**Imagination and the Virtuous Peasant**

1

Murdoch argues in favour of the possibility of living an unexamined yet virtuous life. She illustrates this possibility with characters like the inarticulate, selfless mother of a large family, or the aunt whose ego is quietly subsumed in the activity of caring for another, or the emblematic virtuous peasant. She claims the virtuous peasant may be able to act on a nuanced moral understanding which they are not able to articulate. The virtuous peasant has a simple (?) inner life, and is not disposed to long deliberation or episodes of doubt.

One might think that a fully worked out morality should equip a person with the resources they need to engage in rigorous criticism of the society in which they find themselves, and to subject their own thoughts and feelings to social and political critique. Nussbaum (2001) writes of Murdoch that "she seems almost entirely to lack interest in the political and social determinants of a moral vision, and in the larger social criticism that ought, one feels, to be a major element in the struggle against one's own defective tendencies." On a related point, Lovibond (1983, p.190) writes "Murdoch maintains that we need to think of our obligations as contextually determined… Yet it seems that we exercise no control over the context of our duty, but must humbly accept it in all its violence."

So long as Murdoch endorses virtuous peasantry as a way of moral life, she leaves open in her moral philosophy the possibility of an unreflective, uncritical moral and political underclass. Clarke (2006) attempts to solve this problem for Murdoch by drawing attention to the distinction between fantasy and the moral imagination, and argues that the virtuous peasant's exercise of the moral imagination puts them in a position to engage in social and political critique. This is, however, precisely the most difficult point to demonstrate. Why should the kind of careful attention to particulars which characterises the virtuous peasant's engagement with the world give rise to critical understanding of a wider context? And if it does, what is the difference between the virtuous peasant and anyone else? What does it mean to lead an unexamined life?

There is considerable affinity between this line of investigation and Hannah Arendt's criticism of the unthinking person, and exploration of the connection between failure to think and moral failure. I hope to show that Murdoch's virtuous peasant is much more like Arendt's thinking person than the unthinking one, and I will try to make the case (?) that the virtuous peasant does think, in Arendt's terms. That being so, I will argue that the virtuous peasant's ability to engage in political discourse is limited, but not non-existent; so we should perhaps not be too concerned about the problems the unexamined yet virtuous life poses for Murdoch's moral philosophy.

2

Arendt argues that wrong-doing need not be the result of a wicked character, but can be the result of a failure to think. By this she means a kind of idle complacency in which the subject unquestioningly adopts the meanings and frames of reference that are impressed on them

by (in the most salient cases) authorities. When we are engaged in the ordinary business of living, Arendt (1971) claims, there are only certain kinds of thinking we engage in, which tend towards settling questions and making decisions. In order to be able to cope with the cognitive demands of everyday living, we accept and utilise “cliches, stock phrases” (p.418) stereotypes and snap judgements which reduce the complexities of real people and real things to simple representations. Language abstracts away from particulars which are too diverse and too numerous to think about; and those abstract representations are the currency of thought. What we think with, when we think, are not objects, but mental representations which group objects together according to rules which may or may not be explicitly available to the subject who makes use of them.

The kind of thinking we typically do not do in the hustle and bustle of daily life, is *meditation*: attending to the contingency and particularity of things, and the rules which we use to unite them under abstract representations. As Arendt puts it, a word like “house” is a kind of “frozen thought” (p.431) which meditation unfreezes, so that it can be subjected to scrutiny. If a person were never to engage in meditation, then they would not explicitly think about the meanings of the words they use; they would not think about the great range and variety that can be captured under a single phrase. Such a person would, Arendt claims, be greatly attached not to the specific content of the habits and conventions they use, but to the idea of having a framework of rules. It is those rules which make it possible for a person to go about their life without engaging in the difficult and demanding task of thinking. So, Arendt claims, it is relatively easy to induce such a person to swap one set of rules for another; because they are not concerned with the content of the rules - and indeed, since they do not think, they may be only dimly aware of what that content actually is; they are deeply concerned with having rules, which make their lives easier.

Arendt’s argument here brings to mind the suspicions about the unexamined life; although there are significant differences between the virtuous peasant and the unthinking person, as well as striking similarities.

The unthinking person is primarily interested in coping with what is in front of them, and does not engage in the kind of speculative, imaginative thinking required to develop an understanding of the social and political context in which they find themselves, or to protect themselves from having authoritarian forms of thinking imposed on them. The virtuous peasant is also primarily interested in dealing with what is in front of them; but because the virtuous peasant is attentive and exercises their moral imagination, what they find is not a path of least resistance, but rather, a route to virtue within the confines of their situation.

Arendt draws a distinction between thinking, which we have discussed, and judging, which is the application of thoughts to particulars. Thinking is therefore conducive to good judgement, since it gives rise to more nuanced thoughts, and ways of understanding their rules of application. It is tempting to describe the virtuous peasant as someone who judges but does not think. Indeed, this seems to be part of the force of Nussbaum’s criticism - that the virtuous peasant gets by well enough, even morally speaking, within their particular situation; but lacks the concern or resources to subject their wider circumstances, or their own thoughts, to sustained criticism. I think this is not quite right. Instead, I think we should see

the virtuous peasant as one who both thinks and judges, but about a limited range of phenomena. I will first defend the claim that the exercise of the moral imagination is a form of thinking, and then the claim that the virtuous peasant's simplicity consists not in a limited capacity for imagination, but in the limited scope of things to which that imagination is applied.

3

The virtuous peasant's form of thinking is careful attention. The meditator thaws out frozen thoughts in order to inspect the full range of things to which they are applied, and the rules of their application. In doing so, they become aware of differences and limitations in the meanings of words; in Arendt's example, reflection on the word "house" (p.430) reveals that it refers not to a type of building, or to a building as such, but rather to a structure used in a particular way, so that the term "house" can be applied equally well to a cottage or a castle (though, we might think, the connotations would be quite different). The virtuous peasant, by selflessly attending to the people they encounter, opens themselves to the whole range of possibility for a person, and avoids understanding them in the shallow, self-serving terms of the ego. Think again of (Murdoch's famous example) M and D. By re-opening the question, and paying more attention, M comes to understand her daughter-in-law not as common and vulgar, which are class-inflected descriptions received from wider society, but as refreshingly unaffected.

This kind of imaginative exercise cannot be performed without experience to reflect on. It cannot be wholly simulated without drifting into fantasy. M knows D, or at least knew her; yet we do not. So for us, M is understood only as a condescending mother-in-law, and D as a chirpy daughter-in-law. They are each presented to us through the characteristics that are salient for the thought-experiment. We cannot go beyond the description of D as common, except by piggy-backing on M's imagined line of thought. We cannot reflect on D in all her nuanced contingency, because we do not know her. (c.f. Anscombe's objection to the use of thought experiments in ethics.)

The virtuous peasant needs people to attend to. They avoid falling into understanding people in egocentric terms precisely by curbing their imagination (SG p.40) so that real people can be revealed to them. This kind of careful attention requires close familiarity. Arendt writes that we adopt cliches and stereotypes because it makes the cognitive burden of life in the society of others bearable. We do not have the time or the mental endurance to treat just everyone we meet with the kind of careful attention characteristic of the virtuous peasant. Yet, the call to be involved in political discussion involves a call to deal with or think about people in a generalised, abstract sense; to think about people who are not present, not familiar. One cannot use the moral imagination to come to understand someone or some group of people who are presented to us only abstractly.

There is an important dissimilarity between the virtuous peasant and Arendt's thinker. The thinker deals with mental representations, hence things which are not available to the senses. Arendt remarks that to think about the person in front of us, we must absent ourselves from the ordinary business of life, in order that we can be still and quiet and think,

uninterrupted by the need to carry on the social encounter. She writes: “In order to think about somebody, he must be removed from our senses; so long as we are together with him, we don’t think of him - although we may gather impressions that later become food for thought; to think about somebody who is present implies removing ourselves surreptitiously from his company, and acting as if he were no longer there” (p.424). As Altorf observes, daughter-in-law D is notably absent at the time when M reconsiders and has a change of heart. “The couple have emigrated, or D has died.” D’s absence helps Murdoch to make a case for the inner life, against the behaviourism of contemporary moral philosophers (Altorf 2008, p.63). What does it mean to imaginatively observe a real person in their absence? Or perhaps the better question is, what does it mean, or what is it like, to imaginatively observe a real person in their presence? ~~What is it like to selflessly attend to someone, and allow that attending to form one’s opinion - or to change it? What would one have to see?~~

I think Murdoch’s account of moral imagination give us reason to contest Arendt’s claim that we do not think about the people in front of us. To come to a new way of understanding someone through a shift in perspective on the basis of real sensory observation is a cognitive event, and a cognitive achievement. Perception may be passive, but the imagination is not; and imaginative observation is not mere looking. If I selflessly attend to someone I am familiar with and in so doing come to regard them differently, more sympathetically than I did before, I must surely be aware that something has changed; though I might, perhaps, be unsure whether it is me who has changed or them, I must surely be aware of the change. It is a change in my world as experienced.

The alteration in my perspective is a shift in the way I understand my friend, the other. It might involve a shift in the way I understand certain character traits. For example, I might realise that brashness conceals insecurity~~, or that kindness can be manipulative~~. This is something that I might observe, in a fairly literal sense, in a fake smile, or too-loud laughter. Insofar as I really recognise the fake smile as disguising underlying anxiety, in the experience I discover something about fake smiles and about insecurity; not just about my friend. So one encounter prepares me for others, and my ability to exercise my moral imagination and insight improves with experience. This learning, I suggest, happens in the moment, in the ongoing experience, and does not require me to take myself away and think about it. The experience alone does not, however, grant me an understanding of fake smiles which I could reflect on, articulate or discuss. Those are the outcomes of meditation; bringing the experience to mind again and unpicking it, trying to pin down in what precisely the fakeness of the smile consists, why I think of it as “fake”, comparing it to a genuine smile, considering what would induce a person to smile in this way, and so on. That requires concentration, and time; that would require me to take myself out of the experience.

I would like to tentatively suggest that this is the difference between the virtuous peasant and those who take part in what Murdoch calls “a more talkative morality” (MGM p.??). Not that the virtuous peasant does not think at all, but that in the case of the virtuous peasant, the metaphor of vision is less metaphorical and more literal. The virtuous peasant is less able to (or perhaps less inclined to; or perhaps just happens not to) remove themselves from the experience and attend to it in the manner characteristic of meditation. Nevertheless, even without removing themselves from the experience, the virtuous peasant comes to a more

nuanced understanding of the way things are, in a way that informs their future experience; and this is at the heart of thinking.

4

What, then, is there to be said about the ability of the virtuous peasant to engage in political discourse?

First, Arendt's remarks on the political usefulness (or perhaps uselessness) of meditation seem to me to resonate with the idea of the virtuous peasant as a character who is selfless and not easily swayed. What's worrying about the unthinking person is that they are not particularly tied to the content of the norms and customs of their society, so could easily be weaned onto a different set of rules, which might have immoral contents. What is initially worrying about the virtuous peasant is not so much that they might easily have their head turned, but rather that their perspective is closed off. Arendt argues (1971, p.445-6) that thinking (in the sense of meditation) is not ordinarily useful in the political sphere in the sense that, like Socrates, the meditator will not usually uncover new values, be spurred to action, or even make decisions. However, the paralysing effect of thinking, the unwillingness of the thinker to adopt new frames of reference without close consideration of the content, is useful in times of crisis, when society at large is undergoing a shift from one set of meanings to another. Then, the thinker's reticence to act, their unwillingness to go along with things, becomes visible, and politically salient.

Secondly, we can ask what sort of political and social views paying careful attention to particulars gives rise to. Murdoch herself gives us a clear example. In her response to the Wolfenden Report, she argued that human lives, situations and characters are so diverse that it is unjustified to draw any sort of connection between sexual orientation and propensity or ability to live a fulfilled, happy, productive life. The sheer particularity and complexity of the lives of a great many others means that the only morally justifiable response is an attitude of toleration; a refusal to impose a rigid framework of meaning or value onto a collection of individuals that are not unified in a meaningful sense. In this response, we can see how Murdoch draws on familiarity with and experience of individuals. Use of the moral imagination brings to light the depth and diversity of the human condition; and because it does so through attentiveness and sensitivity to particulars, it tells us little about how to engage with collectives. Murdoch's own recommendation here amounts to, "live and let live". Good advice, to be sure, but likely to prove insufficient. I think we can see here why Nussbaum would find this unsatisfying; her "capabilities approach" to human rights has as a central motivation the thought that a right which cannot be exercised is meaningless. It is no use being merely tolerated if your enjoyment of the goods of civil society is not secured by toleration alone.

So to summarise: Arendt's work on thinking and the failure to think as a moral failing encourages us to see the virtuous peasant not as someone who does not think at all, but as one whose thinking takes place in or through experience. The virtuous peasant neither fits the model of the unthinking person, nor do they achieve the separation from experience which characterises the meditator. This I think makes sense of Murdoch's descriptions of the

virtuous peasant as inarticulate and simple in some senses, but also having an inner moral life characterised by imagination and virtue. The risks associated with endorsing the unexamined life as a path to virtue are thereby mitigated, but not removed.

**Works Cited**

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