**Iris Murdoch: Trust in the World**

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**Introduction**

In the seminal essay ‘Trust and Anti-Trust’, Annette Baier (1986) complains about the neglect of the concept of trust in Western moral philosophy, and suggests that the lack is due to patriarchal reasons: Western moral philosophy, being male dominated, has also been concerned with problems faced by men, which traditionally revolve around the public rather that the private sphere, and around relationships based on promise-giving and contract-making as opposed to the more vulnerable and less freely chosen relationships of dependency and trust. While seeking to instate the importance of trust in contemporary philosophical conversation, Baier also diagnoses the relative lack of interest in trust through a political analysis, showing the hidden interests and power relations that lie within a tradition of moral philosophy that has as one of its central structuring claims that of having universal validity.

From her early essays collected in *Existentialists and Mystics* (1999), and continuing in the three essays contained in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Iris Murdoch situates her reflections within a broad philosophical aim of showing that we need to re-think the very ways in which we do moral philosophy, issuing a challenge to her contemporaries in the English-speaking world. Contemporary moral philosophy, she writes, has as its central hero ‘the man’ of liberal culture, who experiences himself very much as an individual, who moves in a world which is separate from him and within which he freely chooses, whose morality is identified with his will, and whose acts are public. In this ‘man’, Murdoch sees crystallised a whole culture and its philosophical offspring, ‘a happy and fruitful marriage of Kantian liberalism with Wittgensteinian logic solemnised by Freud’ (‘The Idea of Perfection’ 305-6)[[1]](#footnote-1), also traceable in existentialist and utilitarian philosophies. The pervasiveness of such an idea of the moral ‘agent’ is seen in the fact that this man is considered by Murdoch to be not only the hero of philosophical texts, but also of ‘almost every contemporary novel’ (IP 304).

The above description of contemporary thinking opens the pages of ‘The Idea of Perfection’, one of Murdoch’s best-known essays, and in the very beginning she claims that she wishes ‘in this discussion to attempt a movement of return, a retracing of our steps to see how a certain position was reached’ (IP 299). The position, and the picture of morality that comes with it, is problematic according to Murdoch not so much because it’s false (sometimes it’s not) but because it excludes other pictures, because it pretends to be neutral, and because what it ignores are certain important and fundamental ‘facts’, such as: ‘that an unexamined life can be virtuous and love is a central concept in morals’ (IP 299).

Both in method (asking: ‘How was a certain philosophical position reached?’ ‘What moral, psychological, and political factors contributed to reaching that position?’) and in content (shifting the attention from public to private, or rather including the private as well as the pubic, and taking seriously, in ethics, those factors that one does not control through the will), Murdoch’s project has significant points of overlap with that of Baier, and more generally with feminist epistemologists. In *What Can She Know?* (1991), for instance, Lorraine Code argues not only that women are less likely to be taken seriously, but that the very model of knowledge which excludes women’s expertise and testimony is based on patriarchal structures (see also Alcoff 1995). This is the system of knowledge creation and acceptance which, according to Baier, has pushed trust to the boundaries of public and philosophical discourse, despite its actual centrality in people’s lives.

The lives of those with less power, the ones to whom things are done, or whose control on the world around them is slight or irrelevant (as argued convincingly, for instance, by Soran Reader (2007)) are not traditionally central to the Western philosophical paradigm that both Baier and Murdoch are engaging with. In that tradition of moral philosophy it is the agent, rather than the patient, or more simply the subject, that is the real object of concern. The fact that trust’s importance is greater in the lives of those who are not, primarily, moral ‘agents’, explains why ‘the man of modern moral philosophy’ described by Murdoch is more likely to talk about respect and contracts, and less likely to talk about passivity and trust. But, as Trudy Govier (1992) argues, trust can be supplemented, but cannot be replaced, by the recourse to contracts or legal institutions. The two, as Murdoch shows, operate on different levels of morality, and we need both. In fact, as frequently noted, the more urgent the call for laws (including moral laws) and contracts, the more likely it is that trust is weak or absent.

These reflections and parallels apply mostly to Murdoch’s criticism of moral philosophy. But the positive, constructive side of Murdoch’s philosophy, too, has important elements in common with feminist philosophy, especially in this case with care ethics. Murdoch’s proposal is that we take seriously ‘the inner life of the individual’: that instead of only focusing on outer, public acts, we also restore the importance of the inner, which on her view has been ‘theorised away’ together with other important facts (IP 299). Murdoch’s ethics, then, is concerned with the more intimate, private dimension of morality, not at the expense of the public sphere, but in order to provide a fuller picture of what we are talking about when we talk about goodness. This is a concern that clearly animates care ethics, in different ways.[[2]](#footnote-2) In *Caring* (2013), Noddings puts emphasis on the importance of ‘engrossment’, which she understands to involve a receptive, empathetic attention – where ‘attention’ is one of Murdoch’s key concepts. Indeed, Noddings later goes on to prefer the word ‘attention’ as required by caring. Similarly, Sara Ruddick invokes both Murdoch and Simone Weil in emphasising ‘attentive love’, showing the ethical importance of finding a stance that is at the same time epistemic and affective (1989, 119).[[3]](#footnote-3) The domain of caring and of intimacy, where attentive love finds a paradigmatic expression, is one where trust has a central place, as many feminist philosophers besides Baier have noted (see also, e.g., Govier 1992 and Held 1987).

**Trust in Murdoch**

This dual connection of Murdoch with feminist philosophy and her investigation of domains where trust operates in fundamental ways would make it seem that Murdoch can be studied as a helpful philosopher of trust. And yet: on the one hand, Murdoch say little, explicitly, about feminism, and does not draw, from her analysis of ‘the man’ of contemporary moral philosophy, the consequences that feminist philosophers, epistemologists in particular, have. Indeed, Murdoch’s relationship to feminism is contentious and ambiguous. Some readers, such as Sabina Lovibond (2011), are in fact critical of Murdoch’s stress on attention and ‘unselfing’ precisely on feminist grounds. For Lovibond, the withdrawal of the self required in attention and love has a suspicious connection with the self-abnegation that has been traditionally expected of women. Therefore, Lovibond worries that being fascinated by selfless attention as an ethical ideal may reinforce rather than dismantle the patriarchal structures that expect women to be, or become, ‘nothing’.

On the other hand, Murdoch also never explicitly touches on the topic of trust. Nonetheless, her interest in personal relationships is strong, as evidenced not only by her emphasis on love and attention, but also by her most prominent examples: as in the much-cited story of M and D, where a mother-in-law changes her perception and description of her daughter-in-law thanks to the exercise of attention with no outer change occurring; or, in less extended examples, where a change in objects of attention is illustrated through falling out of love, or where selflessness is shown through the person who knows when to let another go even if they’d rather do otherwise. Murdoch also frequently uses personal relationships and intimate situations not only as examples of moral dynamics but also as the place in which morality is born, first experienced, first negotiated. As she writes in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992):[[4]](#footnote-4) ‘Human relationship is no doubt the most important, as well as the first, training and testing-ground of morality’ (MGM 17).

At this point, we have reasons to wonder what place, if any, trust can have in Murdoch’s philosophy, and whether analysing Murdoch’s philosophical work through the lens of trust can be helpful in itself or as a way of connecting it with the feminist theories that she came close to but that she did not explicitly embrace. In the rest of this chapter I will propose a reading of Murdoch that brings out an implicit commitment to trust, part of which also helps to strengthen her connection with feminist concerns from a different angle.

There is, I suggest, a general dimension of Murdoch’s work where reflecting on trust can help expand and deepen our understanding. This dimension is not that of personal relationships, where trust is typically considered to be at home in the philosophical literature. It is, however, a dimension that underlies personal relationships, and colours them as instances of moral experience in the way Murdoch sees them, but is not limited to them. This dimension of trust is that of trust in the world. However, by combining the shift towards moral psychology and first-personal experience in ethics which the study of trust has emphasised, with the more impersonal dimension of trust in the world, exploring the role of trust in Murdoch’s philosophy may help at the same time to understand the non-straightforward placing of her thought in relation to the main pillars of feminist thinking.

Even through this reading trust is, as we have seen, only implicitly present in Murdoch’s philosophy. Yet this form of trust underlies some of Murdoch’s most central and original ideas. It is required, for instance, by Murdoch’s suggestion that we shift our focus from principle-based, impersonally applicable ethics to a form of ethics that revolves around the inner life and moral perception. It is particularly in moral perception that trust in the world is an important albeit silent element.

Murdoch appeals to the possibility of moral perception repeatedly throughout her work. Her most significant positive proposal, indeed, is that we need to develop the capacity for attention, which will allow us to see things justly and is therefore prior to, and arguably more important than, principle-based ethics. Murdoch talks about ‘moral perception’ and, more frequently, ‘moral vision’ to refer both to the (successful) outcome of attention – the moral reality or facts that we see or perceive – and to the moral quality of perception and vision themselves.[[5]](#footnote-5) This potentially confusing double usage of ‘moral perception’ and ‘moral vision’ has been noted in the literature.[[6]](#footnote-6) Here, I will focus on the first meaning of moral perception and vision in Murdoch: the perception or vision of a reality that contains moral elements.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In order to shift our hopes for moral improvement away from an exclusive reliance on impersonally and publicly determined principles towards moral perception (which can include both the intuition and understanding suggested by a more metaphorical understanding of ‘moral vision’) which, by definition, relies on no such external check outside of our own perception, we need to be able to trust that what our perception reveals is true. In moral perception we lose some of the security that principle-based theories offer: shared rules that allow us to analyse our actions and give reasons that anyone possessed with the same faculty of reason will be able to understand.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moral perception requires trust because there is nothing outside of the act of perception that allows us to be certain that what we are perceiving is true.[[9]](#footnote-9) This form of trust extends beyond moral perception to perception in general, and it one that we exercise all the time, without realising (such is the nature of trust, according to Baier: like air (Baier 1986, 234).) In moral perception, however, greater trust is required because what perception reveals is not always ‘on the surface’ and it is clearer that more than functioning sight, smell, or touch are needed.[[10]](#footnote-10) To perceive the moral qualities of a situation we may need to be correctly attuned and possess the right sensibility, the right motives. That’s why Murdoch uses the vocabulary of attention, as opposed to ‘mere looking’, to refer to moral perception. Attention, for Murdoch, is a state which is itself morally valuable and which allows us to perceive justly what we may not perceive in an inattentive state. But, once again, to think of attention and what it reveals in terms of moral achievement, which Murdoch understands Platonically as a progressively closer approach to the truth, we need trust: trust that the reality we are attending to will reveal the features we need to see, and trust in ourselves and our capacity to perceive correctly and not be subject to misperceptions and illusions. These are non-standard forms of trust, which may explain why Murdoch does not explicitly discuss the concept.

**Trust in the World**

Murdoch’s alternative vision of morality is explicitly opposed to a conception of ethics that is too exclusively focused on outer, observable action, psychological sources that can in principle be made public, and the freedom of the will (see especially ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ and ‘The Idea of Perfection’). Instead, she offers a vision of morality that is less easily codifiable, not only by denying that principles are always necessary to guide us and that they can capture all that is needed in a given situation, but also by denying that the moral subject can be reduced to whatever about her is publicly available (IP 319ff.) ‘We are obscure to ourselves’ (‘The Darkness of Practical Reason’, 1998, 200), Murdoch notes, and this means that moral understanding requires a sensibility which is attuned but also patient in its deepening, in the course of attempting to discover what is real.

The world, in this picture, is not presented as inert and separate from us. Rather, reality is something that we are ‘immersed’ in: something of which we are part, which we partly determine, but also to which we must pay attention and to which we must obey. In ‘The Idea of Perfection’, Murdoch declares her view to be ‘a kind of inconclusive non-dogmatic naturalism’ of which she says elsewhere:

The true naturalist (the Marxist, for instance, or certain kinds of Christian) is one who believes that as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes. (VCM 96)

The metaphor of immersion in reality is an important image to understand Murdoch’s metaphysical view, repeated in the more famous quote from ‘Vision and Choice’[[11]](#footnote-11):

There are people whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct. There are other people whose fundamental belief is that we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual*.* (VCM 88)

In the first vision of the world described here by Murdoch, all that we need are functioning senses and well-developed rationality. ‘All’, of course, should be in inverted commas, and Murdoch shows no disrespect to theories based on such a view of the world, accepting them as helpful and even in some cases necessary parts of morality. The problem, for Murdoch, is that they tell a limited story about human morality, and hence a distorted one. That is why she combines moral psychology and metaphysics in a way that makes them inseparable: we experience the nature of reality to be such that reality is available not immediately but to a patient, honest, *moral* sensibility; the Good is absolute and therefore always ‘beyond’, and yet we must strive to get closer to it; in fact, human life is dominated by its (erotic) tension towards the Good, which is at the same time a tension towards the real, in progressive degrees. Plato’s ascent and St Anselm’s ontological argument inspire this view (see MGM 391ff).

This metaphysical picture of reality removes the distance between the individual and the world, not only in the trivial sense that the individual is part of the world, but insofar as, on the one hand, reality is to be constantly and creatively pursued through subjective engagement, and on the other, the answer to the questions of how to live and what to do will come not only from an exercise of reason and will, but from reality itself, revealed to the attentive individual. These two features of our engagement with the real, central to Murdochian metaphysics and ethics, rely on two sets of concepts – mystery, perfectionism, attention, and moral perception on the one hand, and obedience, passivity, and interdependence on the other – which contain trust of reality as an inescapable, although silent, element. The idea that we are immersed in a reality which transcends us implies that we must trust that reality, not only because we are powerless to do otherwise, but also because our task, as Murdoch sees it, is to move in synch with reality, understanding its nature and its demands on us, rather than act as independent agents upon it. This notion of reality requires a passivity and a vulnerability that are central elements of trust.

This is, of course, as I have noted, a non-standard domain of application of the concept of trust, which the philosophical literature has mostly placed within the domain of interpersonal relationships. Yet some voices have been raised against this restriction. Recently, C. Thi Nguyen (2022) has argued against this focus and has proposed a model of trust which can be applied beyond relationships, as well as beyond the human. According to Nguyen, trust is to be construed as an ‘unquestioning attitude’ which allows us to integrate other objects or people into our agency. Nguyen writes that ‘trust … is about … letting something inside, about uniting with it. Closeness and unification are some of the key markers of intimacy’ (240).

Nguyen’s account provides a helpful point of connection between Murdoch’s unspoken trust in reality and the more systematic contemporary philosophical literature seeking an understanding of the pervasiveness of trust. For Nguyen, trust is an ‘attitude’ of refraining from questioning that which we trust, and which requires greater reasons to do so. That does not mean, as Nguyen notes, that we never questioned what we trust, or that we may never be in a position to do that should the situation arise. That would be particularly incongruous with a trust of reality, such as Murdoch’s, that aims to be at the same time morally answerable. But like Nguyen’s view, Murdoch’s dependence on a reality of which we are part and which we need to see more and more clearly is grounded not on a discreet act of will or positive action (which would be self-defeating) but on an attitude of attention which we must cultivate, and which includes a necessary passivity: attention, which allows us to enter into contact with the real, is receptivity rather than assertion. As Simone Weil, Murdoch’s great inspiration on this point, writes: ‘Attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts perhaps, but it is a negative effort’ (1951, 111).

Central to Murdoch’s idea of the way in which we should approach reality is the idea of ‘unselfing’, which removes the distortions generated by the ego which make it difficult for us to see things clearly (see, e.g., IP). Unselfing is connected with the passivity of attention, refraining from imposing our will or our interpretations on reality. By removing the veil between us and reality, unselfing is also connected with a greater unity with reality, moving closer to the embeddedness into the real which allows for our perceptions and actions to be truly responsive to what the situation calls for, as opposed to being self-generated. This entails giving up a certain degree of control and allowing reality, as it reveals itself to us, to guide us. This is an ‘integration’, in Nguyen’s words, that is part and parcel of trust, and that does not need any beliefs in the goodwill of the one trusted, nor indeed does it require any agency in what we trust. Differently from Ngyuen, however, we can read Murdoch’s trust in the world as operating in a parallel fashion but in an opposite polarity: in Nguyen, we integrate the world into our agency; in Murdoch, we integrate our agency into the world (I will return to this).

**Ontological Trust**

To mark the specificity of the role of trust in the world in Murdoch, then, we need to appreciate the abstract nature of the discourse by observing once again that trust operates in Murdoch not only as an ethical stance but also as an ontological one. This distinction is drawn by Josef Früchtl (2018), who, in a study of how film may help restore our ‘trust in the world’, writes that: ‘Trust is a resource that is as fundamental as it is precarious. It is fundamental socially, especially in a moral, political, economic or psychological sense, but also in an ontological or existential sense’ (Früchtl 2018, 2). Früchtl goes on to connect the ontological-existential meaning of trust with philosophers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, James, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, who through a leap of faith, the affirmation of life, or the acknowledgment of a lack of further grounding for our beliefs, variously remind us that some degree of trust in the world is required and, indeed, already present in our engagement with reality, and that uncovering it and embracing it can illuminate a different path for philosophy to take. It is not surprising, then, that all of these philosophers had an impact on Murdoch, who shares the idea that we will not get at what is real, especially in the moral sense, by closer intellectual scrutiny, but that we need to acknowledge the mystery of life for what it is, through imagination, moral effort, and indeed, once all resources have been deployed, through trust.

This form of trust, as I said, is different from the standard, interpersonal understanding of trust, although it is not unrelated. Like Nguyen’s unquestioning attitude, trust in the world is more pervasive but also less identifiable. For these reasons, it establishes a way of relating to reality which can be found, with due differences, in ways of relating to others. Karen Jones’s (2004) notion of ‘basal security’ is offered as that which does not accommodate the widely-accepted model of three-place trust, yet *explains* three-place trust. This notion helps us to further understand the aspects of Murdoch’s philosophy which imply an attitude of trust in the world. For Jones, the way we live in the world requires an unspoken sense of trust that things will work in certain ways, that we do not need to constantly check everything – that the earth will support us, that strangers will not shoot us in the streets. These are not beliefs insofar as we do not think about these possibilities (Jones 2004, 7). We show our trust precisely by not thinking about them. Yet when these forms of security are shaken – in Jones’s example, by terrorism – we feel that something fundamental has been taken away and our reaction is not merely one that would follow wrongly-placed reliance. As Jones writes, our reaction, in line with the nature of basal security, is affectively laden and properly expressed in terms of the betrayal of trust. Jones notes that, while it may be disputed that the concept of trust applies in these cases, that is exactly the concept that the victims of terrorism or other world-shaking cases reach for (Jones 2004, 13). And while that is not enough to secure the right application of trust, it is both an important fact that we do conceptualise trust this way and an invitation to revise excessively restrictive conceptions of trust. Nguyen explains the expression of betrayed trust, in these cases, as instances of failed integration into our agency. Jones suggests that these are cases in which our sense of security in the world as such is shaken, a sense that is undefined but also fundamental to our ability to function despite knowing that we have no absolute guarantee that we will not be harmed nor full control over that possibility. Trust is implicit in our very ‘framework for interpreting the world,’ and this is closer to the ontological sense of trust that Früchtl talks about, which underlies Murdoch’s moral ontology. Murdoch discloses such fundamental trust, however, not by talking about threats but about ‘the authority of the real’ (‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts, 374).[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Trust and the Good**

In different ways, Nguyen, Jones, and Früchtl emphasise cases in which trust is betrayed, with Jones and Früchtl discussing radical cases when such betrayal leads to a shattered sense of reality. It is easy to see why that focus is important: trust, as we saw, becomes visible when something goes wrong. But the emphasis on more radical reconfigurations of our sense of reality after a betrayal of trust indicates a further dimension, more intriguing and more relevant for our purposes. In cases of terror as discussed by Jones, it is not a specific object of trust, nor a specific domain of trust, that is broken. It is one’s sense of the world as such that shifts due to the impossibility of continuing with the same affective sense of safety and related behaviours (non-checking, etc.) that mark the presence of trust. Früchtl reads this phenomenon through a moral lens, not just insofar as occurrences like terrorism may shake one’s trust in the goodness of others, but more interestingly insofar as an attitude of trust as such goes hand in hand with a sense of goodness, and hence, he concludes ‘evil is what shakes to the very foundations our trust in the world, not only our moral trust but also—and perhaps even primarily—our ontological-existential trust. Evil is the moral opposite of trust’ (2018, 3).

Murdoch’s moral realism, and the importance of trusting both her philosophy and that which her philosophy suggests, can be understood as building a trust in the Good such that no instance of terror can shake it. For Murdoch, the Good is good with a capital ‘G’, because it is ‘a single, perfect, transcendent, non-representable, necessarily real object of attention’ (‘On God and Good’, 344). The Good is the idea of perfection which guides all encounters with reality and which provides motivation for progressing in one’s perception and understanding of it. If the Good is thus omnipresent, and its operations in our lives received with trusting certainty as Murdoch suggests, then when the ontological trust in the world is broken, the certainty of the reality of the Good is also put into question. It is with this Murdochian thought in mind that we can explain and give further depth to Früchtl’s observation that ‘evil is the moral opposite of trust’ (3). The experience of evil, then, is not an experience of a specific act or occurrence but a loss of the Good, and hence loss of that which, according to Murdoch, sustains our experience of life and the world. This Murdochian interpretation agrees with, and adds a dimension to, Jones’s statement that the victims of terror and those whose trust in the world has not been thus broken live ‘in different worlds’ (Jones 2004, 7).

**The Authority of Reality**

‘The authority of morality is the authority of truth, that is, of reality’ (SGC 374), Murdoch writes. If we are to accept the real as authoritative, we need to trust that the real is not betraying us. This is both a cognitive and an action-guiding point: a clear-eyed perception of reality is what, for Murdoch, is fundamental to morality, but reality in her sense is not inert. It is experienced by us as posing limits, as inviting to action, or to contemplation. This conception is grounded on the metaphysical difference we have seen between Murdoch’s conception of ethics and one that sees the world as independent of value, and as morality dependent on the will. On that model, trust is irrelevant. But if we are to be determined in our being and guided by the real, then we have to trust that the real is something that is inextricable from goodness, and we have no independent way of verifying that – no way that is independent from our sense that what is good cannot be deception, that truth is revealed progressively, and that such progress is also moral progress. St. Anselm’s ontological proof, which Murdoch takes as important for illuminating her idea of moral realism, proceeds in such a fashion: the ontological argument is not compelling for everyone, because it appeals not to the intellect, but to faith; Anselm’s beginning is *credo ut intellegam*. The parallel to Anselm is twofold. On the one hand, Murdoch describes a love for reality that is not the outcome of but the prerequisite for a clear understanding, and truthful vision as something we should, in our moral life, exercise. This is a form of trust in the world understood as the starting point of the moral pilgrimage (an image dear to Murdoch). On the other hand, her own philosophy has such an ‘invitational’ character. Like Anselm’s proof, Murdoch’s metaphysical arguments are not to be logically or empirically proven but invite the reader to notice something about life, to see it in a certain light, and if that way of seeing it illuminates and explains something about it, then it is worth pursuing. The idea of faith is invoked, by Anselm and by Murdoch, not as an irrational surrender in order to make any claim one feels like making, but as an attitude of the mind bent on discovering something that it only darkly intuits, akin to Plato’s love or *eros*, the desire to apprehend the Forms that it does not yet see. As Simone Weil notes, ‘the proof does not address itself to the understanding but to love’ (Weil 2013, 375, quoted in MGM 505). Here we observe again how Murdoch is practising, and inciting us to practise, philosophically, the same attitude that she holds as central to the moral life more generally: attention, as the desire to discover something that one does not yet fully comprehend, that nevertheless presents itself compellingly to consciousness through a process in which we need to surrender ourselves through a trust that is however not blind.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Obedience**

A more extreme reading of the idea that reality has authority over us is its action-guiding interpretation, which in Murdoch’s thought, as I hope has become clear, is not the idea that reality provides the data from which we act; rather, it is the striking idea that, if we pay attention, reality will indicate what to do in such a way that choice and will may be rendered irrelevant. This is the idea of ‘obedience’, another concept that Murdoch takes from Weil. According to Weil, obedience refers to the self-surrender that occurs when we allow ourselves to be led by reality, which she takes, like Murdoch, to be displaying what is required for us if we are able to pay attention. The capacity to pay attention is fundamental, because it allows us to distinguish between ‘low’ obedience to the base forces of the ego and ‘high’ obedience to the demands of the real. Attention and ‘decreation’ (‘unselfing’ for Murdoch) go hand in hand in removing the pernicious influence of the self and acting out of the recognition of a need instead of will or self-assertion. As Weil writes:

Obedience. There are two kinds. We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationship of things. In the first case we do what we are driven to by the imagination which fills up empty spaces … If we suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship of things, a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying. Until then we have not any notion of necessity and we have no sense of obedience. (GG 48)

A thought which Murdoch echoes very closely, for instance here in ‘The Idea of Perfection’:

If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at. This is in a way the reverse of Hampshire’s picture, where our efforts are supposed to be directed to increasing our freedom by conceptualising as many different possibilities of action as possible: having as many goods as possible in the shop. The ideal situation, on the contrary, is rather to be represented as a kind of ‘necessity’. This is something of which saints speak and which any artist will readily understand. The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like ‘obedience’. (IP 331)

If we are to act out of obedience to reality, we need to trust that reality is authoritative. The idea of obedience, then, is the most radical application of the idea of trust in reality where, as Murdoch argues, reality acts as a normative term in more than one sense: as something constantly to be pursued, and as something to be followed.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have been asking why Murdoch does not explicitly address the concept of trust, despite her philosophy containing elements that are strongly connected with trust. One is the concern with interpersonal relationships. Another is Murdoch’s aim to move away from a (patriarchal) philosophical model based on public acts and promises, contracts, and respect. These two concerns link Murdoch with feminist philosophy through the implicit role that trust has in Murdoch’s thinking. However, I have argued, it is in Murdoch’s metaphysics and in a broader application of the concept that trust is most at home in Murdoch’s philosophy. That is the idea of trust in the world. Trust in the world, I have suggested, is required for Murdoch’s ideas of moral perception, the reality of the Good, and moral obedience. While trust in reality is necessary if moral perception is to be both cognitive and action guiding, Murdoch’s arguments for the reality of the good require a sense of trust in reality in order for them to be understood. Hence trust is an element both of Murdoch’s philosophical ideas and of her methodology.

While Murdoch does not openly relate the key aspects of her philosophy to feminism, many feminist thinkers have found in Murdoch an important ally in emphasising the importance of intimacy, of care, and of particularised attention. Even if Murdoch’s aim is to point in the direction of a different way of thinking about ethics and morality that she takes to be applicable regardless of gender, it is a social and historical fact that many of the central ideas and attitudes she stresses have been associated with women and have been put forward by feminists as a counter to patriarchal thinking. Trust can be considered as a nodal point in this connection, because of the associated vulnerability, uncertainty, and self-withdrawal that are part and parcel of trust, whether it be the ontological or the interpersonal kind.

If trust, as Baier famously stated, is ‘accepted vulnerability’ (1986, 235), Murdoch’s philosophy exhibits precisely such acceptance by delineating a picture of reality that acts upon us instead of being simply a field for us to act on, in which we are immersed in ways which we cannot control, and which nonetheless we must accept as such, not only because we have no choice but because doing otherwise would be a pointless and morally pernicious self-assertion, substituting truth with the self. Murdoch’s normative concept of reality is one in which trust is necessary because there is no harder certainty outside our best perceptions and reflections, we are always ‘in medias res’, and it is only out of the affective-cognitive attitude of trust – or faith – that we can hope to get the kind of clarity that morality, specifically, requires.

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1. Hereafter IP. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for instance, the foundational work of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (2013); Virginia Held (1993) and Joan Tronto (1993) have applied considerations of care from the intimate to the social-political domain. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joan Tronto, in *Moral Boundaries* (1993), also takes attention to be central to care, but she draws mostly on Simone Weil for that concept. For a comparative analysis of Murdoch, Noddings, and Tronto on the theme of moral attention, see Gendron 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Henceforth MGM. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the sake of this discussion, I take moral perception and moral vision to refer broadly to the same phenomenon. On the interpretative difficulties surrounding Murdoch’s use of perceptual vocabulary and metaphors, see Lawrence Blum (2012), who attempts to disentangle the use of ‘attention’, ‘seeing’, ‘looking’, and ‘vision’ in order to differentiate between three notions: perception considered neutrally as to its moral quality and its truthfulness; successful, i.e., clear and just, perception; and the attempt to achieve such perception. As Blum notes, Murdoch sometimes refers to the first notion by using ‘seeing’ and ‘vision’, taken as activities that present to us the world we have partly created for ourselves through the use (either good or bad) of the imagination. Blum calls this the ‘subjectively perceived’. This idea is also expressed in verb form by the use of ‘looking’, which Murdoch contrasts directly with attention (IP 329). Frequently, however, ‘moral vision’ refers to the content of that vision (a moral reality) and ‘attention’ both to the morally praiseworthy effort and to the successful achievement of moral perception; the reason being, for Blum, that ‘there is a sort of tendency … for outward focus to become attention – to successfully grasp another’s reality’ (Blum 2012, 311). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Scott Clifton 2013, 211, and Panizza 2019, 275–6, on moral perception; see Gomes 2022, 144, on moral vision. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On Murdochian moral perception, see especially Blum 1991, Mylonaki 2019, and Cooper 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This can give rise to the sense of giddiness addressed by McDowell (2001), who, reading the later Wittgenstein on rule following, proposes that the experience is due to the assumption that a concept has been correctly applied only if one follows universal rules, independently of human practises and the set of responses and attitudes that we typically have as participants in the practises (McDowell 2001, 203). On Wittgenstein’s influence on Murdoch, see Hämälainen 2014, Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen 2022, and Forsberg (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Murdoch herself mainly gives negative criteria for attention: the absence of the self or of self-interested distorting filters between us and reality. Bridget Clarke (2012) has worried about the lack of criteria for checking attention and has proposed that we address it by trying to compare our perception with that of others and identify patterns of perception. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I write ‘it is clearer that’ because, according to Murdoch, all perception requires more than functioning senses and sensibility, conceptual skills, and experience, which she considers as moral: ‘all just vision … is a moral matter’ (‘On God and Good’, 357). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hereafter VCM. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hereafter SGC. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Credo ut intellegam (I believe in order to understand) is not just an apologist’s paradox, but an idea with which we are familiar in personal relationships … I have faith (important place for this concept) in a person or idea in order to understand him or it’ (MGM 393). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)