

Question 4:

*We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusions. The great task in life is to find reality.*

Through this quote, Iris Murdoch advances an argument in two parts: firstly, that we live in a 'fantasy' world; and secondly, concluding that our 'great task' is to find reality. In this essay, I shall forward strong and weak versions of this claim in support of Murdoch's ambitious metaphysical and normative argument. Failing that, I will establish her modest argument pertaining to the epistemic virtues of questioning. In closing, I will present and support my claims regarding the given excerpt.

To begin, I will present the ambitious argument. Here, I have taken Murdoch to be arguing that our present epistemic processes do not provide us with knowledge of the 'reality' or an external world; instead, they provide us with 'illusions' and 'fantasy' – falsehoods or distortions that are not mind-independent. Upon this basis, Murdoch argues that 'the great task' – a primary goal – of our lives is indeed to seek this reality. In this essay, I shall evaluate the justification for these claims to conclude that while we may be able to accept that our lived reality may be constructed, I am disinclined to wholly accept that the pursuit of reality is the principal goal of life.

Firstly, I would like to grapple with the claim that we live in a 'fantasy'. The strong reading of this argument suggests that the world as we perceive it is radically deceptive. This may well be the case -- there is no shortage of arguments for such external world skepticism (EWS). To present a classical argument for EWS:

P1: If I don't know that I'm not being deceived by an evil demon, I don't know that the external world exists.

P2: I don't know that I'm not deceived by an evil demon.

C: I don't know the external world exists (P1, P2)

In the absence of evidence supporting that we are not deceived by a Cartesian Evil Demon, it is possible that the external world does not exist – we cannot know. EWS hence lends credence to Murdoch's claims that we live in 'fantasy' or deception.

While logically valid, the argument above entails that if EWS falls, Murdoch's strong claim falls with it. Indeed, appealing to anti-skeptical arguments, we appear to have good reason to believe that we have knowledge of the external world. Hence, it is evident that

Question 4:

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there are many possible defeaters, entailing the failure of her ambitious argument. To illustrate this point, I will forward two particularly notable anti-skeptical arguments. Importantly, whether these specific arguments convince the reader is rather secondary to the point; if the reader rejects EWS for whatever reason, the strong claim falls.

Firstly, it does not seem meaningful to question external reality to argue that ours is a fantasy. To borrow from Moore, meaningful doubts require justification greater than the claim. If I meaningfully doubt that I'm in Warsaw, I can appeal to greater justification of maps and my eyes. However, when it comes to knowledge of the external world, we do not have anything greater than our perceptions to appeal to. The best evidence we can give appears to be our hands. Hence, it appears that we cannot meaningfully question the world. In the absence of our ability to meaningfully question it, we appear to be able to construct knowledge of the external world, defeating EWS.

Secondly, and alternatively, EWS also appears to distort the ordinary usage of what it means to know. The strong reading of this claim appeals to an extraordinarily high bar for what would qualify as knowledge about reality, which is plainly not the understood threshold. When we talk about 'knowing', we typically do not require 100% certainty (unlike EWS). Hence, it appears that EWS raises meaningless doubts with particular, unwarranted standards. Here, I would contend that this entails our ability to construct knowledge of the external world according to commonsensical epistemic standards.

On either of those grounds, or following from any other anti-skeptical argument, we may reject the notion that our world is wholly deceptive, toppling Murdoch's strong claim that ours is a 'fantasy' world.

Given the failure of the strong claim, I would like to advance and defend a weaker reading of Murdoch's claim. Here, I take 'fantasy' to refer to a mind-dependent, constructed version of the world. There are two ways I seek to understand this, either of which is individually sufficient to support this reading. If either are granted, Murdoch's claim stands.

Question 4:

*We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusions. The great task in life is to find reality.*

Firstly, I would like to propose a Postmodern reading of reality; by this view, reality is constructed relative to each individual. This entails an individualistic conception of the world, beginning with the mind-dependent processes of each subject. Seen this way, our world would be the 'fantasy' constructed in each individual's mind.

Secondly, and alternatively, we may split reality into two – the external world, as it really exists, as well as our perception of it. Taking Kant's view, we may divide the world into the noumenal and phenomenal, with the latter relying upon a priori filters of consciousness and forms of understanding. Put succinctly, we have knowledge of the phenomenal world via our minds as active constituters of knowledge. Returning to our earlier definition of 'fantasy', it does appear that the phenomenal world we perceive is illusory, insofar that we construct it.

Here, I would like to note that both Kant and Postmodernism are not unanimous. However, that we are able to posit theories of reality that provide positive reason to accept Murdoch's claim implies the plausibility of her claim. In light of this, we have positive reason to accept Murdoch's weak claim.

Murdoch next claims that the great task in life is to find reality. However, since this does not necessarily follow from her first claim, it requires substantiation in its own right.

This idea is relatively commonplace, perhaps unwarrantedly so. To be the singular great task of life implies that the truth is the sole or primary good worth striving towards. This connection between the pursuit of truth, and normative good is not necessary. Indeed, it is conceivable that truth and the good are distinct. For instance, the tale of the veiled statue of Sais reveals the disconnect; in this classic cautionary tale, a traveler lifts the veil of the statue, hungry for truth, and is stricken mad. The truth is not always the end worth pursuing. Expanding on Cioran's writings, the dogged pursuit of truth and attachment to knowledge, it seems, can also lead to mad fanaticism and misery. Even if my reader does not share this Pessimistic perspective, that it is plausible that this pursuit of truth is inimical to goodness casts doubt on Murdoch's normative claim that it is 'the great task' in our lives.

Question 4:

*We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusions. The great task in life is to find reality.*

Secondly, this preoccupation with an objective reality can also be seen to privilege a higher reality or truth over personal experiences and individual judgements. This implied allegiance to some 'ascetic' ideal of reality above and transcending our own flesh-and-blood experiences of the world appears to deny the value of our lived reality. Adapting Nietzsche's arguments, it appears that this pursuit of an external reality is life-denying; insofar that our purpose in life is to construct meaning for ourselves and shape the world in our own image, the goal of pursuing some external 'reality' appears deeply misguided and indeed corrosive.

Lastly, even if neither of my criticisms of the pursuit of reality are accepted, it still remains an open question of why this pursuit is the great one in our lives. Indeed, that we can meaningfully raise this question (as opposed to 'why is a bachelor an unmarried man?') implies that it is not analytically, self-evidently true. This implies a synthetic, a posteriori structure – however, that we can conceive of instances where truth and good are opposed seems to cast aspersions onto the idea that truth is the greatest or primary good in our lives.

At this point, I must concede that the pursuit of reality may be an end worth pursuing. While I would hesitate to deem it the highest possible good, the truth appears to be a valuable end worth pursuing, as seen from the experiences of the martyrs, religious and secular alike, ready to perish for the truth of their ideals. That we continue to have lively debates about whether one should rather cruel truths over kind lies further supports the idea that we value truth in itself. However, that these debates are not settled also entails that the strong reading is not viable. Hence, I would be more inclined to endorse the weak claim in this instance that a task in life is finding reality.

It is worth noting, however, that this weak reading rather strains credulity and charity in interpretation. Murdoch appear to claim, rather straightforwardly, that the pursuit of reality is the great task of life. The failure of this strong conclusion in itself suffices to mark the failure of this argument. The weak conclusion I advance, while plausible, falls outside the ambit of Murdoch's claim, and must be read as an extension, rather than a possible rescue.

To accept either reading of this claim, however, one must grant two assumptions, which are each individually necessary, for Murdoch's argument to proceed: firstly, one must establish that there exists a reality outside of 'fantasy'; and secondly, that this 'reality is

Question 4:

*We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusions. The great task in life is to find reality.*

attainable'. These assumptions provide critical warrant to her claim; if either are rejected, it becomes nonsensical. Much as it is incomprehensible for me to set out to colonize the fictional Kingdom of Narnia, it is similarly nonsensical to set the unattainable goal of 'finding reality' if there is no reality, or if it is not findable.

However, we appear to have good reason to reject that there is a singular reality to be found. Returning to Postmodernism, a central tenet is that all perspectives and narratives are valid; indeed, to paraphrase Lyotard, it appears essential that we fear the tyranny of grand narratives that commit oppressive violence against individual small narratives. Seen this way, 'reality' as advanced by Murdoch appears to merely be a grand narrative tyrannizing and silencing individual narratives, without a greater claim to truth. In 'finding reality', we perpetuate oppression by privileging one narrative and retreat further from the truth. Hence, no one 'reality' appears to exist, and hence this argument cannot stand.

Similarly, our Kantian understanding of the phenomenal and noumenal world is devastatingly agnostic towards the existence of the 'real' noumenal world and, by definition, precludes the possibility of knowledge of the noumenal. If Kant is to be accepted, this implies that knowledge of this 'reality' is unattainable – we cannot strive towards it. Hence, it is not a legitimate goal. On these grounds, Murdoch's argument fails.

At this juncture, I believe it is critical to note that these critiques only succeed if either Kant or Postmodernist ideas are accepted. If neither are upheld, Murdoch's claims may still stand. However, given that one of either Kant or Postmodernism appear necessary to support Murdoch's first claim, that they materially contradict her second is troubling. For such reason, we may be inclined to reject this argument on these grounds.

For these reasons, I would be unwilling to grant that there exists a 'reality' that is 'findable', and that even if there were, it would be our great purpose in life to find it. Given the failure of Murdoch's ambitious argument to sufficiently justify its claims, I would be inclined to largely reject this argument. I would like to acknowledge, however, that Murdoch's argument need not be read in its most ambitious form. Indeed, a modest form would reveal a possible argument for epistemic virtues. According to this reading, Murdoch merely argues

Question 4:

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that we ought to strive to interrogate our 'fantastical' unsupported beliefs and should strive towards truths – 'reality', so to speak.

This argument would generally be well-supported. In calling for interrogation and critical thinking, Murdoch joins the ranks of thinkers like Descartes. This tendency to question is largely valuable to the epistemic project in a few distinct ways. Firstly, it wards against dogma, improving the quality of our knowledge claims. Secondly, it provides standards and thresholds for knowledge, again enriching our pursuit of knowledge. Thirdly, questioning can lead to epistemic developments as we seek to improve our certainty and breadth of knowledge claims, leading to developments such as the idea of hinge epistemology, linguistic games, etc.

In this light, Murdoch's support for questioning the 'illusions' and 'fantasy' we live in to 'find reality' reads as a rallying cry for epistemic standards, questioning, and critical thinking, and appears beyond reproach. However, it is also rather stale and trivial – there is little of argumentative merit in a bland restating of Modern epistemic ideals.

For such reason, I am rather disinclined to look favorably on this argument. On one hand, read ambitiously, it fails to live up to the strong conclusion (the pursuit of reality as *the* great task of life) it sets out to support. Even taking a weaker conclusion to this ambitious project, the argument still contends with contradictions. On the other hand, the modest form merely appears to parrot rather trite and tired calls to epistemic virtues without significant argumentative merit.