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Saving the Contingent. A Dialogue Between Iris Murdoch and Aquinas*

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They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.
But the man that is shall shadow
The man that pretends to be.

T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"*

If it's true that the main aim of Murdoch's moral philosophy is that of confuting the liberal-existentialist view, which conceives the individual as an empty and solitary locus of freedom capable of "flying in the face of the facts",[1] thus emphasizing his loneliness, an equal effort is devoted to avoiding a vision in which the individual is absorbed in a given theoretical framework or a 'system', as I have tried to suggest by quoting Eliot at the beginning of the paper. This is how Murdoch's critique to the 'Natural Law moralists'[2] should be read, many ideas of which she nevertheless accepts. These philosophers, although not affected by the much heavier accusations against the so-called 'existentialists', are however defined, with a vague and ambiguous expression, such as those according to which "the individual is seen as held in a framework which transcends him, where what is important and valuable is the framework, and the individual only has importance, or even reality, in so far as he belongs to the framework".[3]

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[1] Cf. I. Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in P. Conradi (ed.), *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, London: Chatto & Windus 1997, 320-321.

[2] Cf. I. Murdoch, 'Metaphysiscs and Ethics', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics,* 70.

[3] Cf. Ibid.

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Murdoch mentions Aquinas together with such metaphysicians of the past,[4] who compose therefore a diverse group including, among the others, Hegelians and Marxists as well. Although this hint to the group of the Natural Law moralists neither contains a direct critique nor explicitly mentions Thomas, but rather the Thomists, broadly understood, one has the feeling that Murdoch, labeling these authors as a single block, is implicitly distancing herself from them, in order to promote a position that, while sharing some fundamental issues with theirs, differs significantly from it, like the use of the word 'held' suggests. This hypothesis, along with the unmotivated juxtaposition of Thomists, Hegelian and Marxist, suggests that Murdoch has, in all probability, interpreted Aquinas as a deductivist, as if he promoted a moral account conceived as a closed system, received 'from above', to which the individual could only passively submit.

Therefore, in this paper I will try to show: that Murdoch's concern in distancing herself from this group is to 'save the contingent'; that Thomas Aquinas's moral philosophy, if properly understood, is not a 'prison' in which the individual has no role as a moral agent, and is reduced to a mere executor of an entirely given system; finally that there is, therefore, much more closeness between Thomas and Murdoch than she could have believed.

1. Iris Murdoch between *Liberal view* and *Natural Law view*

As highlighted by Maria Antonaccio in her article on form and contingency, in Iris Murdoch's thought there is a profound tension[5] between two poles that the British philosopher points out several times in her work and that she attempts to preserve in their polarity, trying to avoid the opposite risks of emphasizing either of them. The first pole is the irresistible tendency of human reason to give unity, form and order to the chaotic matter of experience, while the second is the equally irresistible impulse of accepting the intrinsic irreducibility of experience to that unity and order. The exacerbation of one of the two tendencies at the expenses of the other is at the origin of liberal existentialism (the 'Liberal view') on the one hand and, on the other, of a totalizing metaphysics, such as that of the Natural Law moralists.

If Murdoch's critique to the Liberal view is quite well known, much less attention has been given, to my knowledge, to an examination of her fundamental concern for the safeguard of the contingent from a

[4] As noted also by Piergiorgio Donatelli. Cf. P. Donatelli, 'Iris Murdoch: concetti e perfezionismo morale', in P. Donatelli, E. Spinelli (eds.), *Il senso della virtù*, Rome: Carocci, 2009, 101-121.

[5] Cf. I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London: Chatto & Windus 1992, in particular 211.

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system which risks to unify it into a form, to the point of cancelling it. This is nevertheless a constant guideline of her thought, present both in her ethical and metaphysical reflections and in her observations regarding literary criticism and the qualities of a good novelist.

For what concerns the strictly philosophical side of this concern, according to Murdoch what jeopardizes a genuine opening to the particular, to the chaotic and unpredictable detail of experience is, among others, the danger coming from the Natural Law view. According to her, "[. . .] Hegel's man [. . .] abhors the contingent or accidental. (*La Nausée*, horror of the contingent)".[6]

In other words, what prevents a full opening to reality in its autonomy and authority is not only the liberal conception, which separates facts and values and transforms value into a label attached by the will, nor is only the neurosis, that is, the obsessive closure in one's consoling fantasies. An important role is also played by social conventions and by the unifying and totalizing tendency of consciousness, typical of the Natural Law view: "The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies, that is, of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis. One may fail to see the individual because of Hegel's totality, because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined".[7]

According to the Natural Law moralists, whose precursor is Kant, just as in the case of the Liberal view, "[. . .] the individual is seen as moving tentatively vis-à-vis a reality which transcends him. To discover what is morally good is to discover that reality, and to become good is to integrate himself with it. He is ruled by laws which he can only partly understand. He is not fully conscious of what he is. His freedom is not an open freedom of choice in a clear situation; it lies rather in an increasing knowledge of his own real being, and in the conduct which naturally springs from such knowledge".[8]

A good metaphysics, on the contrary, and consequently a good moral philosophy, should be able, according to Murdoch, to take both aspects into account, combining them without reducing either of them to the other. Moral philosophy, in particular, cannot forget to preserve what is contingent, particular and individual.[9] It should

[6] I. Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 269.

[7] I. Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 216.

[8] Murdoch, 'Metaphysics and Ethics', 70.

[9] Cf. M. Antonaccio, 'Form and Contingency in Ethics', in M. Antonaccio, W. Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 111.

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follow the example of the great art, which is capable of defeating the *horror vacui* caused by the contingent and by its chaotic irreducibility: "A great novelist is essentially tolerant, that is, displays a real apprehension of persons other than the author as having a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves. [. . .] The great novelist is not afraid of the contingent; yet his acceptance of the contingent does not land him in banality".[10]

What is needed are "moral attitudes which emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world",[11] that is, a moral thought which does not surrender to the rationalistic tendency to unity, but is capable of sustaining the differences,[12] giving a full account of the entire richness of experience. What is needed, therefore, is a 'two-way movement' between a unifying thought, imposing a certain unity to the complexity of experience, and a particularizing thought, resisting the impulse to order and identifying the phenomena.[13] That is, a "movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts".[14]

This ascending-descending dialectic is at work, according to Murdoch, in Plato's thought as well: "Because of his ambiguous attitude to the sensible world, [. . .] Plato sometimes seems to imply that the road towards the Good leads away from the world of particularity and detail. However, he speaks of a descending as well as an ascending dialectic and he speaks of a return to the cave. In any case [. . .] goodness [. . .] must combine its increasing intuitions of unity with an increasing grasp of complexity and detail. False conceptions are often generalised, stereotyped and unconnected. True conceptions combine just modes of judgement and ability to connect with an increased perception of detail".[15]

In short, a good moral philosophy should find a third way between the Liberal view and the Natural Law view, so to safeguard both the transcendence of value and the tension to unity, and the irreducibility of the individual and of particular experience. It should struggle both against neurosis, which traps the agent in an individual dream, in which he absorbs external reality, becoming incapable of grasping its authority, and convention, which equally prevents the agent from

[10] Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 271.

[11] I. Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 87.

[12] As observed by F. Cattaneo, *Etica e narrazione. Il contributo del narrativismo contemporaneo*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2011, 64.

[13] Cf. Antonaccio, 'Form and Contingency', 112.

[14] I. Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 299.

[15] I. Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 378-379.

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grasping the individual by immersing him in a social totality.[16] This would be the only way to obtain that realistic perception, whose essence is love, which is both the method and the goal of the moral pilgrimage proposed by Murdoch: "Art and morals are [...] one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. [...] It is the apprehension of something particular, as existing outside us".[17]

Let us analyze briefly how Murdoch develops the idea of a particularizing thought compatible with a habitable 'house of theory'.[18] The two movements, far from being separate, proceed in Murdoch hand in hand, through the central dispositions of attention and imagination, which construct the moral vision, and are in turn corroborated by it, so to preserve both the irreducible tension to form and the safeguard of the contingent, that is, "the minute and absolutely random detail of the world".[19]

As it is defined by Murdoch, "the word 'attention' [... expresses] the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent".[20] Attention, therefore, is the capacity of detaching from the obsessions and neuroses of the ego, and also from systematic and totalizing conventions, in order to grasp individual reality such as it is. Thus, it is not a punctual and momentary activity, but a continuous one, which builds up an always renewed moral and conceptual configuration of the world. Imagination is an activity to which, like to attention, Murdoch confers a key role in moral life, and can be defined as "a type of reflection on people, events, etc., which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual. When this activity is thought to be bad it is sometimes called 'fantasy' or 'wishful thinking'. [...] Imagining is *doing*, is a sort of personal exploring. [...] The world which we confront is not just a world of 'facts' but a world upon which our imagination has, at any given moment, already worked; and although such working may often be

[16] Cf. Cattaneo, *Etica e narrazione*, 75.

[17] I. Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 215-216.

[18] Cf. I. Murdoch, 'On 'God' and 'Good'', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 337: "A moral philosophy should be inhabited". For the expression "house of theory", cf. the homonymous essay 'A House of Theory', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 171-186.

[19] Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', 371.

[20] Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', 327.

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'fantasy' and may constitute a barrier to our seeing 'what is really there', this is not necessarily so".[21]

Continuous acts of attention and imagination, made possible by the magnetic power of attraction of the good, shape a moral vision which becomes increasingly complex and articulated, and allows the agent to see the virtues in their mutual relationships and hierarchy, so to give to each of them the due credit in each situation.[22] The most famous example is that of M and D, in which a mother, through the exercise of these dispositions, comes to see her daughter-in-law in a different light, learning to see her in her individual reality, with compassion, justice and love.

Attention, together with imagination, as it has been noted by Blum,[23] are fundamental steps of moral perception, which precedes judgment and enables the agent to acknowledge the moral features of a situation. Moral perception, according to Blum's account, is a complex process, scarcely reducible to unity, which involves several psychological capacities and processes, both related to perception and to the agent's moral character. A good moral perception requires a perceptive attention to the salient details of a situation, a moral character of a certain kind (that is, the possession of certain moral categories and concepts), and an adequate imaginative capacity. To sum up, in order to grasp a moral situation many capacities are needed, some more related to sensitivity (such as attention, empathy, opening to the other's feelings and concerns, imagination), and others displaying a more intellectual nature, such as the possession of a certain character, the willingness to change one's moral concepts, a critical attitude towards oneself and one's moral categories, the capacity of calling oneself into question. It is this descent to the particular up to the detail of the individual situation, grasped in its unique moral configuration, which allows to build and to clarify one's moral vision on a more general level.

This reconstruction of the dispositions necessary for an effective opening to the particular, carried out by Blum in the wake of Murdoch, seems particularly useful in deepening the two-way movement which characterizes Murdoch's thought, as well as in elucidating how Murdoch intends the salvation of the contingent.[24]

Let us sum up briefly what has appeared so far to be the way Murdoch safeguards the dialectic between and ascendant movement

[21] I. Murdoch, 'The Darkness of Practical Reason', in Conradi, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 198-199.

[22] Cf., for example, Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', 378.

[23] Cf. L.A. Blum, *Moral perception and particularity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 30.

[24] It must be said that, although I find Blum's analysis of moral perception extremely useful, I disagree with him in making Murdoch a moral particularist.

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(towards the universality) and a descendent one (towards the contingent), without sacrificing either of them. The universal pole is represented by the attraction of the good, conceived as a transcendental horizon, capable of magnetic attraction, which compels the agent to unify experience and to advance morally, making his perception of reality always morally colored. It is this power of attraction which makes possible the agent's moral vision, to which Murdoch, as it is well known, gives special attention, considering it one of the milestones of her own reflection: "[. . .] Moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision. In other words, a moral concept seems less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of *Gestalt*. We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds".[25] And, "There are [. . .] moments when situations are unclear and what is needed is not a renewed attempt to specify the facts, but a fresh vision which may be derived from a 'story' or from some sustaining concept which is able to deal with what is obstinately obscure, and represents a 'mode of understanding' of an alternative type".[26]

The key role in the particular pole, on the other hand, is played by the capacity of paying a loving attention to the chaotic details of a manifold reality, so to reshape continuously, in a potentially never-ending process, the moral vision itself. As it has been noted by F. Cattaneo, moral progress is, in Murdoch's account, an increasing capacity to see the universal starting from the particular, and to grasp the particular in the light of the universal.[27] Through continuous acts of attention, one can constantly rebuild his moral vision, enrich his set of concepts, enlarge, or modify, the area of his liberty. One can discover new connections among virtues and change their respective roles in his life: "I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. [. . .] One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see. If we ignore the prior work of attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify it with. But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. [. . .] The exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all

[25] Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', 82.
[26] Ibid., 91.
[27] Cattaneo, *Etica e narrazione*, 84.

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the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. [...] What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial".[28]

2. Thomas Aquinas: virtue, prudence and the particular-universal dialectic

Now that I have briefly exposed the dialectic between universal and particular in Murdoch, and her attempt to save the contingent, I would like to show, through an analysis of the dynamic of virtue and prudence in Thomas Aquinas, that the same dialectic and an analogous safeguard of the contingent are a milestone of his moral thought as well. In particular, I will claim:

i. That in Aquinas's moral thought it is possible to find the same two way movement we have just seen in Murdoch, even if expressed in different terms;

ii. That Aquinas displays an accurate analysis of moral perception, aimed at saving the contingent.

If the latter claim was true, it could be argued that Thomas should be considered exempt from Murdoch's critique to the Natural Law moralists. Moreover, in this case, not only could be applied to Thomas what has been noted by Crisp and Slote,[29] namely that Murdochian moral sensitivity is similar to Aristotelian *phronesis*, but also that their claim would be even more credible for Aquinas's concept of prudence.

First of all it must be said that to the detriment of Aquinas, and to the detriment of a proper reception of his thought, several false and distorting interpretations can be numbered, which exacerbate its distance from Aristotelian thought. In particular, I would like to emphasize here the attribution to Thomas of a deductivist ethics, dominated by the idea of natural law and substantially indifferent to the importance of virtue and practical perception of details.

In my opinion, this reading of Aquinas's ethics as dominated by a deductivist activity which nullifies the importance of prudence is misleading, as many scholars have attempted to demonstrate in a very persuasive way.[30] A correct interpretation requires a rehabilitation of

[28] Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', 329.

[29] Cf. R. Crisp, M. Slote, 'Introduction', in Idem (eds.), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 11.

[30] Cf., among many others, L. Melina, *La conoscenza morale. Linee di riflessione sul Commento di San Tommaso all'Etica Nicomachea*, Rome: Città Nuova, 1987;

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the centrality of virtue and prudence, which makes Thomistic moral account a real virtue ethics, although not in opposition to an equal importance assigned to the role of natural law. Let us see now in more detail what constitutes this centrality of virtue.

From the standpoint of the emotional-affective orientation, at a radical level, what underlies our always morally connoted vision of the world is, according to Thomas, the tension to the good, that is, the radical volition, which means the inability to aim for anything outside the perspective of the good (*sub ratione boni*). For Thomas, as for Aristotle, the movement of each being can be explained only as determined by the tension to an end towards which its movement is addressed: *omne agens agit propter finem*. Human beings, in particular, although sometimes unconsciously, always tend not only to *an* end, but to the end *per se*, that is, to an ultimate end which represents the goal of all their actions,[31] and of their moving towards certain particular goods, which represent partial or intermediate ends. This ultimate end is what Thomas calls beatitude, or perfect happiness, no matter what conception of happiness the agent has. This does not mean that a human being does always think about happiness, but that happiness is the ultimate reason of his actions, a reason he can easily identify whenever he reflects upon his actions, just as Thomas explains by using a very effective image: "One need not always be thinking of the last end, whenever one desires or does something: but the virtue of the first intention, which was in respect of the last end, remains in every desire directed to any object whatever, even though one's thoughts be not actually directed to the last end. Thus while

G. Abbà., *Lex et virtus. Studi sull'evoluzione della dottrina morale di san Tommaso d'Aquino*, Rome: LAS, 1983; D. Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action and Prudence in Aquinas*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994; S.J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002.

[31] Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 1, art. 4, co.: "Absolutely speaking, it is not possible to proceed indefinitely in the matter of ends, from any point of view. For in whatsoever things there is an essential order of one to another, if the first be removed, those that are ordained to the first, must of necessity be removed also. Wherefore the Philosopher proves (*Phys*. viii, 5) that we cannot proceed to infinitude in causes of movement, because then there would be no first mover, without which neither can the others move, since they move only through being moved by the first mover". See also ST I-II, q. 1, art. 5, co.: "It is impossible for one man's will to be directed at the same time to diverse things, as last ends. Three reasons may be assigned for this. First, because, since everything desires its own perfection, a man desires for his ultimate end, that which he desires as his perfect and crowning good. Hence Augustine (*De Civ. Dei* xix, 1): 'In speaking of the end of good we mean now, not that it passes away so as to be no more, but that it is perfected so as to be complete.' It is therefore necessary for the last end so to fill man's appetite, that nothing is left besides it for man to desire. Which is not possible, if something else be required for his perfection. Consequently it is not possible for the appetite so to tend to two things, as though each were its perfect good".

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walking along the road one needs not to be thinking of the end at every step".[32]

However, this generic orientation to the good is not the only source of a morally colored vision: fundamental is also the possession of certain habits, that is, virtues, which shape the agent's choice of his ends, making it more particular and definite. By possessing ethical virtues, the agent becomes able to see something that the non-virtuous cannot see at all; virtues illuminate a non-neutral world, allowing the agent promptly to want and choose certain ends at the expense of others. They shape the agent's vision and choice, according to the well-known principle *qualis unusquisque est talis et finis videtur ei*. As Aristotle had already noted,[33] the habits we possess inform our capacity of appreciation of certain goods. Thus, the agent whose rational will is shaped by virtue not only *wills* something different from the non-virtuous, but actually *sees* a different world, that is, he sees the world in its moral truth.[34] This morally laden gaze to the world cannot be the result of a punctual and momentary choice, but depends on the acquisition of a certain character, which implies a long training.

But, as we have already said, this is not enough: the orientation of the agent's gaze does not stop either at the most general level of the tension to the good in itself, nor at the less general one of the ends of the virtues, which shape the will and consequently the moral gaze on the world, directing prudence. Otherwise, prudence would be a mere applicative-executive capacity, whose role would only be that of inferring the good action from a given set of ends or principles. Here we come to one of the less known aspects of Aquinas's thought, namely to a reading of prudence as the capacity to discern the contingent and its concreteness in the light of those ends which shape our vision of the world.

In line with Murdoch's fundamental concern – namely that of reaching the contingent, keeping it in a constant dialogue with the unifying impulse of consciousness – Thomas conceives moral vision not only as the building of a character, which enlarges the area

[32] ST I-II, q. 1, art. 6, ad 3.

[33] Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a 7-1144b 1.

[34] It must be mentioned here that, according to Aquinas, even if moral virtue is the measure of prudence, since it fixes the ends towards which practical perception is oriented, it is in turn measured by an objective *res*, that is, nature, as it is grasped by reason's highest powers. Only in this case it can reach what Aristotle and Thomas call practical truth. The very idea of practical truth, therefore, suggests a very strong form of moral realism, according to which reason grasps an objective moral truth, and by so doing it informs the virtues, which in turn give a certain moral orientation to prudence. *Sententia Libri Ethicorum* VI, l. 11, n. 2-3 and Ibid. VI, l. 2, n. 8. In paragraph 3 and in the Conclusion of this paper I will briefly try to discuss this important point, showing how it can be compatible with a non-deductivist reading of Thomas.

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of our liberty, but also as an ability to see the individual. This is exactly why the possession of prudence is needed, since the latter is the disposition enabling the agent to identify the good in particular and concrete situations. As I have already noted, Crisp and Slote in their influential work explicitly compare Murdoch's moral sensitivity with Aristotelian *phronesis*,[35] which is interpreted by many authors as being itself a form of practical perception or moral sensitivity.[36] The same comparison, to my knowledge, has never been done with Thomistic prudence, which has been often interpreted as a deductive mechanism rather than as a practical perception capable of autonomy and creativity.

In order to reject such a misleading reading, it must be said, first of all, that Thomas[37] makes a fundamental distinction between a 'scientific' level of practical reason, whose task is to consider contingent things according to their universal concepts, and an 'empirical' one, typical of prudence, which reaches particular things as they are in the concrete. This empirical level of practical reason – connected to the process of deliberating on the right action to accomplish here and now, of judging and of choosing – is not dominated by the idea of deduction from first practical principles, as many authors claim, but by that of determination, as Kevin Flannery[38] has shown. The centrality of determination, which has been demonstrated by Flannery himself in a very convincing way, means that, if it is true that prudential deliberation tends to a universal end, it is nevertheless undeniable that its movement towards the universal is not deductive at all, but proceeds upward. This means that in deliberating "we test out, i.e., posit, alternative stratagems, until, through a process often characterized by fits and starts, we arrive at a solution: a path up to the principles. It is clear, therefore, that [. . .] the process is not a step-to-next-step process, but, rather, a matter of hypothesis and even invention".[39]

The principles are at the beginning of practical reason's path towards them, but only in the order of intention. For what concerns the order of execution, the path is something practical reason must discover, through imagination, research, hypotheses and attempts. Universal principles given by natural reason (or *synderesis*), and assimilated by the virtues, are not enough to act well, and, above all,

[35] Cf. R. Crisp, M. Slote, 'Introduction', 11.

[36] Cf. M.C. Nussbaum, 'The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality', in Ead., *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 54-105.

[37] Cf. in particular *SLE* VI, l.1, chap. 15.

[38] K.L. Flannery, *Acts Amid Precepts. The Aristotelian Logical Structure of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theory*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001.

[39] Ibid., 71.

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are not the chronological starting point of deliberation and action. They represent, rather, general indications the agent must consider while deliberating, in order to identify the good particular actions.[40]

Prudence deals with a contingent matter which cannot be determined *a priori* by a scientific theory or a fixed set of universal rules to be applied. Its task is to elaborate its own particular rules in the light of circumstances, bearing the principles in mind, but changing from time to time its conclusions in order to adapt to the variability of the situation. In this work of determination, circumstances play a key role, since they are often decisive to establish the moral configuration of a given situation, and to correctly assess what action, here and now, is better and leads to the desired end. Thus, prudence's excellence consists in being able to descend to the singular case, not deductively but identifying the particular action which embodies the end here and now, in the light of the circumstances. The capacity of discerning and perceiving the situation in its singularity, therefore, is not accidental to prudence, but rather represents its specific excellence.

But how does it acquire its peculiar knowledge of the contingent, which enables it to understand and grasp the situation and the circumstances? My thesis is that the answer lies in an accurate analysis of the link existing in prudence between practical reason and internal senses, and, consequently, of the parts of prudence, particularly the integral ones. I maintain, indeed, that the latter represent prudence's "eyes" on the contingent, and its means to reach the sensible sphere.

Integral parts of prudence are defined by Aquinas as "the things which need to concur for the perfect act of a virtue [*scil.* prudence]";[41] Aquinas mentions eight of them: "[. . .] the 'sense' of prudence is also called 'understanding': wherefore the Philosopher says (*Ethic*. vi, 11): 'Of such things one needs to have the sense, and this is understanding'. Of these eight, five belong to prudence as a cognitive virtue, namely, memory [*memoria*], reasoning [*ratio*], understanding [*intellectus*], docility [*docilitas*] and shrewdness [*eustochia*]: while the three others belong thereto, as commanding and applying knowledge to action, namely, foresight [*providentia*], circumspection [*circumspectio*] and caution [*cautio*]".[42]

According to my view, integral parts (or at least some of them) represent prudence's cognitive preconditions: prudence receives the end from the moral virtues, which unify reason and will and shape the agent's moral gaze, and derives the knowledge of the singular it

[40] Cf. Abbà, *Lex et virtus*, 222-225.

[41] *ST* II-II, q. 48, art. 1, co.

[42] Of these parts, six derive from Macrobius's commentary on the *Somnium Scipionis* (cf. 1 *In Somn. Scip*., c.8), memory from Cicero (Cf. 2 *De Invent. Rhet*., c. 53) and shrewdness from book 6 of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

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equally needs to give birth to good actions from dispositions which are not deliberative nor related to judgment, but only receptive of the data. I am referring here in particular to memory, understanding, docility, reasoning, circumspection, foresight and caution. These parts make use of the internal senses, sometimes even overlapping with them.

In order to deliberate well (*eubulia*), the agent needs a good disposition of his imaginative power, enabling him easily to see different data; in order to judge well, then, the agent needs a developed common sense. Internal senses, therefore, have a central role for practical reason. Moreover, a useful guide to deliberation is represented by experience, which is the first source from which one can obtain indications and data, and is strictly related to internal senses as well. Experience, indeed, results from several empirical perceptions and memories, and can therefore convey to the agent general guidelines, enabling him to solve a practical problem without an excessive expenditure of cognitive energies. From this point of view, two are the main integral parts involved, namely memory and docility. Prudence, therefore, in order to obtain the knowledge of contingent it needs to operate well, must lean on the external and internal senses, since they are the only powers which can reach the individual in its individuality. It then needs to use the data coming from the senses, connecting them in the deliberative and judicative process.

Deliberation, thus, treasures the actions already undertaken, and the experiential knowledge gained by carrying them out, by remembering their modalities and outcomes and using them as guides. Remembering a past action, which turned out to be appropriate, or, on the contrary, damaged the agent although it at first sight had seemed to be pleasurable and right, represents one of the easiest ways to evolve morally. Without memory there could be neither moral progress, nor development of a unitary character: actions would be isolated events, and experience only a sum of unrelated episodes. But this evidently contradicts our common experience of agents: we are always engaged in a continuous process of evaluation of our past actions, from which we can (or we can refuse to) benefit. Not only memory remembers individual experience, but also that of others, especially when they are significant to us. Their actions and the consequences they have, often represent a warning or a solicitation. Among the data deliberation takes into account, thus, there is also other people's experience, which requires, on the part of the agent, a good disposition to listen to others, and willingness to receive advice, that is, the possession of docility.[43]

[43] *SLE* VI, l. 9, n. 20.

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Docility is, according to Aquinas, the willingness to be educated by others, especially by those who are wiser than us,[44] not only through their memories, but in act. It does not only imply attention and listening, but above all requires defeating laziness (which could lead to neglect of advice) and pride (which often leads to disregard them). Negligence and disregard can thus impede our attainment of the good; therefore, they are not innocent affirmations of autonomy, but forms of the vice of thoughtlessness, that is, a lack of right judgment because of which "one fails to judge rightly through contempt or neglect of those things on which a right judgment depends".[45]

As we have seen, memory and docility emphasize the central role, for prudence, of experience, conceived both as individual and as commonly built up with the contribution of others. Memory preserves singular past data provided by experience; docility does the same operation with data coming from the experience of others. Both, therefore, rely on internal senses.

The same dependence from internal senses we have seen so far is fundamental for another integral part of prudence, namely understanding, which provides to prudence knowledge of present singular data by a sensorial and intellective intuition of them. Understanding is a form of perception capable of grasping data as particular specifications of the universal end of action.

Finally, circumspection ensures that the agent, while deliberating, considers all the relevant circumstances: "Since [. . .] prudence [. . .] is about singular matters of action, which contain many combinations of circumstances, it happens that a thing is good in itself and suitable to the end, and nevertheless becomes evil or unsuitable to the end, by reason of some combination of circumstances. Thus to show signs of love to someone seems, considered in itself, to be a fitting way to arouse love in his heart, yet if pride or suspicion of flattery arise in his heart, it will no longer be a means suitable to the end. Hence the need of circumspection in prudence, viz. of comparing the means with the circumstances".[46] It is therefore an accurate examination of circumstances, which, in their variability, represent the most contingent aspect of the situation, and can even modify in a crucial way its moral features.[47]

[44] Cf. ST II-II, q. 49, art. 3.
[45] ST II-II q. 53 a. 4 co.
[46] ST II-II, q. 49, art. 7, co.
[47] Cf. *De malo*, q.2, a.6.

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3. Some divergences

Now that I have exposed briefly how Murdoch and Aquinas answer in their own way to the common task of saving the contingent, I cannot avoid to mention some inevitable divergences among two authors so far away from each other, both chronologically and ideally. Since it would be impossible to accomplish this task exhaustively, I will only list some particularly relevant points.

First of all, Aquinas's thought, as we have in part seen, involves a strong concept of human nature, which represents an objective *res* against which the virtues are measured. This is, obviously, a form of strong moral realism, based on the concept of *lex naturalis* and first universal principles of practical reason, which are the universal and objective criterion of the virtues. Murdoch, on the contrary, never seems to conceive the universal pole of the two way movement as a set of universal or general norms. In her thought, the relation between the good and particulars does not seem to be mediated by general and specific norms. But this, according to my view, does not necessarily mean that Aquinas's account sees the individual as "held in a framework which transcends him".[48] That is, it does not mean that the objective ends and principles which measure the virtues are known *a priori*: there is, on the contrary, a heuristic priority of the contingent. It is while engaging with real situations that practical reason can identify the ends which are appropriate to human nature, and can discover their objectivity. A deeper examination of Aquinas's theory of action could profitably account for this heuristic priority.

Moral conversion is also made possible for Aquinas by the *semina virtutum*, that is, the first principles of natural law, while in Murdoch it seems only to be the result of the agent's tension to the good, which activates the dynamic of the moral pilgrimage.

Finally, Murdoch assigns a key role to love: for her, the moral pilgrimage culminates in loving the individual, especially the individual person. A similar attention might seem at first not to be present in Thomas. But it must be said that the topic of love, although in a different context, is widely present in Aquinas's thought as well. First of all, what activates the dynamic of action is the *appetitus*, that is, a form of desire, whose aim is to enjoy its object, becoming a kind of love (*fruitio*). Secondly, according to Thomas as a theologian, the final end of human life, and therefore of morality itself, consists in the love of God (*caritas*), which gives unity and order to every other form of human love.[49]

[48] Cf. Murdoch, 'Metaphysics and Ethics', 70.

[49] Cf. for example ST I-II, q. 73 art. 1 ad 3: "The love of God is unitive, in as much as it draws man's affections from the many to the one; so that the virtues, which flow from the love of God, are connected together. But self-love disunites man's affections among

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Conclusion

Despite the inevitable and significant differences, Thomas and Murdoch seem to agree on some important points. First of all, on the fact that ethics can be distinguished but cannot be completely detached from metaphysics, for what is at stake here is the very possibility of moral philosophy. Secondly, as we have seen, their ethics are dominated by the idea of vision: for Thomas, a whole moral vision is only possible to the wise (*prudens*), that is to the agent who possesses the moral virtues (which shape his gaze to the world), and who is capable of interpreting the situations thanks to prudence and its parts. In particular, it is only the wise who possesses the understanding of particulars (*intellectus*), an intellectual and at the same time ethical disposition which enables him to grasp the moral relevance of the situation.

Thirdly, both suggest an idea of freedom conceived as the progressive building of a character, and not as primarily situated in the moment of choice.[50]

Finally, both, although adopting different models, demonstrate an extraordinary will to preserve the dialectic, or the hermeneutic movement, between particular and universal, so as to give an account of moral experience as it presents itself in practice, and to offer an attempt to save the contingent. The more Thomas reaffirms the intrinsic bond between prudence and first principles, the more he simultaneously strives to show the chronological priority of the contingent, and the need to grasp all its practical details, in order to find in it the universal. This bottom-up process ensures that prudence, in accomplishing its task of identifying the action which best incarnates the end here and now, cannot avoid to attentively evaluate contingent data, that is, reality in its particularity and variability. Being prudent, for him, does not consist in applying mechanically given universal norms, but implies a practical perception of particulars, and the ability to grasp their moral relevance. The prudent man shows an emotive and intellective capacity of appreciating the singular in its singularity, thanks to the possession of the integral parts of prudence.

Without overstating the analogies, I maintain here that several of these dispositions echo some of Murdoch's key concepts, displaying

different things, in so far as man loves himself, by desiring for himself temporal goods, which are various and of many kinds: hence vices and sins, which arise from self-love, are not connected together". And ST II-II, q. 179, art.1 co.: "Wherefore also in men the life of every man would seem to be that wherein he delights most, and on which he is most intent".

[50] Choice (*electio*) is for Thomas only one of several steps which constitute his reconstruction of human action, and certainly not the most important. Cf. Westberg, *Right Practical Reason*.

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a kind of 'family resemblance' with them. Memory and docility, for example, can be said to recall the fundamental role played by virtuous examples, literature and all the sources of experience which, according to Murdoch, help the agent in re-orienting his gaze;[51] understanding is nothing else than a form of attention, in so far as it makes possible to reach the individual, and is the apex of the agent's practical perception; circumspection is the creative ability to grasp the circumstances, quite similarly to Murdoch's imagination. The remaining parts show a sensitivity to the contingent which makes them hybrid ethical-intellectual capacities: thanks to their bond with the sensitive sphere, they allow the agent to reach the contingent in its contingency; in a word, to save it.

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[51] Cf. Cattaneo, *Etica e narrazione*, 90.

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