

The Saint's Dilemma: When the Good Turns Away from Reality in Murdoch's Tallis

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Abstract: In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Iris Murdoch portrays Tallis Browne—whom she herself described as her only “saint”—as the ultimate embodiment of her moral ideal of “unselfing.” Yet the “success” of this portrayal paradoxically exposes the inherent dilemma of her ethics when applied in practice. Drawing upon Aristotle’s doctrine of the “mean” as its theoretical lens, this paper argues that Tallis’s conception of the Good systematically deviates from τὸ μέσον (the mean) of key virtues, thereby rendering his goodness powerless, passive, and even “masochistic” when confronted with reality.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch; Tallis Browne; The Good; The Mean.

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of World War II, both traditional faith [1] and rationalism [2] in Europe collapsed. Seeking to fill the ensuing moral void, Iris Murdoch rejected the dominant philosophical responses of her time and endeavored to reconstruct the Platonic Idea of the Good as the foundational value for a secular age. At the heart of her moral philosophy lies an effort to secure an ethical foundation for moral life after the demise of religion. She reinterprets Plato’s transcendent Good in a secular key—transforming it into an objective reality that transcends the individual and can only be approached through “unselfing” and “attention”. Within this framework, Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* stands as the supreme literary manifestation of Murdoch’s philosophical vision. Humble, patient, and radiating an almost divine love for those around him [3], he is widely regarded as the most complete incarnation of Murdoch’s “saint.” [4]

Scholarly interpretations of Tallis have largely centered on the philosophical implications of his “unselfing,” viewing his figure as both a critique of solipsism and a call for renewed faith in the Good [5]. These readings have illuminated Murdoch’s philosophical intent with considerable clarity. Yet one crucial question remains suspended: can such a moral exemplar—so idealized in conception—truly operate effectively within a world defined by contingency and evil?

To address this question, this paper employs Aristotle’s doctrine of the “mean” as a critical framework. Aristotle’s μέσον is itself an ethical construct grounded in the lived experience of the ancient polis—a framework designed not to proclaim an absolute truth but to assess the practical efficacy of moral action within human reality. The argument advanced here is that Tallis’s moral practice, though seemingly radiant with goodness, systematically deviates from the Aristotelian mean in the domains of anger, self-respect, and φρόνησις (practical wisdom). As a result, his moral ideal collapses into a form of ineffective, even “masochistic” moral posture [6]. His sainthood, as revealed at the novel’s conclusion, testifies not to the triumph but to the profound impasse that arises when the transcendent ideal of the Good is unconditionally transplanted into the secular realm of human relations.

2. The Mean: A Mirror Testing the Moral Utopia

Before delving into the main analysis, it is essential to pose a prior question: why should Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean serve as the lens through which to examine a literary embodiment of a Platonist? The answer lies in a subtle but decisive philosophical parallel between Murdoch and Plato. Both situate the ultimate resolution of moral inquiry within a transcendent order of Forms, envisioning moral progress as an ascent toward that reality—whether through Platonic “recollection” or Murdochian “attention.” Such a path is inward and vertical, predicated upon the purification of the soul rather than its engagement with the contingencies of the external world. The moral self thus turns away from the flux of the social and the political, seeking illumination in an abstract and contemplative solitude.

By contrast, Aristotle’s ethics unfolds along a horizontal and worldly plane. His doctrine of the mean does not present itself as a transcendent Form awaiting contemplation, but as a dynamic equilibrium discovered and enacted through φρόνησις—practical wisdom exercised within the texture of everyday life and human association (polis, πόλις). To read Murdoch through Aristotle, therefore, is to restore Tallis—the “morally perfect specimen” suspended in an existential vacuum—back into the living “petri dish” of social reality, observing whether the moral ideal retains vitality once reinserted into the conditions of human interaction. For if a moral vision collapses when confronted with the very structures that constitute human life, its validity as an ethical model must be called into question.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines virtue as the disposition to find the mean between *excess* (ὕπερβολή) and *deficiency* (ἐλλειψις), a principle characterized by three interrelated features. First, **contextuality**: virtue is never abstract, but contingent upon the circumstances of action, demanding from the moral agent a responsive and situational judgment in a world of flux. [7] Second, **the unity of emotion and action**: genuine virtue requires not merely performing the right act but doing so at the right time, with the right feeling; the truly generous person not only gives, but delights in giving. [7] Third, **the centrality of practical wisdom**: the discovery and maintenance of the mean presuppose φρόνησις,

the rational faculty by which one discerns, balances, and chooses rightly amid the manifold pressures of life. [7]

Aristotle thus conceives morality not as a flight from the world but as an art of living within it—a perpetual calibration of judgment and feeling through which both the individual and the community may flourish. By contrast, any moral ideal that isolates itself from this field of human reciprocity, and that proves sterile or self-defeating when tested against lived reality, must be seen as ethically impotent, however luminous its original intention may appear.

3. Tallis's "Good" and Its Deviation from the Mean

Scholarly interpretations of Tallis Browne abound, each emphasizing different facets of his moral identity: some regard him as a "religious man" [8] inheriting the spirit of suffering, others admire his "spiritual potency," akin to a radioactive element [9], which sears the self-interest of those around him [10], while yet others acknowledge his goodness as "tender but real". These readings successfully highlight the spiritual resonance of his character, however, if we return the criterion of examination to the very starting point of Murdoch's own philosophical inquiry—namely, her attempt to find a moral foundation that could stand and operate effectively within the post-religious world [11]—then all the foregoing interpretations suspend a more fundamental question: how effective, in the rough texture of real life, is such a moral ideal in actual practice?

First, consider the dimension of *anger*. Tallis's gentleness slips into *deficiency*. Faced with his wife Morgan's overt humiliation, psychological manipulation, and even acts of arson, he responds with near-paralytic calm and infinite forbearance. While traditional interpretations situate this stance within the context of ascetic or religious traditions, the absence of any transcendent justification in Murdoch's post-religious world renders his gentleness incapable of grounding moral action. According to Aristotle, appropriate anger is essential to justice—it defends personal dignity and resists injustice. Tallis's unqualified temperance is thus not virtue, but paralysis. Though some argue that this anti-Aristotelian posture constitutes a "quasi-religious" moral force capable of restraining chaos, the narrative itself problematizes this claim.

Second, this internal *deficiency* manifests outwardly as disorder in his domestic sphere, revealing a neglect of *self-respect*. The "home," as an externalization of personal order and psychological boundaries, degenerates under Tallis's care into a permissive, chaotic space: "Old dirty lodging houses usually have a stale odor, stale sweat, stale food, stale urine and the dark brooding smell of dirt" [9]. The inhabitants are diverse and unregulated, entering and taking at will. A healthy personality requires boundaries, a sense of security, and the pursuit of basic order. Tallis's abandonment of these principles represents a profound deviation from self-respect. He becomes a mere receptacle, a neutral container for all others, dissolving his status as an autonomous moral agent. His extreme humility constitutes yet another departure from the Aristotelian mean: just as excessive self-regard is vanity, excessive self-negation is no less a moral failing.

Nevertheless, this chaotic "receptacle" produces a paradoxical moral influence. Even the Julius shifts from contempt to admiration: he unconsciously succumbs to Tallis's influence, actively helping with chores, providing support, and disclosing hidden personal histories [9]. This

phenomenon, while not fully explainable within Aristotelian ethics, suggests that Tallis's boundless receptivity functions as a mirror, reflecting others' latent deficiencies and desires, and eliciting instinctive moral responses. Yet whether such responses result in sustained ethical transformation remains questionable.

Indeed, his limitless tolerance produces consequences contrary to its original intent: it fails to neutralize or reform evil, and objectively enables or nurtures it. As Bran Nicol perceptively observes, Murdoch's characters often exhibit "a pronounced preference for sexual masochism" [6]. Tallis is continually invaded and drained by troubled adolescents, neighbors, and Morgan herself. He rarely establishes boundaries, forgiving and readmitting even those who betray him. His "unconditional love" toward Morgan manifests only as a static posture of waiting and endurance—like that of a one-dimensional "shelter"—yet it utterly fails to grant her any genuine spiritual awakening, nor can it rescue her from her own frenzy, nihilism, and destructiveness. Such endurance, in its objective consequence, may in fact enable, or even intensify, the very evil it seeks to redeem.

The core deviation lies in the absence of *practical wisdom*. Tallis's goodness is structurally powerless against reality. Though uniquely perceptive of Julius's latent dangers, he cannot translate insight into preventive or corrective action. He fails to anticipate the full scope of Julius's schemes and cannot intervene effectively. Even his last-minute guidance—prompting Julius to place a phone call—is contingent on chance and others' conscience, ultimately insufficient to prevent Rupert's demise. Even more revealing and ironic is that his impulsive act of justice—striking a racial bigot in a restaurant—does not attest to the efficacy of his moral power; rather, it sharply exposes the inner paradox of his moral reflex. He is capable of responding with instinctive, physical force to the blatant and bodily injustice between strangers, yet becomes passive and powerless when confronted with the subtler, more insidious forms of spiritual violence and emotional manipulation within his intimate circle.

Tallis's spiritual influence may evoke admiration in Morgan or respect in Julius, yet it fails to further produce practical transformation. His *quasi-religious appeal* functions primarily on an emotional plane, eliciting fleeting respect rather than substantive ethical change. Simultaneously, his lack of practical wisdom is undeniable. Julius's concrete achievements, however, morally compromised, stand in stark contrast to Tallis's impotent moral universe, underscoring the gulf between idealized goodness and effective action in a world rife with calculation and malice.

4. An Unfinished Blueprint: Between Ideal and Reality

A comprehensive assessment of Tallis must encompass his dual and paradoxical dimensions. On the one hand, he undoubtedly embodies Murdoch's ideal of the "religious man," a figure who, through humility, endurance, and the effacement of ego, erects a spiritual beacon amid a desert of value. His very existence proclaims that even after the withdrawal of God, a kind of quasi-divine, other-directed love remains possible. Yet, from an Aristotelian standpoint, he simultaneously constitutes a failed case: his moral practice systematically deviates from the "mean" across three crucial dimensions—anger, pride, and practical wisdom—rendering him ineffective, passive, and even, in an objective sense,

complicit in the perpetuation of evil within the complexity of lived reality.

Murdoch's portrayal of Tallis thus becomes a profound act of self-interrogation. Through her most saintly creation, she turns the lens upon herself, testing the practical validity of her own philosophical design. This compels us to ask: in a post-religious age, can a transcendent ideal of the Good retain its spiritual allure while also functioning as a viable moral force within secular life? Tallis's predicament suggests that Murdoch's moral architecture remains, in large measure, an "unfinished blueprint."

The incompleteness of this blueprint first manifests in its intrinsic tension. Murdoch attempts to implant a Good of transcendent origin into a disenchanted, secular world stripped of transcendental guarantees. Tallis's saintly conduct, within a theistic framework, might be read as an active imitation of divine will—his passivity acquiring a positive, spiritual significance. But once the figure of God disappears as the ultimate guarantor and telos, his passivity, patience, and boundless forbearance lose their transcendent reference points, degenerating into a purely inward, almost psychological posture. Such an attitude may momentarily evoke emotional sympathy or moral guilt, yet it struggles to generate any transformative force capable of reshaping social or political reality.

Secondly, the blueprint's difficulty lies in its insufficient treatment of the problem of power. Murdoch's conception of the Good emphasizes attraction and moral suasion, but it lacks an operative mechanism for sustaining itself within a world saturated by hostility, manipulation, and moral ambiguity. Tallis may "see" the Good and even "be" the Good, yet he cannot "act out" a form of goodness with tangible efficacy. His contrast with Julius makes this painfully clear: the latter, though morally dubious, wields a manipulative "wisdom" that decisively alters the destinies of those around him; the former, despite his purity, proves impotent even to prevent a tragedy occurring within his immediate circle. This exposes a perilous implication: if goodness remains forever fragile and powerless in the face of worldly forces, might it not ultimately devolve into a mere commentary upon power and cunning—thereby eroding faith in the Good itself?

Tallis, then, is far more than a singular failure; he serves as a crucial reflective coordinate within Murdoch's moral philosophy. He marks the point at which ethical idealism, driven to its utmost, encounters its practical impasse. Murdoch was not blind to this. Through Tallis's "gloriously failed" sanctity, she records with philosophical honesty the fissures that appear when her moral ideal collides with the texture of reality. Hence, the "unfinished blueprint" acquires a distinct heuristic value: it reminds us that no viable modern ethics can rely solely on an inward, vertical ascent of the soul. It must also incorporate the Aristotelian, horizontal concern for human nature, contingency, and social form. Genuine moral excellence, perhaps, requires a synthesis—one that preserves the transcendent aspiration toward the Good while simultaneously constructing, on the plane of the human, an ethical ecology sustained by practical wisdom and institutional justice. Tallis's story thus stands as a contemplative milestone on this arduous road toward reconciliation.

5. Conclusion

Tallis's predicament directs attention beyond individual moral cultivation to broader social and political dimensions. The brilliance and limitations of Murdoch and Plato alike lie in their attempt to resolve ultimate moral questions within the individual soul, reducing social and political complexity to ethical striving. In the post-war moral vacuum, this inward turn is understandable and historically situated. Yet Aristotle's insight is instructive: human flourishing cannot occur in isolation. As he asserts, "man is by nature a political animal" (*ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον*). Ethics must interface with communal structures to realize the common good. Her moral project falters structurally at the individual level due to deviation from the mean and, at the societal level, over-relies on individual moral transformation while underestimating institutional frameworks and universal justice in constraining human vice. Ironically, Aristotle's framework also bears limitations: the polis is bounded, exclusionary, and ill-equipped to contend with larger external powers.

Thus, Murdoch's philosophical and literary legacy emerges as a richly instructive "unfinished blueprint." Her work illuminates both the necessity and difficulty of post-metaphysical moral grounding, demonstrating that any viable ethical framework must integrate Aristotelian-style practical attention to human character and the mean, and a political vision capable of realizing justice beyond the individual. Genuine moral excellence may not be attained solely through vertical, inward pilgrimages; it requires a dual cultivation of personal virtue and structural justice. Tallis's *fairly honourable failure* marks a reflective waypoint on this arduous path.

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