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Reflections on the Self, Its Nature and Origin, in Light of the Work of Iris Murdoch

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Abstract: The British philosopher Iris Murdoch made an important contribution to twentieth century philosophy of mind, challenging the scientifically motivated, quasi-behaviorism of her day. Prior to important work by Thomas Nagel and others, it was Murdoch who stressed the vital, evident reality of subjective experience. As she and other philosophers came to recognize the irreducible nature of the mental, philosophers have come to re-entertain the merits of a greater variety of accounts of the self and its origin than were countenanced in the mid-twentieth century. Murdoch did much to pave the way to re-thinking the self, its nature and origin.

Keywords:

dualism;
materialism;
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subjective experience;
theism

1. Introduction

In 2024 an intriguing book was published, **The Origin of the Soul: A Conversation**. The conversation included a materialist, a substance dualist, an emergent dualist, an Aristotelian or Thomist hylomorphist, a panpsychist, and others.¹ If a British or European philosopher from the 1950s could time-travel to our present time, he would be shocked. The 1950s were ripe with disdain for dualism

¹ See Joshua FARRIS and Joanna LEIDENHAG (eds.), **The Origin of the Soul: A Conversation**, *Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies*, Routledge, London 2024.



of any kind, and there was a major drive to defend a more physicalist, even behaviorist outlook, of the self. From a 1950s perspective, for a serious philosopher to entertain dualists and a panpsychist as equal conversation partners would seem preposterous. To appreciate the expansive conversation today one needs to take into account the work of Iris Murdoch (1919–1999).

This paper has three parts. In the first, I highlight why philosophers became dissatisfied with the dominant strand of 1950s philosophy, and why this opened the door to dualism and other (ostensibly) extravagant perspectives. Most commentators or historians on this shift leave out the role of a gifted British, Oxford-based philosopher, who became a famous novelist: Iris Murdoch. Her affirmation of the inward, subjective nature of persons and the importance of emotions like love was of great significance. A second section offers reasons for thinking that a phenomenological or psychological account of the self is warranted. Arguably, such a methodology favors recognizing the irreducible reality of selves as enduring, concrete individuals. A third section entertains matters of origin. While there are merits to Murdoch's naturalism, she unleashed (or revived) practicing a metaphysic that is open to theism, panpsychism, idealism, and other alternatives.

2. What Interrupted 1950s Philosophy of Mind?

The philosophy of mind in Britain at the mid-twentieth century was profoundly anti-Cartesian. In 1949, Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle published **The Concept of Mind**.² The book was written largely for the purpose of dispelling any appeal of a form of mind–body dualism, associated in our time with Descartes (though earlier adherents include Augustine and Plato). Cartesian dualism was caricatured as presenting us with two worlds, the visible, public, common sense world of our experience and a secondary, invisible world of private thoughts, sensations, emotions. It was Ryle's thesis that positing this secondary world was like attributing a ghost (the soul or self) to a machine (the body). By Ryle's lights, psychological or mental terms need to be understood as dispositions that are actually or potentially analyzed in terms of behavior. Ryle explicitly denied being a behav-

² See Gilbert RYLE, **The Concept of Mind**, Hutchinson's University Library, London 1949. For a more detailed account of this period of philosophy and its critique, see Stewart GOETZ and Charles TALIAFERRO, **A Brief History of the Soul**, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford 2011.

iorist, but it seems that such a denial was on his assumption that behaviorists deny the existence of the mind, whereas Ryle recognized that one can make true statements about the mental life of persons. Still, as we shall see, he did not recognize the robust existence of the mind and he held that mental states should be analyzed in terms of behavior.

Ryle's work has been rightly seen in tandem with the work of Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin. Austin's chief target was not Descartes but the logical positivist A.J. Ayer. While Ayer was not a dualist, he gave fundamental importance to what he called sense-data, empirical experience. Ayer saw himself as a modern-day David Hume in the empiricist tradition.³ Austin thought that positing a realm of sense-data was a violation of ordinary language. According to Austin, we see actual objects around us — persons, tables, and barns — not mere appearances like clusters of real and potential sensory experiences. Ayer was accused of making an elementary conceptual mistake such as inferring from the fact that *a barn appears to be old* to positing that *there is such a thing as an old appearance*.

Stuart Hampshire similarly thought that the proper starting point in philosophy should be recognizing that we live in a public world of material bodies and events, rather than starting out with sense-data or sensory experience. In **Thought and Action**, Hampshire defended this bodily portrait of ourselves: “The observer is always a self-moving body among other bodies which he observes and intentionally manipulates”.⁴

The methodology of Ryle, Austin, and Hampshire had much in common with the Austrian-born Cambridge University philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. His work admits of various interpretations, but a mainline understanding of his mature thought about the meaning of language is that such meaning needs to be understood in terms of objective, public rules. Many interpret Wittgenstein as providing reasons not to recognize a private, internal, subjective world in which persons have privileged access to their own mental states. Famously, Wittgenstein

³ Because Hume and Ayer appealed to experience, they may be thought to have practiced phenomenology, but the phenomenological movement was broader than their empiricism and which was more akin to phenomenism than phenomenology. See Charles TALIAFERRO and Jil EVANS, **The Image in Mind: Theism, Naturalism, and the Imagination**, *Continuum Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Continuum, London 2011.

⁴ Stuart HAMPSHIRE, **Thought and Action**, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1991, p. 53 (first published in 1959).

likened the positing of such an internal world to the idea that different persons have private access to a beetle in a box. Likening dualists to this strange beetle in a box metaphor is akin to Ryle's image of positing a ghost in a machine.

Perhaps many readers are familiar with the challenges facing the above depiction of the mind or self. In his famous 1974 essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Thomas Nagel developed an argument to the effect that you could know all about the anatomy and behavior of a person or animal, and yet have no idea of its subjective, mental states.⁵ While Nagel did not at the time endorse some form of dualism, his thesis encouraged philosophers not to identify conscious experience with physical anatomy and behavior. After all, if a bat's experiences are the self-same thing as its anatomy and behavior, it seems that if you know one, you know the other.⁶

Bit by bit, various philosophers challenged whether Ryle et al. were indeed on the side of common sense or experience. For example, H.D. Lewis challenged Ryle in the analysis of an everyday experience. In a 1951 paper, "Feelings", Ryle contended that a feeling like a tickle should be understood as the disposition to scratch.⁷ In 1969, Lewis replied: "The tickle, like a sensation of pain, seems obviously something I feel or experience in a way that cannot be reduced at all to any mode of my dispositional states".⁸ Later came an argument from Frank Jackson against physicalism that you could know all about the public material facts about the world but without knowing something real, the sensory experiences themselves (what red looked like). Hilary Putnam introduced his super-spartan thought experiment in which persons may be imagined to have all sorts of feelings but no behavioral dispositions at all. More recently, there was the zombie argument by David Chalmers, to the effect that we can imagine a cell-for-cell replica of

⁵ See Thomas NAGEL, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", *The Philosophical Review* 1974, Vol. 83, No. 4, pp. 435–450, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>.

⁶ This does not involve what is called the intentional fallacy, e.g. you can know your father and know that a masked man robbed a bank, and yet your father might turn out to be that masked man. After all, if your father is the masked man, continued observation of his activities will lead you to observing him, with a mask, robbing a bank. But continuous, detailed observation of the bat's autonomy and behavior does not lead to observing its experiences.

⁷ See Gilbert RYLE, "Feelings", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 1951, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 193–205, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2217246>.

⁸ H.D. LEWIS, *The Elusive Mind*, Allen and Unwin, London 1969, p. 75.

a human person's body and yet the being has no conscious states whatever. And even more recently, Richard Swinburne has revived a Cartesian modal argument for dualism in the mode of Descartes.

What is missing in this familiar overview is the role of Iris Murdoch. In April of 1964, she published "The Idea of Perfection", based on a lecture she gave in 1962.⁹ In this paper, later republished in the collection **The Sovereignty of the Good**, Murdoch takes issue with her contemporaries who treat the mental as a mere shadow world, something we can discard unless the mental is expressed (or analyzed) in terms of language and action. Her main target in that essay was Stuart Hampshire, especially in his book **Thought and Action**, but it could just as well be Gilbert Ryle or Wittgenstein. Murdoch develops a thought experiment in which a woman's behavior, speech and all manifest material aspects of her being remain constant. And yet, she contends that we can readily imagine that the woman undergoes a very real and ethically significant change. She transitions from being hostile to her daughter-in-law to being empathetic and accepting, even loving.

I cite Murdoch's thought experiment at length:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for the purpose of the example that the mother, who is a very "correct" person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question is happening entirely in M's mind.

Thus much for M's first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well intentioned person,

⁹ See Iris MURDOCH, "The Idea of Perfection", *The Yale Review* 1964, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 342–380; Iris MURDOCH, "The Idea of Perfection", in: **The Sovereignty of Good**, Routledge, London 1970, pp. 1–45. It is also published in the collection of her essays: Iris MURDOCH, "The Idea of Perfection", in: Peter CONRADI (ed.), **Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature**, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1997, pp. 299–336.

capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object that confronts her. M tells herself: "I am old fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again". Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D's behavior but in M's mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. And as I say, *ex hypothesi*, M's outward behavior, beautiful from the start, in no way alters.¹⁰

In her essay, Murdoch does not make the claim that she is original in pointing out how there can be very real, non-shadowy processes that go on mentally that are not captured by a behaviorist (or quasi-behaviorist) point of view. She takes herself to be articulating what is widely known to each of us in our interior struggles, and has been widely recognized in spiritual practices of repentance, as when a person may profess to repent of their sin, but still not be certain that he has truly repented. She opted not to use a religious example to make her point, lest this raise special concerns in the philosophy of religion, but she does not shy away from referring to love as a real, elementary goal in life (religious or secular). The mother-in-law M is seeking or comes to succeed in loving the daughter in law D. In sum, Murdoch's case for a non-behavioristic account of the mental comes down to a case for recognizing the reality and importance of love. So, prior to Nagel and company, it was Murdoch who sounded the alarm about denying the reality of evident, emotional states that resist analysis in terms of public, overt behavior and language. And, interestingly, almost none of the other, well-documented objections to the behaviorist movement against the mental make an overt case on the grounds of the reality and importance of love.

Murdoch's "The Idea of Perfection" essay has been appreciated as drawing attention to the ethical importance of our interior states, thus challenging the mid-twentieth century moral philosophy focus on action and rules that should guide decision-making. But more or just as important is her affirmation that we persons have inner states and lives not covered by public, behavioral analyses. As an aside, it should be added that she did not claim that persons have infallible access to their mental states. One may be genuinely perplexed about whether one is loving a person or has truly repented a sin. Our lack of infallible access to the mental

¹⁰ MURDOCH, "The Idea of Perfection...", pp. 312-313.

should no more diminish recognizing the reality of the mental than our lack of infallible access to the material should lead us to skepticism about whether there is a material world.

Appreciating Murdoch's essay invites us to a very different point of view than Hampshire, Ryle and her other contemporaries. This can be enhanced when comparing Murdoch's position to Ryle's famous case of seeking to discount any appeal to the mental beyond overt behavior. Ryle contended that when you consider the sentence "she came into the room in a flood of tears", this should not be considered as real and straightforward as the claim "she came into the room in a box".¹¹ Ryle claims that both sentences may be true, but then he goes on to claim that their truth is not a univocal or straightforward matter. As he wrote:

It is perfectly proper to say, in one logical tone of voice, that there exist minds, and to say, in another tone of voice that there exists bodies. But these expressions do not indicate two different species of existence, for "existence" is not a generic word like "colored" or "sexed". They indicate two different senses of "exist", somewhat as "rising" has different senses in "the tide is rising", "hopes are rising", and "the average age of death is rising". A man would be thought to be making a poor joke which said that three things were now rising, namely the tide, hope and the average age of death. It would be just as good or bad a joke to say that there exist prime numbers, and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies; or that there exist both minds and bodies.¹²

There are two problems here.

The first is that Ryle seems to conflate claims about what there is (what exists) and claims about what makes the claims true. In his first example about "rising", each claim is (in principle) worthy of being considered true (a claim about what exists), but obviously in recognizing their truth one is not committed to positing that there is an observable thing, "the average age." An "average age", like the average plumber, is a mathematical calculation about a median number. As H.D. Lewis pointed out in reply to Ryle, the effort to assimilate mental states to abstractions like "the average age" flies in the face of the evident reality of the men-

¹¹ RYLE, *The Concept of Mind...*, p. 22.

¹² RYLE, *The Concept of Mind...*, p. 23.

tal as no less real (or existing) than bodily processes: “Mental processes are real, they »are« or they go on just as physical ones do”.¹³

On Ryle's second set of examples, I suggest they should not motivate us to think that each of the items involves a different sort of existence. I propose one should claim that there are prime numbers, Wednesdays, public opinions, and navies (with no equivocation about the copula), but then offer one's best account of prime numbers (I happen to be a Platonist about numbers, but one might offer a nominalist account), calendar times (there is a long history of humans arriving at the names and the temporal demarcation of days), public opinion is presumably some generalization of the opinion of people in a community, and navies involve a particular military incorporation as distinct from, say, armies and church groups.

So, the first point is that Ryle gives us no reason to think we are equivocating when we claim that bodies exist and there are persons with internal emotions that lead them to cry, and so on. If there is a joke in play in Ryle's claim here, it is to infer that minds and bodies are not equally real on the basis of the oddity of a person stringing together such odd examples of what there is. Actually, a little imagination might help make the examples Ryle uses less strange. Consider this statement that seems (to me) meaningful: As the tide was rising, Jones started hoping he would be rescued and not drown like the average person in his position. Or: On the 7th of April, a Wednesday, public opinion wavered about whether the government should increase its funding for the navy.

But a second problem with Ryle's perspective, and more vexing, Ryle's discounting the existence or truth-value of a woman's coming into a room weeping may reflect something that is not particularly honorable. Why think a woman “in distress” should be less real than a body “in a box”? Of course, the term “flood” in the sentence “she came into the room in a flood of tears” is a metaphor (she did not literally come in the room on a wave of tears). But most English speakers would readily interpret this as a claim about the intensity of the weeping (e.g. she did not come into the room stoically, holding back her tears). Does Ryle really think the existence of a weeping woman is not as straightforward and ontologically secure as making a claim about the movement of boxes? Apart from the obvious distinction between when “in” is used to refer to a state or process (weeping,

¹³ LEWIS, *The Elusive Mind...*, p. 43.

perhaps grieving) and when it is used to refer to a physical enclosure, the (ostensibly pithy) cases seem on the same footing as far as making truth-claims. Discounting a woman's stress seems (at least modestly) insensitive to what is truly at issue and what should be the focus of loving attention.¹⁴

3. Where Does a Phenomenological Account of Selves Take Us?

In the first section we have seen how the appeal to first-person, subjective experience interrupted the quasi-behaviorist accounts of the mid-twentieth century. Efforts to eliminate the mental or reduce it to non-mental things and processes continued in work by Daniel Dennett, Paul and Patricia Churchland, and others, but their projects did not fare well with the persistence of phenomenology.¹⁵ An influential line of reasoning about the adequacy of a so-called objective or scientific approach to reality was that even an exhaustive, accurate third-person view of reality would not reveal an important fact: your own identity. I could be in possession of the history and current state of the cosmos and every person in it, and yet not know that I am Charles Taliaferro. The ineliminable importance of one's self-identity has been forcibly affirmed by a host of philosophers from Geoffrey Madell to Lynne Baker.¹⁶

Many, but not all, philosophers concede that recognizing the reality of the self and subjective experience has great intuitive appeal. Thomas Nagel, an advocate of recognizing first-person experience, aptly summarizes the current state of play philosophically. In the passage below he contrasts a philosopher who gives decisive authority to our first-person point of view, Richard Swinburne, with those with misgivings:

There is a methodological question at the heart of this topic: How much authority should be given to judgments made from the first-person point of view? Most dis-

¹⁴ For further critical comments on Ryle on existence, see Peter VAN INWAGEN, **Existence: Essays in Ontology**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, chapter three.

¹⁵ See Richard FUMERTON, **Knowledge, Thought, and the Case for Dualism**, *Cambridge Studies in Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013.

¹⁶ See Geoffrey MADELL, **The Essence of the Self**, *Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy*, Routledge, London 2015; Lynne R. BAKER, **Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

agreements among philosophers of mind can be traced to different answers to this question. There are hard-line reductionists who regard all subjective appearances with suspicion, think anything real must be describable in the objective terms of physical science, and are even prepared to regard consciousness as an illusion. Others admit the reality of consciousness and the irreducibility of its phenomenological features, as revealed to the first-person point of view, but think the nature of the person or self cannot be understood apart from the objective conditions, mental and physical, by which we identify and reidentify human beings other than ourselves. Swinburne, resisting such compromise, accords decisive authority to certain first-person convictions and intuitions, much in the manner of Descartes, as the basis for direct knowledge of our nature — knowledge of a kind that can neither be grounded nor called into question by external empirical observation.¹⁷

At this point, should we trust our phenomenological experiences of ourselves or subordinate them to a physicalist framework? I think Iris Murdoch's viewpoint may be useful.

As noted earlier, Murdoch did not contend that our first-person, subjective experiences may be known with infallible certainty. So, unlike Swinburne, she may not have given “decisive authority” to first-person experience. But there is a more moderate position to consider: Shouldn't our first-person experiences be given presumptive or *prima facie* authority? So, Murdoch could concede to philosophers like John Cottingham that it is possible (at least logically and epistemically) that phenomenological experience does not reveal the essence of what we are, but such experiences have an epistemic primacy or significant evidential value, all the same. I have defended such a presumption elsewhere, arguing that we should trust appearances, until we have strong reasons not to trust them.¹⁸ In the absence of a compelling case for physical reductionism or the primacy of a naturalistic perspective, our phenomenological awareness is trustworthy.

Two other considerations may be relevant.

First, another reason for trusting a phenomenological method rather than beginning with a third-person point of view, is that it has been forcefully argued that the “objective” third-person point of view is unintelligible without relying on

¹⁷ Thomas NAGEL, “Richard Swinburne, **Are We Bodies or Souls?** [book review]”, Notre Dame Philosophical Review 2020, April 7, <https://tiny.pl/7vmwtey1> [15.05.2025].

¹⁸ See Charles TALIAFERRO, “Substance Dualism: A Defense”, in: Jonathan J. LOOSE, Angus J.L. MENUGE, and J. P. MORELAND (eds.), **The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism**, *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford 2018, pp. 41–60, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119468004.ch3>.

the first-person point of view.¹⁹ A third person point-of-view only makes sense if the first-person point-of-view is trustworthy.

Second, if we dare to allow matters of love and value to have a role in our philosophy of mind, there may be additional moral reasons either to embrace or at least favor the view that selves have a real, substantial reality, subjects who are capable of loving and caring for each other. There is a long tradition from Pascal to William James that it is legitimate to take into account which philosophical worldview would promote greater value. Arguably, the non-reductive worldview of Iris Murdoch invites a more humane way of life that takes the welfare of others more seriously than its reductive counterparts.²⁰

4. Metaphysical Origins?

The 1950s philosophers we began addressing in this essay (Ryle, Austin, Hampshire, Wittgenstein) were not great champions of big metaphysical accounts of origin. With the possible exception of Wittgenstein, their views were secular and pitted against British Idealism (which was decreasing in influence by the 1930s) and traditional theism. Following Ryle, if we have no good reason to posit a self or soul (a ghost) along with the body (the machine), why posit a transcendent God in addition to the cosmos? Ryle's student, Daniel Dennett spent a lifetime championing a philosophy that was as physicalist as it was atheistic. But, as Thomas Nagel came to observe in his bold 2012 book **Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist neo-Darwinian Conception Is Almost Certainly False**, the failure of reductionist accounts of the mind have cosmic implications.²¹ While Nagel persisted in his rejection of theism, he expressed great respect for its plausibility and he hoped that a non-theistic, teleological account of nature was in the offing.

¹⁹ See TALIAFERRO, "Substance Dualism...", pp. 41–60.

²⁰ Near the end of her life, Murdoch was drawn to Buddhism or a blend of Buddhism and Christianity. Jil Evans and I see her attraction to Buddhism as stemming from her life-long antipathy to egotism and selfishness, rather than embracing a no-self theory of the self (Anatta). See Charles TALIAFERRO and Jil EVANS, **Iris Murdoch and the Transcendent**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [forthcoming].

²¹ See THOMAS NAGEL, **Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist neo-Darwinian Conception Is Almost Certainly False**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

Like Nagel, Murdoch was an atheist, but she held views that invite a reconsideration of theism and non-theistic alternatives to forms of naturalism like Dennett's. She not only defended a robust recognition of the reality and importance of subjective experience, but she was a Platonic moral realist who extolled the Good. In her essay "On »God« and »Good«", she writes of the ultimate reality of a transcendent Good, "a single perfect transcendent not representable and necessarily real object of attention".²² This is a far cry from the popular view at mid-century enthralled by the Humean view (championed by A.J. Ayer) that values are not facts, but expressions of personal preferences and desires. On the contrary, according to Murdoch, through loving attention toward other people and the world, our personal preferences and desires can be reshaped and transformed, leading us to lives that are less in the service of what she called "the fat, relentless ego" (a favorite phrase).

Murdoch's turning away from quasi-behaviorism and materialist reductionism, and her positive turn toward the recognition of goodness or the Good, have been recognized by some philosophers, such as Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum, but her work needs wider recognition for creating a philosophical climate in which there can be books like **The Origin of the Soul**. I have argued elsewhere for my own preferred view of the soul and its origin.²³ The point of this paper is not to rehearse my reasoning or invent new lines of argument. It is, rather, to bring to your attention how the work of Iris Murdoch challenges us to expand our horizon when it comes to the philosophy of the nature and origin of the self.

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²² Iris MURDOCH, "On »God« and »Good«", in: **The Sovereignty of the Good**, Routledge, London 1970, p. 55 [46–86].

²³ See Charles TALIAFERRO, **Consciousness and the Mind of God**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.

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