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Back to Ancient Questions?  
Tornare alle domande degli Antichi?

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Back to Ancient Questions?

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## Mysticism and morality. Iris Murdoch's Platonic mysticism

Giuliana Di Biase

What is the essence of mysticism? In the *Phaedrus*, Plato's most mystical dialogue, the answer to this question is to be found in what Socrates affirms regarding the vision of forms, which would be enjoyed only by those who have experienced the divine madness of love. Socrates differentiates between four types of madness (*mania*) inspired by god, *i.e.* prophecy, religious frenzy, poetic inspiration and *eros*; they have something in common, the idea of possession, for those who experience divine madness are said to be full of god. Despite their divine origin, none of these forms of madness is equated with knowledge (*episteme*), because prophets, religious enthusiasts and poets do not know what they are saying or doing when they act as a medium for a deity; it is not wisdom (*sophia*) which enables them to do this. Even the fourth type of madness, love, is not equated with wisdom, because in order to love (or long for) wisdom one cannot already possess it. However, Socrates affirms that those few souls who approach a full and unmediated vision of true reality have experienced the madness of love, which is a longing to regain the original vision of eternal forms and the most blessed of all.

Can the mystical significance which Plato attributed to the vision of forms have some relevance to the contemporary debate over the essence of mysticism, in particular regarding its relationship with morals? The answer to this question seems to depend on the meaning conferred on the term "mysticism", which is however a much disputed point within the context of a comparative study of mystical experience<sup>1</sup>. In the introduction to

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the debate originating in the English-speaking academic world around five decades ago; the authors I mention are some of those cited, for instance, in R.K. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness. Mysticism and Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990.

his work *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn has given a broad definition of the phenomenon as a «process» or «way of life» expressing direct or immediate «consciousness» of the «presence of God»<sup>2</sup>; mysticism is said to be always dependent on religion, intended as a wide historical whole. The definition aims at being flexible enough to embrace the various forms of mysticism proper to the world's major religions; it intentionally avoids terms such as “union with God” and “experience”, which McGinn considers as problematic. Union, he claims, is «only one of the hosts of models, metaphors, or symbols that mystics have employed in their accounts»; as for “experience”, the term in his view «tends to place emphasis on special altered states – visions, locutions, rapture, and the like – which admittedly have played a large part in mysticism but which many mystics have insisted do not constitute the essence of the encounter with God»<sup>3</sup>. The careful choice of terms is symptomatic of McGinn's disagreement with a certain vocabulary, having its remote source in William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James described mystical states in terms of union with the Absolute, and identified them with individual experiences characterized by ineffability, transiency, passivity and a noetic quality. These states' distinctive features were exclusively phenomenological, in James's view, for their content was essentially the same in the various religious contexts. Several scholars, including Evelyn Underhill, Rufus Jones and Walter Stace, endorsed James' idea of an eternal, irreducible mystical unanimity or common-core experience transcending particular religious traditions and historical epochs; they claimed that all mystical experiences are the same in essence, although differently interpreted and expressed in distinct cultures. “Perennialism”, as this approach was named by Aldous Huxley's work *The Perennial Philosophy*<sup>4</sup>, came under sustained attack some decades ago, when “constructivism” emerged as an alternative position. Constructivists claimed that there is not a unique, identical mystical experience underlying any religion, for mystical experiences are always influenced by the culture and worldview of a particular place and historical era; scholars such as Steven Katz,

<sup>2</sup> B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 4 vols., vol. 1: *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, SMC Press, London 1992, p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>4</sup> A detailed account of the origins of Perennialism is in R.T. Dible, *The Philosophy of Mysticism: Perennialism and Constructivism*, in «Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research», 2, 1 (2010), pp. 173-183.

Robert Gimello and Hans Penner insisted on the important role played by language and concepts in mediating mystical experiences. The experience of unity with God or nature, or *unio mistica*, which perennialists considered as the fundamental trans-cultural characteristic of mystical experiences, was unable to bear this burden for the constructivist because of its being absent from dualistic mysticism.

Some scholars have attempted to compose the perennialist-constructivist debate by offering more nuanced definitions of mysticism and mystical states; McGinn's definition provides an example of this strategy. Another example may be found in Jerome Gellman's distinction between a wide and a narrow sense of "mystical experience", with the first being not unitive<sup>5</sup>.

The main problem with nuanced definitions of mysticism such as Gellman's is that they do not help clarify whether mystical experiences have any relationship to morals. Several perennialists have given a positive answer to this question; Iris Murdoch was one of them. She was convinced of the existence of a mystical common-core experience transcending cultural and religious boundaries; however, she criticized the idea of a monistic, non-relational mystical experience. Murdoch looked at Plato's philosophy in order to affirm the existence of a link between morality and mysticism; an analysis of her Platonic strategy within the context of the perennialist-constructivist debate is the subject matter of this essay.

### *Murdoch on mysticism in Existentialism and Mystics*

Murdoch's interest in mysticism appears to have grown out of her dissatisfaction with twentieth-century philosophy. Brought up in a philosophical landscape dominated by the teaching of Wittgenstein, whose lessons she attended for a short time in Oxford, very early Murdoch challenged the predominant logical concern with language typical of analytic philosophy with a reassessment of the basic role played by consciousness in moral life. Several of her earlier writings insisted on this point: the magmatic scenario of internal events which analytics had dismissed in order to focus on the subject's "surface" had to regain a central place in philosophy, so as to restore moral life to its fundamental importance<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> J.I. Gellman, *Mysticism and Religious Experience*, in W.J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 138.

<sup>6</sup> This is a recurrent theme in the many essays collected in I. Murdoch, *Existentialists and*

Murdoch countered the picture of moral life which she found in analytic philosophy (a sort of dry “behaviourism” focusing on isolated episodes of choice and action), with the idea of spiritual progress achieved through meditative exercises based on “obedience”, “waiting” and “attention”<sup>7</sup>. This was the vocabulary of Simone Weil, who played a fundamental role in the development of Murdoch’s thought<sup>8</sup>; Weil’s work introduced her to Plato’s philosophy, as well as to Christian and Eastern mysticism.

Plato attracted Murdoch’s attention essentially as the “mystic” celebrated by Weil, the ancient austere moral philosopher who «attempted to reveal a truth which was not accessible to all men»<sup>9</sup>. Murdoch was particularly fascinated by his treating beauty as «an introductory section of the good»<sup>10</sup>, the visible and accessible aspect of it: several of her earlier writings insist on the similarity between the apprehension of beauty in art or in nature and the contemplation of the Good. In her view, both imply a refinement of “vision”, *i.e.* an attempt to contrast the centripetal tendency of our naturally selfish psyche with an effort to attend to reality; this effort is nourished by love intended as an *eros* purified from its Platonic ambiguity, and culminates in «the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real»<sup>11</sup>. A clear, just and loving awareness of others is the goal of moral life, the apprehension of a good which, though perceived as transcendent, is always “incarnated” in the world<sup>12</sup>. The spiritual journey described in Plato’s myth of the cave is to Murdoch, as well as to Weil, a clear and accessible metaphor of moral life intended as a progressive turning of the self outwards, towards reality<sup>13</sup>. Plato’s ascending and descending dialectics and his idea of a return to the cave confirm her in this opinion: the road towards Good leads away from the world only momentarily,

*Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Penguin Books, London-New York 1997. See M. Antonaccio, E. Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1996.

<sup>7</sup> I. Murdoch, *Knowing the Void* (1956), in Id., *Existentialists and Mystics...*, cit., pp. 157-160.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding Weil’s philosophy, see I. Murdoch, *Against Dryness* (1961), in *ivi*, p. 293; Id., *The Idea of Perfection* (1962), in *ivi*, p. 332; etc.

<sup>9</sup> I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics and Ethics* (1957), in *ivi*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> I. Murdoch, *The idea of Perfection*, cit., p. 333.

<sup>11</sup> I. Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Good* (1959), in Id., *Existentialists and Mystics...*, cit., p. 215.

<sup>12</sup> I. Murdoch, *The Darkness of Practical Reason* (1966), in *ivi*, p. 266.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the important implications for Christian mysticism of Plato’s myth and his theory of the love of beauty see L. Nelstrop, K. Magill, B.B. Onishi, *Christian Myticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*, Ashgate, Farnham 2009, pp. 23-42.



for it must combine increasing intuitions of unity (the unity and interdependence of the moral world) with an increasing grasp of the complexity and detail of reality (the reality of others).

In a 1969 essay entitled *On "God" and "Good"*, Murdoch appears to be particularly impressed by Plato's picturing the good man in the *Republic* as «eventually able to look at the sun»<sup>14</sup>, a kind of superior spiritual achievement which she considers as very difficult to imagine. «Perhaps indeed only the good man knows what it would be like to look at it – she comments –; or perhaps to look at the sun is to be gloriously dazzled and to see nothing». Murdoch prefers to concentrate on the idea of moral life as a progressive change rather than on this exceptional experience: the focus of moral philosophy, she insists, should be on the contemplation of goodness and on those «techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish». These techniques, such as prayer in religious contexts, would represent an attempt to re-address attention from the self towards something external perceived as valuable, such as God or goodness; a «non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience», is «some sort of mysticism», Murdoch affirms, and the proper «background to morals»<sup>15</sup>. Plato's myth of the cave seems therefore to be the immediate source of Murdoch's idea of mysticism as a kind of accessible experience, not requiring adherence to a peculiar set of religious beliefs; she interprets Plato's mysticism as essentially non theistic (a point on which classical scholars of Plato would agree). However, she insists on the dualistic nature of mystical experience: the Good is a transcendent, separate reality, although not a personal one. Dualism implies relation with something other than the subject: this is the reason why morality is the true essence of mysticism, in Murdoch's view.

In a 1970 essay, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch identifies the Platonic form of the Good with the perfection to which all man's acts and thoughts incline, the truth which may be perceived beyond the «falsifying veil» of our egocentric, reassuring fantasies<sup>16</sup>. «True morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism – she declares –, having its source in an austere and unconsolated love of the Good»: the absolute «for-nothingness» of goodness,

<sup>14</sup> I. Murdoch, *On "God" and "Good"*, in Id., *Existentialists and Mystics...*, cit., p. 357.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 360.

<sup>16</sup> I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts*, in Id., *Existentialists and Mystics...*, cit., p. 369.

its «nakedness and aloneness» is what «mystics of all kinds» have «attempted by extremities of language to portray»<sup>17</sup>. The essence of mysticism, this is Murdoch's point, lies beyond any system of religious concepts and reassuring beliefs, in an unattractive and seemingly senseless process of «unselfing»; the unity which mystics experience at the summit of the spiritual ascent (Plato's four stages of enlightenment in *Republic*, 510-11) is not so important as the increasingly clearer intuitions of unity which accompany their moral progress. When this progress is interpreted in the right way, that is to say as «an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection», the identity between morality and «true mysticism» becomes apparent, for Murdoch: both are essentially «a kind of undogmatic prayer which is real and important»<sup>18</sup>.

Similarly, in a 1972 essay entitled *Salvation by Words*, Murdoch commends «a kind of healing agnosticism, a natural mysticism, a new humility» favouring «the expression of obvious and unpretentious truths»<sup>19</sup>. This reference to a natural form of mysticism is the first in her writings; it recalls the description which the perennialist Evelyn Underhill gave of mystical perception as a «natural human activity»<sup>20</sup>, yet whereas Underhill's focus was on the irrelevance of exceptional spiritual talents in mystical life, Murdoch's is on the irrelevance of religious backgrounds. True mysticism transcends the «mythologies» of the different religious traditions, she insists in several of her writings; religion should equally transcend them, in her view. Religions should be «demythologized» for Murdoch, *i.e.* divest themselves of commitments to elements which might be perceived as magical and which render them unbelievable to contemporary man. To ignore these aspects – that is, to leave these elements unaltered – is to condemn religions to obsolescence (as would be confirmed by the general decline of religious belief and practice in the Western world, in Murdoch's view). Natural mysticism would be a remedy for this situation.

Maria Antonaccio has argued that, in spite of Murdoch's emphasis on the necessity to demythologize religion, an interpretation bridging the gap between her Platonism and Christian theology is legitimate. The fundamental task for Murdoch would be to reform religion without a loss of

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 375-376.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 383.

<sup>19</sup> I. Murdoch, *Salvation by Words*, in Id., *Existentialists and Mystics...*, cit., p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> See E. Underhill, *Practical Mysticism. A Little Book for Normal People*, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York 1915, p. 11.

crucial substance; although she insists that the Good and God are two separate entities, she acknowledges that «to a large extent they interpenetrate and overlap»<sup>21</sup>. Clearly, this begs the question of how much God and Good are alike; if the point of intersection is great, Antonaccio's interpretation may prove valid. Conversely, if the two concepts are more loosely conjoined than she supposes, then David Robjant is right when he argues that theological readings «do violence to Murdoch's position»<sup>22</sup>. Robjant points for instance to Murdoch's essay *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts*, where she manifests atheist leanings: «there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term – she writes –; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense. When Bonhoeffer says that God wants us to live as if there were no God I suspect he is misusing words»<sup>23</sup>. In the light of this and other comments, Robjant believes that there is little doubt as to how to understand Murdoch's version of the Good. It is not my purpose here to investigate who is right, whether Antonaccio or Robjant; however, Murdoch's insistence on the importance of a “natural” mysticism suggests that the latter's interpretation is correct. She seems to warn against theistic readings of her thought in no uncertain terms. On the other hand, Murdoch shows a great interest in theistic mysticism (that of Paulus of Tarsus, John of the Cross and Meister Eckart, but she mentions also Augustine of Hippo and Julian of Norwich); besides, her ideas on mysticism seem not to be static, but rather to evolve throughout time. The almost exclusive emphasis on a natural, “demythologized” form of mysticism in her earlier writings makes space progressively for the more complex idea of a hierarchy of spiritual achievements, with different stages and levels.

This idea emerges in a 1976 essay, *The Fire and the Sun*, where Murdoch attempts to clarify Plato's mistrust of art. She reflects on the description of the artist in the *Republic* as someone who «can imitate doctor's talk», and on the similarity between the sophist and the imitative artist in the *Sophist*; she insists on the religious nature of Plato's objection to art, his concern with the artist's aping and trivializing the spiritual<sup>24</sup>. Religious imagery – in particular personal imagery – may be particularly misleading,

<sup>21</sup> I. Murdoch, *On “God” and “Good”*, cit., p. 344; M. Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000.

<sup>22</sup> D. Robjant, *As a Buddhist Christian; the Misappropriation of Iris Murdoch*, in «The Heythrop Journal», 6, 52 (2011), pp. 993-1008, p. 993.

<sup>23</sup> I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good...*, cit., p. 365.

<sup>24</sup> See I. Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato banished the Artists*, in Id., *Existentialists and Mystics...*, cit., pp. 390, 443.

Murdoch remarks; «escape from the cave and approach to the Good is a progressive discarding of relative false goods, of hypothesis, images». She recalls John of the Cross's description of God as «the abyss of faith into which we fall when we have discarded all images of him», but she also insists on the use of deliberately incomplete images in Zen Buddhism<sup>25</sup> to emphasize the same point: images are «valuable aids to thought», yet they «must be kept within a fruitful hierarchy of spiritual endeavour»<sup>26</sup>. This idea re-emerges when Murdoch considers Plato's attitude towards art in the *Phaedrus*: although the unconscious nature of the artist's inspiration seems to fascinate him, she notes, «the genius of the poet is left unanalysed»<sup>27</sup> and poetry is not viewed as the highest form of divine madness. Plato offers a hierarchy of lives, corresponding to a hierarchy of spiritual endeavours; the poet is not ranked as high as the philosopher. Not all those affected by divine madness have seen the eternal forms; not all mystics reach the summit of spiritual ascent. The idea of a hierarchy suggests Murdoch is refining her conception of mysticism: she appears to be increasingly interested in investigating what happens at the vertex of mystical ascent. This seems to be confirmed by an interview of 1977<sup>28</sup>, where she proposes a definition of the «mystical» as «an ever-present moral idea, that of extending ordinary decent morals indefinitely in the direction of perfect goodness». Here the stress is on mysticism as a refinement of morals rather than as its background. «The «ordinary» good man – Murdoch affirms –, aware of the magnetism of good as well as the role of duty, is thus connected to a mystical ideal whether or not he is, in the traditional sense, religious»: mysticism represents the evolving of morals into a more perfect form, independent of the support of religious beliefs. This idea is insisted on in several of the essays collected in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, as we shall see.

### *Mysticism in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

Wittgenstein's views on mysticism, deeply influenced by William James', represented an important source of inspiration for Murdoch. In *The*

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 448.

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, p. 421.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 323.

<sup>28</sup> I. Murdoch, *Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee*, in Id., *Existentialists and Mystics...*, cit., pp. xxiv-xxv.

*Sovereignty of Good* and elsewhere she quoted a sentence from the *Tractatus*, «Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical», in order to highlight the moral import of an unselfish perception of reality attributing an independent, “pointless” existence to it<sup>29</sup>.

A deepened reconsideration of Wittgenstein’s ideas on mysticism and its sources seems to be the background of Murdoch’s work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. The first essays in the volume show her interest in Schopenhauer’s idea of “dying to the world”, a «mystical spiritual condition» influencing Wittgenstein’s thought. «Schopenhauer’s interest in Hindu and Buddhist mysticism may well have touched the young Wittgenstein – she notes –, prompting for instance his attachment to Radindranath Tagore, as well as his concept of ‘the mystical’ in *Tractatus* and *Notebooks*»<sup>30</sup>. Both the philosophers, she argues, conceive mysticism as a total denial of the will, yet Wittgenstein thinks of an accessible form of stoicism, whereas in Schopenhauer «the mystical stage is only reached by extreme asceticism»<sup>31</sup>. They both consider mysticism as what is real and important in human life, and assign a peculiar place to art in this context, yet they do not consider mysticism and morality as fundamentally related. Wittgenstein thinks of morality as something we cannot speak about, given its transcendent nature, whereas Schopenhauer has much to say about morality (in particular about compassion and justice), but his asceticism «lies *beyond* the virtues»<sup>32</sup>. Murdoch rejects this idea and argues that a mystic is a «good person whose knowledge of the divine and practice of the selfless life has transcended the level of idols and images»<sup>33</sup>. Only the virtuous man can become a mystic and reach the vertex of knowledge, Plato’s *noesis*. «Mystical writings – she continues – usually take ordinary virtue for granted; that is, the approach to God or Avatar (or Form of the Good) is achieved not through any annihilation of the world, but by a purification of virtue». Mysticism in its genuine form (*i.e.* not degraded by Gnostic or magical beliefs), always involves the world in all its variety, insists Murdoch: love of the Good or God and care for others cannot be separated. This makes mystical experience a moral experience.

<sup>29</sup> I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good...*, cit., p. 360. The same quotation is in I. Murdoch, *A note on the Riddle*, in Id., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Chatto & Windus, London 1992, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> I. Murdoch, *Fact and Value*, in Id., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> I. Murdoch, *Art and Religion*, in Id., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, cit., p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 73.

The higher levels of asceticism Murdoch refers to in subsequent essays seem however to be more difficult to reconcile with this conviction. In *Notes on Will and Duty* she speaks of mystics as «exceptional persons»<sup>34</sup>, and in *Imagination* she describes mysticism as one of the highest activities of the mind<sup>35</sup>. The kind of experience she refers to in these contexts is always imageless: «beyond the last image», she writes, mystics fall into «the abyss of God», they are completely absorbed in a spiritual higher status of conscience. This kind of mysticism is «much above our own moral level as being morally demanded», says Murdoch<sup>36</sup>; it consists of an indescribable state (the Christian *visio beatifica*, the vision of Beauty in the *Phaedrus*), where «the self is no more». However, Murdoch hastens to remark that even this kind of experience «does not imply leaving the world». Relation is always present, even in the highest forms of asceticism.

This point is restated in one of the last essays, *The Ontological proof*, where Murdoch affirms that total annihilation of the self is also obtained through a less ascetic, duty-based kind of mysticism. She mentions those «saintly figures [...] self-evidently religious», but also those «invisible» people «buried deep in families or offices or silent religious houses»<sup>37</sup>, whose «vision, if any, may have been entirely dissolved into the work». «At the highest level – she notes – this is practical mysticism, where the certainty and the absolute appear incarnate and immediate in the needs of other». *Practical mysticism*, as Murdoch names it recalling Kant's concept of practical love, involves a total abnegation with respect to duty (a duty warmed by Plato's *eros*); it represents the perfection of moral life, deprived of any reward (vision is absent). This sort of austere Kantian-Platonic mysticism is the point of arrival of Murdoch's reflections in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and a plain expression of her main conviction: mysticism and morality are intrinsically linked, for both involve a relationship. Both consist in a progressive re-orienting of the self outwards, and in an annihilation of the self at the highest stage. Murdoch is not alone in this conviction, as will be argued in the conclusion.

<sup>34</sup> I. Murdoch, *Notes on Will and Duty*, in Id., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, cit., p. 306.

<sup>35</sup> I. Murdoch, *Imagination*, in *ivi*, p. 318.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> I. Murdoch, *The Ontological Proof*, in Id., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, cit., p. 430.

### Conclusion

Several perennialists have claimed that there is an important link between mysticism and morals: Evelyn Underhill insisted that the true essence of mysticism is practical, not theoretical, and Walter Stace was a strong advocate of mysticism as the justification of altruism. Even a constructivist like Stephen Katz agreed on this point; by contrast, Albert Schweitzer wrestled with the issue of how to reconcile a monistic interpretation of mysticism with morality, which presupposes relation, and Arthur Danto claimed that mysticism and morality are incompatible<sup>38</sup>. A more balanced position was reached by William Wainwright: in his view, mystical experience is compatible with morality though it provides less support for it than it has often been supposed, because it does not teach any morally relevant truth which is not already available to the subject apart from mystical experience. Mysticism may sometimes affect morality adversely, for it may make a person indifferent to moral values<sup>39</sup>.

Wainwright's opinion is clearly different from Murdoch's, who considers mysticism as the perfection of moral life. Mysticism implies relating, in her view: both mysticism and morality are essentially a loss of egoism. Morality is love; love aims at union, which is the goal of the mystical ascent, but complete union with the beloved (the "mystical Christ", but also the "mystical Buddha" or the many gods of Hinduism, for Murdoch)<sup>40</sup> can never be reached. The distance which separates the lover from "You", and makes love possible, is always maintained.

It has already been said in the Introduction that the experience of unity with God or nature, which some perennialists considered as the fundamental trans-cultural characteristic of mystical experiences, is seen by the constructivist as being unable to bear this burden because of its absence from some contexts (the dualistic experience of God in theistic mysticism, the Jewish kabbalistic experience of a single supernal *sefirah* and shamanistic experiences of spirits). The meaning which might be given to union in

<sup>38</sup> See E. Underhill, *Practical Mysticism...*, cit.; W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Macmillan, London 1960; S.T. Katz, *Ethics and mysticism*, in L.S. Rouner (ed.), *Foundations of ethics*, Notre Dame 1983, pp. 184-202; A. Schweitzer, *Die Weltanschauung der indischen Denker: Mystik und Ethik*, Munich 1935; A. Danto, *Mysticism and morality: Oriental thought and moral philosophy*, New York 1972.

<sup>39</sup> See W.J. Wainwright, *Morality and Mysticism*, in «The Journal of Religious Ethics», 4 (1976), 1, pp. 29-36.

<sup>40</sup> I. Murdoch, *Morality and Religion*, in Id., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, cit., p. 487.

Hindu and Buddhist “world-negating” mysticism is radically different, in the constructivist’s view, from that in Christian mysticism or in monistic forms of mysticism aiming at oneness with nature. Murdoch partially agrees with the constructivist in this regard: she thinks that the fundamental trans-cultural characteristic of mystical experiences is love, not unity, which is only one of the many images used in religious mystical traditions. Images are important but may be misleading, she notes in several of her writings; union in particular is a very ambiguous image. Platonic imagery avoids this ambiguity; this is why it has to be preferred, in Murdoch’s view. In one of her last essays<sup>41</sup> she insists on this point: unlike Plotinus and religious mystics, who spoke of union with the One, Plato «spoke only of (perhaps) glimpsing the Form of the Good», he did not think of an ultimate, erotic union with it. The impossibility of complete union preserves the reality of distinctions and makes space for relation.

## Abstract

*The paper aims to investigate Iris Murdoch’s Platonic mysticism, setting it in the context of the contemporary debate between perennialists and constructivists. Like many perennialists, Murdoch believed in the existence of an essential link between mysticism and morality: this clarifies why she was fascinated by Plato’s philosophy. She conceived of mysticism and morality as having the same essence, love intended as an eros purified from selfishness, and viewed mysticism as the perfection of moral life. Like constructivists, however, Murdoch rejected the idea that mystical experiences are essentially unitive: she used Plato’s imagery of the eternal forms to emphasize that complete unity with the mystical “You” can never be achieved, and that this impossibility assures the existence of a relationship. Mysticism is essentially this relationship, for Murdoch.*

Keywords: mysticism; morality; unity; relationship; eros.

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<sup>41</sup> I. Murdoch, *Martin Buber and God*, in Id., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, cit., p. 462.



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