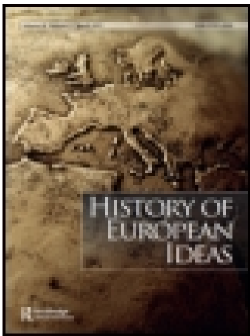

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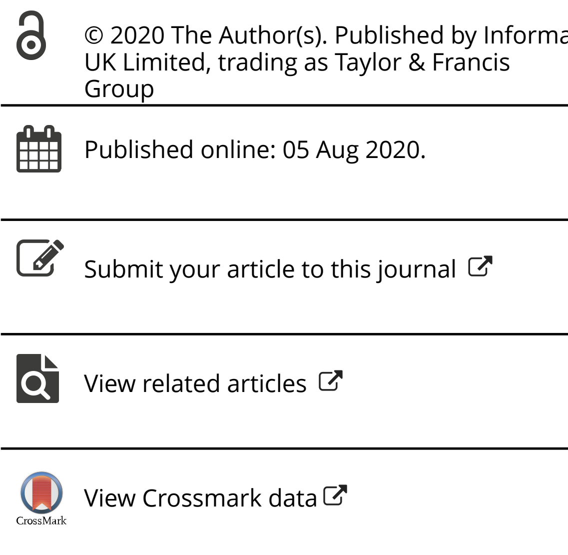

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Existentialists or mystics. Kierkegaard and Murdoch on imagination and fantasy in ethical life

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the role of imagination in ethical life. I do so by discussing the thought of Kierkegaard and Murdoch, both of whom stress the importance as well as the dangerousness of imagination for ethical life. Both distinguish between proper imagination and mere fantasy in dealing with the tension. Anti-Climacus's views on imagination emphasize that the proper use of the imagination plays a vital role in realizing the fundamental ethical task of becoming ourselves, whereas fantasy only alienates us from ourselves. Murdoch's account of imagination stresses that a proper use of the imagination contributes to the realization of a selfless attunement to the world, whereas fantasy only reinforces the (what she describes as) 'fat, relentless ego'. In the final part of the paper I discuss some existing comparisons between both accounts. I conclude by drawing attention to the fundamental choice that comparing their views on the role of imagination in ethical life confronts us with: should we be existentialists or mystics in ethics?

KEYWORDS

Imagination; fantasy; virtue ethics; self; Kierkegaard; Murdoch

1. Introduction

In this paper I will explore the importance and the dangers of imagination for ethical life. This requires us to have an account of what it is to imagine. As is noted in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on imagination, however, this is a controversial question that receives many different answers from many different fields of research.[1] The authors refer to P.F. Strawson who expresses the difficulty in characterizing imagination as follows:

> The uses, and applications, of the terms "image," "imagine," "imagination," and so forth make up a very diverse and scattered family. Even this image of a family seems too definite. It would be a matter of more than difficulty to identify and list the family's members, let alone their relations of parenthood and cousinhood.[2]

While it is important not to forget the controversial nature of any attempt to come up with a comprehensive definition of imagination, that controversy, of course, should not have the effect of stopping any inquiry into the nature and importance of this faculty. Let us, therefore, consider the following very general description:

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[1]Shen-yi Liao and Tamar Gendler, 'Imagination', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/imagination/ (accessed December 11, 2019).

[2]P.F. Strawson, 'Imagination and Perception', in *Experience and Theory*, ed. Lawrence Foster and J.W. Swanson (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 31.

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> To imagine is to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are. One can use imagination to represent possibilities other than the actual, to represent times other than the present, and to represent perspectives other than one's own.[3]

Reflecting on this characterization, there are two ways in which it seems immediately clear that imagination is important for ethical life. *First*, imagination seems to be the capacity that allows me to envision how things (including myself) could be different. It makes it possible to envision a better life, a more just society, being a more compassionate person. *Second*, imagination seems a necessary condition for empathy. It seems to make it possible to picture and engage with another person's condition and perspective.

Such considerations, important as they are, are commonly brought forward. Less commonly defended, but equally important, is the idea that imagination poses a serious threat to ethical life. As the capacity that goes beyond what is immediately given, our imagination might be 'free-floating', losing itself in daydreams or fantasies that become entirely detached from the lived reality of our lives. One way in which this is detrimental to ethical life is that it seems to cause us to overlook or neglect the concrete ethical tasks and responsibilities we face in our actual lives. Other reasons why imagination can pose a danger to ethical life are brought forward by two authors that I will pay close attention to in this paper, Søren Kierkegaard and Iris Murdoch. On Kierkegaard's view, imaginings that are not somehow grounded in the reality of our lives alienate us from ourselves, leading to the 'existential sickness' he describes as 'despair'.[4] And for Murdoch, imaginings might easily present us with a distorted picture of the world, subjecting the (natural) world and other persons to the consoling wishes of (what she describes as) 'the fat, relentless ego'.[5]

We are faced, then, with an interesting ambiguity regarding the significance of imagination in ethical life: it seems *both* of great importance *and* dangerous. In what follows I will explore this tension in more detail. Focusing on Kierkegaard and Murdoch, both of whom are deeply sensitive to this tension, will help us to understand it. It is fascinating to note that both authors reflect extensively on the role and importance of imagination in a perfectionist, virtue-ethical framework, while the specific ways in which they believe imagination can be important in ethical life are not only different but – I will show – mutually exclusive. Confronting their thought has not been done often: there are not many texts discussing at some length Kierkegaard *and* Murdoch. Patrick Stokes draws attention to parallels between both thinkers with regard to, precisely, the ethical value of the imagination.[6] Marilyn Gaye Piety has written a full-length paper comparing both authors with regard to moral vision and knowledge of the good.[7] And Anthony Rudd, in a book in which he relates Kierkegaard's thought to both classical thinkers (mainly Plato) and contemporary philosophy, shows a particular interest in Murdoch's philosophy.[8] In this paper, I will show that comparing Kierkegaard's and Murdoch's thoughts on the imagination will, the end, confront us with the fundamental question of what ethics can and should be.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the *second* part I will explore Kierkegaard's thoughts on imagination as he elaborated them in the books he published under the pseudonym 'Anti-Climacus'. In the *third* part I will reconstruct Murdoch's views on imagination and fantasy. In the *fourth* part I will confront their views, arguing that, although there are important similarities between them, they actually point to incommensurable conceptions of ethics. In the *conclusion*, I will summarize the main conclusions of this paper.

[3]Liao and Gendler, 'Imagination'.

[4]David J. Gouwens, 'Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982): 204–5. Gouwens provides the reader with a selection of passages in the pseudonymous oeuvre where the pseudonymous authors criticize the imagination.

[5]Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 52.

[6]Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors: Interest, Self and Moral Vision* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 75–7.

[7]Marilyn Gaye Piety, 'Kierkegaard and Murdoch on Knowledge of the Good', in *Why Kierkegaard Matters: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert L. Perkins*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, Marc Allen Jolley, and Edmon L. Rowell (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), 204–14.

[8]See especially: Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, & Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 157–9, 249–53.

2. Anti-Climacus on imagination

In this section, I will discuss Kierkegaard's thoughts about the importance and dangers of imagination for ethical life. I will do so by focusing on the writings that he published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus: *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and *Practice in Christianity* (1850). Although he wrote about the imagination in numerous places in his extensive authorship, these books exhibit probably the most elaborate and surely the most systematic account of what imagination is in the context of (and the role it can play in) ethical life.

Although Kierkegaard understands the imagination quite generally as our capacity to explore possibility,[9] he discusses it mainly with regard to what Jamie Ferreira describes as 'genuine self-development'.[10] This fits in the overall existentialist-ethical framework of Kierkegaard's thought which predominantly – though not exclusively – is about the task of becoming oneself. On a Kierkegaardian view, we all have the ethical task to become ourselves. I do not have the space here to elaborate Kierkegaard's views on that task and on the philosophical and theological anthropology that lies behind it.[11] For my present purposes it is important to see that a key element in the process of becoming oneself is to strive for one's ideal self. In order to do that, however, one has to have a conception of one's ideal self – and this is where the imagination comes into play.[12]

Imagination, Anti-Climacus writes, is 'the capacity for perfecting (idealizing)' (PC 192/SKS 12:191).[13] He elaborates this characterization as follows:

> We shall now imagine a youth. With his imagination he perceives some image of perfection (ideal). … To this image … the youth is now drawn by his imagination, or his imagination draws this image to him. He becomes infatuated with this image, or this image becomes his love, his inspiration, for him his more perfect (more ideal) self. (PC 186-187/SKS 12:186)

On this view, imagination is the capacity that allows us to envision an idealized or perfected possibility that, because of its idealized or perfected nature, has the power to gradually change the imagining agent. It is tempting to phrase this in 'active' terms: inspired by the image of an ideal self, the agent actively takes steps to come to resemble the image.[14] Yet, although this certainly seems part of what happens in such transformative processes (think, for example, of aspiring young football players actively taking steps to resemble the skills exhibited by their footballing exemplars), I do not think this is the whole story. A significant part of such transformations is, I believe, passive: in a sense, the idealized image transforms *us*.[15] Perhaps to our surprise, we discover (or other people point out) that we have begun to change. I take it that this is the reason that Anti-Climacus ascribes the transformative activity to *the image* in the following passage:

> And just as it so beautifully happens with lovers that they begin to resemble each other, so the young man is transformed in likeness to this image, which imprints or impresses itself on all his thought and on every utterance by him. (PC 189/SKS 12:188)

Given the transformative power of the imagination, then, it is hardly surprising that Anti-Climacus regards it as vitally important for ethical life. Indeed, he writes that 'the power of the imagination' is

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[9]Cf. Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 76–8.

[10]Jamie M. Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 2.

[11]I have developed an account of these issues in: Rob Compaijen, *Kierkegaard, MacIntyre, Williams, and the Internal Point of View* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 89–155.

[12]David J. Gouwens, 'Kierkegaard on the Ethical Imagination', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982): 208.

[13]In-text citations are to the standard Kierkegaard sigla. See Kaftanski, 'Introduction'.

[14]I have explored this matter more fundamentally in two earlier publications. See: Rob Compaijen, 'Authenticity and Imitation. On the Role of Moral Exemplarity in Anti-Climacus' Ethics', *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2011): 341–64; and Rob Compaijen, 'Recognizing and Emulating Exemplars', *Ethical Perspectives* 24 (2017): 569–93. For other publications that discuss Kierkegaard's views on imitation and moral exemplars, see: Wojciech Kaftanski, 'Kierkegaard's Existential Mimesis', in *The Kierkegaardian Mind*, ed. Adam Buben, Eleanor Helms, and Patrick Stokes (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 191–202; and John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 27–46.

[15]Cf. Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 90–92. Stokes discusses the experience of *being claimed* by the imagined ideal.

'the first condition for what becomes of a person' (PC 186/SKS 12:186). Any genuine development in human existence, that is, presupposes the workings of the imagination.

Notwithstanding this positive assessment of the role of the imagination in ethical life, Anti-Climacus emphasizes the ethical dangers that pertain to the imagination as well. In his writings he identifies, I think, two such dangers that, although they are quite different, both have to do with the overarching issue of the (mis)relation between what is real (or actual) and what is imagined. The *first* problem Anti-Climacus sees is that, as we have already seen, the imagination can only imagine perfection. This is bound to come across as rather odd. Surely, we could reply, it is possible to imagine horrendous suffering? Anti-Climacus responds by arguing that, although, of course, we can imagine suffering, imagined suffering is necessarily idealized suffering. The imagination can only envision suffering 'in a perfected (idealized), that is, in a mitigated, toned-down, foreshortened depiction' (PC 187/SKS 12:187).

How convincing is this reply? I think there is definitely something to the idea that imagined suffering is idealized suffering. For example, when suffering is represented in art (perhaps the chief example of imaginative activity) it can, for all its intensity and gruesomeness, even acquire genuine aesthetic quality, as the paintings of Francis Bacon, or Johann Sebastian Bach's *Matthäus Passion*, or Lars von Trier's films demonstrate.[16] Actually undergoing the suffering that exists as imagined suffering in art, however, is a radically different story: it is, generally speaking, very difficult to regard the suffering one experiences as beautiful or fascinating. 'Generally speaking', because it might be possible to do so by adopting a higher-order view towards one's suffering, experiencing it no longer merely 'from the inside' as raw suffering, but looking at it 'from the outside' and experiencing it, perhaps, as beautiful or interesting as well. This reveals something important, namely that the point of view of the imagination is (in a sense) an external standpoint, looking at life and the world from a standpoint that has detached itself from the immersion and involvement that characterizes much of our everyday existence. This, then, makes clear why, on Anti-Climacus' view, what we imagine necessarily involves a *distortion* of actuality or reality.

Why, exactly, is that distortion a problem? That is, why does it pose a risk to ethical life? Perhaps having a view of reality that is (to some degree) distorted might even be necessary for our attempts to live an ethical life. (Think of those who are fueled by radical hope – 'a hope against hope' – in their attempts to build a better world.) One consideration that seems important for Anti-Climacus is that, because imagination provides us with a distorted picture of reality, it might seriously mislead us with regard to the question of which ideals we should strive for. That is, imagination could easily conjure up an image of an ideal that is no longer grounded in (or continuous with) who I, factually, am. This brings us to the other danger tied to imagination in ethical life.

The *second* risk Anti-Climacus sees is that imagining could easily result in what he describes as 'despair' and what we could, alternatively, understand as being alienated from oneself. Although it is the primary function of the imagination in ethical life to envisage ideals that we could strive for in the process of becoming ourselves, there is nothing that guarantees that the imagined ideals are continuous with who I am as this particular person. This should not surprise us, because, as we have seen, we should understand the imagination as the capacity that goes beyond the actual in its explorations of the possible. This, however, implies that an imagined ideal self is not necessarily *my* ideal self – and if it is not, striving to realize it will mean that I become alienated from who I am. Anti-Climacus provides us with the following wonderful illustration of this insight (where 'possibility' corresponds to the imagined ideal, and 'necessity' to who I, factually, am):

> Legends and fairy tales tell of the knight who suddenly sees a rare bird and chases after it, because it seems at first to be very close; but it flies again, and when night comes, he finds himself separated from his companions

[16]Iris Murdoch (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992)) is sensitive to this tension as well, writing: 'Art, which consoles and to which we also return for wisdom, tends to, or may seem to, romanticize despair. Innumerable poems, stories, pictures, portray it in ways we are easily able to tolerate and enjoy. Christ on the cross is an image so familiar and beautified that we have difficulty in connecting it with real awful human suffering.'

> and lost in the wilderness where he now is. … Instead of taking the possibility back into necessity, he chases after possibility – and at last cannot find his way back to himself. (SUD 37/SKS 11:153)

We could put the point as follows: in this process, where we lose track of ourselves in pursuing an imagined ideal, imagination is, in fact, fantasy.[17] Deploying this terminology, Anti-Climacus writes: 'The fantastic is generally that which leads a person out into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thereby prevents him from coming back to himself' (SUD 31/SKS 11:147). When we let ourselves be guided by fantasy, our lives become 'fantasies': 'The self, then, leads a fantasized existence in abstract infinitizing or in abstract isolation, continually lacking its self, from which it only moves further and further away' (SUD 32/SKS 11:148). On an Anti-Climacan view, that is, we should distinguish between two shapes the imagination can take. While proper imagination allows us to picture ideals that go beyond actuality or reality but, at the same time, remain tied to it, fantasy conjures up ideals that are not in line with who I, factually, am. Hence, David J. Gouwens writes that, if this occurs, 'the imagination becomes "fantastic," unrelated to concrete life.'[18]

An important question, of course, is: how can we make sure that we are guided by imagination and not by fantasy? Unfortunately, I do not have the space to answer that question in detail here.[19] Following the above line of thought I think we should say that, for Anti-Climacus, self-knowledge is pivotal: knowing oneself allows one to differentiate between proper ideals and (what we could describe as) 'alienating ideals'. This idea of imagination as informed by self-knowledge is mirrored by Judge William, the pseudonymous author of the second part of Kierkegaard's book *Either/Or* (1843). He writes:

> The self the individual *knows* is simultaneously the actual self and the ideal self, which the individual has outside himself as the image in whose likeness he is to form himself, and which on the other hand he has within himself, since it is he himself. (EO 2:259/SKS 3:246-247; my italics)

I take this to imply that, if one know oneself as one actually is, one is able to see or recognize whether an imagined ideal is, in fact, one's ideal self. Self-knowledge puts a constraint on imagination; it marks the difference between proper imagination and mere fantasy. Such proper imagining is central to ethical life, while free-floating fantasy poses one of the greatest risks to its realization.

3. Murdoch on imagination

'Imagination' is a central concept in Murdoch's thought. She writes about the vital importance of imagination for (ethical) life throughout her philosophical authorship, and that felt importance is demonstrated, of course, in her richly imaginative body of literary work. (I will be focussing on her philosophical authorship in what follows.) Despite all of this, however, it is not easy to come up with a satisfying answer to the question just how Murdoch understands the imagination and its workings. I will attempt to reconstruct her account of the imagination by exploring how she contrasts imagining with two other modes of cognition: scientific thinking and fantasizing, respectively.

3.1. Imagination and scientific thought

On Murdoch's view '[w]e are fantasising imaginative animals.'[20] Imagining is something that is intimately tied to who we are as human beings – it is 'something which we all *do* a great deal of the time.'[21] This should not be understood as saying that we are lost in daydreams much of the time (although that may be true too), but, more fundamentally, that we have to use our imagination to

[17]See also: Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 76.
[18]David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 155.
[19]See Stokes (*Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 73–94) for a clear and insightful discussion of this issue.
[20]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 323.
[21]Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (New York: Penguin, 1999 [1997]), 198.

interpret the world. We cannot choose not to imagine; it is something we all do in trying to find our way in the world. Murdoch writes:

> The world is not given to us "on a plate," it is given to us as a creative task. It is impossible to banish morality from this picture. We *work*, using or failing to use our honesty, our courage, our truthful imagination, at the interpretation of what is present to us, as we of necessity shape it and "make something of it." We help it be. We work at the meeting point where we deal with a world which is other than ourselves.[22]

This passage suggests that *any* interpretative activity requires the use of the imagination.[23] And in a sense that seems right: it seems that even scientists (*qua* scientists) need to deploy the imagination, for example in formulating hypotheses, in coming up with new experimental set-ups, or in envisaging different ways to interpret data. We could ask, therefore, whether Murdoch even wishes to draw a contrast between imagination and scientific thought. Yet, the above passage does not exclude – and earlier passages confirm – that next to imaginative thinking there is something Murdoch describes as 'strict' or 'scientific' thinking. Twenty six years before the publication of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, in the 1966 paper 'The Darkness of Practical Reason', she highlights the contrast between imagination and scientific thought:

> This activity, which may be characterised by a contrast with "strict" or "scientific" thinking, is (like so many totally familiar things) not easy to describe, but one might attempt a description as follows: a type of reflection on people, events, etc., which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual.[24]

Murdoch, it seems to me, wishes to distinguish imagining from scientific thinking both in terms of its *character* and in terms of its *object*. With regard to its *object* she writes that, unlike scientific thought, imagining goes beyond the 'strictly factual'. What does that mean? Murdoch's views about imagining as going beyond scientific thinking are grounded in a particular, anti-naturalist conception of the world: it seems that, on her view, reality is not exhausted by the (natural) sciences. That is, there are parts of reality that we cannot access with the disengaged methods of inquiry of the (natural) sciences. She writes: 'To be a human being is to know more than one can prove, to conceive of a reality which goes "beyond the facts" in these familiar and natural ways.'[25] And, demonstrating acute awareness of the controversial nature of these views given the influence of naturalistic conceptions of the world, she adds that this makes clear that we need imagination: 'That reality goes beyond "mere fact" and that to reach it we need strength and refinement of the imagination is not an obscure metaphysical doctrine.'[26]

Murdoch, to repeat, describes the object of the imagination as that which goes beyond the strictly factual. As a characterization this is not very precise, but that imprecision is significant: our imagination can conjure up almost anything that is not immediately or factually given: other people's experiences and (tacit) needs, the future, unicorns and golden mountains, books we have not yet read, other careers I could (have) pursue(d), possible holiday destinations, tragic things that might have happened to us, and so forth. This might suggest the list is endless, but – although Murdoch does not mention this – it is important to see that the use of the imagination *is* constrained in at least one sense: it is impossible to imagine the logically impossible (such as square circles).

Imagination is about such things as are listed above, which, Murdoch suggests, are inaccessible to scientific thought, although thinking about them is central to human life. But there is another sense in which imagination goes beyond the strictly factual according to Murdoch. Imagining can be (and, Murdoch suggests, rather often is) an *evaluative* activity. Imagining, she writes, is 'usually and often

[22] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 215.
[23] Hannah Marije Altorf, 'We are Fantasising Imaginative Animals' (MGM Chapter 11)', in *Reading Iris Murdoch's Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, ed. Nora Hämäläinen and Gillian Dooley (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 169–70.
[24] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 198.
[25] Ibid., 199.
[26] Ibid., 201.

inevitably, an activity of evaluation.'[27] This is, I think, not obvious (I imagine going to the grocery store – how is that evaluative?), but perhaps we should understand it in the following way. Our imagination makes us consider new ways of working on a project that we immediately find desirable or objectionable, I imagine the details of the difficult childhood my colleague has had and admire his way of dealing with it, we picture walking in the Scottish highlands and are drawn to this image, and so forth. In any case, reflecting on the evaluative capacity of the imagination, Murdoch writes that 'a constructive activity of imagination and attention "introduces" value into the world which we confront.'[28] (EM 201)

With regard to its *character*, Murdoch highlights the active nature of the imagination: imagining is, as she writes in the passage quoted above, a matter of '*building* detail', '*adding* colour', '*conjuring up* possibilities'. She adds that '[i]magination is *doing*, it is a sort of personal exploring.' (EM 199) Murdoch, then, seems to want to contrast imagination with the more passive openness which I think she believes is characteristic for scientific thinking. On this line of thought, scientific thinking embodies an attitude of receptivity towards the 'strictly factual', whereas imagining is active and creative. And, generally speaking, this contrast seems right. There is a definite sense in which the scientific way of engaging with the world is a matter of *discovering*, which, although itself an activity, is (ideally, of course) a matter of *opening* oneself to what is there outside one and *letting* oneself be guided by it. It is important, on the other hand, not to exaggerate the contrast, because a scientific engagement with the world is not simply a matter of 'being receptive to the facts': observing the facts is not simply open but theory-laden, and 'mere facts' stand in need of interpretation.

Like Kierkegaard, Murdoch too narrows her discussion of the role of imagination in human life. She focuses on the role of imagination in our attempts to become better people, which, she argues, is the core ethical task of human existence: 'How can we make ourselves better? is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer.'[29] This is why she writes, for example:

> "Be more sympathetic, imagine her situation, see it from her point of view." Fairly everyday advice. Imagination is here a moral discipline of the mind, which would, for instance, help people not to become embittered or brutalised or stupefied by affliction.[30]

The perfectionist function of the imagination is also highlighted in a passage that draws our attention to Murdoch's distinction between imagination and fantasy: 'The good (better) man is *liberated* from selfish fantasy, can see himself as others see him, imagine the needs of other people, love unselfishly, lucidly envisage and desire what is truly valuable.'[31] As was observed above, Murdoch wishes to distinguish imagination from both scientific thought and fantasy. On her view, it is of vital importance to distinguish between both capacities as they are crucially different and whereas imagination is needed in ethical life, fantasy poses the greatest risk to ethical life. How should we understand this?

3.2. Imagination and fantasy

For Murdoch, the importance of imagination for ethical life is, to put it in one sentence, that it allows us to perceive the world as it is. It is important to see that this entails a fundamental decision with regard to the nature of ethical life. As we have seen, ethical life is about becoming better people and, it is important to realize, not (at least not primarily) with right action. When Murdoch describes the self, 'the fat, relentless ego', as the enemy of ethical life, she is not just saying that we should abstain from selfish action.[32] Rather, ethical life is fundamentally about diminishing the influence of the self

[27]Ibid., 199.
[28]Ibid., 201. Contrary to most interpretations of Murdoch's thought, Carla Bagnoli ('The Exploration of Moral Life', in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. Broackes Justin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 197–225) has argued – referring to this passage – that we should understand Murdoch to be a constructivist instead of a realist about value.
[29]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 78.
[30]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 322.
[31]Ibid., 331.
[32]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 52.

so that we break out of the fantasies that prevent us from being attuned to the real world.[33] And for the realization of this task, imagination is of vital importance. She writes for example that '[w]e use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it … .'[34] Imagining, she observes, is 'the effortful ability to see what lies before one more clearly'.[35] This is the key point she emphasizes in setting up the difference between imagination and fantasy. Whereas imagination involves the attempt 'to see and to respond to the real world',[36] fantasy 'prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.'[37] This is bound to come across as odd. Surely, one could object, any human capacity that goes beyond what is factually given, a capacity that, moreover, '*builds* detail' and '*adds* colour', can hardly be understood as providing us with a clear and truthful picture of the world?

Before engaging with this problem, it is worth noting that the importance of Murdoch's distinction between imagination and fantasy is reflected in the scholarly literature. Sabina Lovibond, in *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, highlights the importance of imagination for ethical and political life but, interestingly, *dismisses* Murdoch's views. Murdoch's philosophy, on Lovibond's view, is ethically and politically conservative because it does not have room for imagination as a capacity that allows us to conjure up images of ethical and political life that go radically beyond (and consequently have the potential to be critical of) the *status quo*. Lovibond uses the following passage from *The Sovereignty of Good* to substantiate this interpretation: 'As moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection.'[38] Responding to this critique, Bridget Clarke argues that Lovibond overlooks Murdoch's distinction between imagination and fantasy, and that, while Murdoch uses 'imagination' in that passage, she actually refers to fantasy.[39] To do justice to the emancipatory function of the imagination, then, it is important to be able to distinguish between imagination and fantasy.

Let us first turn to Murdoch's conception of fantasy. Fundamentally, fantasy is the capacity that belongs to and is expressive of the self. This is a topic she is particularly concerned with in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Here she describes fantasy as 'the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images'.[40] Fantasy, she argues, is 'the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.'[41] As Clarke puts it: 'Fantasy generates stories that satisfy the deeply human craving for predictability, certainty, safety, prefabricated order.'[42] Murdoch sometimes even equates fantasy and self, for example when she writes that 'fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person.'[43] For Murdoch, then, fantasy seems to be a kind of imagination that is dominated by self-concern. Imagining what another person needs is an instance of fantasy when my perceptions are shaped by self-concern: for example, when the needs I think I perceive are such that I can be the person to help out, or when they are such that they console me because, having these needs myself, I now feel recognized. More generally, if my imagination is shaped by fear or resentment – both of which are, of course, typically expressive of self-concern – I will be inclined to falsify other persons, viewing them as, for example, wholly different from myself or – ironically – as incurably narrow-

[33]Anna Bergqvist ('Moral Perception and Relational Self-Cultivation. Reassessing Attunement as a Virtue', in *Ethics and Self-Cultivation. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Matthew Dennis and Sander Werkhoven (New York: Routledge, 2018), 197–221) also highlights the importance of attunement for Murdoch's ethical project. Remarkably, however, Bergqvist relates Murdoch's ideas of attunement and imagination (or moral vision more generally) to the project of self-cultivation, without discussing Murdoch's fundamental critique of the self.
[34]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 90.
[35]Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 322.
[36]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 93.
[37]Ibid., 59.
[38]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40; Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 190.
[39]Bridget Clarke, 'Imagination and Politics in Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy', *Philosophical Papers* 35 (2006): 387–411.
[40]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 66–7.
[41]Ibid., 59.
[42]Clarke, 'Imagination and Politics in Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy', 400.
[43]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 70.

minded. More fundamentally still, imagination amounts to fantasy when I am lost in daydreams, unaware of my surroundings and the concrete responsibilities, tasks, and 'callings' that I face. We might even overlook, Murdoch tells us, the radiant beauty of trees, birds, and blades of grass.

Fantasy, therefore, is imagination distorted by self-concern. This is the background against which we can understand Murdoch's view that proper imagination allows us to view the world clearly and truthfully. If, as Murdoch seems to believe, self-concern is the most fundamental (perhaps even the only) obstacle in our attempts to perceive the world (including other people) clearly and truthfully, then we might, ideally, reach such clear and accurate perception when the influence of the self has been minimized. Nonetheless, we might still be sceptical about the idea of a capacity that goes beyond the strictly factual, 'builds detail' and 'adds colour' as allowing us to see and join the real world. As always with Murdoch, art gives us insight into what she is getting at here. A great piece of art – a book, a painting, a film – is, in one sense, something imaginary, something which goes beyond the facts. Yet, Murdoch continuously emphasizes that there is an important sense in which great art draws us deeper into life and the world. 'The great artists reveal the detail of the world.'[44] That is, through art we can become acutely aware of how other people think and feel, what it might mean to experience profound solitude or success (it is clear that Anti-Climacus disagrees here), but it can also draw our attention to details of the natural world that we, in our everyday lives, do not notice. This is the sense, then, in which we should understand Murdoch's idea that proper imagination allows us to perceive the real world.

Given the crucial distorting influence of self-concern on our perceptions of the world it is unsurprising that the primary task of morality, on this view, is to 'silence and expel self' as Murdoch puts it.[45] It would take too far to spell out, in this paper, what this entails for Murdoch, but I do want to elaborate one crucial element here: the role of, again, great art and aesthetic experience. She writes:

> It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound. Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen. Beauty is that which attracts this particular sort of unselfish attention.[46]

The experience of beauty in nature and in great art has a key function in silencing the self. Perceiving beauty pulls us out of our self-concerned and self-absorbed states. Aesthetic experience is our best hope in attempting to prevent our thoughts 'from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair.'[47]

On Murdoch's view, to summarize, imagination is a capacity that should be distinguished from scientific thought as well as from fantasy. Imagination allows us to explore that which goes beyond the strictly factual in a way that nevertheless allows us to see the world clearly in such a way that we become attuned to it. Realizing such selfless attunement to the real world is the primary goal of ethical life, and, following Murdoch's line of thought, imagination is crucial to its realization.

4. Existentialist or mystical ethics

The above explorations of Anti-Climacus's and Murdoch's thoughts on imagination in ethical life reveal some deep and interesting similarities. Both authors emphasize the vital importance of imagination for ethical life, and, interestingly, do so by invoking the idea that our imaginings should be grounded in reality. They both relate this to a distinction between proper imagination and fantasy: whereas imagination is tied to reality, fantasy is 'rampant' or 'free-floating'. They develop these

[44] Ibid., 96.
[45] Ibid., 64.
[46] Ibid., 65.
[47] Ibid., 91.

thoughts in the context of a perfectionist, broadly virtue-ethical framework. Imagination, they argue, is of vital importance in the process of becoming better people.

As I mentioned in the introduction, as of yet there are not many texts comparing Kierkegaard's and Murdoch's thought. One which does do this is Stokes' *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, which highlights the similarities between Kierkegaard's (Anti-Climacus's) and Murdoch's views on the imagination. Stokes sees similarities between their emphasis on the 'tension with respect to the ethical value of imagination' and the resulting distinction between fantasy and imagination.[48] More specifically, he adds that 'for Anti-Climacus, the appropriate use of imagination is one which does, indeed, look very much like "ethical imagination" in the Murdochian sense, in which we posit morally desirable states of affairs in opposition to present circumstances'.[49] At the same time, Stokes does not argue that there are no differences between both accounts. Reflecting on how, for Anti-Climacus, imagination is essentially characterized by the deeply existential tension between envisaging ideals and being grounded in the actuality of life, he writes that the 'Murdochian notion of ethical imagination […] does not, on the face of it, seem to contain within itself the sort of tensions which Anti-Climacus emphasizes.'[50]

We should not be surprised that Murdoch's account does not contain the tensions that Anti-Climacus emphasizes, since – despite similarities in their conceptions of the imagination – her project is fundamentally different from Anti-Climacus's. Succinctly put, whereas Kierkegaard's views, underlining the central importance of 'becoming oneself', are clearly 'existentialist', Murdoch's views, highlighting the central importance of 'expelling the self', qualify as 'mystical'. Thus, it is here that we see that Murdoch's views imply a fundamental critique of Kierkegaard's ideas. In the remainder of this section, I will explore that critique and ask how persuasive it is.

Before doing that, however, I want to draw attention to two other comparisons between Kierkegaard and Murdoch in the literature. Piety confronts their views in a full-length paper. More specifically, she uses Kierkegaard to criticize Murdoch's account of moral vision.[51] She focuses on Murdoch's idea that moral vision, in its imaginative and attentive forms, allows us to perceive and gain knowledge of goodness as a property of the external world. The example she discusses is whether we can have *knowledge* of another person's moral character. Murdoch seems to affirm this, arguing that, if the influence of the self is minimized, our perception of another person's moral character (or, for that matter, any other aspect of the world outside the self), is clear and accurate. Referring to passages from Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, Piety denies that this is possible, as we do not have immediate access to another person's moral character. All we can observe and come to know is another person's behavior, but inferring from a person's behavior to his or her moral character is an open-ended interpretive process. We cannot *know* another person's moral character, but what we can come to know is our *own* moral character and how that influences our moral perception of the world outside the self. *Contra* Murdoch, Piety concludes that '[w]e 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.'[52]

An account that goes in a radically different direction is developed by Rudd in his *Self, Value, & Narrative*. Briefly, Rudd argues that Kierkegaard should be understood as being part of a (broadly Platonic) tradition to which Murdoch also belongs; a tradition that, contrary to the picture Piety presents us with, sees goodness or value as part of the world outside the self. Unsurprisingly, Rudd discusses Murdoch's views quite extensively. Yet, despite the fundamental similarities he sees, he does not argue that Kierkegaard and Murdoch are involved in what is basically the same ethical project. A key difference Rudd takes time to discuss is that for Kierkegaard self-knowledge, as have seen, is of

[48]Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 75.
[49]Ibid., 76.
[50]Ibid., 77.
[51]Piety, 'Kierkegaard and Murdoch on Knowledge of the Good', 204–14.
[52]Ibid., 214.

vital importance in ethics, while for Murdoch self-knowledge merely reinforces the power of the self, which is the key obstacle to becoming a better person.[53]

Although Piety and Rudd fundamentally disagree about the kind of ethical views Kierkegaard develops, they agree that, in a Kierkegaardian ethics, self-knowledge is of the utmost importance. And this is, to recall, something that I have highlighted as well. As Rudd rightly emphasizes, this is also why, from a Murdochian point of view, Anti-Climacus's concern with the role of imagination in becoming oneself must be fundamentally misguided. Despite the careful way in which Anti-Climacus distinguishes between imagination and fantasy, arguing that self-knowledge is able to tie the imagined ideal to the actuality of our existence, his entire framework should be seen as ethically and morally dubious on Murdoch's view. Any ethical framework that makes becoming oneself as central as does Anti-Climacus (and Kierkegaard) closes us off from the world or reality *beyond the self* and reinforces 'the fantasy mechanism'.[54] Contrasting her own 'picture' with an existentialist ethics, Murdoch writes:

> In such a picture sincerity and self-knowledge, those popular merits, seem less important. It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power. … Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object.[55]

How convincing is this critique? That is, is Murdoch right to criticize the kind of existentialist framework put forward by Anti-Climacus as revolving, fundamentally, around self-concern?[56] In one, philosophically important, sense she is not. An ethics that puts becoming oneself (or striving to realize an ideal self) center stage does not, thereby, advocate self-concern. The reason is this. If, through the imagination, we are struck by an image of an ideal, *we are not simply drawn to ourselves but to a recognizable image of an ideal* embodied in a particular practice or way of life. Attempting to realize the imagined ideal should be understood as springing from the desire to realize a practice or way of life one experiences as meaningful, and *not* as springing from a desire to become oneself. Becoming oneself (or realizing an ideal self), then, is what we could call the 'background picture' of this existentialist-ethical framework – it is, one might hope, not *itself* that which motivates us in becoming better people. A clear example here is, precisely, the account Anti-Climacus develops in *Practice in Christianity*: the imagined ideal that transforms the young man is the way of life exemplified by Christ. What motivates the young man, in striving to realize and express this way of life in his own existence, is not that he thereby becomes himself – instrumentalizing the imagined ideal for that goal – but the meaningful nature of that imagined ideal itself. Criticizing existentialist-ethical frameworks for being fundamentally self-concerned, then, seems misguided.

Nonetheless, there is an important consideration that gives us reason to suppose that Murdoch's critique of existentialist ethics is persuasive. Although becoming oneself or realizing one's ideal self is not the motivating thought in ethical life, the question of the appropriateness of the ideals I strive for can only be settled with reference to who I, factually, am. That is, my actual self is the criterion that determines the appropriateness of the ideals I could strive to realize in my life. This is so, I believe, even if we accept that Christ, according to Anti-Climacus, represents a *universal* ideal.[57] The

[53]Rudd, *Self, Value, & Narrative*, 249–53.
[54]Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 67.
[55]Ibid., 67–8.
[56]In asking this question, I am not, it is important to see, implying that Murdoch is *explicitly* referring to Kierkegaard (let alone Anti-Climacus) in her critique of existentialism. In fact, although there is reason to suppose that her critique of existentialism is mainly directed at Sartre, we find very few explicit references to Sartre or any other existentialist author in *The Sovereignty of Good* (which contains the most elaborate critique of existentialist views of ethics). What I *am* arguing is that Murdoch's critique is applicable to the framework that we find in Anti-Climacus' writings.
[57]Whether Christ does *in fact* represent a universal ideal is, I take it, ambiguous. On the one hand, Anti-Climacus clearly describes Christ as representing 'the universally human' (cf. PC 242/SKS 12: 235). On the other hand, however, one of the crucial insights expressed by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is that certain fundamental existential choices might, in a deep sense, not be 'real possibilities' for particular agents. The choice for ethical life, for example, is a real possibility only those aesthetes whose aesthetic life-view is crumbling down. Similarly, being able to view the choice to imitate Christ as a real possibility, requires one to

imitation of Christ, as in the case of the young man discussed above, is not a matter of imitating Christ as literally as possible, but expressing the ideal in one's own life. Crucially, this ties the ideal Christ represents to who I, factually, am. For Anti-Climacus, then, my actual self is *not* the criterion that determines whether the imitation of Christ is, generally, the ideal I should strive for, but it *is* the criterion that determines whether the particular way in which I give expression to this ideal is appropriate.

Another way in which the central importance of the actual self as a criterion comes to the fore is that, as we have seen, it is very well possible to strive for ideals that are not continuous with who I, factually, am, but the price will be a state of despair in which I will be alienated from myself. That this serves, for Anti-Climacus, as a normative criterion to judge the appropriateness of ideals underscores the importance of the self and of knowing oneself for this ethical framework once more. On the kind of mystical-ethical view that we encounter in Murdoch's works, however, such worries about self-alienation are both trivial and deeply significant. They are trivial in light of the goal of selfless attunement to the world, although they manifest, significantly, just how deeply we are, in fact, attached to our selves.

The elaboration of Anti-Climacus' and Murdoch's views on the imagination undertaken in this paper, then, strongly suggests that there is a radical difference both authors on these issues.[58] Further research may be needed to spell out just how sharp these differences are. Nonetheless, from the discussion that was undertaken in this paper there emerges a deep questions in ethics: should we, in exploring how to become better people, take the self or, instead, selflessness as criterion? Should we understand moral improvement in terms of discovering, accepting and realizing who one really is, or, instead, of dispelling, silencing or exorcizing one's attachment to oneself? In short, should we be existentialists or mystics in ethics? Perhaps, precisely because this choice is foundational, making it will be more a matter of temperament than of reason.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to explore the role of imagination in ethical life. I began by noticing a deep tension: imagination seems both of great importance and dangerous for ethical life. I then elaborated the thought of two authors who are sensitive to this tension: Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus) and Murdoch. Both distinguish between proper imagination and mere fantasy in dealing with the tension. The discussion of Anti-Climacus's views on imagination showed how for him the proper use of the imagination plays a vital role in realizing the fundamental ethical task of becoming ourselves, whereas fantasy only alienates us from ourselves. The discussion of Murdoch's account of imagination made clear that she beliefs that a proper use of the imagination contributes to the realization of a selfless attunement to the world, whereas fantasy only reinforces the 'fat, relentless ego'. In the final part of this paper I discussed some existing comparisons between both accounts, and I drew attention to the fundamental choice that comparing them confronts us with: should we be existentialists or mystics in ethics?

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have gone through several life-views first. In this alternative sense, then, Christ does not represent a universal ideal: even within the world pictured by the pseudonymous authorship, there are many for whom Christ does not (yet) represent a recognizable ideal. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to consider the implications of the supposed universality of the ideal Christ represents for my argument.

[58]This is, of course, not to say that there are no interesting or substantial similarities between Kierkegaard and Murdoch on other issues. Richard Moran, for example, sees substantial overlap between a Kierkegaardian and a Murdochian account of choice. See: Richard Moran, 'Iris Murdoch and Existentialism', in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 195–6.

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