

“We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.”

Iris Murdoch

It is precisely this question, the one over that which is “real” and that which is “false”, that has plagued and restlessly chased the history and development of Western thought all the way from Thales. This divide has simultaneously functioned as the stimulus of change in Western philosophy but also as something that seemed irrevocably unresolvable. And because of these very notions, and their structures, and the structure of ontology that we are familiar with, we cannot dare to think outside of this paradigm. We seem like we are, by nature, inclined to think that reality, and truth are something to be “found”. In the quote itself this tension is evident; it presupposes three things. 1. That we inhabit a world of illusion, of untruth, of non-correspondence to the real, a world which is solely defined by its non-relation to trueness. 2. That the goal of “obtaining” said truth is a “great task”, a mountain to summit. 3. That the task is to “find” that truth, that which corresponds to the true. We must discover the static model of being that habit has deemed the centre of our structure. In this essay I will try to deconstruct these structures and binary notions, to try to outline something which can be both true and false at the same time and to guide our thought not to “find” the static reality, but to foster in ourselves and active discovering of being.

Reality, and truth for that matter, are not static, singular things to be found. Reality and truth are an event, a constant happening in the world, not merely something to be found, they reveal themselves to us in being itself. The opposition that Murdoch creates between the fantastical and the real is circular, they serve to justify one another, inhabit one domain. The thing which this binary structure cannot contain is the Deleuzian notion of the virtual – that which is potential, but not actual, it is neither in the real; it isn’t present; nor fantasy; it is possible. Through the virtual we can rethink the divide between the real and unreal, not as something which exist ontologically by necessity, but something that is facilitated by the structures of thought. Truth is not to be attained, it is *aletheia*, that which reveals itself to us, and it doesn’t discover itself by us trying to “find” it, but by our presence in being. In this framework, fantasy and illusion are not diametrically opposed to the act of experiencing truth, but something which helps us experience reality.

1. The relation between fantasy and reality.

The quote presupposes that the very nature of reality is singular, that everybody in this “we” that Murdoch points to, experiences being in the same way. However, this is a very perilous

universalisation, we can merely suppose that every subject experiences this singular structure of reality. A structure, which again, it seems is contained in reality itself and must be “found”. To “find” something is to regard that that, which can be found is something concrete. We know what we need, we just need to know where to look. It seems as if our task is to follow and participate in this ontology of presence, to find the true once and for all and inhabit it. The teleology that we are inclined to follow is to correspond to the true and real. And in order to be present and part of reality we are also forced to consider that reality, and truth itself are static. A notion and mode of thought that have been ossified in Western thought ever since Plato and his parable of the cave, through the medieval scholastics, the genealogy of modern philosophy and onwards and all the way to our present day. But by taking a step back and looking at the source of confusion – Plato – can we see the origin of our confusion. According to Heidegger in his lecture “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth”, we are used to regard truth as something which is fixed and unchangeable only by mere happenstance. There, Heidegger, and in “Being and Time” redefines truth according to its lost definition: *aletheia* – unhiddenness, and that truth reveals itself. In the cave, the subject does not grasp and “find” truth, but through his experience truth *reveals* itself to him through the shadows, the fire, the stars and the sun. Through this dynamic, flowing and changing, participation in being he experiences truth and reality, he doesn’t “find” it. Because of this, we cannot neither relate to truth as something singular, or static, but rather as something dynamic.

Going back to the quote, we can see that the very language which Murdoch uses immediately instils in our thought a hierarchy of the two modes of being that according to her, constitute us. In this structure, illusion and fantasy are hierarchised; they are at the bottom, have no weight, authority or importance, unlike reality and truth, which sit at the top and are the eminence of this metaphysics. Thus, we have no choice but to think everything through this binary opposition of either true and false. It is bad to live in fantasy, because we do not achieve the great task of finding reality. But if we look a little closer and start to ask ourselves what makes something a part of reality or fantasy, this rigid framework collapses in on itself. The illusory is not defined by anything other than its non-relation to the real, and the other way around, the real is only that, which is not in the realm of fantasy. These notions that we have the habit of regarding as secure collapse under their own tension, because their opposition is solely distinguished by them not being that which the other one is. Thus, they are not in a real opposition but rather serve to justify one another. They are self-constituent, they cannot exist without each other, enveloping us in a circular logic which seems hard to escape. And maybe

indeed because our focus is so intensely aimed at achieving the great task of finding reality, that we cannot achieve it. Our active drive to find truth is the obstacle which prevents us from discovering it, according to Heidegger, precisely because we so desperately want to be in control of being, to rationally command ourselves, that we cannot succeed. Rather we need to foster what he calls openness to disclosure. The result of our inquiry so far is that neither fantasy, nor illusion, in this framework are something which truly exists by itself, without it being chained to the notion that it opposes. Thus, proving that this structure has its centre not within itself, but outside. And I will now try to find something which the structure and its constituent notions cannot appropriate fully.

2. The third term, the virtual

But is there something that may be illusionary but true at the same time, which we cannot easily quantify into one category? It is this third term, that the structure implicitly hides, through which use we can shudder its centre and deconstruct it, and be capable to see how it really works. The virtual, originally coined by Bergson, Deleuze radicalizes and defines the virtual as that, which inhabits the real, without being possible. The virtual itself is not actualised, and cannot fully be actualised. The virtual is in contrast to the traditional ontological divide from Aristotle onwards, between possible and actual. The actual is present, it is findable, we can point to it, it is real, it's here and we can point to it. The chair is both real and actual. The possible presupposes within itself a goal – actuality. But the virtual is real, without being actual, it is not nothing but it is not anything, it is a force, a tendency. The seeds of a tree are virtual, the tree exists and is real, but not actual.

Through this we can reevaluate both notions of fantasy and reality. Trying to apply the framework of Murdoch to something like memory, for example, we can see that it cannot hold its weight. Memory isn't exactly real, so does that mean it is something illusory? The past is not something we can concretely point to, but it is definitely real, because it happened. How come then we cannot easily define according to Murdoch's terms. This becomes even more confusing when we think about the effects of memories, a memory can hold within itself a wide variety of temperaments and upon return to the memory we can experience these emotions. They are not something real as in that they are constituent around us and tangible, but rather, radically intangible, even through the means of language, but we can fully grasp them through experience. Either way, they do have ontological weight. The logic of Murdoch breaks down here, memories aren't fantasy but they aren't exactly real either. Which is why we can define

memory as something virtual – it is real, but not actual, its reality reveals itself to us through experience and distance. The contents and effects of this example of the virtual are real and change our perception of the world, without the memory itself being something we can point to. The grief we can feel towards a fictional character is real, without the character in question being actual, and this grief can affect us and change the way in which we experience reality and truth. It is this affect that can allow us to “find” reality, not as something definitive, but as a key to our participation in being. Desire is real, but we can’t point it out, although its effect on us is something which can be observed.

3. Conclusion

The irony of Murdoch is that despite being a prolific writer, she seemingly condemns fiction, as something unreal and fantastical, which distracts us from the goal of finding reality. Simply, in this binary mode of thought – between fantasy and reality, being itself cannot fully and authentically show itself in all of its realms and registers. If we think that reality is a goalpost, a trophy to win, the end reward of a road, we can never truly experience being and reality in its complexity. Precisely this quote serves as a point of deconstruction through which we can understand Murdoch and being better, that ironically, that which is deemed fantasy here is the thing that allows us to grasp reality and truth. Fantasy is not an obstacle to understanding and the disclosure of reality, but something through which we can better discover it. The structures which we deem rigid hide in themselves a relation for which we need to attune ourselves. We need to shift the focus from that which is outward, which can be possessed, to that inner virtual, the groundless ground which lets truth reveal itself to us.