Transcendence Without Reality

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> 'Is there … any true transcendence, or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need on to an empty sky?'
> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*

I

In *A View From Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel celebrates the effort to 'climb out of our own minds' as 'philosophically fundamental' because the discipline of philosophy is defined by its pursuit of eternal and non-local truths.[1] Nagel believes that a central aspect of the philosophical enterprise is the pursuit of an objective, 'external' view of reality that is 'as independent as possible of who we are and where we started.'[2] The other aspect of our enterprise, according to Nagel, is to reconcile that external perspective with our subjective 'internal' perspective, as a means to a comprehensive self-understanding that includes a description of what we are as well as prescriptions of what we ought to do. Although this project is grand, optimistic, and viewed by Nagel as essential to philosophy, Richard Rorty has disparaged Nagel's project as 'fruitless and undesirable.'[3] According to Rorty, Nagel's project is motivated by misguided views about our needs, and thus philosophy will be fruitless until it gives up that mistaken view. Rorty's position is that we do not help perfectly good practices like natural science by trying to amend them with an 'external' picture of that practice as carving up reality in accordance with parts purportedly defined before we bring to it any of our concerns. For him, claims like 'we use 'atom' as we do because atoms are as they are' are mere pseudo-explanations. Further, he contends that the very idea of an external viewpoint creates two more pseudo-problems: defending our subjective view from the twin threats of skepticism and nihilism. Because the

[1] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 11.

[2] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* 74.

[3] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, *Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7.

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external view can seem hopelessly removed from our internal perspective and also because it is denuded of any values we hold from the internal perspective, the notion of an external perspective gives rise to these interminable yet, to Rorty, unnecessary philosophical projects. And so, on this view, aspirations to transcendence like those expressed by Nagel ought to be educated out of us. Indeed, this expurgation would count for Rorty as 'moral education,' presumably because he thinks it will make us better not to have the wasteful habit of pursuing a philosophical programme based on an illusory picture of our needs when we can change the subject to more productive matters.[4]

I contend that even if Nagel's project is as fruitless as Rorty says it is, for the reasons he thinks it is fruitless, it would not mean that any idea of self-overcoming is equally fruitless. I will defend in this paper a view of transcendence that does not depend on the metaphysical apparatus of Nagel's conception, and that has, I contend, a crucial practical role. As conceived here, transcendence does not require striving for an external, objective viewpoint on nature or looking at matters from someone else's or an impartial point of view. On my view, which builds on the work of Iris Murdoch, transcendence consists of a refinement of our concepts and sensibility to make them more adequate to the individuals we encounter. The struggle to describe another person as she merits being described may overturn our previous concepts and sensibility; indeed, we may struggle to describe any natural object as it merits being described. If successful, that struggle results in something that should be described as transcendence because it involves overcoming our previous views for a better view. My formulation seems to invoke a way that things are, and so, it seems to invoke the 'external' perspective on reality to which we would be matching our representations, precisely the fantastical and fruitless picture Rorty wants to educate out of us. Yet, I will insist that this commonality of language is misleading, and that the sense of 'getting at another as she merits being described' need not involve an attempt to fit a world stripped of our contributions to it. What is to be transcended is not the human viewpoint, but any of the concerns that can prevent me from virtuously attending to another and describing her justly. Of course, it will take some explanation and argument to establish that this language does not invoke reality in Nagel's sense, and also how it preserves a meaningful sense of transcendence without invoking Nagel's conception of reality. I begin with a review of Nagel's

[4] Rorty, *Objectivity*, 8.

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conception of transcendence, and offer some specific criticisms of that conception. Then, I distill a contrasting conception of transcendence from various writings of Iris Murdoch. I conclude with an argument that the conception of transcendence I arrive at is adequate to our needs and avoids the problems I identify in Nagel's notion of transcendence.

II

Nagel distinguishes two basic types of transcendence.[5] First, there is 'subjective transcendence,' which he defines as the imaginative attempt to enter other points of view, to see how things appear from another subjective standpoint. This type of transcendence plays an important role in morality, Nagel holds, since morality requires us to employ the viewpoints of others to build an impartial perspective on a proposed course of action. Second, there is 'objective transcendence,' which for Nagel consists of attaining an understanding of the world that is purged of any idiosyncrasies introduced by my individuality and my type. In order to get to an objective viewpoint, he holds, I must transcend not only my individual viewpoint, but also a human and even a mammalian viewpoint. Transcendence in this sense applies primarily to understanding the natural world, and only derivatively to understanding creatures with points of view; objective transcendence, Nagel claims, helps us to understand the biological and physical realities underpinning the facts of our existence, including how things appear to us. Although subjective transcendence is important to morality, it is objective transcendence that is really important to our pursuit of full self-understanding that is grounded on the world as it is, as well as a healthy acknowledgement of the incompleteness of our perspective on the world, however far we mortals carry our pursuit of objectivity.

For Nagel, objectivity and objective transcendence are essentially synonymous. Objectivity is not a result, but rather a method of understanding in which we seek explanations that 'involve one's own point of view not essentially, but only instrumentally …'[6] Starting from how things appear to us, we seek to get at an explanation of what the world is like, including an account of why things appear to us in the way that they do. A

[5] Nagel, 'Subjective and Objective' in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 209.

[6] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* 74.

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paradigmatic example of objective self-transcendence, for Nagel, is the emergence of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. With this distinction, we realize that the best explanation of appearances avoids ascribing, for instance, intrinsic colours to the objects of perception; rather, it ascribes only size and shape to them, taking colour to belong only to our perspective. The key advance here is that the theory of colour based on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities can 'include and explain' the theory based on intrinsic colours. We can, Nagel claims, explain colour, among other features of our appearances, solely in terms of a small set of primary qualities; whereas, if we ascribe colours, tastes, and smells directly to the things, then we are left with a large set of unsatisfying *virtus dormitiva* explanations ('x appears red in virtue of x's redness'). Of course, this distinction thereby relegates colour to the realm of appearances, and strikes several properties from the list of real properties accessible in our perceptual experience. Objectivity is likely to have this effect as we pursue it, and that is why Nagel associates it with transcendence. We transcend the possibly misleading subjective appearances in favour of a more satisfying underlying explanation that is intelligible, Nagel wants to claim, to those who do not share the experience of colour.

The value of objectivity on Nagel's view is clearly that it extends our grasp on the world as it really is, that is to say, on reality. The fact that an explanation 'contains' previous explanations (i.e., it covers a broader range of content under a single account) and is accessible to viewpoints other than our own gives us reason to think that through it we have cottoned on to the way things really are, and transcended how things merely appear to us. Nevertheless, Nagel emphatically states 'objectivity of whatever kind is not the test of reality.'[7] I take it that he means by this that it is not a necessary condition for something to count as real that it can be regarded 'externally', say, by one who does not share our sensory apparatus. The world as it is includes appearances, among which there are some irreducibly subjective elements, namely, qualia. Because Nagel holds that objective reality cannot include subjective elements of reality, he rejects Bernard Williams's 'absolute conception of reality', which postulates a complete physical account of all things, including subjective appearances. Nagel thus rejects an exclusive disjunction between appearance and reality. Indeed, all appearances are, taken by themselves, real. Still, he holds, we must distinguish between appearances qua isolated experiences and appearances qua appearances *of* something, which can, in this respect, mislead.

[7] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* 26.

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Objectivity helps us sort out appearances in the latter sense from reality. Also, appearances in the former sense are only a subset of reality, or, as Nagel puts it, 'even if not everything is something from no point of view, some things are.'[8] So, despite some qualifications, objectivity is still valuable and valued in its capacity for uncovering reality from appearances.

Still, there are two key problems with this account of objective transcendence. First, it is not entirely clear that the primary/secondary quality distinction does achieve the result that Nagel ascribes to the method of objectivity, that of transcending local viewpoints. The quality that is the explanandum of our account, 'such as to appear red to a human observer under normal conditions,' is itself not graspable to someone who does not share a relevantly similar sensory apparatus, e.g., intelligent extraterrestrials with a different sensory apparatus. Such a person might therefore grasp the *content* of the explanans, but since they do not have access to the explanandum, they could not grasp that content *as* an explanans. Therefore, in an important sense, they would not grasp what we were trying to convey. Although explanations of secondary qualities in terms of primary qualities are indeed of interest to us, the accounts still appeal more than instrumentally to our own point of view. That is, our perception of colour provides more than the occasion to launch an inquiry and the materials on which we conduct it; it also provides the point of the inquiry, and thereby the sense of the statements that result from the inquiry.[9] This criticism troubles the idea that the explanations Nagel designates 'objective' genuinely involve the type of externality he attributes to them, and so our arrival at such explanations may not merit being called 'transcendence.' Of course, these explanations may still be good explanations, but the picture of objective transcendence that Nagel provides has not enhanced their credentials.

The second problem relates to an effect Nagel attributes to objective transcendence in addition to its yielding explanations that clarify why things appear to us as they do. Objective transcendence also, Nagel claims, uncovers a reality that extends far beyond our ability even to conceive it. According to Nagel, since the idea of a reality, of a realm of 'things in themselves' makes sense, propped up by the success of the method of objectivity (taking the primary/secondary quality distinction as an instance of *its* success)

[8] Nagel, 'Subjective and objective,' 212.

[9] See John McDowell's similar remarks on Bernard Williams in 'Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World' in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 123ff.

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there is no reason to think that all reality can be captured in the nets of our concepts. Indeed, the incompleteness of our conception of reality is a central issue in Nagel's argument against those he takes to be his philosophical nemeses, idealists including Berkeley and, supposedly, Wittgenstein.[10] On Nagel's view, such idealists 'attempt to cut the universe down to size' by not admitting the intelligibility of facts about the world that are simply inconceivable to the kind of creature we are. It might seem that this complaint amounts to accusing idealists of avoiding a burden of transcendence that they should otherwise shoulder. But that cannot be, since there is no burden of transcendence that I can undertake with respect to that which definitively transcends the possibility of my knowing it. Indeed, there is not even much in the way of contemplation that I can do about these matters. It is therefore somewhat mysterious what he thinks the idealist is missing out on other than humility without practical consequence. Still, Nagel takes as a 'clear sign of something wrong' Wittgenstein's treatment of the question of whether the sequence '7777' occurs in the expansion of π. Nagel takes it that at §516 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is 'led to doubt that there must be an answer to whether the sequence 7777 occurs in the decimal expansion of π.'[11] Yet that is clearly not Wittgenstein's point in this passage:

> It seems clear that we understand the meaning of the question: 'Does the sequence 7777 occur in the development of π?' It is an English sentence; it can be shown what it means for 415 to occur in the development of π; and similar things. Well, our understanding of that question reaches just so far, one may say, as such explanations reach.

Wittgenstein's point here is not that the question does not have an answer, but rather that the *question* makes only a limited degree of sense. We understand it as a sentence of English; we understand what it is to find the sequence '415' in the expansion of π. In other words, we know what it would be to set out to verify whether that sequence occurs in the value of π, and we may picture ourselves coming across such a series in the value of π. Still, that picture does not, according to Wittgenstein, yield the sense of the question. In an earlier passage of the *Investigations* (§352), Wittgenstein's interlocutor invokes the law of the excluded middle to say that either the numerals '7777' occur in the decimal expansion of π or they do not,

[10] I disagree with attributing idealism to Wittgenstein, and I call this into question later.

[11] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* 107.

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so the question must have an answer. In his reply to the interlocutor, Wittgenstein takes this invocation of the law of the excluded middle to employ the picture of a series that one person sees the whole of, in contrast with we who do not. Yet the series that this person sees the whole of is an infinite series. So, this purported perspective would permit the transversal of an infinite series in a finite amount of time. As Peter Winch has pointed out, 'postulating a being able to make infinitely many observations in a finite time is not like postulating, on a much larger scale, a being who lives long enough to experience the whole life-cycle of a redwood tree, from its germination to its withering.'[12] Now, the invocation of the law of the excluded middle is not merely an attempt to maintain that the question has an answer; rather, it is an attempt to defend the question. What Wittgenstein wants to uproot is the entirety of the picture that *appears* to give asking such questions a point. Because the asker looks to the possibility of the same view that underlies the interlocutor's response, pointing to the law of the excluded middle, the attack on that response is at the same time an attack on the sense of the question. The point of asking the question derives from an incoherent picture of a being capable of taking in the entirety of an infinite series, and so, it does not, in anything more than a surface linguistic sense, have a meaning.[13] As Wittgenstein continues in §517:

> The question arises: Can't we be mistaken in thinking that we understand a question?
> For many mathematical proofs do lead us to say that we cannot imagine something which we believed we could imagine (e.g., the construction of the heptagon.) They lead us to revise what counts as the domain of the imaginable.

This passage confirms that Wittgenstein's target in §516 is indeed the incoherent picture that provides the imaginary underpinning of the apparent sense of the question.

Nagel's understanding of §516 is based on Saul Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein according to which the meaning of our utterances depends on its meeting assertibility conditions set out by community agreement. On this view, the question makes sense (insofar as we

[12] Peter Winch, '*Im Anfang war die Tat*' in *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 44.

[13] See also Harvey Cormier's excellent treatment of similar questions in a critical discussion of Hilary Putnam's realism in *The Truth is What Works: William James, Pragmatism, and the Seed of Death* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 135–150.

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know what would answer it), but the answer has no determinacy until a community reports back on whether this series has in fact occurred in the expansion of π; since that has yet to happen, and may never happen, Nagel understands Wittgenstein to be saying that the question makes sense but might not have an answer. Nagel takes Wittgenstein's view, so understood, to have catastrophic consequences; it would make all thought an illusion. That is because, like the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, he thinks that the capacity to picture a possible state of affairs is a fundamental function of thought. Since whether our 'thought' hits its target is to be determined by a community agreement on this view of Wittgenstein, and such agreement may be lacking, our thought is radically restrained to the relatively minute realm upon which the community has reported.

As others have shown thoroughly, there is no reason to saddle Wittgenstein with this community agreement view, and more generally, those taking Wittgenstein to be an idealist need to contend with his professed interest in 'the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature.'[14] For, as Wittgenstein points out, if lumps of cheese varied in mass suddenly for no obvious reason, our practice of weighing cheese and pricing it by weight would have no point (PI §146). The upshot of that line of thought is 'it is always by favour of nature that one knows something.'[15] We are, for Wittgenstein, at the epistemological mercy of a world that extends beyond us, even if there is no justificatory relation between particular aspects of nature and particular concepts. So, provided we do not saddle Wittgenstein with the community agreement view, Wittgenstein's views do not entail that nothing extends beyond our present conception of things (although he does not offer, so far as I can tell, any positive vision of transcendence). Rather, we can see Wittgenstein as attacking a 'false transcendence' based on incoherent questions.

This line of attack cuts to the core of Nagel's project insofar as that project is based on the idea of attaining a viewpoint that is no one's point of view. This viewpoint is built on analogy with our

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), II, xii, 230.

[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 505. Note there is no reason to capitalize 'nature' as is done in the translation, since German capitalizes all nouns. See also Anscombe, G. E. M., 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism' in *The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Volume 1: From Parmenides to Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 124.

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modes of finding things out, carried out by what Michael Dummett called 'some suitably placed hypothetical being with sufficiently extended powers.'[16] But, our investigation of Wittgenstein's treatment of the expansion of π should leave us at least suspicious of the coherence of the 'powers' we are imagining this being to have. Nagel takes this battle over the expansion of π to be a proxy for a larger conflict about the view from nowhere. As I have shown, Wittgenstein does not, as Nagel contends, argue that this question may permanently escape our possibilities for verification and thus not have an answer. Rather, he claims that the question itself is based on an incoherent picture. I contend that we should have the same suspicion about any question that presupposes a similar view. So, it isn't that these questions are without answers, but that the questions are, other than in a surface linguistic sense, non-sensical. Yet to deny that such questions have a sense is not to trap us within a verificationist space bounded by community agreement.

One further argument that Nagel uses to support his view of reality and our transcendence towards it must be examined. Can we imagine, as Nagel bids us, beings that stand to us as we stand to nine-year-olds? This analogy, which Nagel employs to defend realism against idealism, might not seem to involve the incoherent aspiration that I have argued against in Nagel with appeal to Wittgenstein. After all, we adults are not beings with infinitely surpassing powers, but still, we do seem to have awareness of features of the world of which a nine-year-old is unaware, and that indeed go beyond his present powers to apprehend. Nagel wonders about a group of hypothetically marooned, permanent nine-year-olds whether someone philosophically inclined among them could attain a 'general conception of reality which applies beyond everything with which he and his like could conceivably become acquainted.'[17] Nagel does not seem to recognize a distinction between having a 'general conception of reality' in this sense and 'wondering whether there may be things about the world that he and others like him are incapable of ever finding out about or understanding.'[18] The latter reflection is not nonsense on anyone's conception; however idle it may be, it is an innocent reflection. The flawed conception of reality, which is nonsense in either the mouths of the nine-year-olds or our mouths, is Nagel's 'general conception of reality', because according to Nagel that concept contains what is

[16] Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), 467, cited in Winch, '*Im Anfang*'.

[17] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* 96.

[18] Ibid.

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inconceivable to us. This general conception of reality, according to Nagel, is a variable corresponding to our concept 'everything,' and everything includes those things we cannot conceive. It permits the articulation of claims and questions that are not only idle, but quite possibly senseless and misleading. Although Nagel admits that it could not be said to contain what we could positively show to be inconceivable, (i.e., we cannot sensibly say 'all the square circles in the world are brown'), he still thinks it makes sense to speak of 'all the things *no* finite mind could ever form a conception of.' Again, as with the question about π, this is a matter of superficial linguistic sense, but nothing more. There is no meaningful 'general conception of reality' that encompasses both our conception of what there is and that of the hypothetical being who can cognize infinite series in a finite time.

These considerations call Nagel's conception of objective transcendence deeply into question. We do get at better explanations, and among our criteria for a 'better' explanation is surely its ability to contain previous explanations. Yet our pursuit of such explanations requires us neither to break from the world as it appears to us nor to posit a conception of reality that extends beyond the world as we conceive of it. Indeed, there is no need to conceive of the pursuit of better explanations as involving transcendence in Nagel's sense. If we are seeking genuine transcendence, Nagel's idea of a 'general conception of reality', leads us down a blind alley, because it encourages us to think that transcendence is occurring while we are entertaining a thought that only apparently makes sense. Nagel rightly claims, 'only a dogmatic verificationist would deny the possibility of forming objective concepts that reach beyond our current capacity to apply them.'[19] But there is an enormous gap between allowing that innovative and, in some sense, objective application of our concepts is possible, and holding that we can use the thought of innovative and objective applications of our concepts to maintain the sense and importance of questions about a realm that rests on the postulation of an incoherent perspective. The denial of Nagel's conception of objective transcendence does not, however, mean that there is nothing that extends beyond our conceptions, and does not mean, furthermore, that there is no objective application of concepts beyond ground that we've already covered.

Nagel was looking in the wrong place for transcendence; our pursuit of better explanations does not bring into focus the central cases that call for transcendence. Instead, I will argue that

[19] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* 24.

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understanding other persons is a central case, in that it most often requires us to transcend ourselves. This shift in focus does not make this conception of transcendence irrelevant to Nagel's concerns, however. Persons are simply natural beings of enormous complexity and particularity, and that is why they require transcendence from us, in order to be understood accurately. In this context, transcendence will appear as something quite different from the breezy cognitive ranging that Nagel allows for; the novel application of concepts is the result of an often hard-won innovation that requires grappling with the complexity of individuals in the context of our concrete surroundings. Once we bring into focus the work necessary to achieve transcendence, our conception of transcendence becomes more realistic and genuine in that it may actually require us to change, and change more than conceptually, in order to achieve it.

III

Transcendence need not mean coming to a perspective that is more external in Nagel's sense; rather, it may 'merely' mean overcoming my present point of view or way of conceiving things. Yet, this sense of transcendence is not adequately captured by what Nagel has called 'subjective' transcendence, meaning the attempt to see things from another's point of view. Though coming to understand another person or creature better does often involve taking her or its point of view, enriched understanding and conceptual change does not always emerge from that sort of transcendence, and, indeed, an enriched understanding of someone else may be necessary *before* one can see things from her point of view. In other words, coming to grasp what the world looks like from a point of view informed by her interests and concerns requires the prior understanding of those concerns and interests. That, in turn, may require bringing different concepts to bear on those interests and concerns. Understanding another person may require something more than subjective transcendence, in Nagel's sense. Such transcendence, rather than looking at the world from someone else's point of view, is what I am after here. I am not proposing an alternate conception of subjective transcendence, but rather an alternative view on how we transcend ourselves in understanding one of the most complex features of the natural world, another person. That is because the practical function of transcendence, as understood here, is not to develop an impersonal description of the natural world, but to develop a

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description that does justice to the particularity of individuals in the natural world.

If transcendence means something like 'overcoming my previous views to get to a better understanding,' but 'better understanding' does not mean 'getting a closer approximation to how things really are independently of my concerns and concepts,' then the focus must shift from an 'external' reality to the interests, desires, and concepts underpinning my understanding. I contend that a better understanding will be the outgrowth of an effort to understand guided by better interests and desires, which effort will, sometimes, result in conceptual change. Better understanding, in other words, requires a virtuous exercise of the intellect. Although the product of transcendence is still intellectual, genuine transcendence requires an effort, that is, it requires the will; though at times transcendence requires a heroic effort, it is an ordinary part of the life of a virtuous mind, that is, an intellect directed by a good will.

Iris Murdoch suggestively treated the kind of transcendence I am aiming at here in several of her writings. To explicate this conception of transcendence, then, I will turn to one of her examples in which a jealous and snobby mother comes to see her daughter-in-law differently.[20] The mother starts out with the view that her poor son 'has married a silly vulgar girl' and comes to discover that the daughter is 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.'[21] Murdoch sees this mother as engaged in an activity, albeit a purely inward and mental activity. In particular, she sees the mother as engaged in an effort of directing her attention to the daughter-in-law and discovering what she really is. Murdoch recognizes that, for the most part, it will be extremely difficult to recognize in actual instances of 'coming to a better understanding of someone' whether that has actually taken place, but she contends that she is thinking of a case in which the description of the mother as discovering the truth about her daughter-in-law fits. That admission may seem to beg the most important question we would have for her account: how, in the end, do we know that what we 'discover' is to count as a *bona fide* discovery, anyway?

Murdoch does not evade this question. Rather, she writes into her example, as supporting her view that the mother makes a discovery,

[20] This example, though it involves attributing what Murdoch calls 'normative epithets' to another person, is still, I will argue later, a counterpart to Nagel's objective transcendence.

[21] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1970), 17–18.

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that the mother is trying to 'see her [i.e., the daughter-in-law] justly or lovingly'; the justice and lovingness of her vision, to the extent she achieves it, is what leads us to count her realizations about her daughter-in-law as genuine discoveries.[22] This response, of course, raises the further question of what it is to regard someone in this way. Some things might come to mind, such as a commitment to try to see the daughter's actions as positively as possible, to apply a principle of charity to her conversational contributions and the like. No doubt that is part of the meaning, but something more interesting is meant as well. Murdoch speaks of the mother as learning not only about the daughter-in-law, but also about the concepts that she uses to describe the daughter. As Murdoch puts it, the just or loving attention that the mother directs toward the daughter-in-law changes the mother's 'moral vision' by making it apparent that a given concept has an application to a new case. Now, this conceptual innovation is not as simple a matter as coming to see that the concept 'chair' applies to something initially thought of as an odd looking composition of metal and cloth. That is because it involves coming to see someone thought to be vulgar as 'refreshingly simple,' and that means not only viewing a person very different, but also quite possibly taking a very different view of 'vulgarity' and 'simplicity'. Such change is likely to be a more wrenching than extending our conception of what a chair is, because it will have an impact on more than what we choose to sit on; it will impact the concepts with which we describe persons, which concepts are involved in significant decisions about the course of our lives.

We must bear in mind that what justifies describing the daughter-in-law as 'refreshingly simple' is that she is also 'gay' and 'spontaneous,' that she has done things that we have come to see as meriting these descriptions. There are, however, no pre-cut teeth for the gears of our conceptual machinery to fit into here. The challenge, Murdoch contends, is not for us to match an extra-conceptual texture of reality, but for us to *bring ourselves* to believe something that is difficult to believe. The shift of the will has two components: first, it is a commitment to describe this person as she merits being described. In view of that commitment, the charitable redescriptions of the daughter (as 'gay', etc.) become salient as live possibilities, that is, a possibilities that we are willing to entertain that were before not even considered.[23] To endorse those redescriptions, the mother-in-law

[22] Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 23.

[23] The language of a 'live possibility' is that of William James in 'The Will to Believe' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1923).

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must overcome her commitment to seeing the daughter-in-law as 'vulgar', 'noisy,' etc., and that very likely requires renouncing her jealous attachment to her son. She must, in other words, not only will to see the daughter-in-law as she merits being described, but, once an alternative description becomes salient, she must will to endorse those particular descriptions. She must will to believe that the daughter is really 'gay,' not merely 'noisy.' Of course, it may turn out that a memory of a particularly loud outburst of laughter thrusts itself upon the mother so that she cannot avoid seeing her as noisy. There is an alternative here: on the one hand, the mother might recognize her inability to see past this outburst as a weakness on her part; if only she could see past this outburst, she could see the daughter-in-law as really 'gay', but she can't bring herself to do so. On the other hand, the thought of the outburst may lead her to give up the idea that the daughter is 'gay' and recommit her to her initial description, perhaps with renewed conviction. Now, if the mother let us into her contemplation of the daughter-in-law, we should have to decide whether, if the mother refuses to change her view of the daughter-in-law, the mother is capitulating viciously or if she is really right about the daughter-in-law. Interestingly, what permits us to make this judgment is not an impartial, detached view, but only sharing the mother-in-law's commitment and intimacy with the daughter. It may be that, lacking the jealous attachment to the son, we could attain a 'purer' view of the daughter-in-law, but whether that attachment is what leads the mother to the judgment, in the latter case, that the daughter is really just noisy will be the result of our exercise of judgment guided by a similar commitment to viewing the daughter justly.

Murdoch describes the mother's effort here as the 'work of attention,' because she is describing a process whereby the mother devotes herself to attending to the daughter-in-law, and, in the process comes to see how she can apply her concepts to support an alternative description that transforms what those concepts mean to her. The challenge is indistinguishably intellectual and moral, a task for the will as much as the mind. For what must be worked against are inclinations to dismiss a view that will require admitting our previous wrongs and relinquishing our grasp on someone who is dear. The descriptions that were shaped by the selfish attachment must be changed. We know that they are not adequate because they resulted from the mother's selfish concerns.[24] The 'work of

[24] In the case of understanding another person, selfishness is directly an intellectual vice; in other areas, it is not so direct. Though vanity may lead a scientist to falsify experimental data, a generally selfish scientist can get good results if he or she is sufficiently scrupulous in her scientific work.

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attention' engaged in by the mother shifts her view of the daughter-in-law through an awareness of the way the selfish concerns shaped her previous conception of the daughter, and an effort to see her lovingly. At the same time, this effort recasts the web of concepts that she comes to see as fitting an individual heretofore conceived in very different terms.

At this point, one might be tempted—even if one is not generally a non-cognitivist about value—to view this example as nothing more than the mother taking a different attitude toward the same behaviour, behaviour that is simply there independently of her account. But this ignores what Murdoch is taking seriously: an agent's effort to figure out what language this behaviour *merits*, and to get at the truth about the daughter-in-law by overcoming jealous attachment to her son.[25] The point is that this overcoming is motivated by a different concern, that is, a concern to describe this individual in language that does her justice. Furthermore, this kind of effort generally is the kind of effort that can result in seeing, for the first time, what 'spontaneity' or 'gaiety' or 'courage' really means; she points to an experience of having our conception radically reshaped when confronted with an individual that merits a certain description. Not all such experiences are equally wrenching (though we can imagine that the realization of the daughter's true character was for this mother-in-law), but some are crucially transformative. If Murdoch's account of our moral phenomenology, in particular, our experience of conceptual change is accurate, and I think it is, then it raises yet another issue that the non-cognitivist has to contend with. For it seems to me that the refashioning of concepts to which she draws our attention could not be accounted for in non-cognitivist terms. According to that view, the mother would be at one time describing the daughter-in-law in terms that express her negative attitude and then, after a change of heart, wheel in terms that express her positive attitude. The non-cognitivist might point out that she may be changing the range of behaviours to which she is ready to apply the terms of appraisal. But that is not genuine conceptual change; it is not a changed view of the behaviour that we think merits these concepts, but rather a change of heart in the agent. The terms themselves consistently express a positive or negative attitude, and it is up to the agent to decide, on the basis of her passions, where to direct them. By contrast, the conceptual change that Murdoch describes as a change of moral vision

[25] For the importance of this aspect of the phenomenology of value, see John McDowell 'Values and Secondary Qualities,' *Mind, Value, and Reality,* 144.

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means realizing that an individual merits being described with a particular concept and likewise that this is an instance where this concept should be applied. And, especially in the wrenching cases, that individual comes to stand as an unanticipated exemplar of what 'courage' or 'spontaneity' is all about when she previously stood as an exemplar of opposed qualities. Here, in other words, is a case of the 'innovative and objective' application of a concept that Nagel wants to rescue from dogmatic verificationists, stripped entirely of the notion that objectivity requires getting to a more external perspective.

Indeed, Murdoch describes the development of moral concepts for an agent as a movement toward greater 'privacy', meaning that we develop a more idiosyncratic, individual use of moral terms as we mature morally. We develop, for example, an individual sense of what to look for that might merit being called 'courageous'; which necessarily involves developing a more individual sense of the terms 'steadfast', 'calm', 'temperate', and so on. In spite of Murdoch's claims to the contrary, she does not mean 'private' here in the same sense that is employed in Wittgenstein's private language argument. It is not the case that the term is not shareable with someone who does not possess our sensibility, although appreciating the idiosyncratic application might require change of sensibility.[26] Murdoch herself makes clear that there is nothing that is in principle incommunicable about my individual sense of normative terms:

> Uses of words by persons grouped round a common object is a central and vital human activity. The art critic can help us if we are in the presence of the same object and if we know something about his scheme of concepts… Progress in understanding a scheme of concepts often takes place as we listen to normative-descriptive talk in the presence of a common object.[27]

In the presence of a common object the art critic can lead us to realize what descriptions the object *merits*, independently of some personal concerns that may deflect us from such descriptions, which is not to say: independent of our human or mammalian concerns. This passage suggests that we see an art critic exemplifying delicate appreciation of an art object; she is guided not only by a rich knowledge of art objects, but also by a concern to describe the object in terms that it merits, and by a sensibility about the application of value language to such objects that has developed

[26] See John Wright 'Moral Discourse, Pluralism, and Moral Cognitivism,' *Metaphilosophy* (forthcoming).

[27] Murdoch, *Sovereignty,* 32.

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over time. We can picture ourselves coming to the object with the same concern, listening to the art critic describe the object as she points out how features of the work merit the application of certain terms. In this example, the art critic, unless she is corrupt, might be described as being more in touch with the reality of art objects, yet not because she is able to explain her concepts to someone who does not share her sensibility. Rather, it is because she is able to show us that her appreciation of the object, her sensibility, is an outgrowth of her concern for justly describing art objects. If we recognize that the art critic's sensibility is indeed the outgrowth of her concern for the just application of value terms, and begin to follow her in her use, we may be brought to transcend our previous usage. We become, in the process, more virtuous appreciators of those objects. We have, in such a case, overcome a superficial, unjust assessment, and we are now more in touch with the reality of that object; we begin to see how new objects merit the application of concepts we may have already possessed at some level, but would not have considered using on *these* objects. Here, transcendence begins with and ends with our way of conceiving things, because it is the realization that something heretofore not seen as x merits being called x without appeal to features graspable independently of the sensibility that allows me to determine the appropriateness of that description. This realization may change what I think of as being x, though not, of course, out of all connection with our previous conception or the sensibility that allows me to apprehend that description.

Now, Murdoch does conceive of such change as putting us in touch with reality, and describes her view as moral realism. But what Murdoch means by reality and realism stands in stark contrast with Nagel's view. Whereas objective reality is held by Nagel to be that which is accessible to those not sharing our sensory and conceptual apparatus, Murdoch holds that our shared conceptual apparatus as well as our developed, idiosyncratic uses of those concepts are vital to approaching the real world. First, for Murdoch, describing the world accurately means coming to terms with the world as we have, in part, willed it. She holds that 'we have already partly willed our world when we come to look at it.'[28] I take it that she means to say by this that our practical undertakings give shape to our conceptual apparatus. It is in the context of our willed, practical undertakings that a set of conceptual distinctions takes shape, not that we create and recreate the world in accordance with our will. Yet, this position is not incompatible with talk of reality for her

[28] Iris Murdoch, 'The Darkness of Practical Reason' in *Existentialists and Mystics* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 201.

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because, first, although our concepts are our creations, they have implications that extend beyond what we first willed. Second, our *judicious* use of our concepts to describe someone or something is itself a part of our normative conception. When Murdoch speaks of 'moral realism' she means not the reality of some set of moral facts, but rather, as she puts it, 'morality … is a form of realism'. In other words, the term 'moral' in Murdoch's 'moral realism' does not designate the mind-independence of some set of entities described as moral facts. Realism, for her, signifies a kind of serious engagement with the individuals that we encounter, because we are committed to doing justice to persons and things in word and deed.[29] For Murdoch, to be a realist is to be moral and vice versa. Our sense of what it is to be realist, what it is to embody this serious engagement with the world and commitment to the judicious description of individuals, is likewise something that may develop toward idiosyncrasy as we encounter individuals who challenge us to see them as embodying this quality. In this sense, realism may not generate convergence, but that need not generate worry, since people, art objects, and the terms we use to describe them are complex enough that divergence over them is to be expected. There may, indeed, be distinct, mutually compatible ways to do justice to a person or work of art.

A suspicion might linger, however, that the transcendence that Murdoch describes applies *only* to a restricted range of properties, and not to properties that concern the scientist making experimental observations of the natural world. Scientists, after all, do not seek idiosyncrasy in their language, but rather quite the opposite. They seem to seek after something much more like what Nagel described, an impersonal, if not independent description of the world. It's true that scientific knowledge exhibits a stability and convergence that is often, if not usually, lacking in discussions of morality and aesthetics. Yet we should not move from that observation to the kind of logical distinction between fact and value that Murdoch so forcefully and eloquently criticized. I shall not renew these arguments, but rather point out two matters of relevance to this context, where I hope only to prevent the notion of transcendence I have elaborated from Murdoch's work from being sidelined as applying *merely* to moral and aesthetic matters. First, we should

[29] Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 59. See also, Cora Diamond's '"We are Perpetually Moralists": Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value' in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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not exempt any fact of nature from being part of an appreciation of the world that is idiosyncratic; our appreciation of the reproductive cycle of a plant may no doubt figure in our idiosyncratic appreciation of a plant. Yet Murdoch would claim that our idiosyncratic appreciation of the individual plant goes deeper into the reality of that plant than our scientific understanding permits because it grapples with features of *this* plant in particular. While we may be able to study several features of a given plant scientifically, we would still be describing it only in terms derived from procedures that focus on features that the plant shares with other individuals of that species, or other plants. Fully understanding a plant as an individual would go well beyond what science would tell us about it, reaching into its aesthetic and moral value, but the appearance of a separation between these two emerges, on this view, only from the fact that aesthetic and moral value are more deeply wedded to the individual than are the matters that interest scientists. As with plants, so much more so with human beings; Murdoch claims, 'the most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man.'[30] That is, the descriptions that best capture a human being will lie beyond the reach of the methodological generality of science, even though ultimately we are describing a completely natural entity with those terms. We learn about the digestive and nervous systems of *Homo sapiens* inductively by studying the function of those systems across individuals, and thus become able to describe systematically the anatomy and physiology of a single individual's organ system. One might say that we similarly learn about courage, by having courage ostensively defined for us in several instances, until we are able to apply it successfully to new cases, eliciting agreement from those who taught us the concept or else being able to convince those who taught us that we have a good case for calling this 'courage'. Yet Murdoch argues that moral and aesthetic concepts are highly responsive to the individuals that fall under them, such that lighting on a new individual to which they apply can transform our moral vision in changing our moral concepts. Such concepts have, as it were, a volatility that is essential to their capacity to describe individuals adequately.

Because these moral and aesthetic descriptions of individuals transcend what is methodologically available to the scientist, they are seen as logically different. Typically, they are also seen as less real not simply because they are rightly recognized as dependent on

[30] Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good' in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 215.

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our sensibilities and idiosyncratic deployments of our concepts, but because there is an invidious comparison with scientific views based on the idea of an external perspective à la Nagel. If we deny the coherence of this notion, there is no basis for such an invidious comparison: it is simply the case that our grasp on such facts is associated with the development of an idiosyncratic sensibility. Further, such qualities are likely to be the basis of many choices and the course of our lives. Hence, Murdoch has a tendency to treat such qualities as 'moral facts'. Such moral facts are, however, not *logically* distinct from any other sort of fact, even though they may elude scientific study. The distinctions I just noted between the kinds of descriptions that science tends to offer and the kind of moral and aesthetic descriptions that we offer of natural individuals are only a matter of degree. Nothing prevents us, in principle, from deriving moral conclusions from scientific facts, Murdoch argues. Also moral facts do not rest on further (descriptive, scientific) facts. Murdoch rejects definitional naturalism and argues that the natural world itself has a 'deep moral configuration.'[31] That is, our moral descriptions capture part of what a situation simply is, and without these descriptions we will be missing something about it. Indeed, Murdoch suggests that our apprehension of moral facts puts us in touch with reality to a greater extent than scientific facts, in that the former put us in touch with the particularity of individuals.[32] So, transcendence, in this sense, applies to just the same things that science applies to, but instead of achieving a picture that is more impersonal, it consists of a progressive refinement of our sensibility in light of attempts to do justice to the individuals that we encounter. I therefore christen this conception of transcendence 'sensibility-transcendence', and, in the next section I will draw some more general conclusions about sensibility-transcendence.

IV

Murdoch, in the passage used as an epigram for this essay, suggests that true transcendence would be something independent of human need.[33] Further, she argues that her way of talking is not a mere *façon de parler;* she wants to say more than that 'it works' to speak

[31] Iris Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 30 (1956): 55.

[32] Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 34.

[33] Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 58.

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this way. This may suggest that Murdoch would not be satisfied with the interpretation I have just put on her work in contrasting it with Nagel's notion as dispensing with the notion of a 'general conception of reality'. After all, Murdoch herself says:

> The true naturalist … is one who *believes* that as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes.[34]

Further, having just concluded a discussion that gave an irreducible role to natural moral facts in capturing what a situation simply is, my claim that the sensibility-transcendence I have attributed to Murdoch dispenses with reality may now seem disingenuous.

Yet, as I have pointed out, sensibility-transcendence does not depend on a notion of accordance with a reality that is beyond our ways of conceiving things. Rather, it is necessary for us to have a concept of courage in order to think of what beings *merit* being called 'courageous'. In the process of virtuously considering which individuals merit this normative epithet, our conception of courage may undergo significant change that counts as a discovery. Intellectual virtue is an essential component of Murdoch's account of moral realism, which is, as I noted above, thoroughly normative. 'Discovery' is a term that for Murdoch signals precisely that the thought process leading up to a given realization was in fact virtuous. Indeed, I contend that, for Murdoch, the whole language of 'reality' is one that must be read in this light, that is, as a part of her normative vocabulary. 'To be put in touch with reality' therefore signals not to have beliefs that correspond with a piece of reality as it exists apart from our notions, but rather, to have arrived at a belief via a virtuous thought process. On this view, if moral facts are essential for being in touch with reality, that is because this language and mode of contemplating natural beings are essential for being a virtuous agent. Again, morality is, for Murdoch, a form of realism, in the normative sense. That means that terms like 'courageous', 'petulant', 'clear-minded', 'incoherent' and the like are essential vocabulary for a virtuous contemplator. We will not have a good description of the world without employing that language, and without doing so in a manner that would be described by a virtuous agent as itself good deliberation. There is, indeed, circularity here. We may not be able to convince a vicious agent that his description of the world embodies intellectual vices, and we may certainly be

[34] Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice,' 56.

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wrong. A fully virtuous agent, for Murdoch, is aware of the fallibility of her judgments so that 'the good', for her, is an elusive and magnetic ideal.[35] Still, the connection should not be broken between 'the good' and what is good for human beings. It may not, for Murdoch, be reducible to a specific set of natural properties, but it is not for that reason a non-natural property. Rather, the good serves to guide our fallible yet virtuous deliberation and contemplation. It is tied to the constant possibility of transcending our previous conceptions in light of complex concrete individuals. Nothing in Murdoch's writings is inconsistent with seeing the virtues as to be defined in terms of the human good, serving human needs and interests. Genuine transcendence need not, therefore, be severed altogether from human needs. It is clear, nevertheless, that some types of transcendence are little more than a consolation, such as the 'transcendence' achieved through pictures of the world that achieve a unified complete description only through excluding the complexity of individuals and the moral and aesthetic vocabularies that would describe them adequately. Thus, when Murdoch contrasts true transcendence with human need, she is not saying that transcendence must be wholly independent of human need, but rather, she is worrying about short-circuiting our efforts at contemplation by settling for a description that merely fills some of our more immediate needs. In other words, she is setting up a contrast between transcendence that is the result of virtuous contemplation and deliberation on the one hand and the false transcendence that results from vice on the other.

Still, the language of submission to reality's transcendent purpose is just the sort to which Richard Rorty objects, and, indeed, this is language to which many contemporary philosophers would also no doubt also have objections, without necessarily signing on to Rorty's more global objections to reality-talk. The passage cited above suggests a pre-modern teleological view according to which we map our purposes onto nature and then think we must conform to those purposes. It may therefore be taken to invite a dangerous narrowing of our imagination, making us think that we must accept descriptions that we would do better overthrowing, or even the kind of consoling dream that Murdoch so wanted to avoid. Yet Murdoch's claim here must be taken together with her claim, cited earlier, that we live in a world that is already shaped by the contributions of our will, and that our task is to reconcile ourselves to a world we have willed, which is not something we can simply overthrow, not all at once at any rate.

[35] Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 62–63.

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Murdoch's talk of conforming to the purposes of a transcendent reality need not contradict sensibility-transcendence. For the talk of submission and obedience is a way of describing the motivations that lead us to expand the range of our concerns and such expansion is necessary to transcendence. We do not in fact know the purpose of this reality that transcends us, so we attend to it as carefully as possible, and resist mapping onto it concerns that really are our own. This motivation is present in good science, in which scientists methodically check their desire to see a given outcome from leading them to find that outcome.[36] Good science can lead to transcendence, but does not define transcendence, as Nagel suggests. For there is a range of transcendence which is distinct from the methods and concerns of natural science, and that involves a wrenching confrontation with an individual. More importantly, the transcendence that good science brings about is not to be defined by anything about its product, e.g., the fact that it might be shareable with Martians. Rather, this transcendence is associated with our will. For from the standpoint of sensibility-transcendence, the so-called 'independence' of reality is nothing other than the limited scope of our concerns by contrast with the concern for justice that leads us to a more adequate picture of another natural being. In other words, the mere consideration that there may be facts about these things that extend beyond our conception of them does not matter from this perspective. In that way, the notion of a 'general conception of reality' does not serve any important purpose in this conception of transcendence. What does matter is what we fail to see because on some level, we would rather not. Such facts do not stand alone in an extra-conceptual reality; rather they are implications of a conceptual apparatus that our activity creates. Perhaps we could avoid recognizing a hard fact by giving up a concept, but we may still question underlying motives for doing so, and may have to recognize something ugly about those motives.

On my view, then, 'submission to the purposes of a transcendent reality' may be taken as a picturesque presentation of sensibility-transcendence. It describes, albeit indirectly, virtues that lead us seriously to engage in the effort required to arrive at descriptions that the individuals we encounter merit. Of course, having the intention to describe individuals in this way does not ensure that we will describe them in terms that they merit. Yet all that we can bring forward to contest what descriptions individuals *do* merit are other descriptions that are recognizably guided by an intention to do justice that is itself the product of a virtuous intellect, that is, an

[36] Murdoch, S*overeignty*, 70.

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intellect shaped by long standing concern to carry out such intentions successfully. The conception of transcendence that I have attributed to Murdoch does not appeal to any notion of 'cutting reality at its joints'. It is therefore, I still contend, an important and genuine sense of transcendence that does not rely on a conception of reality as already cut up into pieces that we then match.

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