

Fatalistic Determinism (1)

by: Douglas Lockhart

Postmodernism's radical reassessment of what constitutes the
'human' questioned as to its validity and effect

Douglas Lockhart

Introductory Thoughts

We are, it seems, on the cusp of wide academic agreement that our idea of what it means to be a human being is in need of radical readjustment along more robust deterministic, postmodern lines. We are not at all what we intuitively feel or think ourselves to be, what we have believed ourselves to be for millennia: we are altogether different. I agree with this contention, but not with postmodernism's dour conclusions.

The form of determinism now under offer has hardened into what the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch called "fatalistic determinism",¹ an interpretation of the facts of our biology and psychology that annuls the self's perception of itself as having any validity. What we believe about will and freedom, truth and falsity, ethics, morality and much else is now under direct attack, our whole idea of an inner life packed with meaning interpreted by most postmodern-oriented determinists as a subjective illusion. And at the heart of this illusion our notion of time, our notion of past, present and future, our notion of a conscious self caught up in a stream of experiences. There is, apparently, a question mark over "experience", over "consciousness", over there being any such thing as the "present" moment. Experience is structured by language, we are told; the division between self and world is the result of the acquisition of language by the formative 'I', or ego. So also concepts like "inner life", "self-consciousness" or "self-presence"; these too are the result of language acquisition underscored by the raw biological and neurological facts of our existence. The experiences we have are real enough, as are the sensations of an internal life that we enjoy, but they are at the same time

unreal in that they are generated out of language descriptions and cannot be subjectively explored in quite the way we imagine. Explorations of experience can only lead to illusion, the conclusions reached by this route a hindrance to identifying language as the underlying creative force in every circumstance.

Thinkers like Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger have gone as far as to suggest that the very nature of philosophy itself is about to radically change, indeed, that a "new kind of thinking" is already under way, a claim many fellow philosophers view with suspicion. As two-dimensional beings would struggle to comprehend the possibility of living in three dimensions, we are, according to this new thinking, faced with much the same problem in relation to the mesmerising linguistic dream that is our home. Language paints and textures the world, and ourselves, into existence. Mind *is* language in that it is word combinations that generate and inform us of self, other and world: our existence is sculpted into recognisable form through language. We are walking dictionaries sporting names found in dictionaries. As words only have meaning in relation to each other, we too only have meaning in relation to other selves and the world we mutually inhabit. Everything we do, everything we are is housed in a social and cultural context embedded in the larger context of language as omnipotent, omnipresent creator.

This brings us to the fact that conscious engagement with our idea of self, other or world is, or appears to be, a ceaseless engagement with reality carrying unexpected conceptual consequences in relation to our being in the world, to our supposed *hereness* as living beings. For if there is no actual "present" as physicists and philosophical physicalists claim, no immediate moment within which an immediately cognised self could exist, be grasped or owned, then our everyday experience of such is a sham. In this sense our "hereness" has nothing to do with being *present to ourselves* as sentient beings; it has to do with *process*. Our experience of being in existence is no more than a process busily processing; it is not a personal dimension of experience over and above the processing of events whatever we might feel to the contrary. We are a processing

medium caught in the grasp of space and time that generates sense of self out of its interaction with space and time, a process that inadvertently processes itself into existence as an object among other objects. It is as simple as that, and in being so simple it is an ultra difficult concept to process back on itself because the act of processing strengthens, rather than diminishes, the illusion of personal existence. It is a game we play right up until our last breath, and perhaps beyond our last breath given that there may be final acts of processing going on deep in the dying brain.

But there's a catch in all of this, and it's a catch we will progressively explore in an attempt to fathom what I think has become a theoretically truncated picture of what it means to be a human being. In the most basic of terms there are two quite distinct levels to our being conscious individuals, and one of them reveals our unrecognised struggle to be awake and aware in a more keenly sensitive and extended fashion. Enhanced sensitivity arises spontaneously in relation to circumstances, but there are occasions when we have to willfully pull ourselves into psychic focus. Our problem is that we perceive these differing levels of awareness as much the same thing in spite of their being radically different; we acknowledge them, but only tacitly. Caught up in a ferment of verbal and visual connections that even sleep cannot fully stifle, we move around in what could be described as a conscious dream within which we see without seeing, hear without hearing, and do without knowing that we are doing. We know *what* we are doing, but we mostly do not know *what* is doing the doing due to being *caught up* in the act of doing and thinking. Sense of self is absent; there is no one at home even when thinking about one's self. For thinking, too, is a form of doing; it cognitively captures us, submerges us, disappears us into ourselves as process. Some contend that we never actually surface from the engagement of doing and thinking, that to *not do* or *not think* while conscious is an impossibility: to be conscious is always to be conscious *of*.

There is a terrible truth in all of this, but it is a "truth" pushed way too far by postmodern thinkers in that they ignore what ought to be

obvious: there is an experiential difference between being present or not being present. We can in fact swap one for the other and exhibit a more sensitive, a more *selfed* form of awareness when the need arises. Or at least appear to do so. There again, we may only have swapped one level of processing for another, which suggests, in spite of a glimmer of hope, that engagement with self, other and world may only be an endless process of engagement *switching*: we may never actually surface (come back to ourselves) in any meaningful way - merely *think* that we do.

The illusion of "surfacing" is however ubiquitous; we all sense the difference between the one state and the other, the transition from a submerged (unconscious while conscious?) level of awareness to that of a more available, more humanly engaged level of awareness. We *know* we've been *away*, and that during our being away we are recognisably *not there* due to particular behavioural characteristics such as talking to ourselves, or to some imagined other in what can only be described as a kind of awake trance. And these private ruminations are often detectable: our lips move, our inner dialogue with friend or foe is reflected on our faces, our removed state of mind obvious to any passing individual *not so engaged*. A smile of recognition when we see this behavioural peculiarity in others. We know exactly what's going on; we've only just *come too* ourselves, *come back* to ourselves, *woken up* to the fact that we've been in some curious sense *entranced*: entranced and dreaming that we are awake while actually awake. We know what's going on, yet at the same time we do not know what's going on due to being immediately caught up again in thinking and doing. Our shuffling between levels of awareness *is* occasionally detectable, but it is of little importance to us because, well, *that's just how things are*.

The phrase "that's just how things are" harbours a perception of ourselves as *wholly* governed by biological, neurological and linguistic forces. We do not consciously state this to ourselves, but that is our tacit understanding in relation to processes over which we know ourselves to have little control. So when postmodern-oriented psychologists and philosophers tell us that this is in fact the case we not only have little reason to disagree with them, we are all but oblivious to the reasons

why we *ought* to disagree with them. We may feel a twinge way down deep, but psychologists and philosophers know best, don't they? And anyway, what does it matter? Such thinking has no bearing on how we think or relate.

Not so. This kind of thinking reduces us to a system lacking any central focus or self that mindlessly conjures the illusion of a central focus or self out of itself. In this scheme biological and neuronal processes no longer assist us in the production of our sensibilities; they are perceived as *constituting* those sensibilities. It is convenient to think otherwise, but that holds us back from penetrating to the heart of the reality we think we know and understand. A "new kind of thinking" is necessary for this to become apparent, a mode of thought we may shy away from because it challenges us to re-evaluate our existence in terms of process alone. And in terms of the language-generated virtual space we naively call *mind*. When awake this space is what we take to be our personal inner reality, when asleep it is the charade our ever-busy brains keep active in relation to our disjointed dreams. And permeating it all, language. Language is however not a tool that we use, it is in fact a self-regulating, self-generating phenomenon that uses us: we do not *have* language; language *has* us. We do not speak language; language *speaks* us - hence our not knowing what we mean until we *say* what we mean! Where is the personal volition in that? It is not that we think up things to say, it is that we speak and think and act automatically in response to cues.

So goes the deterministic argument in its hardline form, and it is not an easy argument to refute given the amount of supporting scientific and philosophically sophisticated evidence now being accumulated. But does that make all of its pronouncements beyond question? Are we to accept what these industrious thinkers say at face value and conduct ourselves accordingly? In terms of behaviour, attitude and outcomes, what does that mean? What would an intrinsic acceptance of such ideas do to us? Would it change us in some subtle way, perhaps diminish the way in which we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world? Is such thinking dangerous, or is it as many of its exponents believe, the scalpel

with which we can finally remove centuries of old-growth metaphysical nonsense? That is a laudable aim, but what does it say about those who accept this premise in its extreme form? In what way are they different from the rest of us given that they live their ordinary, everyday lives *as if* their radical vision is not true while believing that it is true? They obviously have to *remember* that their everyday perception of self and world is not accurate, keep reminding themselves of this fact and reclaim what they believe themselves to know over and over again. But only when they have to, when it is necessary in terms of their being professional thinkers, when they re-engage with this other perception of self, other and world.

The novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch takes up this problem by observing that Hume spoke of the philosopher's vision fading when he left his study,² a fact that didn't concern him much. Descartes, on the other hand, spoke of an *effortful intensity* in relation to going beyond our notion of a personal self. In contrast to this Wittgenstein's formulations tended to "remove ideas of consciousness and of presence from the philosophical scene"³, a purely intellectual stance requiring, it seems, no further elaboration. Which, when one thinks about it, is a shrewd and convenient way to live a life, a behavioural anomaly where one can profess belief in an extreme form of determinism, yet spend most of one's time functioning *as if* it were not so. Or simply ignore what's involved. Truth is, we can't stop ourselves from being naively caught up in our perception of reality; to obsessively perceive self, other and world through such a brutal deterministic lens would render us either dazed or comatose.

This curious perceptual/cognitive double-act has also been noted by the distinguished literary critic George Steiner⁴ in a slightly different context, that of Ptolemaic, geocentric astronomy and our continued use of "sunrise" and "sunset" in spite of having discarded the Ptolemaic position. And in our use of "table" and "chair" in spite of the advances in molecular chemistry and particle physics. The argument for an integral determinism can certainly be made, but it is an argument that derails

itself by dint of claims that are too all-encompassing, and by our not being able to actualise it at the experiential level: we can *think* that it is so, but we cannot *live* as if it so. That tells us something very important, it tells us that our so-called naive acceptance of reality is perhaps not quite as naive as we may intellectually assume: it is not only the bedrock of our perceptual existence, it is also the binding agent that unites conceptualised "fact" with moral "value", that is, with our daily lives as sentient beings. We do a deal more than think thoughts; we also live lives. This tells us that fact and value are not wholly separate issues and should not be pulled apart in an attempt to rid ourselves of life's messiness.⁵ Life's messiness demands that we evaluate our perceptions and conceptions of reality within a moral framework; there is no such thing as a vantage point where science or philosophy can function as neutral agents. Precision of language is one thing; language altogether devoid of moral sense is quite another. So the question we have to ask ourselves is this: Is a conceptual notion of determinism in this extreme mould tenable, or is it no more than a logical conceit born out of a desire to trump religion with its own absolutist playing card?

It is one thing to know that something is physiologically or neuronally based; it is quite another to push that element of our knowing into every nook and cranny of our lives and allow it to influence our whole conception of what it means to be a human being. As a system of facts determinism has a right and proper place in our knowing, but it should not be used to leaver "fact" away from "value" to the extent now being witnessed in deconstructive, postmodernist-oriented forms of thought. That is not determinism, it is hard-core reductionism. Our use of "sunrise" and "sunset" as descriptive terms fools no reasonably educated person; we are fully cognisant of what's going on *out there*. Terms like "table" and "chair" are however not at all the same kind of thing. Tables and chairs are not the equivalent of an astronomical illusion perceived as a literalism; they are self-evidently real in that we can use them in spite of their being *other* at some deep level of their existence. So also our being "other" at some deep biological or neuronal level; neither disallows our being sentient beings. What

disallows us is our habit of being so mentally engaged with "stuff" that we lose track of ourselves and others to a dangerous extent. Dangerous? In the sense of lacking empathy, sensitivity and a capacity for loving attention. As with chairs and tables, our use of terms like "mind", "self" or "consciousness" are self-evidently real to a named self exhibiting mind and consciousness in relation to the vicissitudes of daily life. They are eminently *usable* and should not be jettisoned on behalf of some rarified intellectual conception of our inner life that does away with that inner life. What makes me think so? The fact that self, other and world drip with value-laden issues at every turn. Whether we like it or not, life slams fact and value back into close proximity and demands that we pay attention. The attempt to radically separate fact and value is then a lapse in attention, a lapse in awareness, a lapse in *self-presence* that requires recognition or, to be more exact, a re-cognition (ignition?) of the self through conscious effort. For just as it takes effortful intensity to go beyond our notion of a personal self, so also does it take effortful intensity to rouse the endlessly engaged self out of its engagement stupor.

And again it is Iris Murdoch who captures what is going on here. Factual truth gains much of its prestige from scientific method, she tells us, the desire being to "separate fact and value so as to guarantee the *purity* of value and the *accuracy* of fact." But there's a problem, for the desire for purity and accuracy makes "value difficult to discuss", the "area of fact" appear to be *more real*.⁶ Science's pragmatic, utilitarian perception of things "spreads from [its] proper place in science into peripheral areas", the so-called morally neutral scientific worker or philosopher made safe from "personal prejudice", "messy sentimental[ity]" or "muddled pseudo-factual thinking" by way of that separation.⁷ Truth-telling should be hard and precise, fact and value separated one from the other in an attempt to sustain a form of truth uninfluenced by religious beliefs or emotional factors. The will must be purified through a conscious withdrawal from value perceptions, a liberation of the will from its dependence on value perceptions made

our *telos*, or aim. Ah, the *purified* will; where have I heard that line before?

And all of this conceived on behalf of the idea of *depth*, the idea of *deep*, structural foundations, the idea of reaching down into the very entrails of our existence and *grasping* its essential nature so as to avoid problems of interpretation and integration at the surface level of knowledge.⁸ Which is curious, when you think about it, for postmodern forms of thought are not generally interested in notions of depth; they disparage "depth" and prefer to deal with "surface" appearance alone. This in turn tells us that there is a subtle difference between extreme deterministic thinking and that of postmodern thinking, and that in spite of their ending up in much the same interpretive space. Deconstructive scientific philosophical thinking acknowledges "depth" in relation to the self having underlying processes *at* depth, but from out of this stance (trance?) subsequently denies the self any depth or significance beyond that of it being a social, cultural and linguistic mechanism. So in effect there is very little difference between the two forms: they are both dismissive of the self being what the naive self perceives the self to be, and with growing confidence they initiate a generalised view of life and living that reduces the confidence of that self in its own intrinsic value. And they have every right to do so given that the self's submerged behaviour during cognitive engagement seems to confirm the fact of the self's *notthereness*. Much of our thinking and doing does seem to radiate out of an empty, reactive space, our return to base camp awareness perceived as no more than a return to the messy value-laden system that causes us so much heartache and worry. But there is again a catch, for such determinations inadvertently initiate a corresponding *sense of loss* not immediately cognised by the self, a subtle *falling away* of some intangible thing lying at the heart (rather than the entrails) of lived experience, something felt, something sensed, something difficult to articulate. Iris Murdoch puts her finger on this missing thing when talking about the "inner thing" *lost* in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, and the similar loss of our "rich field of perceptions" in Kant's philosophy as criticised by Schopenhauer.

Language as mind; mind as language. Language as a world unto itself, a world that we inhabit, a world in which we move and have our being without realising that that is how it is. Language as co-extensive with thought. And in terms of methodology the overpowering influence of science by way of language made subservient to a search for accuracy and ultimacy founded on the notion that there is an underlying structure not only to self and world that can be identified and described in terms of process, but also an underlying structure to language that reveals how thought itself is generated in the brain. It is just how we are - get used to it: a theory of *everything* is just around the corner. Acknowledging these bare, brutal facts is a huge advancement in our understanding of what, why and who we are, an advancement in human intelligence that allows us to play with these facts and gain a modicum of control over our lives through intellectual astuteness. Well, some of us, that is; the rest of us just have to put up with the repercussions of such thinking as it surfaces in the most unexpected of places.

This raises an interesting question: Is the supposed difference between "nurture" and "nature" a non-question? Is nurture no more than nature blindly doing what nature does so well, only in less recognisable form? If so, then our societies, our cities and our vaunted institutions are not quite what they appear to be; they are in fact the equivalent of bee hives or ant colonies where we play out myriad predetermined roles. Or is that too extravagant a claim? What would a postmodern-oriented philosopher or scientist make of such an argument? Would they agree, or disagree? Would they hedge their bets? Or would they admit that that is basically how they perceive things to be, albeit so beautifully amalgamated with social and cultural factors as to be completely invisible. And sustained, they might add, by the game we play in what we think of as an "inner space" which, when things are properly understood, is no more than the outer world held in our memory circuits as event or image. Outer and inner as the same space; the world's *thereness* incorporated into the electrically shot-through darkness behind our eyelids as memory residues. There is no more to us than that.

We do not have memories or images; we are composed of memories and images in the same way we are composed of language. And neither do we have "presentness"; we are here in exactly the same way as any object in the world is here: self-presence, as an experience, is an illusion generated out of our quite mistaken idea that time is sequential in nature. There is, strictly speaking, no immediate "present" in which the so-called immediacy of self-presence can arise, or be enticed to arise. It is all a mental conjuring trick. Truth-telling awareness ("veridical" awareness in philosophical speak) is the result of linguistic processes building and unbuilding within the brain, the notion of a self-directing self that can isolate and own its impressions an erroneous impression. Nothing "momentary" can be an item of knowledge.⁹ Moments are not actually "moments" at all; they are the undetected gaps in our gap-ridden perception of self, other and world gestalted into a false continuity.

True? Untrue? Sorry, it is not as easy as that. It is not a matter of either/or; it is a matter of interpretation. There are many disturbing facts about ourselves that have to be faced, the raw interpretation of these facts a problem we have to deal with as a separate issue. Not all determinists are this hardline, of course; some draw back in alarm at determinism being pushed to such a reductionist extent - they sense an intractable problem in the making and bravely try to deal with it. But most of the statements coming out of the hardline camp resonate with exactly this kind of confidence, and should not be ignored. A whole new set of questions and answers have formed around the idea of *fundamental* processes, particularly in relation to language, and they have driving the notion of "self" and "self-presence" all but out of the equation of what it means to be an alive human being. And the determinist/reductionist argument is undeniably strong; everything said about the interrelation of self, other, world and language is arguably true, or at least true to the extent that the processes underpinning our being in the world do exist and have to be acknowledged. But what does that mean? Does it mean that the processes involved are all there is? Can everything "human" be put in

that particular box and shelved under *investigation complete*? What does it mean to evaluate self, other and world in such an all-embracing manner?

And so we return to that privileged group of believers in the "new thinking" (also termed a "new consciousness") who just happen to live their ordinary, everyday lives *as if* their "new thinking" did not exist. Initiates of the new thinking they may be, but they are still experientially bound to this world and the supposed Realism fallacy they claim to have cognitively abandoned: they can't escape its clutches. And how could they; in terms of everyday perception their "new thinking" is nowhere to be detected. It is invisible. It is concealed within itself as interpretation, hidden away just as "linguistic structure" is hidden within ordinary, everyday language.¹⁰ Yet capable of being imagined with a little intellectual effort. It takes effort to imagine what is there, or not there, and when one does everything changes. Well, not quite, everything looks the same, smells the same, has the same range of textures and colours in spite of one's speculative constructions. But not altogether the same. The language being used in relation to language, self and world has subtly changed the *feel* of language, self and world, the words carrying this sense of change not only empty of a previous naivety, but in a sense "emptied" of their value-laden dynamic in relation to a self now imagined out of existence. Something has indeed "gone missing", and that something is a person's idea of their being a person in their own right.

Not accomplished all in one go this "gone missing", however¹¹, more a *going missing*, a slow overtaking of the self through the stealth of an idea, the slow penetration of an idea functioning in the mind like an eraser. In this sense the language of extreme determinism communicates a deal more than a new conception of reality, or a new way of thinking, it also signals a possible closing down sequence in relation to the self's capacity to recognise self in some more sensitive manner. Re-cognising the self is not an objectification of the self, it is self *more fully constituted*, self more fully *subjectified* in terms of experience appreciated and sense

of self invited to *unfold* alongside experience. As life-affirming truths are not to be had through extreme forms of deterministic thinking, the end result must surely be a state of mind within which the *experience of surfacing, of emerging, of again taking up residence within the self that has gone missing* is dismissed as fundamentally meaningless. And further complicated by the fact that such thinking is enamoured of *playfulness* as "style", a tendency towards perceiving everything conceived as a kind of game. Language as a game. Meaning as a game. Life itself as a game. The human situation considered too muddled, too messy, too value-laden to reveal anything of real importance beyond an endless metaphysical bickering. So it's a matter of getting one's priorities right, isn't it? It is a matter of razoring everything we know back to basics, back to the biological and neuronal facts, back to an Occam-governed simplicity where all that messy human stuff can be conveniently ignored.

So what exactly are we dealing with? Genius? Brilliance? Are they the same thing? Is imaginative genius just intellectual prowess elevated to an almost unnerving level of penetrative intensity? Perhaps; perhaps not. Genius tends to be artistic as well as revelatory; it tends to affirm life, not subtly deny it. It tends towards beauty. It also tends to avoid overly complex, convoluted forms of expression.¹² It tends to use ordinary, everyday language (and much else) in unexpected ways. Not in the sense of teasing hidden linguistic meanings out of language, but in the sense of allowing language to move beyond the brilliance of conscious exposition and enter a realm of sensitive, almost breathless, waiting. Genius is not language languaging discreetly in the depths of some neuronally over-endowed brain; it is a probing of the will into the electric darkness of the self that can sometimes produce astonishing results. But that can't be right, can it? The electric darkness of the self is just that, an electrically lit darkness better described as *psychic mush*. We do not actually have a will, or a self, or even consciousness for that matter. These are figments of our undisciplined minds, our folksy way of perceiving reality so that we can get on with the tiresome business of living a life. We are way beyond self-referential terminology now. We've

dragged (bragged?) ourselves up out of naive forms of thought and into a new and all-encompassing freedom of mind. And what a relief that is: all the old philosophical and religious questions have faded away. We are free to toy with existence, probe its inners and insert our new way of thinking into every walk of life.

The privileged group of believers in the "new thinking" are making steady progress on a wide front, their rigorous, no-holes-barred utilitarian philosophy encapsulated in a single word: *codes*. Literature is to be understood in terms of internal codes, *hidden* codes that only an initiated few can detect and decipher. And human beings are in the same boat. We too are composed of codes that can be interpreted by a privileged group of linguistic seers who, by means not fully explained, have managed to sidestep codified being and reached a stage of conscious freedom by way of their brilliance, or genius. In this sense they are, as Murdoch states, the "enlightened" ones, the "untouchables", an "elite" band of thinkers gifted with the ability to see what others cannot see, or are unwilling to see. We have come to the end of philosophical fancy and religious lunacy; we have entered the territory marked *certainty* and are faced with the task of dealing with the repercussions of that "fact" as best we can. The world is in a seemingly irredeemable mess, but that's just societies in transition, societies and cultures undergoing necessary change and upheaval prior to settling down again. It has all happened before, and it will go on happening, except that this time there's an extra factor in the mix: what we're heading into at the intellectual level is not just some fresh variant of past thinking, some extension of past thinking, it is a whole new way of perceiving self, other and world that will revolutionise our existence as human beings in quite unimaginable ways.

Iris Murdoch presciently discusses the existence of a semi-secret, elitist, deconstructive doctrine in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), and with a practiced eye draws our attention to the "free and clever ones [the geniuses] who can invent language" yet miraculously remain free of the dominating power of language. It is, she says, "the old idea of the priestly caste as an initiated few in its unattractive and dangerous

modern dress."¹³ What we have to do is "be "*afraid* of what might be described as a sort of plausible amoralistic determinism", a "relaxed acceptance ... of a deep impersonal world-rhythm which overcomes the awkward dichotomies between good and evil."¹⁴ These are important words in relation to what I'm trying to get at here; the idea of an *impersonal world-rhythm* perfectly captures the underlying philosophy I perceive to be on the loose, a kind of "instinctual debased Taoism"¹⁵ now deeply ingrained in the thinking of our major intellectual disciplines.

In *The Tao of Physics*, Fritof Capra links pre-Socratic Greek thinking with Taoist ideas and the findings of modern physics in an attempt to construct a holistic philosophy, but that is not the tenor of the "new thinking" when dealing with similar alignments in philosophy, physics or mystical apprehension. Any detectable syncretism in relation to "loss of self" is in terms of something that has no actual existence, something that mistakes process for sentience, something incapable of swapping mental engagement for a new, more demanding level of cognitive attention and awareness. This is Murdoch's "impersonal world-rhythm" up close and deadly, and it is not a comforting presence. We are in the shadow of a philosophy that almost sinisterly prefers *absence* to *presence*, for how can there be *presence* if no one is at any time substantially available to themselves?

The question we have to ask is this: Are we in the process of being hijacked by a system of ideas where the notion of self-transcendence (loss of the constantly engaged self *as an experience* in relation to a higher, more creative state of awareness) has been turned into a self-negating exercise verging on the demonic? Self-negation is not freedom from a falsely conceived self; it is a form of tyranny based on extremist attitudes that distort and undermine the self's capacity for greater *presentness*. There is no identifiable evolutionary purpose in negating the self in this way, and in that "fact" lies a clue to its worth as a concept. Learning how to consciously disengage from bouts of submerged, trancelike thinking is an arising (a resurrection?) of the self out of *presenlessness* into *presence* as a capacity for empathy, tolerance and love. Trancelike engagement

with self, other or world is a necessary condition in terms of mental focus, but it is a withdrawn state of mind from which we have to constantly emerge (recover?) if we want to relate to self, other and world in a more humane fashion. We do so emerge, naturally, and at intervals, but knowing this to be the case changes the whole dynamic of our emerging. Not in the sense of lapsing back into thinking about our emerging as an interesting phenomenon, but in the sense of our emerging taking on greater, and greater experiential significance. To wake up into the self for a moment or two is one thing, to wake up into the self and *sustain the act of awaking* is quite another. We can never say with any confidence *when* we will awaken, but once awake we have an opportunity to reverse Descartes' act of *effortful intensity* and establish, rather than relinquish, our being in existence.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1) Murdoch, Iris, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Vintage, UK., 2003. p. 472. Murdoch talks of "fatalistic determinism" combined with a superior omniscience as a mixture at work in "Derrida's nightmarish prophetic theorising", and contends that this mixture relates to the vague idea of the superman as set up by Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Sartre.
- 2) Ibid, p. 219.
- 3) Ibid, p. 220.
- 4) Steiner, George, *Real Presences*, Faber & Faber, London 1991. p. 96. With a characteristic twist, Steiner draws this kind of thinking out of Stephane Mallarme and Ferdinand Saussure in relation to our not ever knowing an object in itself. Saussure is said to have given Kant's denial of our every knowing anything in itself a canonic and systematic form, whereas Mallarme is said to have supplied the ontologically critical step underlying modern notions of linguistics. Absence will replace presence, ontological nihilism will replace the philosophic naivety of Romanticism, the idea of an examined life will fall into crisis.
- 5) Murdoch, Iris, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (as above) p. 50.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Ibid, p. 51.
- 8) Ibid, p. 55. Murdoch's view of "depth" is quite the reverse of that postulated by postmodernists; she talks of "deep foundations" and the grasping of our "essential" natures in terms of human worth, something that has to be built in at the start or it will tend to fly away and become problematic later.
- 9) Ibid, p. 221.
- 10) Allen, Barry, 'The Historical Discourse of Philosophy', *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 19. 1993. p. 131. In this context, Barry Allen describes generative grammars, language-acquisition devices and synchronic linguistic structures as not being the result of laborious inquiry. but as *a priori* postulates of certain preconceived ideas in linguistic science.
- 11) Ibid, p. 49. It is interesting to note that Schopenhauer accused Kant of losing our "rich detail of perceptions" due to the nature of his philosophy; Murdoch, in similar vein, accuses Wittgenstein of damaging some necessary sense of our "inner life" due to the tenor of his thinking.

12) Ibid, p. 322-3.

13) Murdoch, Iris, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (as above) p. 198. See also John Ralston Saul's *Voltaire's Bastards* where he skillfully describes the production of elites who serve neither our needs nor our desires, elites that are perfectly logical products of a rational society. Penguin Canada 1993. (pp. 117-122)

14) Ibid.

15) Ibid.