

Why Kierkegaard Matters  
*A Festschrift in Honor of Robert L. Perkins*

Marc A. Jolley  
Edmon L. Rowell, Jr.  
editors

Mercer University Press  
Macon, Georgia  
2010

MUP/H811

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Macon, Georgia 31207  
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First Edition

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Why Kierkegaard matters : a festschrift in honor of Robert L. Perkins  
/ Marc A. Jolley, Edmon L. Rowell, Jr., editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-88146-212-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813-1855.

I. Perkins, Robert L., 1930—.

II. Jolley, Marc Alan, 1959— . III. Rowell, Edmon L., Jr., 1937— .

B4377.W58 2010

198'.9--dc22

2010037141

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## Sigla

- AN "Armed Neutrality." See *Point of View* (PV).
- BA *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- C *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. See *Christian Discourses* (CD).
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- CD *Christian Discourses. The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- CI *The Concept of Irony* together with "Notes on Schelling's Berlin Lectures," ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- NSBL
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* two vols., ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- COR *The Corsair Affair*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- EO, 1 *Either/Or*, two vols., ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong.
- EO, 2 Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- EPW *Early Polemical Writings*, ed. and trans. Julia Watkin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FOSL
- EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard H. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- FOSL *From the Papers of One Still Living*. See EPW.
- FSE *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- JFY
- FT *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- R
- JC Johannes Climacus or "De omnibus dubitandum est." See PF.
- JFY *Judge for Yourself!* See FSE.
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1, 1967; 2, 1970; 3 and 4, 1975; 5-7, 1978.
- LD *Letters and Documents*, ed. and trans. Hendrik Rosenmeier. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- NA Newspaper Articles, 1854-1855. See TM.
- NSBL "Notes on Schelling's Berlin Lectures." See CI.
- OMWA "On My Work as an Author." See PV.
- P *Prefaces and "Writing Sampler,"* ed. and trans. Todd W. Nichol. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- WS

- PC *Practice in Christianity*, ed and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- PF *Philosophical Fragments* and "Johannes Climacus," ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- PV *The Point of View: 'On My Work as an Author; 'The Point of View for My Work as an Author'; "Armed Neutrality,"* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- AN *Repetition*. See FT.
- R *Repetition*. See FT.
- SLW *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- SUD *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- TA *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- TM *'The Moment' and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- NA *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- WA *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- WL *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- WS "Writing Sampler" See P.

## Danish editions

- SKP *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2nd enl. ed., by Niels Thulstrup, with index vols. 14-16 by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-1978.
- SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, and Alastair McKinnon. Published by Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997ff.
- SKS, K *Kommentar til Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, published by Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997ff.
- SKS, J *Søren Kierkegaard Skrifter, Journalerne*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Anne Mette, Hansen, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, and Alastair McKinnon. Published by Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2000ff.
- SKS, KJ *Søren Kierkegaard Skrifter, Kommentarer til Journalerne*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, and Alastair McKinnon. Published by Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2000ff.

## Kierkegaard and Murdoch on Knowledge of the Good

M. G. Piety

Philosophers go in and out of fashion. There are a few though, such as Plato and Kant, that remain perennially popular either because of their importance to the history of thought, or because of the captivating nature of their writing, or both. Many people are drawn to Kierkegaard because of the beauty of his prose. It isn't just Kierkegaard's writing style, however, that accounts for the fact that he is one of the few philosophers one can count on finding on the shelves of shopping-mall bookstores. His prose style may attract people to him in the first place, but it is the substance of his thought that accounts for his enduring popularity. It takes a certain sort of personality type to be captivated by Plato's divided line, or Kant's *das Ding an Sich*. We are all preoccupied, however, with the issue of how we ought to live, with what sort of life would be truly fulfilling. That is Kierkegaard's concern, finding the truth that is true for the individual as an individual, the one that will make his or her life fulfilling and whole. That's what makes him perennially popular.

One of the most important aspects of the question of how we ought to live concerns how we ought to relate to other people. This forces us to deal with the issue of what we believe are our moral duties, as well as with the epistemological issue of how much we can know both about those duties and about the people to whom they relate. Few Kierkegaard scholars venture out onto the murky waters of Kierkegaard's epistemology. Robert L. Perkins is one of those few, thus it is fitting that there should be some contribution on Kierkegaard's epistemology in this volume dedicated to Professor Perkins.

Perkins is undoubtedly correct in his claim that Kierkegaard "did not develop a thoroughgoing theory of knowledge";<sup>1</sup> it would be a

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<sup>1</sup>See "Kierkegaard's Epistemological Preferences," *International Journal for*

mistake to conclude from this, however, that Kierkegaard did not have a thoroughgoing theory of knowledge. Perkins's preoccupation with the issue of Kierkegaard's epistemology reflects the importance of Kierkegaard's views on knowledge relative to the rest of his thought. It is precisely because he viewed knowledge in a particular way that he emphasized the primacy of faith with respect to issues of existential, or more particularly, ethical or religious significance.

Perkins is correct in his claim that Kierkegaard's "views of epistemology are in the direction of empirical realism."<sup>2</sup> He is also correct, however, in his claim that Kierkegaard is a "moral epistemologist."<sup>3</sup> My own interest has been more in Kierkegaard's views on the nature of ethical and religious knowledge than with empirical knowledge, though the latter, of course, forms the background of the former, as we will see in the pages that follow. It would not be possible to give even an outline of Kierkegaard's general theory of knowledge in an essay as brief as those in this collection.<sup>4</sup> What I intend to do here is to elucidate something of Kierkegaard's view of what it means to know the good by contrasting his views with those of Iris Murdoch because while in a superficial sense, the views of these two thinkers appear very similar, understood properly, they are, in fact quite different.

Scholars sympathetic to Kierkegaard tended to find much of the moral theorizing of the twentieth century either unsatisfactory or downright alienating. Many twentieth-century thinkers distinguished between facts and values in a way that meant there really was no such thing as moral knowledge. A book appeared in 1970, however, that heralded a return to what many who are sympathetic to the views of Kierkegaard, consider a more promising approach to moral philosophy. This book was Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*,<sup>5</sup> and it marked a return to a classical, or substantive, under-

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*Philosophy of Religion* 4/4 (1973): 214.

<sup>2</sup>"Kierkegaard's Epistemological Preferences," 214.

<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Perkins, "Kierkegaard, A Kind of Epistemologist," *History of European Ideas* 12/1:7.

<sup>4</sup>For a fuller account of Kierkegaard's general theory of knowledge see M. G. Piety, *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralistic Epistemology* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

standing of the individual as a moral agent.<sup>6</sup> Murdoch's groundbreaking approach to moral philosophy was later taken up by thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue*<sup>7</sup> and Charles Taylor in his book *Sources of the Self*.<sup>8</sup>

While it is pleasing to see the ranks of professional philosophers becoming more tolerant in terms of the diversity of positions to which they are willing to append the labels "ethics" or "moral philosophy," the Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to moral philosophy bring with them their own difficulties.<sup>9</sup> What I intend to do here is to contrast what one might call an epistemic approach to moral philosophy, exemplified in the works of such figures as Murdoch, MacIntyre and Taylor – using Murdoch as the paradigm example – with the fideistic approach exemplified in the works of Kierkegaard. I have chosen Murdoch's book because it represents the beginning of the trend in moral philosophy that has subsequently been taken up by MacIntyre and Taylor, as well as the beginning of contemporary virtue epistemology.<sup>10</sup>

It is with some reluctance that I embark upon a criticism of *The Sovereignty of Good*. I am hesitant to criticize Murdoch's work on two

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<sup>6</sup>There are, of course, many diverse approaches to moral philosophy which may be grouped under the heading "classical." It is not my purpose here to distinguish between these various approaches. What is significant for my purposes is that, with the exception of the ancient skeptics, most classical philosophy could be characterized as exhibiting what Richard Rorty describes "hylomorphic" (i.e., substantive), as opposed to procedural, view of epistemology. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981) 45. Hence Murdoch's book represents a return to a classical approach to epistemology in that it involves the same substantive view of epistemology.

<sup>7</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

<sup>8</sup>Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>Again, I do not mean to suggest that the views of Plato and Aristotle are essentially the same, but only that they are both substantive.

<sup>10</sup>The historical starting point for contemporary virtue epistemology is generally considered to be Ernst Sosa's paper "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5:3-25 (repr. in Ernst Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* [Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991]). Sosa's article is, of course, more explicitly epistemological than is Murdoch's book. Later work in virtue epistemology, such as that of Linda Zagzebski and Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood, is inconceivable, however, without the precedent of Murdoch's book.

counts. The first is out of a respect for the virtuosity of style it exhibits (emerging as it did in the arid unaesthetic desert of the previous seventy years of moral philosophy, it seemed almost like a miniature oasis). The second is out of a desire to see the type of philosophy associated with the analytic tradition and exemplified in the works of Hampshire, Hare and Ayer, Murdoch's opponents in the book, if not definitively refuted, then at least soundly thrashed.

Many of us who are interested in Kierkegaard's work are similarly dissatisfied with the approach to moral theorizing taken by the analytic tradition. Thus more than a few are sympathetic to the project of Murdoch's book, or, more particularly, to virtue epistemology as it is exemplified in the trend Murdoch started. There is, however, something about virtue epistemology, at least in the form presented in Murdoch's book, that Murdoch herself has failed to notice, something that Kierkegaard, all those years earlier, saw and without which virtue epistemology is ultimately incoherent. Before I attempt to criticize Murdoch's position, however, we must look at the position in some detail.

## I

Murdoch's thesis, much like that of G. E. Moore, is that goodness is a "real constituent of the world" (p. 3). Thus she argues that "[v]irtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature" (p. 41). From this she goes on to argue that our task as moral agents is to direct our gaze *outward* toward reality — therein to perceive the moral ideal — and not inward, in the hope of finding that ideal within ourselves. Murdoch contends that we can attain *knowledge* of the good, or of that single action that is morally, or ethically, demanded of us, through careful attention to the reality that is before us.

If this conception of "moral seeing," as Murdoch refers to it (p. 35), seems at first unproblematic, we must turn our attention to the following example she uses to illustrate this principle.

M [a mother] feels hostility to her daughter-in-law. . . . D. M finds D . . . unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M

does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him (p. 17).

Murdoch goes on to say, however, that

M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object that confronts her. M tells herself: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again" (p. 17).

Murdoch contends that M changes her judgment of D as a result of *renewed attention* to D's behavior or character. Murdoch explains that when M "looks again," D is discovered to be "not vulgar, but refreshingly simple, not undignified, but spontaneous, not noisy, but gay, not tiresomely juvenile, but delightfully youthful, and so on" (pp. 17-18). But D's behavior, Murdoch contends, has not altered in any way; it is only M's judgment of that behavior that has altered.

Again, Murdoch contends that goodness is a real constituent of the world, and that if we are truly or selflessly attentive to the world — after the fashion of an artist — we will see it. It is as the result of such attention that, Murdoch argues, M comes to see that D is not really vulgar or undignified, and so forth. In order to determine if this is a plausible explanation of what has brought about the change in M's vision of D, however, we must reexamine the situation as Murdoch has presented it.

## II

We know that initially M believes or, as Murdoch expresses it, sees D to be "silly and vulgar" (p. 17). Murdoch explains, however, that M

is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism . . . M tells herself: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again" (p. 17; emphasis added).

It is clear here that M's moral vision—to stick to Murdoch's metaphor—has become more acute as the result of her having focused not upon D or upon the world, in a manner analogous to that of an artist focusing upon nature, but as a result of her having

directed her gaze inward and having focused upon herself. It would seem, on Murdoch's own account, that our situation as moral "viewers" is precisely disanalogous to the situation of the artist whose engagement with nature is not mediated by the ongoing activity of self-criticism in which we as moral agents or viewers must engage.

Murdoch contends that we can have knowledge of the good, or of how virtue is manifest in the world; and this, she argues, is the result of a "refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one" (p. 38). Murdoch's contention is that in order to see the good in the world we must not only be attentive to it in the normal sense of "attentive," but we must endeavor to view the world through the patient eye of Love.

This position certainly has a familiar ring to those of us who are acquainted with what John Elrod has identified as "Kierkegaard's Second Authorship."<sup>11</sup> There is a significant difference, however, between the positions of Murdoch and Kierkegaard. Murdoch contends that we can have knowledge concerning what is really the case, morally, about the world, or more particularly about other people. But it is not clear, on Murdoch's account, how loving attention can result in the perception of what is really the case about the world, rather than simply in an impression of what ideally ought to be the case. Ideally, D's actual character would doubtless correspond to M's second, and more favorable assessment. But Murdoch is not contending that proper attention to the world will reveal that, in fact, everything in the world is good; she is contending rather that if we are properly attentive to the world, we will discern where, in the world, the good is.

Murdoch argues that we can attain knowledge of D's true character if we are properly attentive to D or to her behavior. The question is: How does loving attention serve to deliver up such knowledge? It would seem that M's desire to see D "justly and lovingly" (p. 23) might in fact result in clouding her vision as to D's

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<sup>11</sup>John Elrod, *Kierkegaard and Christendom* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

real character. It is possible, after all, that D really is brusque, rude, and tiresomely juvenile.

Murdoch contends that loving attention results in knowledge of how the good is manifest in the world. It would seem, however, that what has been revealed through M's loving attention is essentially something about M—that is, that she is loving—rather than something about D. M is no closer to knowing something about D's true character, or about the world, as a result of the transformation in the nature of her attention. If she is any closer to knowing anything, it is about herself rather than about the world.

### III

I mentioned above that there was something about the sovereignty of good that Kierkegaard had noticed, but that Murdoch had missed. The question is not whether the good is in fact sovereign, but how we are to make sense of this idea. What Murdoch fails to do is to properly distinguish the objects of knowledge from those of belief. It is only through belief, according to Kierkegaard, that good becomes manifest in the world.

Let us ask ourselves, returning to Murdoch's example, what it is in fact that M can be said to know about D. That is, what is there about D that is absolutely indisputable? There is one set of data concerning D that has remained constant throughout both M's original and her revised assessment of the significance of D's actions and that is the actions themselves. D's behavior has not altered in any way. It is only M's judgment of the significance of that behavior that has altered.

Knowledge, asserts Kierkegaard, is "infinitely detached." It places everything in the "infinite indifference [of] equilibrium" (WL 231).<sup>12</sup> What M knows about D is her behavior. She does not attain

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<sup>12</sup>Kierkegaard's claim that knowledge places everything into an equilibrium of contrasting possibilities makes his position look strikingly like that of the ancient skeptics. The skeptics maintained that whenever one attempted to determine the objective truth of a particular situation (e.g., when one attempted to determine from one's subjective impression of warmth whether it was in fact actually or objectively warm) careful application of the skeptical modes or tropes would reveal that the truth claims of one's subjective impressions are always equally balanced by conflicting impressions on the part of other subjects, or by the simple formal

knowledge of D's character, however, through observing this behavior. She makes judgments in regard to D's character and thus forms beliefs concerning that character, but these beliefs do not constitute knowledge. What M knows about D's behavior might just as well lead her to a negative judgment – as indeed it did initially – as to a positive judgment.

If we cannot attain knowledge of the moral character of others, we are nonetheless inclined to believe that we make judgments concerning people's character on the basis of what we know about them – that is, on the basis of our observation of their actions. This is, however, precisely the view Kierkegaard wants to refute. Is it not true, he argues

that the one person never completely understands the other? But if he does not understand him completely, then of course it is always possible that the most indisputable thing [that is, what is known about the individual] could still have a completely different explanation that would, note well, be the true explanation (WL 229)

Knowledge, argues Kierkegaard, “places everything [in the category of] possibility” (WL 230).<sup>13</sup> That is, on the basis of the knowl

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possibility of such conflict. See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1933) 21-107. That is, when attempting, e.g., to determine whether it is actually or objectively warm, what one can be said to know is (1) that one has a subjective impression of warmth and (2) that such impressions vary from subject to subject. Thus knowledge leads to an equilibrium of possibilities or what the skeptics called *isostheneia*.

The skeptical arguments are, of course, considerably more sophisticated, and the application of them more complicated, than I have suggested here. This sketch of the skeptical position should be sufficient, however, to show the similarity between the views of the skeptics and those of Kierkegaard. It is interesting to note that Richard Popkin, in his essay “Kierkegaard and Skepticism” (in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson [New York: Anchor Books, 1972] 342-72) fails to cite *Works of Love* among Kierkegaard's books that exhibit a “powerful and devastating skepticism” (364). This omission is interesting because it is in *Works of Love* that Kierkegaard's skepticism, or more particularly his indebtedness to ancient skepticism, is most clearly exhibited. It would seem Popkin fell prey to the unfortunate and all-too-pervasive tendency to ignore the philosophical significance of Kierkegaard's religious works.

<sup>13</sup>The Hong's first translation of *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964) included the material in brackets even though it is not actually in Kierkegaard's original text. This bit of license is, I believe, entirely justified in terms of

edge M has of D's behavior, it is possible to make either a favorable or an unfavorable assessment of D's character. Kierkegaard contends that

[o]nly half-experienced and very confused people think of judging another person on the basis of knowledge. This is due to their not even knowing what knowledge is, to their never having taken the time and effort to develop the infinite, equal sense for possibilities or with the infinite art of equivocation to grasp the possibilities and bring them into equilibrium or to ponder them in transparency.

(WL 231)

According to Kierkegaard, we can never determine the truth-values of statements about the moral character of other people, or about the ethical significance of their actions. That's why, as Perkins explains, "Kierkegaard's focus is not upon the objective truth value, but the subjective truth relation."<sup>14</sup> We have beliefs about the moral character of others. We do not have knowledge of their moral character. The moral character of others is not even properly an object of knowledge, according to Kierkegaard. Murdoch's problem would appear to be that she has failed to understand this. That is, it would appear she has confused what is properly an object of belief, or of faith—that is, a person's moral character, as against what are simply his uninterpreted actions—with an object of knowledge.

#### IV

But if M cannot be said to have attained any knowledge of D's character, what is it that results from her revised judgment concerning the significance of D's behavior? Kierkegaard explains that

[a]s far as judging another person is concerned, knowledge at best leads to the equilibrium of the opposite possibilities—thereupon the difference becomes apparent in what is now decided. . . . [That is, i]n the very same minute when you judge another person or criticize another person you judge yourself, because when all is said and done, to judge someone else is to judge oneself or to be disclosed yourself.

(WL 233)

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making the English translation more idiomatic. See M. G. Piety, "Translating Kierkegaard," *Per Contra* (Fall 2007): <<http://www.percontra.net/8piety.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup>Perkins, "Kierkegaard, A Kind of Epistemologist," 13.

Thus it becomes clear why it seemed to us earlier that what had been revealed to M, through her loving attention to D was, in fact, essentially something about herself – that is, that she was loving – rather than something about D or about the world. It is here that Kierkegaard possesses a crucial insight into the sphere of the sovereignty of good that Murdoch lacks and it is this lack that makes virtue epistemology – at least in the form articulated by Murdoch – ultimately incoherent and thus untenable.

## V

Kierkegaard argues that to the extent knowledge places everything in the category of possibility “it is outside of the actuality of existence” (WL 230). It is for this reason that Kierkegaard considers it is only through belief, or faith, and not through knowledge, that the good comes into existence in the world.

The difficulty with Murdoch’s position is clear. If good is merely a constituent of the world and not constitutive of it, then it is unclear how loving attention to the world could result in knowledge of the good. There are two difficulties with such a position. The first difficulty is that of determining when our attention is, in fact, sufficiently loving; and the second difficulty is that of determining that our vision is not excessively loving. That is, M may make an unfavorable assessment of D’s character as a result of the fact that her vision is not informed with a sufficient degree of love. But, on the other hand, she may deceive herself into thinking well of D as a result of the fact that her attention is so loving she is unwilling to interpret D’s behavior in a manner that is in any respect unfavorable to the girl.

Kierkegaard argues that “Love Believes All Things – and Yet Is Never Deceived” (WL 225-45). What, one may ask, can he possibly mean by this? Let’s go back to Kierkegaard’s position on the nature of the objects of knowledge. Kierkegaard contends that what we know about a person presents us with two possibilities for interpreting that person’s behavior. M is asked to judge D’s behavior. She may judge it either favorably or unfavorably. The decision is hers. This decision, Kierkegaard argues, does not essentially reveal anything about D; rather it reveals whether there is love or mistrust in M. D’s true character, according to Kierkegaard, is epistemologically inaccessible to M. What is accessible to M, however, is

her own character. For M to judge D's actions unfavorably is, according to Kierkegaard, for M to deceive herself in a very significant sense. Kierkegaard contends that

*in the infinite conception of love . . . to be deceived simply and solely means to refrain from loving, to let oneself be so carried away as to give up love in itself to lose its intrinsic blessedness in that way. In the infinite sense, only one deception is possible—self-deception.*

(WL 236)

Thus Kierkegaard argues, one “defends himself against illusion precisely by believing all things . . . in . . . love” (WL 236-37).

If our situation as moral viewers is analogous to that of an artist, as Murdoch asserts, then what is presented to our moral view is ourselves. Certainly we can be said to have knowledge of the actions of others, as M has knowledge of D's actions. According to Kierkegaard, however, such knowledge is neither the foundation, nor the culmination of the activity of our moral seeing. We do not judge people, he argues, on the basis of what we know about them. We judge them rather on the basis of how much love or mistrust there is in ourselves. We decide to judge or to interpret another person favorably or unfavorably, and with this decision, Kierkegaard contends, we judge ourselves. We do not have knowledge of how goodness is manifest in the world. When we see good in the world, we see it there because there is good, or love, in ourselves.

What we have in terms of knowledge—for example, the knowledge M has of D's actions—is the possibility of good. That is, our knowledge of a person's actions provides for us the possibility of a decision on our part to bring good into the world, or to make it actual, through a loving interpretation of those actions.

Thus what Kierkegaard has seen and what Murdoch and other virtue epistemologists have missed is that it is not through knowledge, but only through such a decision, and the belief that is consequent upon it, that the good becomes sovereign in the world.

An understanding of this is as important to us now as it was to Kierkegaard's contemporaries. It is perennially important. So, therefore, is Kierkegaard.