mode, "There is nothing that cannot be broken or taken from us. Ultimately

we are nothing."[309] This is a reiteration of the chapter's first paragraph, where Murdoch,

despite the range of experiences she discusses, claims that what "I refer to here is

something extreme," where void is a counterpoise to happiness itself.[310]

Void and extreme violence

I am tempted to posit that although Murdoch includes a variety of negative

experiences under void, she is mostly concerned with those experiences of extreme loss

and feelings of meaninglessness and even oblivion, as these more graphically represent a

challenge to her philosophy. *Extreme* here is understood as enduring and denotes

something that strikes one to the core. There is indeed a level of void that includes the

---

[309] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 501. Again, Murdoch seems in this paragraph to be speaking rhetorically. She obviously takes seriously the claims in existentialism that our freedom might be based in a groundlessness, but she is speaking here in abstractions, whereas experiences of void are not only particular but memorably so. Such times of suffering tend to be more accessible to memory than others, although there are exceptions. Is the fact that she does not bring up specific cases evidence that she is conducting thought experiments or is it just part and parcel of her more abstract mission of developing a metaphysics? The way that Murdoch writes, where she starts in one voice or discussing one subject and then moving to another without alerting the reader makes it difficult at times to understand where she is making conjecture, where she is speaking for another position, and where she is making her own claim. One could take this and argue that Murdoch does not actually believe in such extreme statements, or more to the point, that her belief in them is beside the point. Instead, she is anticipating a possible response that appeals to extreme, world-rending, and even personality-destroying experience, a response similar to those critiques of theism, which theodicy tries to answer. In this way, she is thinking through potential reactions to her metaphysics, and although she is open to experiences that can undermine the moral life, she brings them up in order to account for them. After all, she also emphasizes that such experiences are rare and most of the time we get through them. She also emphasizes the many ways we can work through such experience, an emphasis she spend more time detailing than she does in discussing extreme violence and its effects. I actually seem to favor this reading. Murdoch has a dim view of human nature and most likely also appreciates the difficulties of life for so many, as she had witnessed the devastating aftermath in World War II Europe in her humanitarian work. This, however, is not what she wants to affirm, but instead, affirm an understanding both of how we can be good but also how easily it can be to fail to be good (Lawrence Blum is very good at pointing this out in Murdoch's work: Blum, "Visual Metaphors," 322-3).

[310] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498. "As such it might be thought of as an opposing companion piece to happiness." Again, such a statement does not necessarily mean that Murdoch believes "we are nothing." At he very least, however, Murdoch is raising it up as a possible experience other can and could have and that that we must take seriously when discussing moral metaphysics.

ordinary, which Murdoch seems, quite rightly, to hold out as a serious potential pitfall in one's life and one's hope. (Guilt might be quotidian, but even as part of mundane experience, it may for any number of reasons be intense and profoundly affect one's subjectivity. In this way, the situation may be hum drum but the intensity of experience and emotion may be extreme.) Yet, there is another level, which she signals strongly on the first page of the Void chapter, that she is particularly concerned with extreme conditions and extreme suffering, which threaten to leave us with nothing, not even hope.[311]

It seems we can affirm, then, the importance of extreme suffering in her thought and its effects on one's moral life. This not only includes a lack of reasons to be good but also a loss of one's very self. Personality, as we just read, can be annihilated. Identity can be taken away. Murdoch seems to be referring to deep bereavement or depression where in one's grief one's interests and passions can lose all meaning. One can lose energy and stop acting as they normally would.[312] This also resonates, however, with discussions in psychology about the death of the self under situations of extreme duress and dehumanization, as well as sociologist Orlando Patterson's understanding of "social death," where slaves are robbed of the power to decide their own life and daily decisions

---

[311] Again, the average person is "probably without hope and starving." (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 498.) "There are places in lives, and geographical places too, where there is nothing but darkness, the devil has his territory, Christ stopped at Eboli." (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 499) What are these places; whom does she have in mind? Although not specific, there is the danger here of reiterating violent colonial and post-colonial myth making about "darkest Africa" and benighted areas of the world, whom the European has a duty to show the way. (This is particularly found in British colonial era philosophy, of which Murdoch is a direct heir. See Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire.)* Murdoch's lack of attention to history and direct discussion of politics and sociology may find its fruits in such statements, loaded as they are coming from a member of Britain's philosophical, literary, and humanist elite.

[312] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 501.

but also the meaning of one's life and actions.[313] We see here just two examples of how one's personality and identity can leave one or be taken.

There is a range of experience and intensity within each understanding of void, yet with each, the loss of self and meaning is central to an understanding of what is at stake in void, as well as what causes it. In Murdoch's example, ordinary interests during depression or bereavement can become "senseless" to the individual. There is a potential collapse of meaning behind even ordinary pursuits. Something is taken - a loved one, one's personality, an ideal or ideal image, one's God - something that was critical to the existential ground that gives purpose to life, what Charles Taylor would call the *spiritual* aspect of one's life.[314] Void, in this understanding, threatens the ground of the moral life but even that of one's life project in general. Indeed, Murdoch's word for the experiences included under void, *affliction*, she takes from Simone Weil's *malheur*, a suffering involving loss and humiliation that is beyond daily sorrow or discontent.[315] It is a term that by definition separates more ordinary pain from extreme forms that can make one want to seek vengeance or to delude oneself that the lost loved one is somehow still with them.[316]

For Murdoch, the chapter on void does seem to open the opportunity to discuss how such extreme experiences that threaten morality should be dealt with within her understanding of moral development and transformation. Void and despair need not be

---

[313] Gilligan, "Shame, Guilt, and Violence;" Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*; Waller, *Becoming Evil*.

[314] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 4-5.

[315] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 502.

[316] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 502.

the final word, although Murdoch also wants to make sure that the reader understands

that such experience is serious and so can seriously undermine a responsible path through

desolation. Even so, Murdoch mentions a number of ways that one can ameliorate void.

Interestingly, at the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, we see a shift in Murdoch's

emphasis from Eros and virtue to duty, which readers of *The Sovereignty of Good* may

have thought Murdoch opposed. We saw, however, in her moral subjectivity that duty is a

central modality of moral being, and she affirms this by saying a turn to duty and

obligation may be a way to continue acting under despondency when one's motivation

and desires have flagged.[317] Forgetting the experience of such pain can also be a solution

and a mercy, where time is the healer. Religious belief or its "secular equivalent" can also

be a way out, as well as "the support of friends, the ability to make restitution, or to start

a new life elsewhere..."[318]

It seems, though, that Murdoch uses void, again, to reaffirm her central ethic,

absorbing its most serious challenge as a case against which she can apply once more her

---

[317] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 500. Duty, however, seems to fall outside of Murdoch's moral phenomenology of vision. It seems to be part of her larger philosophy but as an incommensurable part along with vision, as it is not part of *Eros*, which Murdoch says is the focus of her metaphysics (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 497) Morality as essentially duty and will is a claim that Murdoch is at pains to push back against, where there is a danger in modern moral philosophy to see morality as synonymous with duty. In *Metaphyiscs as a Guide to Morals*, then, where Murdoch acknowledges the importance of duty, she also wants to make sure that it does not colonize all other aspects of moral subjectivity. Murdoch writes, "The demand that we should be virtuous or try to become good is something that goes beyond explicit calls of duty. One can of course extend the idea of duty into the area of generalized goodness (virtuous living) by making it a duty always to have pure thoughts and good motives. For reasons I have suggested I would rather the concept of duty nearer to its ordinary sense as something fairly strict, recognizable, intermittent, so that we can say that there may be time off from the call of duty, but no time off from the demand of good." (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 482) In this way, I see it as related to vision - Murdoch does say that principles can help in the education of attention and the creation of moral habits - but Murdoch still seems to want to keep it distinct from her discussion of vision. (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 482, 494)

[318] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 503. We can see here an example of using one modality to sharpen the tension within one's subjectivity when another, the Erotic, has flagged. Duty can create more tension that lifts one from a free fall to void.

understanding of responsibility. While not being totalizing and exclusive in her claims, Murdoch still emphasizes the importance of a loving attention that moves toward the most accurate evaluation of other lives and toward the *Good*, itself. It is, at its base, a continuation of her phenomenology that calls for perception that is generous and charitable, two important virtues for Murdoch's philosophy.

Void, however, is also the base of an account of violence for Murdoch. Specifically, cycles of vengeance and violence are wrapped up in the wrong approach to void. Fantasy remains the arch-vice or flaw (or at least is the result of an arch-vice we might call self-indulgence that favors an egocentric worldview). Discussing void and Weil's notion of affliction, Murdoch writes, "We must experience the reality of pain, and not fill the void with fantasy. The image of balance: the void as the anguished experience of lack of balance."[319] The imperative against fantasy is that we may be so desperate to regain balance, to recover from humiliation or pain, that we may strike out in violence and anger. This is fantasy, that such visions of "bouncing back" can really restore one. This is why fantasy is eschewed, and instead, she argues with Weil that we need to look such pain squarely in the face and understand it in the context of the good. We tend to ignore the Holy Saturday of our suffering and move too quickly to the resurrection. One can also seek vengeance, even "to hurt innocent people as we have been hurt," in an effort to feel better.[320]

There is for Murdoch, then, an ethic of suffering. The point of such an ethic is not to blame victims of violence for being a part of the continued cycle of violence. It is,

---

[319] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 502-3.

[320] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 502.

instead, a reflection on the difficulties of the moral life and a warning to those who experience void not to appeal to cheap consolations that can too quickly rationalize vengeance. One must dwell with what has happened, seemingly because it is real and is actually what happened, and so, the reality must be felt: "Instead of this surrender to natural necessity [fantasy, delusion] we must hold on to what has really happened and not cover it with imagining how we are to unhappen it. Void makes loss a reality. Do not think about righting the balance, but live close to the painful reality and try to relate it to what is good."[321] This is for Murdoch, as Antonaccio and Robjant have both argued, an ascetic practice meant to use the suffering to transform our moral being:[322] "What is needed here, and is so difficult to achieve, is a new orientation of our desires, a re-education of our instinctive feelings."[323]

Not all will be capable of this, however.[324] It is appropriate to call this approach an asceticism, as it is a high call, as Murdoch seems to perceive. She holds out hope, even as she acknowledges the strong pull of cheap consolation, such as pretending that what happened did not or even providing an interpretation that does not honor the pain and stakes involved. Hope is not optimism, and it is not easily earned. It requires "re-education of our instinctive feelings," new desires. A saintly quest, indeed.[325]

---

[321] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 503.

[322] Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By,* 126. As Antonaccio writes, "The general claim of this volume is that Murdoch's philosophy can be seen as a constructive enactment of an ascetic model of philosophizing for contemporary life through a creative appropriation of Platonic spiritual exercises."

[323] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 503.

[324] David Robjant argues this, claiming that Mulhall and Antonaccio see Murdoch's understanding of goodness as having a magnetic pull on everyone. (Robjant, 'How Wretched We are, How Wicked")

[325] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 503.

My understanding, in the end, of what Murdoch does in these final chapters is to anticipate a possible response that appeals to extreme, world-rending, and even personality-destroying experience, a response similar to those critiques of theism, which theodicy tries to answer.[326] In this way, she is thinking through potential reactions to her metaphysics, and although she is open to the reality of experiences that can undermine the moral life, she brings them up in order to account for them within her larger thought. After all, she also emphasizes that such experiences are rare and most of the time we get through them. Murdoch also underlines the many ways we can work through such experience, an emphasis she spend more time detailing than she does in discussing extreme violence and its effects.

I favor this reading. Murdoch has a dim view of basic human nature and most likely also appreciates the difficulties of life for so many. She did, after all, witness the devastating aftermath in World War II Europe in her humanitarian work. This, however, is not what she wants to affirm. She wants to affirm, instead, an understanding both of how we can be good but also how easily it can be to fail to be good.[327] Hers is a double movement, creating yet another fruitful tension at the heart of her thought that reflects the tensile moral subjectivity she creates. Murdoch wants to account for moral challenge and

---

[326] The fact that Murdoch throughout her chapter on void goes back and forth between differing views, the fact that it is not always clear whether she is speaking in her voice or not, and how some of the sentences toward the end break down somewhat, I read as a possible indication that certain experiences are challenging to her framework and are challenging to deal with within a philosophy that wants to affirm a moral development based in everyday experience and sensation. [As Muroch writes in her chapter on void, "It is not easy to discuss such a matter or to take it as a single subject," although she does take it as a single subject, the issues of which we have discussed earlier in this chapter. (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 499)] I also see this as a very positive, worthy aspect of her thought. If we are to see Murdoch not as anti-theoretical but certainly wary of systems, then an inclusion of void to represent experiences that challenge and, at times, overthrow her general philosophy in the experience of individual experiences is in keeping with her general take on how a philosophy should proceed.

[327] Blum, "Visual Metaphors," 322-3.

take it seriously, but in the end, wants to emphasize the ways through such challenges.

After all, Murdoch not only saw the aftermath of war; she also saw reconstruction and a

Europe at peace.

I would, however, push Murdoch on the fact that she still wants to claim that we

pass through most void experiences, that they are short lived and can even be spiritually

efficacious. Indeed, Murdoch does not necessarily universalize this, but she does want to

affirm it. And we can certainly see the truth in this; even after the loss of a loved one,

time distances us from the fresh pain, and we can move on, to an extent. Quoting Paul

Valéry at the very beginning of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* she starts out the work

with the claim that if difficulty is a light, than insurmountable difficulty is an entire

sun.[328] The moral life is structurally difficult, and although she affirms extreme suffering,

she also sees in it the fact that such periods in our lives can spur us on to wisdom.

In a way, then, there may be a nuance in Murdoch's thought between the

mechanics of void and void as experienced. (I do not want to be too absolutist here, and

so, I wade into this discussion holding these concepts lightly.) Murdoch is saying that life

is filled with suffering, even extreme, seemingly insurmountable suffering, but that in

most situations there are ways through. This affirmation is distinct, however, if not fully

separate, from experiences of void that are extreme and that *feel* lethal to one's soul. That

is, from one level void can be looked at within Murdoch's thought as an

acknowledgement of the difficulty of the moral life but as part of a larger project that

does in the end emphasize hope. On another level, that of the person dealing with

---

[328] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, epigraph.

experiences of political violence, this may seem a ludicrous assertion. The loss, the

suffering, may seem too great, even for a long while after the events of violence have

passed.

Murdoch seems to be right that, despite it all, most people seem to push through,

and there is often something to be learned from the bruises life doles out. At the same

time, void can have the final say. Suicide would seem to be evidence of this. There was a

woman, Ferida Osmanovic, who escaped from Srebrenica, the only place to be legally

labelled a site of genocide in Europe since World War II. Srebrenica was a United

Nations "safe zone," where anyone within the city was supposed was under the protection

of the international community. Such protection failed, and units from the Bosnian Serb

faction of the war slaughtered the male population of the city. Her husband was one of

nearly 8,000 men and boys massacred in the city that day. The family had already fled

from their town that had been "cleansed" of Bosnian Muslims, arriving in Srebrenica as

refugees heading the rumors that the soon to be U.N. protected enclave provided safety

from the war.

Ferida's two children, Damir and Fatima, described the last time they saw their

mother, the night after the men of the city were taken away by Bosnian Serb militia:

> That night and for five days after, the air around Srebrenica was filled with
> the screams of men and boys being mutilated, slaughtered, some buried
> alive,others killed and dumped in mass graves; and of women and girls
> being raped. Damir and Fatima recall their mother becoming distraught.
> 'At some point, she started repeating over and over again, "My husband is
> coming, my husband is coming," but perhaps she realized he was never
> coming back,' Damir says. 'Then my mother said, "Stay there." We fell
> asleep and when we woke up the next morning we didn't see Mother
> around. My sister and I went looking for her. For two days we searched
> the camp, calling out her name. But we couldn't find her anywhere.'

Ferida's body was found the next day by another boy. She was wearing a white dress, a red cardigan, and hung dead from a tree in the nearby woods.[329]

Concentration camps were also in use during the conflict on several sides. The experiences within could also strain hope to the breaking point. One example comes from a survivor of one such camp, Dr. Esad Boškailo, who relates his experience to the cowriter of his book, *Wounded I am More Awake*,

> There were many ways to kill yourself in a camp. You could provoke a guard so he shot you. You could inflict physical harm on your own body.
>
> When Boškailo noticed a sudden change in a man in his early forties who had already lost his son and brother in the war, he started watching him more closely. First, the man stopped sleeping. Next, he stopped talking.
>
> Then Boškailo saw the scars. The man was waking up each morning with bite marks on his arms. He was trying to bite himself to death at night.[330]

It is hard for me, someone who has never approached the severity of that experience, to understand such desperation, and I read that passage wondering if there are emotions at play that I have never had to feel and for which I have no name. The example speaks for itself as an example of desperation and despair, but what is also interesting is that it brings together the caveat I want to insist on for Murdoch, as well as her move to hold out hope within experiences of devastation. In the case of Esad Boškailo, who is a doctor, such experiences compelled him to form a group within the camp so that the men could support each other through the horrors. This helped Boškailo survive the camp, and he

---

[329] Ferida's children would not know what happened for another six months, as officials did not know her identity. Martin, Lorna. "Truth behind the Picture That Shocked the World." *The Guardian*. Accessed April 14, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/apr/17/warcrimes.lornamartin.

[330] Lieblich and Boškailo, *Wounded I am More Awake,* 43.

continued his work with trauma survivors after the war had ended, itself a sign of hope coming from such a grim time.

In a post-Holocaust world, it is unwise and uncaring to draw too much meaning from such violence. The above two examples, however, has and will always stand out in my mind as a witness to utter despair. In situations where one has lost everything, grace may be possible. But life is such that it is too much to say that grace will save all from the suffering of the world. There is hope, but it does not always dominate all lives. Such examples carves out a place in my understanding of void where the failure of the intelligibility of moral subjectivity and life itself is possible, even if we continue to hold out hope. I want to affirm, then, Murdoch's project and use of void as a way to affirm hope through an acknowledgement of suffering. For her, the sun continues to shine; we will see it once more. Yet, even as Murdoch holds out hope, the experience of void may be such that one cannot see the sun. And though hope and goodness may yet be in reach of an individual, it may not seem that way. For this reason, it is important not only to acknowledge Murdoch's claim but to recognize as well that there are experiences of void that indicate to the one experiencing it a lack of hope and goodness in the world. One whose subjectivity is dominated by void may not feel *able* to re-orient themselves toward the good, even if we philosophically argue that the ability persists. Such an experience of a morally impaired self is real enough to make one's world, even one's life, unintelligible and desperate. It may be all consuming.

What I am moving toward is a reading of void that privileges more extreme experiences as its main constituents. Although not the whole of void, it is certainly a

significant part, and one that we can privilege in order to analyze experiences of profound political and social upheaval.

It makes sense, then, given the breadth of void and the difficulty and question this raises for the term, to think of it in terms of one of its aspects, that is, of extreme violence and/or suffering. This will allow us to take the challenge that void was created to make - challenging the very possibility of meaning in one's life - while making it more coherent - focused on a narrower range of experiences whose connections can be more readily perceived. This will allow us to understand void in a way that, as we will now see, can help capture the experience of those who have experienced political violence and feel they have lost part of their moral being.[331]

What Murdoch ultimately provides us with is, through balancing goodness and our propensity to egotism, a representation of moral subjectivity that engages these possible realities that we can still use in discussing political violence. Indeed, as such a representation is created in the midst of accounting for how the moral life can fail, it is particularly relevant to our study. And as her representation is created to account for void, she opens up a structure to emphasize experiences of void that can help us better understand the experience of political violence. Void, then, is a critical concept to describe the ways in which one can feel to have lost hope and meaning through the

---

[331] It may indeed be that void is formulated mostly as a rhetorical strategy. It includes a broad range of experiences that could be raised against her philosophy. Banding them together under a single category allows Murdoch to deal with all of them at once. The different experiences included may share similar emotions, and at times, emotional intensities. Yet, this creates an issue for the concept itself. The different institutional settings of many, and the different relationships involved, does raise a problem for the term's coherence. This issue with Murdoch's framing of void is another reason to consider a more selective range of experiences and responses to violence in the following pages. It then becomes an issue of how the concepts we have covered in Murdoch's thought can be utilized to articulate and account for the experience of extreme political violence that Maček and others have documented.

activities of political violence. It gives a word to this experience, one that deals with the

phenomenology of suffering and moral loss, while connecting it to a robust

understanding of the self as a tensile moral subject always in the midst of projects that

influence one's moral development and ability to maintain the intelligibility of the moral

life and the efforts it entails. It helps us describe this experience and to account for how

and why may feel they are no longer able to be "good."

Chapter Six: Moral subjectivity dominated by void

In this chapter I want to sketch ways in which we can use the understanding of void and moral subjectivity I have developed to better articulate and account for the type of loss Maček, Dizdarević, and others have documented. We will look at void as a modality of moral subjectivity that can take over one's moral perception of the world through experiences of political violence. Political violence and related extreme suffering can collapse the tension of engagements with different modalities and moral worlds that persons ordinarily negotiate. Such a modality brought on by violence can undermine one's ability to be oriented toward the good, to take a phrase from Charles Taylor, so that a form of felt moral atrophy sets in. One either no longer sees good as possible or good becomes non-existent in some way. This is an extreme experience and suffering that affects one's moral subjectivity extremely, leaving one haunted by past norms in a world no longer able to accommodate their realization. I will end by returning to the discussion we began previously about the way vision is involved in responsibility and its connection to the vulnerability of moral subjectivity.

Experiencing void

To begin, let us return to Murdoch's representation of moral subjectivity that includes four modalities, particularly void. Maria Antonaccio has argued that this four-fold schema is a summary of the aspects of Murdoch's *Metaphysics*, and we have noted that it corresponds roughly to common approaches in philosophical ethics to deontology, consequentialism, virtue, as well as the challenge to the intelligibility of moral effort

embodied in *void*. We can, however, use this schema as a representation of moral

subjectivity, as I argued in a previous chapter.

The different modalities represent different ways of being moral in the world.

Axiom, for example, represents the political dimension of experience. They also can be

seen to correspond to different communities or thought traditions and ideals to which one

has loyalty or is in some way obligated. Murdoch does not emphasize this, but these

different modalities do imply different communities and traditions. If social justice as a

good or value or moral horizon within one of the modalities is a central way through

which one sees the world, then one is engaged in a tradition of thought and practice

around social justice, and one most likely is part of or sympathetic to certain groups. This

does not mean that one has to show up to meetings or be an organizer. We can think of

community here more in Arthur Kleinman's understanding of *networks* as *local moral*

worlds, as well as part of traditions. The ideals and visions of the human and society

within these communities are internalized and influence the way that one sees political

and social issues. If one goes against an axiomatic principle, one can feel real guilt or

regret at having done so. Such emotions exhibit the ties between one's emotional and

moral life and larger society.

In addition to loyalties, these different modalities also embody specific goods to

be had. But even more, they represent how at times such goods compete. This is

fundamental to the tension that Murdoch finds in these different modalities. We are often

pressed to choose between different goods in different areas of life, as well as loyalties to

different groups or ideals or obligations. Is it political action or family? Is it a feeling of

having contributed to society or love? Is it a new policy or living into the vision of a

responsible family member one can depend on? Is it fulfilling a desire to see the world or

commitment to using your resources in a socially conscious way?

Such goods are not always in competition but the moral life is necessarily one of

tension and, importantly, of keeping this tension. If one were to devote their all to being a

parent and ignore both political issues and their own needs, they could be charged with an

unbalanced life. There are different ways, at least in U.S. cultures, to decry this, including

saying that one's life is "one dimensional," "out of balance," that one's priorities are "out

of order," even that one is boring. It is a form of extreme life where one is devoted only

to one area of existence, thus limiting one's experience and development as a moral

being. Tension, then, as the effort to balance one's obligations to and participation in

different aspects of life and different communities of concern is necessary to

responsibility, in H. Richard Niebuhr's sense of the term: to be able to respond to the

many places of account and obligation, as well as love, in one's world.[332]

However, void, in my rendering, represents not just an extreme imbalance of

moral subjectivity. Void names an experience that raises the troubling possibility that the

effort required to be moral and develop as a good person, one who is responsible to the

many places of account in their moral world, is, in fact, meaningless. It is a threat of the

negation of moral effort and moral development in a meaningful sense. Moments or

situations will arise that will question the worthiness of moral development and the effort

needed to constantly negotiate between different modalities and the communities and

---

[332] Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 202. This would include, according to Niebuhr, the need to expand and search out places of account that one may not know of. Responsibility, then, is not just able to respond but to find those that would should be responsible toward.

goods they embody. For most of us most of the time, we move through and away from such questions, even if some effects may linger. But void is a modality that remains and represents the challenges that being a moral subject engaged with the complexity of the world will place before our commitments, pursuits, our loves and hates.

More profoundly, void is a negation of identity and even personality. Connected to moral subjectivity is identity.[333] Each modality embodies not only goods but also images of the human, including ideal subjects as well as images that are meant to warn or repel.[334] There are associated institutions, behaviors, symbols, images that are contested and embodied. These make up our identity as political creatures, as family members, as dutiful people, etc. They reflect communities to which we belong and whose ideal and monstrous images of the human we live in to or try to define ourselves against.

For example, a central goal for certain belligerent groups during the Bosnian War was to alter the moral and cultural landscape of the country and narrow the scope of one's identities. There was a genocidal ideology present in the competing nationalisms of the war.[335] Each pushed to enforce a dominant and narrow identity based on religion and ethnicity upon the population. The only identities that mattered were ethnic: Croat, Serb, Bosniak (Muslim). And these were understood religiously. To be Croat was to be Catholic, and to be Serb was to be Orthodox.

---

[333] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 28, 36.

[334] This also resonates with Murdoch's notion that we create pictures of ourselves that we then try to become. (Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, 45)

[335] Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed*, 28, 51.

The issue, however, was that this narrow understanding of human subjectivity was not supported by the experience of most individuals. Everyday experience refuted it.[336] The importance an individual in Bosnia-Hercegovina accorded their ethnicity or religious heritage differed by geography.[337] But everyone had multiple identities and loyalties. Depending on the context, we are family members, professionals, friends, neighbors, fans, etc. In other words, we all have a common experience of diversity, or at least, of internal pluralism, as we each embody multiple, often conflicting loyalties, that change day to day, even hour to hour. Such experience can push back, and eventually will, against whatever worldviews or social hermeneutics we might adopt.

These issues are so fundamental to one's selfhood that these multiple identities, loyalties, and commitments humans cannot be negated without violent coercion. In Bosnia, such coercion was enacted at the price of human life, community and any affirmations of the richness and robust, if tragic, possibilities of being alive. The targeted "other" or "out groups" first had to be convinced of their identity as other. There were

---

[336] For example, in his influential essays in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz draws on Max Weber's claim that experience can and will contradict the rationalized systems of meaning that communities create. Rationalization, particularly of religious systems, creates a tension the more systematized and comprehensive a religion becomes. At the heart of his theory of the rationalization of religion is the insight that experience can and will contradict the systems of meaning communities create to answer questions of inequality, deprivation, suffering and domination. (See Weber "The Social Psychology of the World Religions;" *The Sociology of Religion*; *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) Geertz retains Weber's claim that experience can be in tension with the metaphysical and moral claims of religious leaders and doctrines, shifting the emphasis from Weber's focus on religious evolution to an understanding of human beings as those creatures that must search for meaning. As Geertz states in his understanding of the problem of meaning, there is the possibility that every individual will experience moral inadequacy with our belief system, even with the world. (Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30)

Whether or not one accepts Weber's broader claims, I want to affirm this idea that pluralism inevitably challenges the ability of our worldviews to provide an answer for every situation. It creates an aporia or type of moral or cognitive dissonance, which provides an opening that, although not always taken, can challenge our religious and ideological systems. Life, it seems, is too big for any system to comprehend, and the more a system reaches toward comprehensiveness, the more open it is to refutation based on experience, or so Weber argues.

[337] Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way,* 21.

three main ways - elements of which we have seen previously - to enforce identity on the

other and coerce them into abandon their communities and homes:

> Radoslav Brdanin, president of the Crisis Staff of the 'autonomous Serb
> region' of Banja Luka, which included Prijedor, in 1992 proposed 'three
> stages of ridding the area of non-Serbs: 1. creating impossible conditions
> that would have the effect of encouraging them to leave of their own
> accord, involving pressure and terror tactics; 2 deportation and
> banishment; and 3 liquidating those remaining who would not fit into his
> concept for the region…two percent was the upper tolerable limit on the
> presence of all non-Serbs in the region.'[338]

Sociologist Rogers Brubaker corroborates this, stating that the ethnic cleansing and

ethnonationalist rhetoric "…involved the nullification of complex identities by the

terrible categorical simplicity of ascribed nationality. It has involved essentialist,

demonizing characterizations of the national 'other…'"[339]

This strategy served two purposes. The first was to coerce members of an ethnic

"out group" to leave a specific area. The second was to make them suspicious of other

---

[338] Wesselingh and Arnaud, *Raw Memory*, 35-36.

[339] Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 20.

groups and flee to their own.[340] The logic behind this was that, if you were attacked

enough as a member of an ethnic group – for example, a Muslim - you would soon run to

Muslims for protection, even though you originally refused such an identity.[341] The

Croatian writer Slavenak Drakulic described it as being 'overcome by nationhood.' She

wrote that she came against her will to be defined by her nationality alone, confined, as

she put it, in a shirt that cut off her blood and that did not fit.[342]

I include this example as it shows the ways in which political violence can

transform identity as it is connected to one's moral subjectivity. The plurality of identity

reflects the modalities of the tensile moral subjectivity. Persons have different identities,

---

[340] This also served to consolidate Serbian identity in Bosnia, as all groups had to be pressured to assume the religio-ethnic nationalist paradigm. To quote Noel Malcolm, a historian of Bosnia, "The main aims, clearly, were first to terrify the local Muslims into flight, and secondly to radicalize the local Serb population..." (Malcolm, *Bosnia*, 236) In Prijedor, for example, Serbian nationalists faced an uphill battle to persuade the populace of its cause. In the 1990 elections, the Serb nationalist party received only 28 percent of the votes, even though 42 percent of the population identified as Serb. (Wesselingh and Arnaud, *Raw Memory,* 38) Extreme efforts were needed, including violence. Noel Malcolm has identified three methods used across Bosnia for the purpose of mobilizing one's own group on behalf of ethnonationalism. The first was to "radicalize the Serb population with a non-stop bombardment of misinformation and fear-mongering through the media and the local politician. (Malcolm, *Bosnia,* 216-217). Early on in the conflict, rising nationalist leaders took control of media outlets, restricting alternative journalistic sources and feeding propaganda to their people (Wesselingh and Arnaud, *Raw Memory,* 38-39; Besirevic-Regan, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka," 72; Rieff, *Slaughterhouse,* 58). The second was the guerrilla technique of "compromising villages," involving "staging an incident – for example, shooting a carload of Croatian policemen outside a particular village – to invite a crackdown or reprisal, and the distributing arms to the villagers, telling them that the police are planning to attack them. When armed police do arrive, it is easy to spark off a gun battle; and suddenly a whole village, previously uncommitted, is now on the side of the insurgents." And the third was to create "violent incidents and then asking the army to intervene as an impartial arbiter, when it was perfectly clear that the army, with its loyalty to Belgrade and its Serb-dominated officer corps…" (Malcolm, *Bosnia,* 216-217). In-group members were also threatened with retaliation if they helped members of the out group (Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed,* 107). These were tactics that needed to use violence, threats and deceit in order to overcome the social bonds and institutions shared by different groups, even members of one's own ethnic group, who would not necessarily view their ethnicity as a primary identity marker, nor an ethnonationalist worldview as a compelling interpretation of reality.

[341] "Certain dramatic events, in particular, can galvanize group feeling, and ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness. This is why deliberate violence, undertaken as a strategy of provocation, often by a very small number of persons, can sometimes be an exceptionally effective strategy of group-making" (Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, 14).

[342] Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 20. This is corroborated by data from "The Children in Crisis Survey" in Bosnia, which showed that in "ethnically mixed areas of Yugoslavia such as Croatia and Bosnia, religiosity was considered to have 'a certain compensatory and nationally defensive function,' especially when a small segment of one ethnic group found itself surrounded by a 'greater nation.'" (Cohen, "Bosnia's 'Tribal Gods,' 52)

including political, cultural, familial, etc., that reflect modalities of Eros, axiom, etc. But in Bosnia a moral vision of the world was being imposed where some identities and ways of being were approved whereas others were deemed cause enough for violence, where identity was being reduced to one dimension. The coercion targeted different modalities of being a moral subject, forcing one to narrow the commitments and loyalties. I already discussed in the previous chapter how the elements of the local moral world can be damaged or destroyed. Such violence, then, is inherently and irreducibly of central moral import for the individual, in addition to whatever other aspects of life it affects.

The corrosiveness of political violence to moral subjectivity

A subjectivity dominated by void, then, raises doubts about the moral life that, in Murdoch's conception, is nearly synonymous with life itself. It is the place, again, of desolation and despair, where one can lose all interest in what once made them passionate. We can lose our personality so that close friends and family members will remark, "she is not herself." This means that one can lose their identity through moral crisis.[343] They lose their self, their responsibility (as-ability-to-respond) toward those communities, represented in different modalities, that provide identity as political creature, as family member, etc. This is an extreme loss and is caused by extreme experience. It takes experience of sufficient intensity to throw into doubt that which matters to one.

Returning to our previous question, what if one's surroundings and experience become populated with images of horror, of a society that is falling apart where one sees not only the best of people - which happens during crisis - but also the worst? What if

---

[343] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

that comes to dominate one's vision? As Stephen Mulhall reflects on Murdoch's *field of force*, "It is also worth noting that she offers orientation to her reader by means of an image or figure, the idea of a field of force or tension; this not only suggests that the kind of unity she detects in moral experience is highly provisional or limited, but also indicates that images are part of the tissue of her thinking - not an ornament or optional extra but the thing itself."[344] What we see, and the images that we value, are central to the makeup of who we are. And in situations such as war, siege, and political violence, the ideal images of, on the one hand, a human being, but also on the other, images of the human as monstrous, that inform the horizons of one's modalities can become reversed or can be undermined. The good person may not seem a possible ideal to realize in situations in which there is not enough resources to go around. Alternatively, such ideals may still seem possible in one's eye, but the cost may be too high, and so, we may come to see such ideals as a form of cosmic mockery or as a source of scorn directed at our moral inability. Goodness as conceived ideally in a pre-war world can come into conflict, for example, with providing for one's family, for caring for those closest to one's heart.

Such situations can create a tension that is impossible to live with. Does one let their children grow hungry, their wounded spouse go without needed medicine? Or do you steal? Do you even steal from those who are weaker than you, making your transgression of previously held values such as charity, generosity, and responsibility toward the needy, all the more egregious? Do you not tell neighbors where they can find food that week so there is more for you and those you love? Perhaps such theft or lying

---

[344] Mulhall, "Constructing a Hall of Reflection," 221-2.

leads, in part, to someone's death? The joy at feeding a family member may remain authentic, but it does not necessarily ease the pain of living into vice, if we can use that term, that one once thought as anathema, even inconceivable when applied to one's self-regard as an upright individual.

In such situations, it might seem impossible to be good. Violence has changed one's environment and with it the secure, stable conditions that enable one to more easily live in to their moral ideals and virtues. The world is now a place where a good person cannot survive. It may seem impossible to respond to each modality, each community, each person or individual or good in a way that all deserve. Perhaps we begin to think that this is how the world really is and any veneer of civilization or community is now revealed as a fraud. The effort required to be responsible begins to seem meaningless as it is no longer possible to *be* responsible in the way we once believed. We do things that we would never have done, and we begin to wonder who we have become. We begin to wonder if we will ever be able to be the good people we once were, or even people who tried to be good and took morality seriously.

Of course, becoming someone new, someone forged in crisis, can be liberating for some. Learning how to survive, overcoming the odds can be exhilarating, as it can also reveal in one abilities they never thought they had. Newer, more valued subjectivities can arise. For others, however, it can be damning. And even those who feel exhilarated may be ashamed by it after the violence is over. Such situations are endlessly complex and conflicted. One can be as proud of their violations as they can be shameful of their joys.

These experiences can either snap the tension of subjectivity or slacken it so that it is no longer meaningful or possible to try to be good. This can happen in a number of ways. In what we have been discussing, there are at least three different experiences of void we can discern and differentiate in the experience of political violence as seen in such cases as the Bosnian War.[345] These are: a feeling that one is no longer able to be good (that one has lost the ability, though it may exist for others); the feeling that goodness is no longer possible in the world (but might have once been before the violence); and another where the world is revealed as never having been good at all (good is an aberration, if real at all). These are all distinct, although related, responses to extreme political violence. They are related because they all assume that the way one perceived the world and one's self, particularly in terms of morality, is no longer accessible. Something has gone wrong and there is a break in moral ability and the worthwhile nature of effort.

These relations to the good remain distinct, however, and in important ways. If one feels they are no longer able to be good or worthy of goodness, yet others might be, shame will be a strong feeling. One may take the burden of good's demise on themselves. If one believes that good has been eliminated from the world, or their corner of it, great sorrow can result, and there may also be remorse that one's community or people had a hand in it. We can think here of the quote earlier where the individual regrets the fact that his people have become thieves. One can feel that they have betrayed something important in the world. If one feels that violence has revealed a cruel world that has

_____

[345] Again, this does not represent all experiences of war. We are, instead, focusing on a narrower set that come from specific accounts.

always been so, one can feel that they themselves have been betrayed, leading to bitterness and resentment. Guilt, shame, remorse, regret, anger, a sense of betrayal - all of these can color one's vision of the *Good* and raise doubts about its ultimate efficacy or even if goodness is possible.

When this happens, Murdoch's representation of moral subjectivity provides us with an image to visualize the change. The snap or slack means one is no longer living into the different modalities whose negotiation make up a moral life and, to a substantial degree, our personality and identity. Another way to put this is that the modalities of moral subjectivity that comprise the ways we search for and orient ourselves to the good weaken or no longer seem intelligible to us. The gravity of void as constant potential negation remains, however, and we sink toward an experience of meaningless, despair, anger, etc. The extreme suffering and loss of self undermine one's felt ability to move toward the ideals and images and obligations embodied in the other modalities. It is not that we do not feel able to be good; we do not, however, necessarily feel able to try to be good. Doubting that goodness is possible or that it ever existed, we search our local worlds with tools we feel to be useless, trying to find something we doubt exists or that we feel has passed forever beyond our sight. It becomes possible, then, to drop our tools and give up the search. One's moral subjectivity is dominated by void, as the other modalities, as well as being a moral subject capable of goodness, slackens into inertia and inactivity.

If we refer back to Maček's account, we can illustrate these dynamics by interpreting her informant's comments through this understanding of subjectivity. First,

the cherished horizons embodying the good as they understood it became less and less plausible for many. It was harder to move toward those horizons, as the ends they represented - say, being a good spouse or parent, some vocational dream, being a good neighbor, achieving great things - became implausible, or at least strained, in the newer context of war and social upheaval. Survival for many grew quickly in importance. This occurred not merely because of a desire to continue living. In a war where one's people, culture, or both is being eliminated from a certain geography, survival becomes a critical form of resistance to coercion. This is particularly true if there is a great imbalance in terms of arms and power between adversarial groups. To survive, in other words, is to thwart more genocidal agendas. By surviving, one can carry on memories and culture, as well as one's existence, which allows the possibility, in the future, of renewal.

Survival, though, can come at a price. Ends, goods, needs, all embodied in the imagery of these horizons, compete, and as we shall discuss shortly, it is difficult to hold these in tension. Survival, for example, often means putting aside horizons that were a priority in one's previous life, horizons in which one's identity as a moral subject were wrapped. We can think here of the image of oneself as trustworthy, dependable, a good neighbor. This could also include an understanding of oneself in relation to God, where there is need to love others, to see them in the most charitable light, and to care for others as children of God. Putting others first, however, is not always conducive to survival. One may have to steal. One may have to hate and resent those who are firing on their home. Anger, ideas of vengeance, can become motives that fuel the fires of survivor. Killing, manipulating, and violating one's sense of self as a morally good person, or one able to

be good or even worthy of goodness, becomes imperative. As Victor Frankl, a psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor put it, referring to that previous genocide,

> …there was a sort of self-selecting process going on the whole time among all of the prisoners. On the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who, after years of trekking from camp to camp, had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves - *the best of us did not return*."[346] (italics mine)

Vision and vulnerability

One's moral orientation and concomitant ability are harmed through experiences of violence as the experience and the knowledge of one's self or the world that it affords slackens or snaps our orientations and experience of value in the world. Yet, we can say something more about how this works, drawing further on Murdoch's understanding of vision and returning to the brief discussion in a previous chapter on vision and vulnerability in Murdoch's thought. I have focused on Murdoch's understanding of moral subjectivity as it is a relatively understudied area of her work that has potential to describe moral experience. There is not, however, a clear connection between her discussion of the moral modalities and void and her understanding of vision as the central metaphor and activity of moral development and transformation. Murdoch does, however, state that what she has written about in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* mostly concerns Eros, and in that statement we have a way to integrate more fully this representation with the rest of Murdoch's work.[347]

---

[346] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 19.

[347] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 497.

Again, Eros "is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world..."[348] This description encapsulates much of Murdoch's discussion of the moral life, including attention as a central moral practice and metaphor, as well as the energy - the impetus - necessary for the moral effort needed to develop as as a good person. Murdoch emphasizes the need for *duty* and a place for the will to describe aspects of moral experience that Eros and virtue do not capture.[349] Likewise, she includes *axiom* to make sure that the political aspects of life, particularly as she had lived during a great period of conflict between political ideologies, are represented in our experience, as they too can become elided in more deontological and aretological descriptions of the human. This representation of moral subjectivity at the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, then, is a sort of summary, as Antonaccio claims, in that Murdoch reveals where the different conversations and concepts she had been developing fit within actual experience, which is the central background against which she philosophizes.

Murdoch's discussion of attention, as well as imagination and metaphor, then, are relevant for a specific aspect of the moral life, even if the erotic is, as she says, most of what we think of when we think of morality.[350] Within this discussion, Murdoch had, as we mentioned, an understanding of moral development that involved centrally an

---

[348] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 496.

[349] This inclusion of duty, found in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, is largely missing in *The Sovereignty of Good*, most likely as Murdoch's emphases in the later were to push back against philosophies she saw as dominant at that time that emphasized such terms.

[350] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 497.

understanding of moral perception, where such development consists in cultivating the ability to see the world more and more accurately. There is, in this, a notion that there is something more accurate, which brings up the possibility that Murdoch is proposing a reality, perhaps a metaphysical plane called *the Good*, that we perceive and represent through our perception. Such a reading, however, is not necessary. As some interpreters have argued, her conception of metaphysics is much more modest.[351] *Real* is a moving target that describes vision that is less and less self-referential, self-centered, and that is more accountable to the lived reality of others, their experience, and the material and spiritual conditions of their lives. Our vision is more *accurate*, in other words, the more we approach a perspective on the world where we are de-centered, as this reflects some fundamental truths in the world. We accomplish this, in part, by focusing charitably - lovingly, Murdoch writes - on others. This brings us away from a world where we are at center and converts us to a more and more accurate world of countless subjects with no real center. This also means that we are always developing a worldview that Murdoch is comparing to a constantly receding horizons of goodness. It may be more accurate to say a constantly shifting horizon, as our ability to see is changing with experience and effort, as well as one that is never quite accessible. We are, in other words, never fully able to perceive a world where we are totally de-centered.

What this means for the present inquiry comes into view when we remember that any such sight is neither permanent nor perfect. During war, the horizon of one's moral vision may transform quickly and enduringly to see one's own loved one's or group much

---

[351] See especially, Broackes, "Introduction."

more favorably, and others, such as strangers, uncharitably. The circle of care may narrow

and close, and although one may be very generous and good within that circle, one may

be vicious to those without. This is a fundamental transformation both in moral

subjectivity and of one's local moral worlds, as the constituents of the local changes,

narrows, becomes less generous. The transformations go hand in hand, limiting the value

one accords others as one limits one's network and community. We can lose our previous

perspective, then, and begin to feel that too charitable a vision of others comes with risk.

Loving attention, in this understanding, must be practiced sparingly. A moral

phenomenology of mistrust may be felt to be needed. And one's worldview and ethos will

provide an epistemological, maybe even ontological, ground and rationale for valuing

one's own group and disparaging another.

During war, this may actually be a correct understanding of what is happening

and what the risks are of trying to live into a more ideal, more expansive understanding

of goodness. What it means, however, is that one's worldview will change through

violence, and according to Murdoch, this means that one's subjectivity will also change.

As one's subjectivity changes, so does one's identity and how one perceives of herself

and others. Love broadly hurled can become dangerous and may be replaced,

understandably, by attention that is more the gaze of the predator, or at least the wary,

than that of the charitable.

This is not Murdoch's own understanding, yet political violence, with which she

does not directly contend, I argue, has this interpretive effect and requires further

extension of her thought. The fact that one can come to feel less generous and may come

to feel vicious toward others is a reflection of the way in which one's surroundings have constrained choices and made certain options or subjectivities very costly or near impossible. Virtue ethicist Rosalind Hursthouse writes that *eudaimonia* may not be possible until better days come.[352] Yet, the situation may be even more extreme than this. As philosopher Lisa Tessman argues, environments of oppression can create selves with different virtues aimed at goals that differ from those people and groups who are not living under domination. Such subjectivities and the *burdened virtues* they include will be enduring, if not permanent.

In the case of more explicit violence, while we wait for better days in which *eudaimonia* may be accessible, we change in order to get through the present violence. Subjectivities are not a light switch, however. As Veena Das argues, our former worlds haunt us in the form of impossible values and ideals. One can go through violence, transforming their moral subjectivity to work toward survival of themselves and a more circumscribed group. This moral subjectivity will continue into a new, post-war, post-conflict world. The impression or echo of that subjectivity developed to survive violence will bear the imprint, habits, and virtues of that time into the new world. One will continue to change, but the specter of past experience, and its influence on one's soul, will remain to some degree.

One's ends, that is, one's *telos* and moral horizons, change. This change raises the question of whether the *Good* itself changes. From the point of view of the individual's experience, it can transform, become insurmountably distant, or disappear. Survival, as

---

[352] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 177.

we have already discussed, can take the place of other ends, and so, will require different virtues, different ways of being a moral subject. In addition, one's moral vision will also change. For example, the experience of violence and the new landscape that violence creates will change the way one sees. If we take seriously, as Murdoch does, that cognition is based in imagination and metaphor, and if we see metaphor as relating two separate objects or ideas to create something new, we must take seriously that during times of violence, the objects used to make such metaphors will change, and the contents of the metaphor may create thoughts and worldviews based in images and experiences of sorrow, betrayal, disappointment, and loss.[353] This can change the way one sees the world, just as it changes the experience of tension in the moral life, leading one to despair of living into certain cherished images and norms, just as they are no longer to see the world as they once did.

This is a transformation of the aspects of subjectivity and of identity, a transformation of one's self, and yet parts of the old self live on. As Veena Das has insightfully written, one may find themselves in a new world and new circumstances, yet they will still remember past norms. Individuals, institutions, and communities may still hold one to those norms, even if the elements that made their realization and pursuit possible have vanished in violence There is a spectrality in the moral life then, where who one was haunts who one has come to be. This is one of the ironies of pursuing the good, one of the side effects of being a subject who reaches toward the *Good*: being good

---

[353] "The development of consciousness in human beings is inseparably connected with the use of metaphor. Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision." (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 75)

means one is more susceptible - more vulnerable - to situations where one is unable to

live into past morality. One holds oneself accountable, even if one no longer has power to

follow past moralities. The past haunts the present, one evaluates their present self based

on the past, and this can lead one to feel even more that they are far from being good, and

even, that the road back to orienting oneself toward good is too far, to inaccessible, or too

deeply buried in the dust. The structural vulnerabilities of the moral life I discussed

earlier are the source for a continued, possibly toxic, responsibility.[354]

What I have presented is a sketch of an understanding of moral subjectivity

interpreted through Murdoch's thought and understanding of virtue. The moral-

philosophical anthropology she creates allows us to show what it is about one's

subjectivity that changes during violence, as well as provide an account that, if brief,

allows us to discuss how those changes come about. Political violence can undermine the

ability or virtue to want to move toward the good. One becomes literally disoriented as

one's local moral world collapses and as one's moral subjectivity is called into question,

as the elements that condition one's teleological drive to orient oneself toward the good is

challenged or weakened. Such lived teleology allows us to create relationships and

community by pushing us to strive toward living into images of the human, and away

from others, so that one can have the virtues, especially social virtues, that are the keys to

others' acceptance and even embrace of us. Trustworthiness, courage, generosity, as well

as other virtues, are valued in friends, lovers, co-workers, compatriots, and we reach

---

[354] Philosopher Nancy Sherman has discussed something similar, arguing that soldiers experiencing moral injury will feel responsible for violent actions they were a part of. This claim of personal responsibility is laudable, particularly if outsiders might argue that the individual solider did not really have power over the situation in question. At the same time, Sherman argues that one's insistence on being responsible can become toxic, if one assumes they had more power to change a situation than they actually did. What was laudable, then, can become dysfunctional. (Sherman, "Recovering Lost Goodness")

toward those virtues and the images of the human they are a part of not just because this allows for the survival of a social animal but, also, it allows for community itself and for a life that is meaningful, one where one might flourish. All of this happens through the metaphoric nature of thought, through the structure of vision and perception, and the ways we change as the world changes around us.

Such abilities and the foundation of enabling communities may, then, be more vulnerable than they seem, as the tension that characterizes moral subjectivity can collapse from extreme violence and suffering. This means that Simone Weil's claim that "all sins are attempts to fill voids" is the inverse of what I have described here. For Weil, spaces of spiritual void in the end affirm through their absence God's inevitable presence. Voids in our examples are not filled by sins. The necessity to act against one's moral values and against the visions of the human one hopes to embody creates, if not the possibility of void, then a moral subjectivity dominated by void. One can experience this as sin, but it is in reaction to the radical transformation of one's local moral worlds, one's relationships and values, and the routines and structures that make up our existence and its context. Such elements we take for granted, and when they are revealed through violence, they are simultaneously damaged or eliminated through the same violence. One's world can collapse.

In such situations, there may be no good choices even as one must act within situations where the stakes are high, where loved one's lives are at stake, where one feels that the outcomes of one's actions will affect their soul. If the new world that arises, one of violence and devastation, constantly admits of no good choices, the effort to be good

can feel futile. One's moral abilities will have seemed to disappear. Murdoch's hoped for

ideal - where we become such perfect moral perceivers that choice is not necessary -

meets its inverse in extreme violence, where there are too many choices. In periods of

extreme violence, the possibility of one right choice recedes and is negated.[355] There is

collapse, and flatness, and we can no longer turn toward the sun or are no longer sure

whether the shadows we see are cast by a sunrise or a burning world behind us.

---

[355] This is not an argument for MacIntyre's critique of modernity as fracturing and morally unintelligible grounded in an understanding of *tradition*. Instead, it is an argument about how political violence can make for extreme situations where no good options exist. Such conditions can exist in any period and within any tradition. In addition, Weil is important in this discussion, as Murdoch seems to cite Weil as the source of her idea that perfected moral vision will eliminate choice and would result in necessity of specific actions. (Murdoch, "Knowing the Void," 159)

Chapter Seven: The Untapped Potential of Virtue

This work began with research into the intersection of religion, violence, and ethics. Central to its development was Ivana Maček's highlighting of the moral loss that occurred during the war in Bosnia, an emphasis that has not received sufficient reflection in studies of political violence. Her framing of survival as one "only by means they would previously have rejected as immoral" brought out for me some of the very profound stakes involved in living in periods or contexts of violence. As I broadened my research, I was curious as a religious and social ethicist by the lack of vocabulary to describe adequately such experiences. There seems an inability, even when intentionally probing the moral dimensions of violence, to put the experience of moral transformation at the heart of our inquiries. This may seem too harsh a critique. There are, after all, many authors looking at the various forms of violence and how they affect subjectivity. Even with the existence of such work, the person as one for whom life is a morally significant whole never seems to receive a level of attention that reflects the degree to which individuals, even in different cultures, understand their lives in terms of a search for goodness, or at least, significance.[356]

My contention throughout this work has been that something is missing in the ways we approach political violence and that resources in the humanities, particularly in philosophy and ethics broadly conceived, can help address this. I turned specifically to philosophical anthropologies grounded in discourses of virtue for several reasons already

---

[356] This will certainly vary in considerable ways among different cultures, and there are ways to handle my assertion that elide experience instead of bring it to light. One's understanding of their self as related to others, whether their community or to broader domains, will also differ greatly. I err on affirming this understanding of moral life, however, because of the way that persons in different cultures have been seen in the humanities and social sciences not as mature or fully moral humans.

mentioned. But a key reason was grounded in my sense that what we miss in our discussions of violence was the way conflict affects moral development.

Virtue discourse has been used throughout the centuries for various purposes, but central to most, if not all, is that such discourse is used to give an account of how humans frame the meaning of life and action and to give guidance as to the best ways to live such lives amongst others. Often, though not always, virtue is employed against a background of violence, power, vulnerability, and chance. It is often, then, not an idealistic take on human nature, although ideals are used. Instead, many philosophers and ethicists using virtue as a central aspect of their thought attempt to give an account of how one can flourish as part of a larger community despite the challenges to human meaning and happiness.

It is too easy to subsume moral experience within issues of economics, politics, history, ethnicity, or any other category. It is too easy to elide moral experience in discussions of social dynamics, even when the purpose of one's study is to discuss the moral dimension of local social dynamics. And it is too easy to treat moral experience as epiphenomenal and reduce it to biological, cognitive, or physiological substrates. What is needed are ways to frame the discussion that tend toward understandings of individuals as first and foremost moral subjects whose negotiation through existence is morally significant, both to them but also to their communities and networks. Morally significant, yet also we are moral subjects whose very subjectivity is one of change, and so we need ways to articulate and account for the experience of being morally transformed. We need

ways to make such transformation and this significance central not only to our research but to the assumptions that make up the methodologies that shape that research.

I have argued, then, for a broad frame I have called *moral subjectivity* to give a focus and foundation for a virtue understanding of the self. This conception of moral subjectivity includes certain characteristics, such as worldview, ethos, practices, etc. What is most important, however, is that framing experience in terms of moral subjectivity opens one's research to engagement with moral vocabularies and theories. It is a frame that emphasizes the conditioned nature of the human self. Institutions, structures, cultural narratives, symbols - all of these help give rise to the phenomenon called *the self*. Grounded in a basic social theory, a frame of moral subjectivity is open to moral theories and theories of moral development and moral phenomenology. This creates a frame that accounts for the imbedded sociality of subjectivity but also helps articulate the experience of being such an embedded, embodied subject. We are able, then, to see how changes to local institutions during the Bosnian War, for example, shaped one's felt ability to be a "good" person, while also being able to account for what aspects of one's subjectivity were transformed and articulate how that was experienced using morally laden terminology.

This is a too cursory sketch of the way virtue discourse is employed, yet it gestures toward the importance of such an approach when discussing the ways that persons feel transformed through violence. In the pages remaining, I want to reaffirm certain points made in the previous pages, and also begin to suggest consequences to this approach, as well as ways forward from this present discussion. The hope, as it has been

throughout, is to create approaches to questions of human life and value that foster

interdisciplinarity that is not just a borrowing of one field by another but brings

disciplines and their members together in creative, fruitful engagement.

Political violence, moral violence

Throughout these pages, then, I have focused on the level of experience. I

privilege this level not because others are negligible. I do so, instead, because moral

subjectivity does not receive enough attention in discussions of political violence, and it

is all too easy to bypass this level, particularly in certain psychological and scientific

discourses, and focus on the material bases of experience. This leads to a reduction that is

helpful in some studies but is not helpful absolutely. How one experiences political

violence is part of the foundation of how communities and societies move forward into

the future. Individual moral experience is not sufficient in understanding these dynamics,

but it is necessary. Without it, we risk affirming understandings based on methodologies

not sufficient to the task.

Indeed, I do not think it is possible to understand the stakes involved in political

violence, nor the dynamics and moves made in such conflicts, without understanding

human beings and communities as continuously engaged in the development of moral

selves who see themselves, others, and the world in certain ways, while rejecting others.

We are involved in these projects, if you will, continuously throughout the day and

throughout our lives. This does not mean we are all fully reflective moral philosophers. It

does mean, however, that our daily interactions have moral significance both in the

moment and aggregated over time. We change as moral beings without knowing it, and can, looking back at our lives, surprise ourselves to see how we have changed.

Political violence can increase and exacerbate this process. Instead of looking back over the years, one can look past and see a radically different person, as well as a radically different world. They can also listen to the radio or other media and look over the border to see how others still pursue the moral ideals and dreams and images of the human that they had taken for granted only a day, a week, a month, or a year ago. Opportunities for comparison will abound, and one can come to feel torn from the moral path and context they have lived in not so long ago. As I argued, however, these values and images that make up the moral horizons to which we attend do not so readily pass away.[357] They can seem like specters that haunt our present, judging us for our failure to be able to attend to them, even if one's context has so changed that it seems impossible to do so. New teleologies emphasizing survival, even cultural survival, may insist we attend to them. And even if we do so, we retain the vision of horizons that are no longer possible, and maybe pursue new horizons that, although important, seem in comparison less worthy to be called the *Good*.

The issue here is not whether the *Good* itself changes. Instead, I argue that, most certainly, one can experience the *Good* as malleable, or at least, one can find that one's subjectivity has changed so as to become disoriented and unable to move toward the *Good*. Or, the *Good* can come to seem to have been an illusion, a fraud. Murdoch would no doubt argue that, nevertheless, the *Good* remains throughout such times of

---

[357] cf. Das, *Life and Words*, passim.

disorientation, and even during times of despair or near despair. This insistence within her thought is a virtue.

Even though I admire this aspect of Murdoch's thought, the devastation that human beings can inflict upon one another will insist on having conclusions of its own. The extreme severity of suffering that sometimes defies both meaning and hope is not something that can be responsibly argued away. For some, and in some situations, the *Good* will never shine brightly enough to call one from the shadows. There is a point at which theodicy must fall silent and hang its head. Grace in the form of unexpected capacities that emerge seemingly without having been earned may break through formerly unsurpassable obstacles, and we err when we too readily bound the resilience of human selves and communities. Yet we also err if we do not make room for despair's insistence, and to recognize that sometimes despair has the final word. Not just grace and gravity, but grace and utter void are both potentials in human life. When we do not take account of these aspects, our images of the self and society become inhuman, and so, inhumane in that we limit our ability to recognize the reality of one's existence.

Political violence, then, is moral violence, and we miss something when we do not attend to the ways in which such conflict transforms one's sense of self and the way we see the world. Murdoch is insightful here, as she calls attention to the way that vision is inherently evaluative. She does not mean this just metaphorically. Moral judgement exists in the organs of the eyes as much as in the lobes of the brain. If we take a moment to pay attention to the way we engage the world through vision, we are constantly evaluating and categorizing what we see and dealing with the feelings and thoughts that

arise from our perception. This is even more true in situations of existential risk, such as political violence, as what one sees is constantly changing, and where one even begins to see loved ones in a new light.

Studies on political violence, then, deal with moral issues, whether this is recognized or not. And to an extent, there would probably be few who would reject this claim categorically. As Andrew Sayer and others have observed, however, there has been a tendency to marginalize such issues. There are many reasons for the reluctance of some in social scientific disciplines to resist discussion of morality or *the moral*. Often, in my experience, this comes from a distrust of unknown agendas, particularly religious agendas, feared to be hidden under the umbrella of the moral. This is not without reason. At least in the United States, there is an ongoing debate, sometimes referred to as *culture wars*, over the nature of knowledge and authority. The voices associated with religious authority are, again, sadly and too often made synonymous with discussions of morality, tainting ethics through such perceived relationships. Such suspicions, however, extend into the histories of such disciplines, conceived as they were in opposition to the domination of philosophy and theology in the academy even into the nineteenth century.

What I mean by moral, however, is more specific than saying war is terrible, is a necessary evil, or is wrong. My intent is to reaffirm the testimony of others who call our attention to a more specific, even more profound understanding of the moral dimension of violence. Violence shapes who we are as moral subjects, and as Charles Taylor argues, that one's identity (I would say *identities*) are grounded in the sense of ourselves as moral subjects, violence shapes who we are in a robust and thorough sense. What we like, what

we don't, whom we trust, and whom we don't, are transformed in situations of violence that I have already presented. Even more, the way we see the world, what we consider to be good, and our ability to respond to others is profoundly shaped by violence. As human subjectivity is deeply conditioned by social structure, institutions, and cultural narratives, the transformations of such conditions through violence, as I described in reference to the Bosnian War, the characteristics that make up what we consider to be our selves are also transformed.

When survivors claim they can no longer be good they are testifying to these facts. Recognizing alternative ways of being in the world, they find themselves no longer able to inhabit them. Feeling that loss, they despair of whom they have become. That despair is a witness to a transformed moral subjectivity. It is a recognition of profound change to one's self and to one's community, though not a loss of memory. The loss is real, as is the emotional reaction, all grounded in the reality of a larger social and political upheaval.

The moral dimension of violence, then, refers to aspects of our lives that we consider essential to who we are. It is not just a loss of moral judgement or of action but the ability to orient oneself toward images of the human, the world, society, etc., that give life meaning and make life worth living. It is a *spiritual* loss, then, in Charles Taylor's meaning of spirituality concerning what makes a life meaningful. Understanding discussions of the moral in this way, then, one can better see how important it is to reflect this understanding in our research, as well as include images of the human and society that can better reflect this understanding.

The moral heart of methodology

Even more, we need images of the human and the world where the worlds we inhabit (local worlds, virtual worlds created in media, our concepts of nature or lack there of, etc.) and envision are seen as domains of signification. Not only people but objects mean something, although such meaning changes and is contested. For many decades, analytic philosophers argued for a value-fact distinction, something against which the newer virtue ethics of the twentieth-century argued against. Regardless of whether such a distinction is correct in terms of formal logic, this is not how human beings move through the world. Clifford Geertz, himself an anthropologist with his own virtue theory of culture and religion, also argued that humans and cultures saw an intimate relationship between *fact* and *value*, where modern philosophy was at odds with everyday experience.[358] There may be good reasons for making such a distinction, but holding to it in the social sciences will obscure rather than illuminate human action. Saying that there is no fact-value distinction is another way of saying that the world is a place of significance, a significance created through interaction of a moral subject with their surroundings. It is another way of saying that everyday human life is not morally neutral. It is morally saturated in experience and transforms us to various degrees as we move through time, space, and intersubjective relationality.

Murdoch, and possibly other thinkers engaging virtue discourse and philosophical anthropologies and metaphysic grounded in virtue, provides a way to describe this view of being a human being. It is a view, as I argued before, that is not only local, as

---

[358] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 141.

Kleinman argued, but eye-level. Murdoch brings us down to the individual senses and stress what the human senses. This is not the researchers abstracted view looking down on society, but a view from the ground, so to speak. At least, that is its potential. Murdoch conceives of an image of the human as a moral subject for whom something as basic as sight (or sensation and perception more generally) is shot through with significance. What and especially how one sees matters morally to a great and profoundly fundamental degree.

When applied to political violence, such an image of the human draws one's analysis to the eye level and emphasizes what happens at that level of interaction. What does one see? How are the conditions of moral perception affected? And Murdoch grounds this further in an understanding of the *Good* to underscore how our imagination and perception are engaging not just with the moral fictions of our minds but engaging in something we understand to be real. Murdoch does not offer a great deal of detail about what this *Good* consists of. That is not necessary, at least not for the purposes of this project. What is important is to emphasize that when engaging those who say they can no longer be good, we examine this as a real claim about a real experiential disorientation. The experience of not being able to be good is not a fantasy. Instead, it is a reaction to very real experience and changes in conditions that enable moral subjectivity. Whether one in the end adopts a high understanding of the *Good* as a metaphysical domain, or sees the *Good* through a low understanding as an affirmation of the way that humans understand themselves and their lives through engagement with others and the world,

positing the *Good* is a move to affirm the moral life as real and not as merely epiphenomenal to the reality of the economy, the state, society, etc.

The image of the subject presented here is one that stresses moral development, perception, vulnerability, and complexity. It is a tensile moral subject constantly aimed like a bow, at once pulled forward to horizons and yet part of it pulled back and inhabiting the past. This tension is needed because such tension is an acknowledgement of the complexity of intersubjectivity. Even in small communities, existence as a moral subject is complex. No one goal or loyalty or obligation can consummate one's moral being. To be a moral subject is to negotiate and balance different places of account. Moral development occurs as one learns about oneself and others through the attention to the many points of subjective tension. Such action does not necessarily end in wisdom, yet it is the only way wisdom can be pursued.

Methodologies, however, can obscure this dimension. Current approaches, I have argued, are not sufficient to engage the testimony of survivors and what they indicate about what is at stake in social upheaval and even in social change more generally. We saw this argument from Andrew Sayer, and although other anthropologists have also called for moral anthropologies or anthropologies of morality and ethics, there has not been enough engagement of anthropologists with ethicists and humanists to make the radical alterations to their discipline that they aspire toward. It remains a conversation *within* anthropology, however. It is not enough to adopt concepts from another field. The outlook embodied in a field's members offers its own insights. An anthropology of ethics,

then, must be a dialogue and interdisciplinary engagement. Otherwise, its limits will be met too quickly.

This brings me back to the importance of such work for the social sciences. Social science disciplines have a great deal of power in shaping our understanding of human life and experience. When its methods leave out central aspects of that experience, it can end up truncating the human. Although not often spoken of in this way in such discourses, we need better images of the human in our studies. Individuals move toward and away from certain images. We think about the world in terms of how we see ourselves and others. One only need to pick a social issue and examine the images used to press one side of a debate, as well as the images that are uncritically assumed, to understand how insightful Murdoch's emphasis on vision is for human life. When Andrew Sayer argues that we need to account for social life as involving concern, he is arguing for a new image of the human to orient the ways social science analyzes social existence and change. No image will ever be complete, but there are better and worse images of the human, just as Murdoch argues there are better and worse ways of seeing the world.

This is, then, a methodological issue. The word *methodological* can seem clinical and stale. It can even infer a level of objectivity - again, the clinical - or a more removed position in relationship to the object to be analyzed, a removed gaze to observe what is separate from oneself. Methodology, however, is not just a set of concepts but a deeply human practice. Nor is it only an attempt at optimizing scientific accuracy. We all engage throughout our day in presupposed methodologies enabling us to interpret or engage the everyday. In an academic context, this process is more reflexive and formalized, but it

still contains a ubiquitous human practice in which we situate ourselves and through which we understand our lives. It is then an aspect of research wherein responsibility is centrally relevant. To take from H. Richard Niebuhr, again, methodologies are the assumed practices, perception, and the images informing them from which we attend to certain aspects of the world. Indeed, methodologies arise from a response to the world, as some issue or experience spurs us to respond to it in an academic mode. How we respond, and what frames we use in that response, will shape the conclusions we come to about society and individuals (in other words, our neighbors and communities). As virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre has written, "where one begins generally makes a difference to the outcome of one's inquiry."[359]

The human sciences cannot be intelligible without rich accounts of the human that prioritize moral development and approach social life as moral life. This does not mean that anthropological or sociological inquiries need to take firm prescriptive stances, nor does it mean that the methods of such inquiries need to be based on a form of moral or moralizing authority. Instead, for research to make primary the moral dimension of social life will better reflect the ways in which individuals and communities understand and practice their own lives. Indeed, such a stance reflects the way that researchers view their own life when away from their professional work.

More social scientists are beginning to understand the moral stakes involved in their work and the moral stakes involved in the life projects of their informants. There seems to be an opening, then, for constructive exchange between fields and traditions.

---

[359] MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 4.

And those disciplines, such as virtue ethics, that have already been reflecting on the moral life for centuries are a ready resource with which to be in dialogue.

I use *dialogue* intentionally, as this should not be a piecemeal engagement. One will only get so far selecting terms and theories from ethical and philosophical treatises. Such approaches access just a part of a discipline's potential. The rest lives with the scholars themselves and the culture and shared work within such disciplines. I do not mean to be romantic here, but instead, I am urging interdisciplinarity not just between a researcher and the works of another discipline but between researchers as true dialogue. Restricting our interdisciplinary forays to the library threatens appropriation of another's discipline. Dialogue can help us all deepen our engagement and make the consequent methodologies we develop that much more sophisticated.

Significance beyond academia

If our methods, however, do not include images of the human and of society that include moral development and effort, if they do not include the moral dimension of experience and social interaction, our methodologies, and so our inquiries, will not be fully responsive and will not be fully responsible, as we will have failed to reflect a key - I would argue, *the* key - aspect of experience.

Much of this work has been theoretical, indeed methodological, engaging works within the academy. A central goal from the start of this work has been to create better ways to speak about and imagine the human so that we can better imagine practical interventions. The ways that international organizations, governments, and inter-governmental organizations engage conflict and conflict transformation pay little

attention to the moral development of those such conflicts have affected. This is understandable, as the aftermath of violent events is difficult enough to deal with on the state level without having states engage in issues of the moral self. And yet, the way that political violence affects the moral architecture and horizons of individuals is highly relevant. These are the individuals who constitute the nations that are being rebuilt. If their ability to imagine new social futures, to imagine new moral horizons that can transcend past traumas, to relate to themselves and others has been damaged or constricted, then there is a fundamental impediment to post-conflict peacebuilding. The specter of past experience, the specter not only of violence but of a feeling of having failed one's former moral ideals and world, live on in the present and affect the prospects of the future. The very fabric, both material and imaginal, of the local moral worlds and moral intersubjectivities that give rise to what we think of as *social*, are harmed through political violence. As Kleinman shows, any other levels, such as the national and geopolitical, on which so much peacebuilding depends, are themselves conditioned by the local, where value and identity are contested and maintained.

This work, then, is an argument for the importance of moral development and integrity for the work of nations, particularly work in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Its conclusions point to the importance of grassroots efforts and networks in peacebuilding. Such groups have the capacity to operate on the local level, which is necessary to address the harm to one's moral subjectivity brought on by political violence. This is the work of relationships, of restorative justice, and of detailed, labor

intensive, hands on engagement necessary to restore the fabric both of local moral worlds and one's own soul.

It is no surprise to me that some of the most effective groups in this regard are religious, such as the Mennonite Central Committee, Roman Catholic networks and organizations, among others. Moral subjectivity, as I argued at the beginning, is the frame in which one's worldview and ethos are created, where one develops as a mature moral subject, all created through social practices. There is a repertoire among such religious groups that include symbols, rituals, and pastoral practices (if I can generalize the Christian *pastoral*) that focus on the individual, as well as the individual as embedded in the communal. The power and potential in these practices and imaginaries we can conceive of as the stuff from which new fabric can be made and wherein it can be rewoven. These resources have the potential of making a generative relational space in which intersubjective restoration, or at least renewal or rejuvenation, can occur.

This is another reason why interdisciplinary engagement is so important. The language of such levels and experiences have been developed most richly in theological and moral-philosophical discourses. Virtue is shared by both and is represented in diverse traditions in both. There is understandable hesitation in engaging these traditions, even when, like some understandings of virtue, there is no inherent religious affiliation required of its application. And yet, these traditions and discourses have the most richly developed conceptions of the moral self and development. As an ethicist, I am indebted to social scientific research for opening up new perspectives on issues of moral import. Yet, as an ethicist, I also see the potential of moral languages and conceptions of the human

that could enrich the research of such disciplines. Not only concepts but the perspectives

of individuals developed as embodied practitioners of their fields are reservoirs that have

yet to be fully tapped. A truly human engagement between disciplines could lead to a

more humane approach not only in research and inquiry but also in conflict management

and transformation practice.

Beyond political violence

As important as discussions of political violence is, it is only part of the violence

persons experience everyday. Kleinman discusses the ways that war affects local moral

worlds, but he is also clear that local moral worlds themselves are implicated in their own

forms of structural violence. Philippe Bourgois, for example, identifies four different

types of violence: political violence, structural, symbolic, and everyday, drawing from

thinkers such as Galtung, Bourdieu, and Scheper-Hughes.[360] I have focused only on

explicit political violence that is easily demarcated, such as war. I have done this to

provide focus and to illustrate a need within discussions of political violence. Application

of this approach points beyond, however, to other forms of violence. Although I have

limited my discussion to extreme political violence, the resources I use from Kleinman

and Murdoch and others are resources applicable more broadly to everyday life. If we

join with Kleinman and feminist theory and philosophy in recognizing that social

relations are themselves violent, as structural violence, we can apply the model developed

here to understand the subtle ways that everyday life lives in structurally violent

situations, which include issues of race, gender, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia,

---

[360] Bourgois, "The Continuum of Violence in War and Peace," 5.

class, and others, transform one's moral subjectivity. This includes exploring violence

inherent in our local moral worlds.

These issues are too great to deal with in depth within these remaining pages, so I

gesture toward areas for further work. There are a growing number of studies

investigating the ways in which poverty, for example, affects cognition, including the

mental energy that is available for an average resident of the United States to put toward

planning and imagining futures, compared to that of someone who must work several

jobs, raise a family while single, and worry constantly about the bare necessities of life.

Any such study has to be very careful not to imply that poverty correlates to viciousness

or immorality. A frame that Murdoch brings, however, can help illumine the ways in

which poverty or race as socio-economic structures condition relationships between

members of a society. Her focus on imagination and vision can help frame the ways in

which imagination and what one sees and does not is conditioned. This includes

understandings of the *Good* as they are developed within different socio-economic and

geographic areas. Such frames could help show why some populations have difficulty in

terms of education and wealth creation by showing the severe phenomenological

restraints they are under, whereas other populations are not. It can also help show how

visions of the *Good* held by populations that one might call *privileged* is overly narrow or

even better described as *fantasy*, as they do not acknowledge the reality of how their

opportunity and good fortune is dialectically enabled by the lack of such goods in other

populations. With the vocabulary provided, one may be able to describe the experience -

not of being no good - but of the moral dimension of poverty, race, class, and other domains.

The subject of character

One of the central arguments that has undergirded this work is the malleability of the moral self. This is not, however, a claim that has gone unchallenged, and is one that has a long history in philosophical and psychological discourse. For example, in her *The Fragility of the Good*, Martha Nussbaum described the argument between Socrates/Plato and Aristotle concerning the nature of what we would call character. For Socrates (or at least, the Socrates that Plato presents) and Plato, character is more unmalleable. A virtuous person does not lose virtue thus presented. This is an understanding with resonance in modern society, at least in the United States. It is alive in certain psychological traditions, as well as the legal system, where one's past actions are used to evaluate their present honesty and trustworthiness (the assumption being a criminal cannot be trusted, and that once one is so categorized, it says something of the permanent character of the individual.) One can also see this in certain worldviews where character is seen as revealed in situations of crisis, not created. In this understanding, which is still a strong tradition in present culture, people are who they are, formed by various processes, and revealed through certain events and conditions, or even through their way of life.

Aristotle, Nussbaum argues, took his cue not only from Plato but also the tragedians against whom Plato and Socrates were often reacting.[361] In his understanding

---

[361] Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness,* xiii-xiv.

of philosophical anthropology and development, events understood as chance could

change one's ability to flourish, and there is a possibility that extreme misfortune could

transform virtue. (After all, an Athenian aristocrat-turned-slave could not continue to be

magnanimous in Aristotle's conception.) This understanding of *moral luck*, as Bernard

Williams termed it, can be seen as part of the Aristotelian tradition. This strand in

discussions of virtue, then, tries to reflect the experience of tragedy in one's life, making

space where Plato seemingly would like to shut the door on such notions.

The consequences of the testimony I have included in this work, however, point to

transformation that is even more extreme than that which Aristotle and those in his

tradition acknowledge. Character was not necessarily stable in Aristotle's view, but the

account I have given is more radical in saying that character, or what I term more broadly

and holistically as *moral subjectivity*, is profoundly based on conditions beyond one's

control.[362] Particularly in wartime, one's control can sometimes seem comically

insignificant. Take for example part of a poem by Semezdiin Mehmedinović, describing a

common occurrence during the siege, of dodging sniper fire:

> I'm running across an intersection to avoid the bullet of a sniper from the
> hill when I walk straight into some photographers: they're doing their job,
> in deep cover. If a bullet hit me they'd get a shot worth so much more than
> my life that I'm not even sure whom to hate: the Chetnik sniper or these
> monkeys with Nikons. For the Chetniks, I'm just a simple target but these
> others only confirm my utter helplessness and even want to take advantage
> of it. In Sarajevo, death is a job for all of them. Life has been narrowed
> down completely, reduced to gestures. It's almost touching to see the

---

[362] In terms of character, there is already a lively body of literature, involving ethicists and psychologist, that is still growing arguing whether character in fact even exists. A resource for this conversation is available at Wake Forest University's "The Study of Character" website (www.studyofcharacter.com).

> comic motion of a man covering his head with a newspaper as he runs
> across this same street, scared of a sniper's bullet.[363]

The scene of survival is turned almost on its head, if not its side. The poet, running for

cover, is being targeted by two different technologies, one a gun, and one a camera. Each

side, though, is trying to get something from the poet, making him utterly instrumental,

and their needs have nothing to do with saving his life or upholding his inherent worth.

One side is trying to kill him for political or other purposes, while the other is not trying

to kill him but has an interest in his death more than his life. Neither parties, most likely,

are residents of Sarajevo, so there is the added angle of the poet running through his

community and targeted by outsiders for interests created beyond the city limits.

Mehmedinović goes on in the same poem to talk of the ways that people use symbols and

writing to ward off bullets, even when the material itself - books, paper - are useless in

themselves. Such technology is poor, feckless in comparison with that of the journalist

and the soldier/paramilitary member, yet, it is all such a resident has at his or her

disposal.

This raises questions for theories of character but also for those of virtue. There

are ways that philosophers have tried to deal with this. One is Lisa Tessman, who

wrestled with Aristotle in her *Burdened Virtues* on whose theory she based an

understanding of virtue and moral luck that, moving beyond moral luck understood as

chance, reinterpreted it to reflect systemic and structural injustice as the main factors

---

[363] The poem's name is "Shelter" (Mehmedinović, Sarajevo Blues, 74). "Chetnik" is a term used to describe Bosnian- Serb militias, a term taken from those militias of Serb nationalists that fought in World War II. Bosnian-Serb forces had surrounded Sarajevo early in the war, taking over the mountain ridges that surround the valley city below. There was a constant threat of sniper fire as well as mortar fire from these positions, creating the sense that one did not know when they might be killed.

shaping one's life. Tessman is the first theorist who has brought issues of modern poverty

and political liberation into constructive dialogue with virtue ethics. I am not in favor of

retaining *moral luck*, since I believe what this luck points to can be understood much

better in terms of structure, institution, narrative, etc. It may remain a good term for

describing the experience of being thrown - to take a term from phenomenology - into

one's life conditions, but even one's birth can be shown as conditioned by factors and

histories that predate one's conception.

I do not intend in this conclusion to fully resolve this issue. Instead, I bring it up

to argue, as I have done throughout this work, that theories of virtue have tremendous and

yet untapped potential in better imagining and accounting for social life. Part of the

consequence of my argument is that virtue, however, is yet to fully engage the profoundly

and radically conditioned nature of moral subjectivity and even agency, and that the

future both of virtue ethics and hermeneutical approaches that employ virtue, such as the

one in this work, will need to account for these facts. As I hope to have showed, this

untapped potential is ripe for the picking, and if we take seriously the experience of those

who have felt the upheavals of human societies, virtue can so inform notions of moral

subjectivity to provide a much richer account of what it is to be human in a complex and

violent world filled with hope and despair. To do so, we may even take further steps to

push the scales more in favor of hope than in fatal desperation.

Hope

It is important, despite the power of despair's domain, to end such discussions

with some degree of hope, albeit a clear-eyed hope. Murdoch has, as I wrote earlier, an

understanding of the most responsible way to deal with experiences that I have called

void-dominated subjectivities. Responding to violence through violence may be what

Murdoch might refer to as *fantasy*, refusing to see the devastation that is there in one's

life and refusing to believe that one does not have the power to undo what has been done.

Possibly, this could include, and most likely would include, rejection of one's own role in

the creation of devastation. Murdoch does not speak directly of pacifism, however, and

her suspicion of violence comes not from a notion of principled nonviolence but her

reading of Weil. Murdoch understood Weil as saying violence was a way of trying to

regain balance when experiences upend our assumptions and expectations. Murdoch,

then, is critical of violent reactions to loss, as it can come from the fantasy that such

violence can somehow right the situation and restore what was lost. She argues, instead,

for an honest way through loss where one sees clearly their loss, and although she does

not discuss mourning, Murdoch acknowledges that honesty is necessary, even though it

may invite in pain.[364] There is an asceticism to Murdoch, as others such as Maria

Antonaccio have argued. This should be no wonder, inspired as she was by Simone Weil.

Her asceticism, however, is not opposed to beauty, and may be more broadly accessible if

viewed not as incurring further loss but in accepting loss already done in an effort to

move forward to new life.

For those who analyze and search to add clarity to events that pose moral and

ethical challenges to understanding of life and what it is to be human, we may also see

forms of hope in what we do. Adding whatever we have to offer to the testimony of those

---

[364] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 502-3.

who have experienced the more brutal side of the human species and cultures may be a step in bringing such voices in from the margins. When peace treaties are signed, people want to move on, the international community wants to look away, and we too often and too quickly want to return to accustomed comfortable worldviews. We do not want to unsettle these views, and so, can end up pushing away the lives of those who embody experience that is inherently problematic to our imaginations - those who have trouble living because they cannot return to former, consoling imaginaries. Scholarship and writing can assist by turning our gaze back to those left behind, in a manner of speaking, and hopefully empowering them to teach us what we have not so much forgotten as we have refused to learn.

There is, then, hope implicit in unheard voices speaking, even if only to acknowledge how quickly and violently our very souls can be transformed. And by offering such experience to others, and in allowing oneself to recognize that experience as real and challenging, some manner of healing, and possibly a better horizon of social possibility, may slip in through our metaled doors. For these reasons, I turn to the poets to have the final, hopeful say,

> Take the emptiness you hold in your arms
> and scatter it into the open spaces we breathe:
> maybe the birds will feel how the air is thinner,
> and fly with more affection.[365]

---

[365] Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 10.

Bibliography

Ali, Rabia, and Lawrence Lifschultz, eds. *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War*. Stony Creek, Conn: Pamphleteers Press, 1994.

Allen, Beverly. *Rape Warfare: The Hidden Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Annas, Julia. "Virtue and Eudaimonism." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15:1 (December 1998): 37–55.

Anscombe, G.E.M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33:124 (1958): 1–19.

Antonaccio, Maria. *A Philosophy to Live by: Engaging Iris Murdoch*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

_____. "Moral Change and the Magnetism of the Good." *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000): 143–64.

_____. *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

_____. "Symposium on Iris Murdoch: A Response to Nora Hämäläinen and David Robjant." *The Heythrop Journal* 54:6 (November 2013): 1012–20.

_____. "The Virtues of Metaphysics: A Review of Iris Murdoch's Philosophical Writings." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 155–79. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Aristotle. *The Politics*. Translated by Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Banac, Ivo. *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Bellah, Robert N., et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Berkwitz, Stephen C. "History and Gratitude in Theravada Buddhism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71:3 (September 2003): 579–604.

Besirevic-Regan, Jasmina. "The Ethnic Cleansing of Banja Luka: National Homogenization, Political Repression, and the Emergence of a Bosnian Muslim Refugee Community." Doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 2004.

Biehl, Joao, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman. *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Blum, Lawrence. "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 307–24. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Bosnia-Hercegovina: "Ethnic Cleansing" Continues in Northern Bosnia. Human Rights Watch Report. New York: Human Rights Watch, November 1994.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

_____. *Pascalian Meditations*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000.

_____. *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Translated by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Bourgois, Philippe. "The Power of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador." *Ethnography* 2:1 (2001): 5–34.

Bringa, Tone. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Broackes, Justin. "Introduction." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 1–92. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

_____, ed. *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Brubaker, Rogers. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006.

_____. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Campbell, David. "Violence, Justice, and Identity in the Bosnian Conflict." In *Sovereignty and Subjectivity*, edited by Jenny Edkins, Nalini Persram, and Veronique Pin-Fat, 2–38. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999.

Cigar, Norman. *Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of "Ethnic Cleansing."* College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1995.

Cohen, Leonard J. "Bosnia's 'Tribal Gods:' The Role of Religion in Nationalist Politics." In *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, edited by Paul Mojzes, 43–73. Atlanta, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Copp, David, and David Sobel. "Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics." *Ethics* 114 (April 2004): 514–54.

Cousins, Ewert. *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, the Tree of Life, the Life of St. Francis*. Paulist Press, 1978.

Crocq, Marc-Antoine, and Louis Crocq. "From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A History of Psychotraumatology." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 2:1 (March 2000): 47–55.

Cuk, Nadia Skenderovic. "Emptations of Transition and Identity Crisis in Post-Communist Countries: The Example of Former Yugoslavia." In *Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: Proposals for a New Era in Eastern Europe*, edited by Andreas Klinke, Ortwin Renn, and Jean-Paul Lehners, 83–98. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998.

Das, Veena. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

_____. "The Act of Witnessing: Violence, Poisonous Knowledge, and Subjectivity." In *Violence and Subjectivity*, edited by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, 205–25. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Das, Veena et al, eds. *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

_____, eds. *Violence and Subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Demick, Barbara. *Logavina Street: Life and Death in a Sarajevo Neighborhood*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012.

Denitch, Bogdan. *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Dizdarević, Zlatko. *Sarajevo: A War Journal*. New York: Fromm International, 1993.

Driver, Julia. *Uneasy Virtue*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Eagleton, Terry. *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*. New York: Verso, 2005.

Farley, Margaret A. "The Role of Experience in Moral Discernment." In *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, edited by Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress, 134–51. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996.

Fassin, Didier. *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

_____. "Introduction." In *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, 1–18. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Flanagan, Kieran, and Peter C. Jupp, eds. *Virtue Ethics and Sociology: Issues of Modernity and Religion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6:3 (January 1969): 167–91.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation Of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.

Gilligan, James. "Shame, Guilt and Violence." *Social Research* 70:4 (Winter 2003): 1149–80.

Glenny, Misha. *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

Gorski, Philip. ""Recovered Goods: Durkheimian Sociology as Virtue Ethics." In *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, edited by Philip Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, 77–104. New York: New York University Press, 2012.

_____, ed. *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

Hall, Pamela M. "Limits of the Story: Tragedy in Recent Virtue Ethics." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17 (December 2004): 1–10.

_____. "The Mysteriousness of the Good: Iris Murdoch and Virtue Ethics." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64: 3 (Summer 1990): 313–29.

Heim, Maria, and Anne Monius. "Recent Work in Moral Anthropology." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42:3 (2014): 385–92.

Herdt, Jennifer A. *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Holland, Margaret. "Social Convention and Neurosis as Obstacles to Moral Freedom." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 255–73. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Hursthouse, Rosalind. "After Hume's Justice." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91 (1990): 229–54.

_____. *On Virtue Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Penguin Classics, 1982.

Kleinman, Arthur. "'Everything That Really Matters:' Social Suffering, Subjectivity, and the Remaking of Human Experience in a Disordering World." *The Harvard Theological Review* 90:3 (July 1997): 315–35.

_____. "Experience and Its Moral Modes: Culture, Human Conditions, and Disorder." In *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 355–420. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999.

_____. "Moral Experience and Ethical Reflection: Can Ethnography Reconcile Them? A Quandary for 'The New Bioethics.'" *Daedalus* 128:4 (October 1999): 69–97.

_____. "Pain and Resistance: The Deligitimation and Relegitimation of Local Worlds." In *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, edited by Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Paul E. Brodwin, Byron J. Good, and Arthur Kleinman, 169–97. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

_____. *Writing at the Margin: Discourse Between Anthropology and Medicine*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Kleinman, Arthur et al. *Social Suffering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Kleinman, Arthur, and Erin Fitz-Henry. "The Experiential Basis of Subjectivity: How Individuals Change in the Context of Societal Transformation." In *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, edited by Joao Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, 52–65. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Kleinman, Arthur, and Kleinman, Joan. "How Bodies Remember: Social Memory and Bodily Experience of Criticism, Resistance and Delegitimation Following China's Cultural Revolution." *New Literary History* 23:3 (Summer 1994): 707–23.

Kleinman, Arthur et al. *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Kolstø, Pål, ed. *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflicts*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2012.

Laidlaw, James. *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Laverty, Megan. *Iris Murdoch's Ethics: A Consideration of Her Romantic Vision*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007.

Lieblich, Julia, and Esad Boškailo. *Wounded I Am More Awake: Finding Meaning after Terror*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012.

Luhrmann, Tanya M. "Subjectivity." *Anthropological Theory* 6:3 (September 2006): 345–61.

Maček, Ivana. *Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. South Bend, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

_____. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. Chicago: Open Court, 2001.

Malcolm, Noel. *Bosnia: A Short History*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Marshall, Ellen Ott. *Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom: Toward a Responsible Theology of Christian Hope*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006.

Mattingly, Cheryl. "Two Virtue Ethics and the Anthropology of Morality." *Anthropological Theory* 12:2 (2012): 161–84.

Mehmedinović, Semezdin. *Sarajevo Blues*. Translated by Ammiel Alcalay. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001.

Mehta, Uday Singh. *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald Landes. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Meyers, Diana T. *Subjection and Subjectivity: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Moral Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Mojzes, Paul, ed. *Religion and the War in Bosnia*. Atlanta, GA: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Moran, Richard. "Iris Murdoch and Existentialism." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 181–96. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Mott, Frederick Walker. *War Neuroses and Shell Shock*. London: H. Frowde, 1919.

Mulhall, Stephen. "'All the World Must Be Religious:' Iris Murdoch's Ontological Arguments." In *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, edited by Anne Rowe. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

_____. "Constructing a Hall of Reflection: Perfectionist Edification in Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*." *Philosophy* 72:280 (April 1997): 219–39.

Murdoch, Iris. "Against Dryness." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 287–96. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

_____. "Art Is the Imitation of Nature." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 243–58. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

_____. "Knowing the Void." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 157–60. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

_____. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

_____. "Nostalgia for the Particular." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 43–58. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

_____. "The Darkness of Practical Reason." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 193–202. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

_____. *The Fire & The Sun: Why Plato Banished The Artists*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1977.

_____. *The Sovereignty of Good*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

_____. "The Sublime and the Good." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 205–20. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

_____. "Thinking and Language." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 33–42. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

_____. "Vision and Choice in Morality." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J Conradi, 76–98. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Murdoch, Iris and Peter Conradi. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

Nussbaum, Martha C. "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion." In *The Communitarian Challenge to Liberalism*, edited by Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D Miller, and Jeffrey Paul, 27–58. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

_____. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2007.

_____. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

_____. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

_____. "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 163–201.

_____. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

_____. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Oksenburg Rorty, Amélie. "The Vanishing Subject: The Many Faces of Subjectivity." In *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, edited by Joao Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, 34–51. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2007.

Ortner, Sherry B. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

_____. "Subjectivity and Cultural Critique." *Anthropological Theory* 5:1 (March 2005): 31–52.

_____. "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26:1 (1984): 126–66.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Perica, Vjekoslav. *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Plato. *The Laws of Plato*. Translated by Thomas L. Pangle. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1988.

_____. *The Republic Of Plato*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Power, Samantha. *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

Prstojevic, Miroslav et al. *Sarajevo: Survival Guide*. New York: Workman, 1994.

Ramet, Sabrina Petra. *Social Currents in Eastern Europe: Sources and Meaning of the Great Transformation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

Ramet, Sabrina Petra. *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia From the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milosevic*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2002.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999.

Reitan, Richard M. *Making a Moral Society: Ethics and the State in Meiji Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010.

Rieff, David. *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies*. Falls Church, VA: Azul Editions, 1981.

Robbins, Joel. "Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change." *Ethnos* 72:3 (2007): 293–314.

_____. *Christianity and Moral Torment in Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2004.

Robjant, David. "As a Buddhist Christian: The Misappropriation of Iris Murdoch." *The Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011): 993–1008.

_____. "Symposium on Iris Murdoch: How Miserable We Are, How Wicked: Into the 'Void' with Murdoch, Mulhall, and Antonaccio." *The Heythrop Journal* 54:6 (November 2013): 999–1006.

Sayer, Andrew. *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

_____. "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 36:3 (June 1995): 409–40.

Sells, Michael. *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Shay, Jonathan. "Casualties." *Daedalus* 140: 3 (July 2011): 179–88.

Sherman, Nancy. "Recovering Lost Goodness: Shame, Guilt, and Self-Empathy." *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31:2 (2014): 217–35.

Slote, Michael. *Morals from Motives*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Stout, Jeffrey. "Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 25:3 (1997): 23–56.

Swanton, Christine. "A Challenge to Intellectual Virtue from Moral Virtue: The Case of Universal Love." *Metaphilosophy* 41:1–2 (January 2010): 152–71.

_____. "Outline of a Nietzschean Virtue Ethics." *International Studies in Philosophy* 30:3 (1998): 23–38.

_____. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Tambiah, Stanley J. *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Tavory, Iddo. "The Question of Moral Action: A Formalist Position." *Sociological Theory* 29:4   2011): 272–93.

Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

_____. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Tessman, Lisa. *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Tipton, Steven M. "Social Differentiation and Moral Pluralism." In *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, edited by Richard Madsen, 15–40. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Trimble, Michael R. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: History of a Concept." In *Trauma and Its Wake: The Study and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, edited by Charles R. Figley, 5–14. Bristol, PA: Brunner/Mazel, 1985.

Vrcan, Srdjan. "The Religious Factor and the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina." In *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, edited by Paul Mojzes, 108–31. Atlanta, GA: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Vulliamy, Ed. *Seasons in Hell: Understanding Bosnia's War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Walker, Rebecca L., and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Waller, James. *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

War Crimes in Bosnia-Hercegovina: U.N. Cease-Fire Won't Help Banja Luka. Human Rights Watch Report. New York: Human Rights Watch, June 1994.

Weber, Max. "The Social Psychology of World Religions." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 267–301. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

_____. *The Sociology of Religion*. Translated by Ephraim Fischoff. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

_____. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

Welch, Sharon. *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990.

Wesselingh, Isabelle, and Arnaud Vaulerin. *Raw Memory: Prijedor, Laboratory of Ethnic Cleansing*. London: Saqi Books, 2005.

Widdows, Heather. *The Moral Vision Of Iris Murdoch*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005.

Widlock, Thomas. "Virtue." In *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin, 186-203. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Widlok, Thomas. "Sharing by Default? Outline of an Anthropology of Virtue." *Anthropological Theory* 4:1 (March 2004): 53–70.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986.

_____. "Moral Luck." In *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980*, 20–39. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Zigon, Jarrett. "Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand A Theoretical Framework for an Anthropology of Moralities." *Anthropological Theory* 7:2 (June 2007): 131–50.

_____. *Morality: An Anthropological Perspective*. New York: Berg, 2008.

_____. "On Love: Remaking Moral Subjectivity in Postrehabilitation Russia." *American Ethnologist* 40:1 (2013): 201–15.