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JEROME FLANAGAN

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ONE DOES NOT NEED RELIGION TO LEAD A GOOD LIFE

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SUPERVISOR: DR. ANGELO BOTTONI

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Abstract

How life is lived is infinitely varied. We are all different. How we look at life is the same. We have many questions about life and ourselves and how we fit in. Questions about why we are here, do our lives have meaning. If we live in a particular way will this add to the meaning of our lives or not? But while we have many questions, we also seek answers, and one of the most important questions we seek an answer to is ‘how do I live a good life?’ There are many calls today for people to return to more religious ways. As society is perceived to be more and more secularised as the years go on, especially in the West, the calls for a return to God have grown. Many believe that we have lost our way somehow because we no longer believe in a higher power or something greater than ourselves. Because of this we are lacking somehow and that this lack can somehow inhibit our ability to live proper lives, good lives. I wish to show in this work that it is possible to live a good life without recourse to religion. I want to show that people who are non-believers are just as capable of living good lives as believers, that they can have a motive for living good lives just the same as those who have religion showing them the way. I will do this through a comprehensive look at the works of two philosophers – Eric Voegelin and Iris Murdoch. Voegelin’s work looked at having a right order of being and gaining an understanding of what such an order of being is. For Voegelin this order of being included a transcendent order as a matter of course. To gain true understanding of both orders of being Voegelin advocated grounding in religion. Only through religion can one gain fullest understanding and be able thus to lead good lives. Murdoch shows us that we can live good lives without recourse to religion. She shows us that there are ways and devices we can use to aid in understanding our lives and how we live them. For Murdoch
a concept she calls the Good can be used to give each of us, as moral agents, something that motivates us to lead good lives.
Background

Moral philosophy must take into account the peculiar capacity of human beings to reflect on themselves. – Maria Antonaccio from her review *The Virtues of Metaphysics, A review of Iris Murdoch’s Philosophical Writings*

Who are we? What are we? Why are we here? Do our lives have meaning? These questions, and others besides, have exercised the minds of men since ancient times. No more than many of the great thinkers of the past or present, at some time or another we wonder to ourselves ‘what is it all for?’, ‘why am I here?’ Different things can prompt such questions – religious education at school or at home, something that someone does that has an effect on one, the death of someone close to you or just an inquisitive nature.

We all live our lives in different ways. We all do different things and in diverse ways. No two of us are alike, thus the infinite diversity of life and the myriad ways in which it is lived and played out.

There are many questions about life, questions about how it is lived, how it should be lived, what makes us as human beings different and apart from other life. Different people have different questions, depending on what has meaning for them. Some people are very questioning and want to know as much as they can. Some are so inquisitive that they spend their lives immersed in these questions and investigating it all. For some
people it just doesn’t matter. Life goes on anyway, whether they like it or not and it will continue with or without them.

In the midst of all the questions about life that are out there, the biggest question is this – are there any answers? We pose all of these various questions for many reasons – but the most fundamental reason we pose them is in the hope of finding answers.

The most fundamental of questions posed down through the millennia, since ancient philosophy, is ‘what constitutes a good life?’ While on the surface this may seem a simple enough question, when one analyses it one sees just how difficult it would be to answer. But many have tried to do just that, to try to provide us with those very answers, to formulate ways, guidelines, rules or laws to aid us in how we live our lives, or to at least try and point us in the right direction. These people have tried to give us a compass which we can use or refer to at times of need, from the earliest of the Greek philosophers such as Thales of Miletus in the 7th century BC right up to today’s great thinkers, people like Albert Camus, Bertrand Russell, Richard Kearney and two philosophers I will be referring to later, Eric Voegelin and Iris Murdoch. In addition to the great philosophers are the other great thinkers on the side of religion and theology – St. Augustine, St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas and successive papal encyclicals which have attempted to inform and enlighten.

I go back to my quote at the beginning of this work where it mentions the “capacity of human beings to reflect on themselves”. This fundamental ability we have to so reflect is
unique to us among all other life on this planet. We are unique in our ability to question our existence. Human beings are self aware. In such self awareness is also the recognition of an inner and outer life, of conscious and unconscious being. We have intelligence and abilities beyond those of other life forms and we are able to use those abilities in ways they cannot and do not. One such ability is to be able to imagine. With imagination we can hypothesis about things i.e. what such things would be like if we were to change this or that. Having such ability allows us as human beings to postulate other ways of doing things and seeing things. It allows us to think of ourselves in other ways and to look at and analyse the world around us. We can imagine other situations and investigate what we would or could do in such other situations.

These abilities have enabled us to do the very things I spoke of at the outset, to question, to pose answers, to re-imagine ourselves. They set us apart and through such questioning and attempts at answers we begin to learn more, more about our environment, our world and ourselves. And it is this learning about ourselves that is critical because being self aware, self reflective allows us gain insight into ourselves and to evolve and grow. It is this I want to focus on for the rest of this paper.
The approaches of Philosophy versus Theology

As human beings we are ever questioning when it comes to life. Investigation through questioning has brought us many insights and knowledge down through the ages. Our unique abilities have gained us much, but it is the ability to harness and use these gifts which really distinguish us. And the questions posed about life and its meaning and the various theories tendered as possible answers have served to provide us with interesting insights and possibilities. One of the oldest oppositions or tensions we have, when it comes to the provision of possible answers or ways forward to fundamental questions like these, is that of the alternatives offered by philosophy and philosophers as opposed to theologians or the religious.

It seems to me that in the debate between the two that theology and the religious tend more to the provision of answers as they see it, whereas the philosophical side tends more toward guidance and pointing out possible ways forward. Religions tend to be prescriptive – they set out how the natural world is, there is generally a supernatural world or ‘afterlife’ which we cannot touch, see or interact with, but which we will eventually see. This is a world to be striven for, our ultimate goal and our current circumstance is temporary. This afterlife has many names – paradise, heaven – and we can get there by leading a good life. Religions then set out how one can live this good life, setting out rules or laws to live by such as the ten commandments.

Philosophy has tended to look around and try to understand the world and our place in it. Down through the years the great philosophers have asked questions and through their
investigations after posing such questions, hoped to gain some insight as to the world and our place in it. The tendency has been to understand our own perceptions of the world and of ourselves and of how we interact with the world. Philosophers and philosophy have tried to provide humanity with the tools to decide for himself what life means to him. They have done this through the development of our faculties and abilities, through investigation and question, through theorisation and imagination. They dare to ask hard questions and do not flinch at the possible answers they may receive, and when they do postulate possible answers, they do not baulk when they appear daunting or even when they may fly in the face of everything they may have believed heretofore. We remember back to people like Copernicus whose heliocentric model of the universe was considered outrageous at the time but eventually became the prevailing explanation for how and why the planets and stars moved as they did.

But it is on how we can live our lives that I wish now to concentrate, specifically on how we are to live a good life. As I have mentioned, there are many questions about we pose about life, living, being in the world, how we perceive the world, the supernatural, life after death, death itself. I want in this paper to look at how we live our lives and what informs us as to how we should go about living a good life.
The Basic Contention

The basic contention of this paper is to show that it is possible to live a good life without recourse to religion, in other words one does not need religion to lead a good life. I will look at the two sides of this debate, using the works of Eric Voegelin (on the side of religion) and Iris Murdoch (on the side of their being no need for religion) to illustrate the arguments from the two sides of the divide.

The modern age has produced a great deal of change in our understanding of the natural world and our environment. The era of the Enlightenment has brought science to the fore as a predominant vehicle for the procurement of knowledge and the understanding of that knowledge. Whole new areas began to open up as scientists began to ask new questions and gain fresh insight and understanding about the world around them. The great breakthroughs spurred others on to see what more could be brought to light.

The Industrial Revolution was just that – a revolution. The age of mechanisation and machines changed the way things were done forever. New sciences emerged to ask new questions and investigate new possibilities. Greater knowledge than ever was now available to ever greater numbers of people. As more was learned and more knowledge was gained, new and ever more exciting areas of opportunity for exploration and investigation began to open up. These new areas provided new insights. New technologies did not just open up new areas of investigation, it also allowed greater, better and more detailed investigations to be carried out.
Awareness and education became more widespread as knowledge and technology improved. The new technologies brought information to the masses. Mechanisation revolutionised the printing industry and the demand for books soared during the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Newspapers and their circulation expanded dramatically. The inventions of photography and film in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and their phenomenal growth during the early part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century began a pace of change that had not be seen since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution itself. And this new pace of change has continued. Throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century this new, faster pace of change kept on going and kept on getting faster. This greater pace became very apparent after the First World War, but it was after the Second World War that it really took off.

Throughout all of this were the calls for a return to religion. Since the era of the Enlightenment itself and what some would term the age of scientism there have been those who have said that through all of this we have been losing our way. Certain parts of society have advocated the idea that the more modernised we become, the less religious we are. It is argued that with the advances in knowledge and science more and more people are turning away from God and religion. As science has progressed and we have gained knowledge, some would posit that society has become more secularised.

This secularisation is deemed bad for society in many eyes. It is said that core values are lost, that there are no more morals or ethics in society or in people, that because we have abandoned God and – in Western civilisation – Christianity and the Bible, we have lost our way altogether. Many of the perceived ills of society are then put down to this lack of
morals or ethics. People, companies and governments no longer treat with or extend the respect to others they used to and the results are the constant famines and wars and the perceived greed of the big companies.

Thus there are the calls for a return to religion, or at least to religious values. That the only way culture and society will ever get back to humane and compassionate ways is to look to religion for guidance as they are the only ones that can help. The religious are the only ones who can provide us with the tools and assistance to get back what we once had so that we may have peace and harmony once again. Because we have turned away from religious ways we have also left behind our humanity and compassion. Because we are godless we are also bereft of morals and ethics and for some there can be no hope for us. This is a stance I wish to refute in this paper.
Eric Voegelin (1901 – 1985)

The prerequisite of analysis is still the perception of the order of being unto its origin in transcendent being, in particular, the loving openness of the soul to its transcendent ground of order.¹

Eric Voegelin was a political philosopher. He was born in Cologne, Germany, and educated in political science at the University of Vienna. He became a teacher and then an associate professor of political science at the Faculty of Law. In 1938 he, with his wife, fled from the Nazi forces which had recently entered Vienna, emigrating to the United States, where they became citizens in 1944. He spent most of his academic career at the University of Notre Dame, Louisiana State University, the University of Munich and the Hoover Institution of Stanford University.

Voegelin’s philosophical thinking, while considered mainly political philosophy, also carried over into the areas of how we should live our lives, the religious sphere, our being in time and in history, our knowledge of transcendence and how we should at all times strive for the transcendent in life and keep the Last Judgement in mind, how we should always be open to the divine. Two major themes to come through in any reading of Voegelin are what he terms ‘the order of being’ and Gnosticism.

Voegelin’s Theological approach

According to Voegelin there is an order to life, an order of being. He pointed out in his book *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*\(^2\) that such an order of life or order of society, as he also termed it, has been sought and looked at since earliest Greek times. A right manner of living and a right order of society have long been sought. Many put forward ideas, models and paradigms as possibilities, but who was to say which was the right one? Voegelin stated that “The science of political philosophy resulted from the efforts to find an answer to this question.”\(^3\) For Voegelin, this right order of society, this order of being could be looked for, investigated and answers possibly provided through this science of political philosophy. A key word in this is ‘science’, because Voegelin believed that such investigation could and should be carried out along scientific lines.

Philosophy is the real science for Voegelin because it can postulate the fullest questions and then get the fullest answers because it is based in a fuller meaning/experience of life i.e. it includes the transcendent aspect. Philosophy realises the transcendent or the divine in ordinary life – “The decisive event in the establishment of *politike episteme* was the specifically philosophical realisation that the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order.”\(^4\)

Voegelin’s works over the years, his histories of western civilisation, the origins of political philosophy and political science and even science itself, have always tried to

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\(^3\) Ibid. 10.
\(^4\) Ibid. 12 (emphasis mine).
root man in reality. This reality insists on the recognition of the transcendent as part of this world in a sense. This recognition of the transcendent is, and should always be, a part of our very selves, a part of our very nature. He wants us to attune ourselves to the flow of the divine presence, to be always searching for God, a God, a presence that has been a constant throughout history.

A good way to illustrate this would be to look at the film *The Matrix*. In the film, the main character, Neo, knows there is something about his own reality that does not quite ring true. There is more to his world, to his reality, he is sure of it. There is something beyond, something just out of reach. He can sense it somehow but cannot explain this sense. Neither can he explain how this can possibly be. It is as if he can see something out of the corner of his eye, but as soon as he turns to look at it, it is gone. Nor can he prove this; he just knows it within himself. But he is sure in the knowledge that there is something else and he will find it.

Voegelin points out that we are not just a part of history or just a part of reality. We participate in reality and we participate in a way that is unique to us. We partake and participate in reality on a much deeper level or a much higher level than animals. We can question our reality as Neo does above. We can intuit differing levels of awareness of the world around us and we can look at reality in a variety of ways. Artists and poets can show us whole other ways of looking at the world. Poets can write of love and beauty and as we read it we know what they are saying to us. We understand on a near instinctual level. Yet love and beauty are abstract concepts, they cannot be touched or seen.
It is the same with the great paintings – they can show us images of things that are both familiar and unfamiliar, yet viewing a piece, perhaps a landscape, can allow a fresh perspective, a new view, a new way of looking at something. It is as if one had never seen such a thing prior to that time. Such art, such poetry can bring us some way toward a level of apprehension we can attain only rarely. It can help us glimpse or intuit that something beyond, that intangible but close reality that is just over there.

This is nothing new either. Voegelin tells us that this order of being he advocates, this right order of society is something that has been around as long as humanity itself. It is an idea that is nearly intuitive. This right order of being, this right order of society, requires action by men. I pointed out earlier that man, according to Voegelin, participates to a greater degree in the world than others e.g. animals. We as human beings participate to a fuller degree. But this participation cannot be passive. While we participate in this world and in its history we must actively open ourselves up to the divine, to the transcendent. This must be done actively.

In his book *The New Science of Politics* Voegelin tells us of the Greek investigations into life and living and our experiences thereof. How we live in the world and how we perceive the world and what we see as our place in the world were questions asked then as now. But the Greeks took the transcendent element of experience of the world as a given. For them this facet was just as much a part of things as waking up in the morning or night following day. Whether there was a belief in a god or gods or not, this dimension

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was always there was came through in their attempts to proffer models or paradigms of explanation.

Their investigations into the inner life of man were critical to their hypotheses as to a correct order of being. Their investigations into man’s non-physical apprehension of and interaction in the world led to many great discoveries and the postulation of many interesting ideas. For Voegelin, a key discovery made by the Greeks was the idea of the psyche – the ability to name or conceptualise this part of ourselves that allowed us to think, contemplate and question within ourselves. This region within us separated us from the other animals. This was the part of us that made us higher beings and allowed man to participate in the world to such a fuller degree. This was what made us so radically different and was unique to man.

It was this part of us, this psyche that allowed us to have a fuller and deeper knowledge of the world. It also allowed man to gain knowledge of the transcendent part of life. Full understanding can only occur in the knowledge of a transcendent order of being as well as a regular order of being. For Voegelin the psyche became “the region in which transcendence is experienced” and thus stood in for and became synonymous with the soul – “…one might almost say that before the discovery of the psyche man had no soul.” In the same pages he claims that “through the opening of the soul the philosopher finds himself in a new relation with God; he not only discovers his own psyche as the instrument for experiencing transcendence but at the same time discovers the divinity in

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6 Ibid. 67.
7 Ibid. 67.
its radically nonhuman transcendence.”8 For Voegelin, having a soul gives man that extra quality that allows him the possibility of knowledge of the transcendent or the divine. Possession of a soul means man is the only one who can, in an active way, open himself to this transcendent order and to in some way experience it. We have an unrest, an experience of being drawn to something outside ourselves. We need to open ourselves to the divine ground. We must not reject transcendent reality.

And the society he lives in must be able to allow him to do this. There is a right order of society too. This kind of society has also been known about since ancient times. As Voegelin points out, this has been a factor in political societies going back to the earliest such entities. Such societies understood themselves as a representation of something, an order of some kind. This order was always understood as a smaller representation of the order of the world, and even the cosmos. Regularity and order was seen in the heavens as the stars moved, in the phases of the moon and the rising and setting of the sun. Even here on earth such regularity and order could be seen in the passing of the seasons and the growing of crops and the harvesting of those crops.

This order of the cosmos was also considered a transcendent order by these early societies. This was innately understood by such societies as they looked at the stars and tried to understand how and why they went away and came back. Patterns were noticed and recorded. While much information was gathered, understanding of what invisible forces were at work was another thing. This was something otherworldly and above, literally as well as figuratively. Many, the earliest philosophers, tried to gain

8 Ibid. 67.
understanding of these things and find ways to represent both the questions and the possible models for comprehension. Societies themselves tried to emulate the great order seen in the cosmos and in the world around it. They became a representation of that order of being that was in some way understandable to ordinary people. And this order of being was intuitively understood as a transcendent order as well—“...one uniformly finds the order of the empire interpreted as a representation of cosmic order in the medium of human society.”

To sum up, our experience in the world requires an order of being, a right manner of living. To live a right life, a good life, a life of worth and meaning requires a life of order, a correct order of being. This correct order must include the transcendent element. Without this element present in our living, in our experience of the world, no true knowledge may ever be gained.

So too is there required a right order of society. Society reflects its inhabitants and their philosophies. From earliest times the cosmos was seen as transcendent. Societies were seen as representations of the cosmos and to have or represent a transcendent quality of life. This transcendent order of being permeated society and those who were a part of that society. This allowed members of the society not just to participate in a correct society, but to participate fully in life, in the world, to experience the world in the deepest possible way, to have the fullest order of being—“The truth of man and the truth of God are inseparably one. Man will be in the truth of his existence when he has opened his

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9 Ibid. 54.
psyche to the truth of God; and the truth of God will become manifest in history when it has formed the psyche of man into receptivity for the unseen measure.”

One last important theme for Voegelin is that of orientation. Having a right order of being or living in a correctly ordered society are things to be sought, but one must also act correctly. I mentioned earlier that participation in the world required actively opening ourselves up to the divine, to the transcendent. This opening up of the soul to the possibilities of transcendence “is as much action as it is passion” and action is important here.

What is important for Voegelin is that we are active participants when it comes to experiencing the world but what is just as important is actively allowing ourselves to access the divine or transcendent. The exploration of experiences leading to the opening of the soul must be at a conscious level. One must take an actual decision, one must decide to move in a particular direction, decide to orient themselves in a specific way. This decision can then lead one in the right direction, put one on the right path so that this too may help them to have a right order of being.

Voegelin uses Plato’s Allegory of the Cave here to demonstrate what he means. This is the famous story of the inhabitants of a cave who see shadows on the wall and assume that those shadows are just there, they perceive them as reality. What they do not realise is that those shadows are actually not reality, but rather the shadows are cast there by the

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10 Ibid. 69.
11 Ibid. 67.
light of a fire which is behind them. It is not until it registers with the inhabitants that something is amiss with the shadows, that something is not quite right with them that leads the inhabitants to re-evaluate what they are looking at. Eventually they turn around, the famous ‘periagoge’, and see the fire and begin to come to a better understanding of the so called reality they had been looking at.

This is what is important for Voegelin the turning around. Whereas in Plato’s story something eventually prevailed upon some of the inhabitants to turn around, Voegelin wants us to actively turn around ourselves, to consciously make that decision. He wants us to take the decision to turn around, to actually orient ourselves in a particular way, to move in a certain direction.

Voegelin does not want someone or something making this decision for us. Turning to the transcendent, opening our souls to the divine should be something we do on a conscious level, deliberately. It should be something we actively seek, something we wish to embrace. We must actively use our souls, our psyche, to look at our world, our reality. We must use the tools the science of philosophy can equip us with to investigate and understand our reality so that we may then be able to turn around and see the full order of being; an order of being that includes the transcendent order.

The other major theme in Voegelin is Gnosticism. It is his contention that the true purpose of this belief system is to take us away from God. For Voegelin the gnostic
system basically says that with knowledge there is no need for God and that it tries to bring elements of what it terms the transcendent into earthly life.

Gnosticism is an old belief system that states that the cosmos was created by an imperfect god, and because this god was imperfect or flawed, all that we know as creation of the cosmos is thus imperfect and flawed. According to gnostic teaching there is a true, ultimate and transcendent God. This god or godhead did not create the cosmos in the way the word “create” is traditionally understood. This being or essence “emanated” or brought forth from itself all there is. This is the realm of the Pleroma where the fullness of the divine essence of the ultimate god operates and holds sway.

Between us and this ultimate god are intermediate beings called Aeons. One such Aeon brought forth from itself a consciousness that created all that we know. This being is sometimes referred to as the demiurge and, given its origins, is not a full deity and thus all that this being created is imperfect or flawed. In addition, this being, not knowing its own origins, believed itself to be the creator or the ultimate god.12

For Voegelin, gnostic beliefs and gnosticism have an influence today through the works of theorists like Georg W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to name but a few. But what he worries about is that the ideologies and beliefs that underlie gnosticism are gaining too great a significance in the modern world. For Voegelin, gnostic ideology is attempting to take over or supplant the proper right order of things – “The aim of parousiastic gnosticism is to destroy the order of being, which is experienced as defective

and unjust, and through man’s creative power to replace it with a perfect and just order.”

For Voegelin, gnosticism is the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Gnosticism is intent on becoming the dominant ideological system in both the religious and political spheres. It does this through clever use of language and debate, making it seem like there is constructive criticism of the current systems and structures, when in actuality this so-called constructive critical debate is sowing the seeds of discord, argument and even doubt. Speculation on the nature of the world is entered into. The natural world is looked at, as is man’s role in and interaction with nature and the natural world. Man, being endowed as he is with abilities others do not, occupies a special place in the cosmos. Man can do things others in this world cannot, chief among them being his ability to think, to question, to imagine, to postulate, to conceptualise.

Having minds make us unique. Our minds, our psyches allow us to do so much more than animals. But this is not the psyche of the Greeks. This psyche gives human beings advantages over the animals in that it allows man to gain a greater and fuller understanding of the world around him and of the cosmos. But this is not the same as the participation in the world the Greeks conferred on their interpretation of psyche. This is the crucial difference – where the gnostics attempt to put man over nature and make him superior and make it seem like he has a so much greater role in the cosmos, unlike the early Greeks and the religions that came after them who saw a fuller role for man because he partook not just in the world, but also in a transcendent order of being as well. “The

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purpose of this speculation is to shut off the process of being from transcendent being and have man create himself.”14 What is important and at the heart of this gnostic thought for Voegelin is the importance of man in the world. If the gnostic thinkers can show that man is so important, they can then go on to allow man so much more. “All gnostic movements are involved in the project of abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in the divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action.”15

Even science is used to bolster the gnostic case. From the time of the Enlightenment science has been seen as an area where answers can be acquired and assurances given. Ever since Copernicus was able to show that the planets went around the sun, science began its ascent as the great leveller, as the one system that could provide answers. What science had that other systems did not was the ability to provide proof. Copernicus did not just put forward a theory, he also provided proof that his theory worked. Isaac Newton was able not just to theorise about possible attractive forces, he was eventually able to prove the existence of such forces. And proof is a critical word here. As seen above, man’s ability to question, to imagine, to postulate new ideas and theories was something that placed man above all others in the world. On top of this, being able to theorise or postulate an idea and then work it through to a conclusion and to an actual proof allowed man another power – the power, the ability to name. Such a power is akin to the ability to ‘create’. Science was now able to endow man with powers; powers that gnostic thinkers were quick to show us were almost godlike.

14 Ibid. 16.
15 Ibid. 68.
The worry Voegelin had with science in the way the gnostics wished to use it was the worry that its nature would be perverted. This new ability to provide answers could be used by the unscrupulous i.e. gnostic thinkers, to turn science into scientism. At the beginning of the era of the Enlightenment the news that answers would be forthcoming in relation to many of the great questions about the cosmos was greeted with joy. As answers or proofs began to emerge, the sciences and scientists began to earn a new prestige. The Church in Europe was no longer the only place from which wisdom and answers were to be obtained. Men not of the cloth, but part of secular society were now providing answers. The worry now was that this new-found prestige was changing the perceptions of ordinary men as to who now held the great truths of the cosmos. The long held view that the Catholic Church could be the only possessor of ‘truth’ was now being opened to question.

But as the prestige grew, so too did the perception of who held the truth, the real answers. The shift away from the Church grew until coming into the modern age it just became automatic to think that science now held all the answers. It became the common assumption that science was right, that science could always be right and that science would provide all the answers i.e. scientism. “Scientism has remained to this day one of the strongest Gnostic movements in Western society; and the immanentist pride in science is so strong that even the special sciences have each left a distinguishable
sediment in the variants of salvation through physics, economics, sociology, biology and psychology.”\textsuperscript{16}

Besides the order of the natural world, gnosticism also subtly tries to undermine religions and religious beliefs, intending to substitute current belief systems with their own underlying thinking and ideologies. As mentioned earlier, the Catholic Church in Europe (and later in Western society) was seen as the legitimate holder of the ‘truth’, of knowledge. Voegelin points out that gnosticism does try to subvert religious thought with its own, again determined to be the sole holder and purveyor of knowledge and truth.

Tying it all together

Living an ordered life, wishing to live such a life, to seek the transcendent or the divine should be the goal of all men. Such a life is the only one that will lead to fulfilment. But such a life is hard because there is no concrete proof of the transcendent. All man has to go on is faith. It is only through faith that he can gain proof – “This thread of faith, on which hangs all certainty regarding divine, transcendent being, is indeed very thin. Man is given nothing tangible. The substance and proof of the unseen are ascertained through nothing but faith, which man must obtain by the strength of his soul”. 17 Because all men do not have the spiritual stamina to undertake this journey, they need institutional help, the help of religion, of the Church if they are to have any hope of success. And sometimes even the Church’s presence is insufficient.

For Voegelin this element of faith and the often perceived inadequacies of the Church are exploited by the gnostics. Through clever wording man is shown ‘proofs’ he himself is all that is required for salvation. Men become “susceptible to ideas that could give them a greater degree of certainty about the meaning of their existence than faith.” 18 Gnostic constructs appear similar to Church teaching on the surface. It is within his own power to gain salvation through his own efforts. All of the new knowledge he has been given through the intellectual debate outlined above and all of the knowledge gained from science had given man new wisdom. Man is now empowered and able to change things and make things happen for himself. As god is more and more identified with nature, the

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18 Ibid., p 75.
essence that was once god is humanised and as man is seen as above nature he is deified – man becomes god and there is no need for religion or god anymore.

For Voegelin this cannot be. He is a firm believer in the need for religion, not just for its own sake, but because it has a role in assisting man in leading a fuller life, a full order of being that includes a transcendent element. Religion, specifically Christianity, provides the only path to salvation. It is only through Christianity that human beings can have or can live a full and a right order of being. With the help of the Church man can learn to know his soul and learn how to open his soul to the divine and know the transcendent order of being – to the “reality of being as it is known in its truth by Christianity”\(^{19}\) The clarity the Christian faith provides is essential in countering the so called evidence or proofs provided by the gnostics. One thing the Catholic Church can do that gnosticism cannot is to provide the faithful with a visible, concrete and tangible centre. The Church itself is real and in the world. It is an institution that has been available for two thousand years. Gnosticism, for all that it tries to provide humanity with greater degrees of certainty cannot provide that tangible centre. When you look at it, given its insubstantiality, one could say you need faith to prove the existence of gnostics and gnosticism.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p 75.
**Iris Murdoch (1919 – 1999)**

Ethics should not be merely an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct, it should be a hypothesis about good conduct and about how this can be achieved. How can we make ourselves better? is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer.20

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin. Her parents moved to England when she was very young and after school Iris studied philosophy at Oxford and at postgraduate level at Cambridge. In 1948 she became a fellow at St. Anne’s College, Oxford. While she is most famous for her many novels, the fact that she studied philosophy at university is less well known.

I should point out here that Iris Murdoch was an atheist, but a profound believer in humanity. For her we are all capable of living moral/ethical lives, even those who profess no religion. Religious believers turn to God, non-believers to the Good. She herself had nothing against religion and respected religion and those who held religious belief. But she believed that religion was not the only route to leading a good or moral or ethical life, that it was possible to show that even those of no religion could live lives just as moral and ethical and good as anyone else.

When it came to philosophy, Murdoch was first and foremost a moral philosopher and her many and influential books and essays in philosophy have always been about morals.

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and ethics and how we can live a good life. Her many novels lend themselves to the debate in this area as many of her characters often find themselves in difficult situations. Characters in her novels find themselves wrestling with choices they would rather not have to think about or even make. They are often on the horns of a dilemma, wondering which way to turn or what to do, desperately casting about themselves looking for someone or something to help them in their predicament.

And this is really what it comes down to for Murdoch, that issue of the moral/ethical choice. But what makes Murdoch different is that she highlights the individual. Throughout her novels and in her contributions upon the moral/ethical choice debate, Murdoch has always emphasised the fact that each and every one of us is involved in this whole area. She points out that many moral/ethical systems that have been put forward for consideration often forget about the role of the individual. The role of the ordinary person in all of this is often overlooked or just forgotten.

But it is the role of the individual, of the person on a day-to-day level that is most important for Murdoch. This is the nub, the kernel, of what is forgotten or overlooked in the many theories of the moral/ethical life. We are each and every one of us moral agents. Each and every one of us is an individual person as well as being part of things that are greater or larger than us – families, sections in the workplace, choirs, theatre groups, book clubs, neighbours on a street, etc. While many of the moral/ethical systems put forward address the person or the individual at these levels, for Murdoch there is nothing out there that addresses the inner life and the day-to-day decisions we all have to make.
Murdoch wished to bring the field of moral/ethical thinking into our living rooms. The impression from her books, especially *The Sovereignty of Good*, is that even if one cannot prescribe certain duties, codes, guidelines or systems for people to work from, discussion of what is involved should at least take place. Such discussion and debate may then at least be there for retrieval or reference if needed. For Murdoch there is nothing available to us to aid us in our day-to-day lives, in our day-to-day decision making, in the ordinary day-to-day getting on with life and living. For Murdoch there is a very social or socialist aspect to what she wishes to advocate. I mean this in the sense that what she wants to see available should be for the people, for the ordinary person. She wants to ground morality in daily experience.
Murdoch’s Philosophical approach

So what does Murdoch posit for us to aid in our daily lives? Well, there are a number of key words or concepts she puts forward for us to look at: **Attention** – attending and listening, being mindful of the moment; **Unselfing** the self – usually through contemplation, especially through contemplation of art; **Love** – patient loving regard and the fact that love itself appears so little in modern philosophical debate on morals and ethics; and lastly, **Good** – finding the good, something akin to Plato’s Forms of the Good, Good replaces God.

The first of our concepts, attention, seems innocuous enough. Murdoch tells us she borrows the word from Simone Weil;

> “to express 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.”

This attention concept is also the most important on all of them, I feel, as it encompasses the rest of them as it is actively pursued. We must attend and be attentive while we go about our daily lives. We must be mindful of the moment. We must be aware and keep aware – we must pay attention to reality.

We must attend to everything and listen to our attention. There are and should be many moments throughout our day where we can attend. Such attention can allow or occasion many things. As I said, this concept of attention encompasses the other concepts in that attending can allow us to find instances where we can turn a loving gaze, where

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something occurs and we find ourselves, just for a moment, outside of ourselves – unselfed – or where we are able to transform ourselves and perhaps briefly catch a glimpse of the good.

This attention is ongoing for Murdoch; it is part of a process, one that should be part of our lives. It is a part of how we look at and see life. It is an accumulation of our lives and our experiences –

The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are ‘looking’, making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results.22

As we go about our daily lives we encounter different situations and people. From an early age we try to build up skills which will enable us to function in society, in our families first, then at school, then outside at play with our friends, then later perhaps at college or at work.

We gain the skills and knowledge required through experience and seeing others go through those same things. We learn by doing and seeing what others do, by emulating what they did, like we learn how to speak. At school we are taught some of the skills required. But there are elements of life we cannot copy from others because we cannot actually see them doing anything. These are the inner moments, the thoughts in our heads. We all have inner lives as well as our outward lives. Our thinking is completely internal to us. ‘I can see what you’re thinking, it’s written all over your face’ is only a turn of phrase. We cannot know what is going on in someone else’s head, we can only

22 Ibid., p 42.
infer – assume that because they are human like me they can have a similar inner life to one’s own.

But it is often in these inner moments that we have to make decisions. Some of these decision making experiences are quite simple – a friend phones you and asks do you want to pop out with them for a cup of coffee? In one sense there is a simple yes or no decision to be made here. But let’s widen the parameters of this example and add the ingredient that this person ticked you off over something recently. If you say no to your friend, suddenly there is a whole new connotation to your response. Are you saying no because you are ticked off or are you genuinely unable to go?

This is a simple enough example of daily decision making for us all as individuals and as moral agents. In both the simple decisions and the more complex ones, we learn as we go, making decisions and probably mistakes. The important thing is that we are building up experience. The experiences we build up over time form our character, as do the outcomes of the various decisions we make. Most especially the experiences we build up with respect to our decision making can be very important. How these decisions have made us feel, as well as how the results made us feel also inform us as to who we are, and also why we are.

As we learn more about this process in our inner lives, as we gain experience in decision making, we gain insight and understanding as to how and why we act as we do. As we build up experience and go about our daily lives we may encounter other people who can
have an influence on us, even to the extent of being able to influence our decision making process. Such people will hopefully be one’s parents primarily, but thereafter teachers, uncles or aunts or friends of the family who we might look up to or feel are people we would like to emulate.

In this way we actively become moral agents. As such it behoves us to act well. This is where we must show how we listen and attend. This is where we put our experience into practice. This is where Murdoch brings one’s active aspect to our moral lives into operation. For her, in being moral agents, the word ‘agent’ bears with it the implication of action, of doing, of being moral. Our built up experiences should equip us with the tools required to make necessary decisions. The characters in her novels are often faced with moral/ethical dilemmas, just as many are in our daily lives. Murdoch’s philosophy is that we are not moral/ethical individuals only at those particular instances, at those particular times when we find ourselves with terrible decisions to make, at those times when we are faced with dilemmas the results of whose decisions may haunt us for the rest of our lives.

No. In the time between those instances or occurrences we are also moral agents. We do not stop being moral agents or people in those intervening periods, because we are involved in decision making of one kind or another all of the time anyway. In addition, Murdoch would have us act morally/ethically/responsibly at all times anyway by virtue of the fact that we are moral agents. Now the concept of attention comes into its own. If we attend as Murdoch asks us to and listen to this attention, the accumulated experience we
have built up will aid us when it comes to those moments when really difficult decisions are to be made. At such a point she tells us that the many smaller decisions we will have made up to that point will have accumulated sufficiently to enable us to make the required decision – “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at.” No choices here meaning that there is no need for an actual choice in that precise moment, that the accumulation of smaller choices will have enabled one to make the necessary decision.

But what are the other elements that aid us in our daily lives, that help us in gaining the experience and the knowledge outlined above? I think two of Murdoch’s other concepts can help us here, the concepts of Love and Unselfing, which I feel are intertwined to an extent. Actions we take and decisions we make are done in different ways and contexts. The same applies to how we look at the world and live in it. Our attitudes and the past experience we bring to each day and the actions we take during each day have a bearing both on what we do and how the results of what we do will affect us moving forward. How we use the concept of Attention set out above is critical. This concept needs to be supplemented with love and unselfing. As we attend we must learn how to use it to best advantage, how best to get good results, to help us take the best actions. When we do this we can then act as moral/ethical agents in the best sense.

Our attention must be activated, must be directed. One of the ways it should be direct or used is in a loving way. For Murdoch, love is extremely important and it is a concept she ranks almost on a par with that highest of concepts, the one she feels we should all be

23 Ibid., p 38
aspiring to – Good, a concept I will go into in more detail later on. If we are to get the best from how we attend, we must give that attention, direct that attention through love. I mentioned earlier the idea of a ‘just and loving gaze’ being directed in certain ways, be it toward a person, thing or situation. When we are giving our attention to something or someone, when we are in the midst of deciding on something while reviewing our day, that activity should be done to the backdrop of love. Murdoch tells us that “while Good is sovereign over Love”\(^{24}\), acting through or with love is to act well – “Will not ‘Act lovingly’ translate \textit{into} ‘Act perfectly’”.\(^{25}\)

This all goes back to our acting, to our being active moral/ethical agents. It brings us back to the idea of there being a process we ought to be engaged in. When we act we have a choice as to how to act – whether we act for good or ill. In aiding us in our choices we ought to have love. Love is instinctive; we know it on a level we cannot explain. We must use this instinctiveness when directing our attention. We think of the instances of the mother loving her invalid child not because she has to or that she should, but because instinctively she knows it is right.

Then there is the Unselfing of the self. When we come to directing our attention, unselfing helps us to see better, to see in a clearer manner. Again this comes back to how we see the world and how we look at our actions in our daily lives. As individuals and people, we are more often than not preoccupied with ourselves. When thinking about what we did and why, we generally these things only from our own perspective. This is

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p 99
\(^{25}\) Ibid., p 99
natural enough, but Murdoch would wish us to try and see or look from another perspective.

“It is the height of art to be able to show what is nearest, what is deeply and obviously true but usually invisible.”26 When we contemplate art, be it a painting or a piece of sculpture, a statue or a mural, we can sometimes look at such works and enter a kind of reverie, to another place if you will. This contemplation of art can take us outside ourselves and we can see the artwork in a more overall way i.e. not in a subjective way. We will look at the piece and see in it something, something we cannot define. We know, though, that whatever it is we see in the piece, it speaks to us or moves us in a unique. It is emotional but on a level that is almost instinctive, maybe even primal. Some call what we see beauty. Some say that is just what art is. But whatever it is, this way we see it and the fact that we do see it is very important. All of a sudden it is not just about ourselves, there is something about the work that just is. There is an aspect, even a life to the work that we notice. Suddenly the context is shifted and we see the art work in a completely different way. Now we can really see it and really look at it and really appreciate it.

Because we cannot always be in a position to look at art, Murdoch gives us another way to aid us in this kind of looking. She asks us to take a moment in our daily lives and contemplate nature. Take a moment to just look out the window and think about what you see. She gives us the example of looking out of her window and sees a hovering kestrel. Upon seeing such a thing of beauty, what she had been brooding about seems unimportant when she comes back to thinking about it. An appreciation of the beauty of

nature, a beauty that is just there, that is just a part of it and being able to actually see it shows us that if we try, we can look that way at other things and hopefully see some form of beauty (or whatever we might wish to call it) in those too.

These things allow us to unself ourselves, to look at what we do and did during our day in a different way. This way of looking at nature or at art and what happens when we do, this can be done deliberately as well. “Give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care.” Clear our minds of selfish care, step outside ourselves and look and see in an unselfish and unpossessive way, to see people and situations as they really are and not bring our baggage from our own perspective into our judgement.

Again coming back to what Murdoch sees as the process here, we must train ourselves to focus and direct our Attention, using tools like Love and Unselfing to aid ourselves in our quest to become excellent moral/ethical agents. Murdoch uses the example of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave here. Unlike Eric Voegelin above, Murdoch does not focus on the ‘periagoge’, the ‘turning around’ the way he does. For her what is important is the fire in the cave, that source of light casting the shadows on the wall that the inhabitants of the cave think are reality. To Murdoch the fire is man’s psyche projecting what it considers to be reality. The inhabitants do not so much as turn around but come to realise that perhaps the way they see the world may not be as complete as they would like to think, that perhaps there is more out there or they could, if they put their minds to it, see more.

As the inhabitants look at the fire they take comfort from it, seeing what they want to see, the introspection of the self and not being able to see beyond themselves. Those who can take their eyes off the fire and walk past it are those who have gained a better self-awareness, who understand better what they were doing and can change so that they can see with a little more clarity – can Attend with Love and in an Unselfed way.
Bringing it all together

One of the toughest things for us is the Good. This is what we strive for, this is what the result of all of our Attention and Love and Unselfing should be. The good is the metaphysical component of Murdoch’s moral philosophy. This is the transcendent part – the Good equates to God.

It is here that it seems to me to be important to retain the idea of Good as a central point of reflection, and here too we may see the significance of its indefinable and non-representable character. *Good, not will is transcendent.*

As I stated earlier, religious believers turn to God, non-believers to the Good. This basic tenet of Murdoch’s philosophy shows us that for those who do not embrace, or wish to embrace religion, such people are not just going to go off and just do as they please. It is the contention of some that those who have no belief in God are thus immoral, so what is to stop such people from just doing as they please. Having a moral/ethical code or imperative given them through religious education and a belief in God stops such wantonness. What Murdoch shows us is that God can be substituted with Good and thus the non-believer is no longer immoral.

This is simplifying what she is saying rather drastically, but the point is still the same. While it might be rather reductionist to say that substituting God with Good makes the non-believer a moral person again, that same reductionist argument can be levelled at the earlier point of what is to stop non-believers just going off and doing as they please. The response is nothing, but there have been non-believers in the world for ever and what are

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28 Ibid., p 68 (her emphasis).
they doing. Just because a person does not believe does not mean they are going to lead immoral lives and become bad people. Some of the most evil people in the world were religious people while others who purportedly do so much for the people, such as politicians, are so often the ones that stray morally.

Murdoch sought to extend the domain of the ethical beyond constricted notions of obligation (“what it is right to do”) in order to encompass ideas of the good life and “what it is good to be”29

Simply, what Murdoch is showing us is that there is something there, if required. There is something to be striven for and there is a point to right action in our daily lives, whether we are believers or not. “Murdoch was persistent in arguing for the necessity of a metaphysical conception of ethics.”30 This Good of hers has similar qualities to those that are associated with the God of believers. She does not say they are the same, just that they share similarities. This Good is outside of us, it is invisible. Murdoch says that given the nature of Good, “beauty appears as the visible and accessible aspect” of it.31 But this accessibility is only on the level that beauty can be accessed through art, like in a painting. This accessibility is only through the senses. The Good Murdoch is telling us of does not have the ‘visible’ aspect or quality that beauty does in this respect. It cannot

29 Maria Antonaccio The Virtues of Metaphysics – A Review of Iris Murdoch’s Philosophical Writings, p 313
30 Ibid., p 313
31 Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good (Routledge Classics 2001) p 68
because it cannot be apprehended, experienced, represented or defined in the way beauty can.

Nevertheless, the Good is there, enticing us on, setting us a standard. “The only genuine way to be good is to be good ‘for nothing’”. 32 This is what makes the Good what it is. This is what gives it its indefinable quality. The ‘for nothing’ gives Good its transcendent quality and that is why it has the ability to make us strive for it, to make the moral/ethical choices that will allow it. And if a reason were needed, and I do not believe one is, this is why non-believers do not just go off doing whatever they please. For those who feel that humanity needs something to strive for or something to give them purpose, somewhere to look to, the Good can provide just as religion and God can.

At this point something should be said of Murdoch’s own attitude to religion. While as I stated at the outset that she was an atheist herself, she had nothing against religion stemming from her own personal position. In fact she had the greatest respect for religion and religious belief, finding that they generally had the good of humanity and the individual at heart. I hazard to imagine that she just had no belief in a God, personal or otherwise and thus no real need for religion.

In respecting religion she acknowledged the role religion had played and still plays in tending to attempt to help people live good lives. She particularly felt the certain religious practices could actually be of benefit where she spoke of directing one’s attention in loving and unselfed ways. Murdoch specifically highlighted prayer as one of those 32 Ibid., p 68
instances – “Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love.” Prayer is a set way of doing something. It is a ritual that is gone through. Being something that is done regularly and often perhaps by rote, it can have the effect of calming the mind so that all the thoughts and worries spinning around in one’s head stop doing so and it becomes quiet in our minds. One can then focus better and give attention to what is important. It is well known that rituals like this have a true psychological effect and can aid us when we attempt certain forms of contemplation. This was, after all, one of the reasons prayer was invented in the first place. Constant praying and chanting can lead to a state of calm reverie and this is a well know fact.

But whatever one thinks of its theological context, it does seem that prayer can actually induce a better quality of consciousness and provide an energy for good action which would not otherwise be available.

Murdoch stated that the Good had a transcendent quality – “A genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good.” Religious belief is not the only motive for good conduct, but it is an important one and this should never be taken for granted. Anything that motivates us to live good lives is to be commended, whether it in the striving for God or for the Good.

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33 Ibid., p 53-54
34 Ibid., p 81
35 Ibid., p 96
My own views as to why recourse to religion is not required to lead a good life

Like Iris Murdoch, I am an atheist. This is a belief that I have come to slowly and over time. It is not a conclusion I reached all of a sudden or just out of thin air. A great deal of thinking and mulling things over was involved.

Growing up I developed doubts about religion. I wondered and questioned over time and cast about me looking for answers. As we go about our lives we develop friendships and relationships with others. No more than anyone else I was involved in many conversations (and even arguments) over the years about many things, including religion and God and how we feel about such matters. In addition I have three aunts who are nuns and with whom I had many discussions on these matters. Also too I read more and more about these topics to try to gain as much knowledge and information as I could. I am someone who always wants to have all of the facts before making a decision. I do not generally rush into anything.

Over time I have gained knowledge and experience of the world. The views I held as a youth were no longer the views I held in adulthood. This is something that can be said of us all, but not, I think, something that can always be said of our religious beliefs. Many of us are brought up in particular religious environments and in specific religious faiths and because of this it is hard for us to change. Many do not bother thinking about these matters too much and just continue on and go along with things because it is easier that
way. Others worry that if they were to change that they would cause offence or even division either in their family or among their friends.

My current beliefs are an accumulation of life experience, of listening to the beliefs of others and asking them why they believe as they do, of finding out as much as I could about Catholicism and other religions as I could, of reading up as much as I could and getting as much knowledge and information about both sides of the debate as was possible. In looking at everything over the years I eventually came to the conclusion that for me a belief in God was not possible. This conclusion is a reflection of myself and the type of person I am more than it is a turning away from religion.

Over the past few years, especially during the height of the Celtic Tiger years, we heard many of the calls for a return to God being repeated. Our secularised society, especially in the West, was being seen more and more as a godless place that was degenerating as we watched. It was this godlessness that was at the root of all the bad things that were happening. I was struck by all of these people seeming to feel that the only way we can lead good lives or be moral people is if we believe in God and have some form of religion behind us – religion being necessary as something physical we can turn to. I was struck by the idea of those who advocate such belief that only religion can provide guidance, laws, tenets, duties or obligations which will allow one to live a moral life.

To me this was completely illogical and effectively sidelined so many people, myself included. Effectively I was not a good person because I did not believe in God and held
no religious beliefs. Now I know this to be patently untrue, and that this particular fiction can be patently seen to be untrue. My difficulty was in articulating what I knew and in being unable to provide any kind of backing for this. While I was generally able to counter many of the arguments myself, I tended to get the usual ‘well, prove it’ or ‘where does it say that’ thrown at me. When I began reading Iris Murdoch I knew I had found my advocate.
Conclusion

So what can be taken from all of the above? Eric Voegelin shows us that the best route to a moral life is an ordered life. We must seek a right order of being. Along with this right order of being must be a right order of society; and accompanying these must be recognition of a transcendent order of being. A key element in such a life is the active participation of each of us in it. Voegelin states we must decide this is what we want. We as individuals must want to know the transcendent and like the inhabitants of Plato’s cave, we must turn around to the light.

We participate in reality in a way unique to humankind by virtue of what the Greeks termed the psyche or soul. Because we are unique in this regard, we are allowed to apprehend the world and come to an understanding of it in a way that no other creature in the world can. With our soul we can conceive the transcendent order and try to know it and this is a gift that Voege lin feels we should not waste, but use to fullest advantage i.e. to gain knowledge of the divine and transcendent in the world and try to be a part of the flow of its influence in the world.

Voegelin is a firm believer in the need for religion, not just for its own sake, but because it has a role in assisting man in leading a fuller life, a full order of being that includes a transcendent element. Religion provides a path to salvation and it is only through or with the aid of religion that human beings can have or live a full life and have a right order of being. With the help of religion man can learn to know his soul and learn how to open
himself to the divine and know the transcendent order of being. For Voegelin, religion is necessary for a good life.

Iris Murdoch tells us otherwise. She agrees with Voegelin when she maintains that we must be active participants and specifically decide to live good lives. Being good or moral people is an ongoing process. We as individuals are moral agents, the word ‘agent’ being the operative word here. Murdoch wished to bring this moral agency into our daily lives. We make all kinds of decisions every day, big and small. Sometimes our decision making has moral implications for us and that we should have ways to aid us at such times.

Murdoch does not advocate just having sets of rules or duties or obligations for us to use or fall back on. For her, what we have is our wealth of experience built up over our lives. But this experience must be tempered with Attending closely to what we do each day and making sure that such attendance is done through Love and in an Unselfed way. We must review our day in an attentive way. We have to look each day at what we do and how and why we do in the way we do. Why did we make such a decision – what motivated to decide in the way we did?

Murdoch wants us to act morally each and every day and we must hone our attention using love and unselfing. We must direct our attention in a loving way because to do anything with love is to act in a good way. In addition, if we can actively find ways to reflect on our day so that the emphasis on the ‘me’ is taken out of the equation and a
more unselfish and unpossessive attention is given everything and everyone around us; we will act as better people. “Murdoch reinstated an older Platonic (and Augustinian) insight that what we do is conditioned by what we love and by the direction of our attention.”

And there are many things we can use to aid ourselves in how we attend. Her example of contemplation of nature and how such contemplation can give us a moment of reverie in which our own cares can seem not to be so great after all. Murdoch tells us that if we can take a moment each day to just see the beauty in nature, the beauty all around us, then we will be able to see why it is worthwhile to act morally. Such contemplation takes us out of ourselves and allows us do look around and see clearly. Contemplation of art does the same thing. When we see beauty in art or nature is one of the only things we can love in an unselfish way.

But what makes people of no religion act morally? For Murdoch there is the concept of the Good. She tells us that inside we all know intuitively when we act good or bad. Such knowledge is innate. For the ancient Greeks, the Good equated to God, and so it is for Murdoch. The Good has transcendent qualities in some sense; qualities that which ever way you term them have the ability to attract us. The Good has a magnetic quality that makes us aspire to it and because of this and not only religion, do we act well. She shows us while religion and religious practice are good things to have and is an aid to many in living a good life; it is not a requirement for a good life.

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36 Maria Antonaccio *The Virtues of Metaphysics – A Review of Iris Murdoch’s Philosophical Writings*, p 314
If we Attend well, if we direct a Loving gaze, if we Unself ourselves, we as individuals and as moral agents can decide to act well. We can choose to live good lives.
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What is Humanism?

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*The Gnostic World View: A Brief Summary of Gnosticism*