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# **Love’s Realism: Iris Murdoch and the Importance of Being Human**

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## **Introduction**

Iris Murdoch’s name has become increasingly common in papers discussing love’s rationality. As we’ll see, she’s brought onto the scene as an ally whose work helps to challenge the unsettling idea that love is in some sense incongruous with an ideally rational human life. The aim of this paper is to bring the appropriateness of those alliances into question and show that Murdoch articulates a distinctive vision of love from those she is recruited to supplement and support. This disharmony is rooted in two fundamental differences: first, in how each understands rationality and its place in moral life and, second, in how love at its best and its proper objects are envisioned. The first differences are more difficult to discuss largely because the conception of ‘rationality’ at play is presupposed and implicit. This is a fact that Niklas Forsberg highlights when discussing Troy Jollimore’s examination of the rationalist-antirationalist debate in *Love’s Vision* (2011).[[1]](#footnote-1) The disputant’s commitments show through in how they see love’s place in human life as questionable and the reasons they deploy to either put those concerns to rest or conclude (as Nick Zangwill argues we should) that love is “arational” and “amoral.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Three themes emerge: reasons responsiveness, consistency, and compatibility with sound judgment.

The first shows through in questions of whether love is an attitude that can be swayed by argument or assessed in terms of the appropriateness of its object.[[3]](#footnote-3) Here the relevant sense of ‘rational’ is connected to what T. M. Scanlon calls a “judgment sensitive attitude.” When something is a judgment sensitive attitude, a reason counting in favour of it “can sensibly be offered or requested” (Scanlon, 1998, p. 18). The relevant sense of ‘reason’ here is distinct from the sorts of considerations one might present to explain what prepared the ground for or caused one to enter into a particular condition (e.g., explaining an angry outburst in terms of a bad day and low blood sugar). [[4]](#footnote-4) Asking about love’s rationality is sometimes asking whether we expect others to be able to speak in favour of their love for another person rather than just telling a story about how it came about—and moreover, whether we expect them to be sensitive to reasons that count against the appropriateness of love (if there are such reasons). Love being the sort of thing that is sometimes notoriously recalcitrant—if only *an argument* could help a friend to stop loving the abusive partner she can’t bring herself to leave!—defenders of love’s rationality sometimes try to show that the ideal of being able to answer for oneself and one’s attitudes—of being *justified*—has a place in our talk of love.

The second theme pertains to the character of the reasons involved in love. According to an influential view well-represented by the moral philosopher R. M. Hare, the hallmark of a reason is its universality and prescriptivity. For Hare, a consideration P that one takes to favour Φ-ing is a moral reason if and only if one is committed to a universal principle according to which P favours Φ-ing wherever it appears—not just in cases indexed to special particulars like individual persons or one’s nation—and not just for oneself (although one should respect others’ right to morally differ).[[5]](#footnote-5) Hare adopted this strategy to show that although moral judgments do not pick out objective features of reality, they are nonetheless properly rational. They are not, say, merely expressions of personal preference. A reasons is, on this view, a consideration that can be abstracted from the concrete case and that might in principle recur and be recognized in other situations. Asking about love’s rationality sometimes means asking whether reasons that favour loving are universal and prescriptive in something like this sense, or whether love is a matter of personal preference (“There is a shoe for every foot—to each their own!”)[[6]](#footnote-6) The reasons that initially favoured love in one case might cease to hold true as one’s beloved changes over time, whereas they might be true of a newcomer.[[7]](#footnote-7) The view that consistency—treating like cases alike in a principled fashion—is a hallmark of rationality shows through in attempts to square universality with the value of constancy.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A third theme is love’s compatibility with sound judgment. We might describe a state of mind as irrational if it compromises one’s ability or willingness to judge what their moral duty is, what would be in their best interest to do, or what is the case. Philosophers of love are sometimes troubled by love’s reputation for disposing us to morally indefensible forms of favouritism, to make rash or imprudent decisions, or to lose sight of the truth. The morality of prioritizing one’s spouse when choosing who to rescue from a burning building—something one might do out of love—is troubling to and addressed by philosophers like David Velleman and Kieran Setiya since it threatens to show that love conflicts with the demands of morality.[[9]](#footnote-9) Jollimore, James H. P. Lewis, and Velleman all address the problem of love’s supposedly deleterious effects on our epistemic faculties by enlisting Iris Murdoch. For Murdoch, love makes us *attentive* to the other and *realistic* about what they are really like. Elaborations of Murdoch on love typically take this to mean that a lover sees their beloved accurately and in their individuality without sugar-coating, wishful thinking, or over-simplification.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The conception of rationality presupposed in these discussions is itself contestable.[[11]](#footnote-11) So too is the view that the struggle to be rational in something like the senses outlined—to live up to ideals of epistemic responsibility, dutifulness, consistency, and responsiveness to reasons—is *the* moral struggle. It is also possible for us to see the struggle to love as distinct and central and to see regarding others *lovingly* as a hard-won moral achievement—the outcome of an effortful resistance to pervasive temptations to devalue those we see as flawed, broken, wayward, tiresome, threatening, deviant, or just plain weird. Disclosing this was arguably *the* task of Murdoch’s philosophical career. That alone should give one pause before enlisting her as an ally to a view of love that looks to establish it as a harmonious element within an ideally rational life.

In what follows, I show that these concerns are vindicated by more specific compatibility issues between Murdoch and the two Rationality Views of love that appeal to her work: the Qualities View and the Personhood View. Far from a supplement, I argue that Murdoch’s work contains a distinct view of what love is at its best and of what its proper objects are. Fully appreciating her alternative, I argue, demands that we supplement prior exegesis of her views and notice that, for Murdoch, love is a realistic perception of what the other is like that is informed by a realistic understanding of what it means to be a human being. Taking this on board clarifies why seeing someone realistically is not a prelude to meritocratic or moralistic judgment—it means seeing them with tolerance and compassion.

## **The Moralism Objection: Loving Warts and All**

As we’ve seen, defenders of the Qualities View—the view that love is ideally a judgment sensitive attitude in the sense of being attuned and responsive to the beloved’s “individual, non-relational, love-worthy qualities” (Lewis, 2023, p. 1676)—have developed refined strategies for accommodating the value of constancy. A deeper concern bears on the sort of attitude involved in considering others in light of their relative loveworthiness. This attitude seems at odds with the way that we see someone’s imperfections and idiosyncrasies when we love them. It seems clear that love makes a difference to how such things figure for us. We can appreciate this by reflecting on the duet “In Spite of Ourselves” by John Prine (featuring Iris DeMent).[[12]](#footnote-12) Throughout the song, the two musicians sing in character as a committed couple and exchange unflinchingly honest but less than flattering descriptions of one another.[[13]](#footnote-13) They convey crassness, differences in taste (in jokes and condiments), indifference to gender norms, sexual kinks, poor impulse control with alcohol and spending, and other personal quirks and foibles—but do so in the course of affirming a loving commitment to one another. For example, Prine sings of DeMent:

She thinks all my jokes are corny

Convict movies make her horny

She likes ketchup on her scrambled eggs

Swears like a sailor when she shaves her legs.

Then in the chorus he insists that he’s “never gonna let her go”.

It’s a funny song, but not just a joke(the humour isn’t rooted in the sheer absurdity of loving an “unworthy” person). I find myself chuckling *but touched* because this earthy and unsentimental talk is unexpected in a love song but jolts me into recognizing that this is how it is with me too when I really love someone. Prine’s ability to produce an extensive list of negative qualities does not imply that loving DeMent is irrational in the sense of *unjustified* (and this does not depend on the assumption that Prine could, if pressed, add a more complimentary verse showing that her negative qualities are in fact outweighed by virtues). Things would be different if Prine’s tone were contemptuous or judgmental (which we might well imagine if we read the unfavourable lyrics without hearing them sung). In their full context, however, his verses sound to me like the stuff of affectionate banter. Far from superior, he gives the impression that he is well aware that he’s DeMent’s “partner in crime” when it comes to being an imperfect and unconventional person (as she confirms when she turns the tables and delivers verses about Prine). Furthermore, we get the sense that even if his beloved’s foibles tipped over into moral vices, Prine’s love would colour his perception of this too. When he sings “she takes a lickin’ but keeps on kickin’” it suggests that his awareness that she’s lived a hard life is relevant to how he loves her. This kind of talk isn’t to everyone’s taste, but it resonates with me. My siblings and I found it meaningful to speak in a similar way about my grandmother after her funeral, informally eulogizing her as a gem of a woman who had it rough and was rough around the edges as a result (before affectionately sharing stories that illustrated the precise nature of those rough edges). Prine loves DeMent warts and all and it’s possible to hear this funny crass song as a beautiful expression of that.

The difference that love makes to Prine’s perception of DeMent’s qualities could be stated in the terms offered by Kamila Pacovská in “Love and the Pitfalls of Moralism” (2018). According to Pacovská, love at its best is averse to moralism. To be moralistic means that, unlike Prine, one “criticizes and condemns as a flaw something that actually is no flaw at all” (Pacovská, 2018, p. 232). When another person makes choices that I would never make or behaves in ways that I would never behave, it can be tempting to respond as if I had discovered a moral failing in them. In many cases, I’ve only discovered differences in sensibility or circumstance the appreciation of which would cast their behaviour in a very different light. I might be censorious about a friend’s choice of husband, judging that she’s debasing herself by settling for a man I don’t think very highly of—in doing so, I’d be failing to appreciate that my friend has her own ideas about marriage, hopes for her own future, and feelings, motivations, and life circumstances that, if all considered together, would make her choice understandable.[[14]](#footnote-14) The same behaviour can be viewed judgmentally as evidence of vice or seen simply as evidence of the fact that my friend is a different person than I am. Love makes a difference to perception in that it is opposed to the disposition to hold ourselves up as superior to others, to measure their behaviour against our own, and to extend moral judgment beyond its proper ken (Ibid. pp. 237–241). Insofar as Prine and DeMent see their differences in a loving way (as quirks and foibles rather than as considerations that count against their respective loveworthiness) there is no need to ask whether they are “outweighed” by positive considerations.

Love can also bear on the tone in which we acknowledge genuine moral vices. Rather than concealing them from view or demanding that they be outweighed by redeeming qualities, Pacovská argues that love is ideally realistic about the other’s flaws while altering the *tone* in which we acknowledge them. The other’s wrongdoing does not figure as a reason to hold them in contempt and seeing it as such would signal a deficiency in one’s love. Love protects against its own demise by shaping our perception of wrongdoing—the loving person “sorrows over what the other has done and pities her for what she has become by doing it” (p. 242). It enables us to see other’s flaws as so many wounds to lament and to hope can be healed. This might mean that in describing the others’ flawed character, we prefer one vocabulary to another (e.g., avoid derogatory appellations such as “monster” or “filthy drunk” in favour of phrases like “poor wretch” that capture one’s sense that the other suffers by being as they are). Alternatively, it might mean a shift between listing someone’s flaws in a tone of indictment and listing them in a voice heavy with grief (Ibid.). When we appreciate the difference that love makes to the perception of flaws, we see why it would be appropriate for Prine to love DeMent even if he thought she was a deeply flawed person (as a life of hard knocks might understandably make one).[[15]](#footnote-15) While there might be much that we like about those we love, the capacity to produce a list of their “redeeming” positive qualities is not necessary for love to be appropriate.[[16]](#footnote-16)

These considerations give us reason to reject the Qualities View. If love were ideally responsive to the other’s individual, non-relational, love-worthy qualities, then the lover would ideally be the judge of their beloved’s merits and demerits. It would be irrational to both judge that one’s beloved lacks love-worthy qualities and to love them despite this, warts and all. It may in practice be true that many of us struggle to love people we find very strange or deeply flawed. The moralism objection invites us to question whether we should idealize our own limitations and criticize those who rise above them.

But the Qualities View is only one strategy for defending the rationality of love. There is a second, perhaps more promising style of Rationality View that turns its attention away from qualitative love-worthiness to explore what it is about an individual that makes them the appropriate kind of being to love. Whereas the Qualities View takes for granted that love can be justified in degrees (and that someone’s loveworthiness can drop down to zero), the Personhood View denies that love is ideally meritocratic. Love’s appropriateness should only be judged by asking whether it is directed towards the right sort of being (and whether that being is being seen in the right sort of light). For example, we might think that something had gone wrong if I claimed to love a baseball card or a caterpillar in the same way that I love my sister, or if I saw my sister primarily as a beautifully functioning system for the conversion of oxygen into carbon dioxide. But if I see my sister in the right sort of light, my love is appropriate regardless of whether she has on balance more positive qualities than quirks, foibles, or flaws. For Velleman, the right sort of being to love in that way is a Kantian Person. Love is the appropriate response to the recognition of the dignity someone possesses by virtue of their possession of a rational will.[[17]](#footnote-17) In “Love as a Moral Emotion” (1999), he draws on Murdoch’s claim that love is linked with realistic attention to account for the openness and accuracy with which we perceive those we love; his personhood criterion ensures that the deliverances of that realistic perception will not count against the fundamental appropriateness of loving someone we experience as a Kantian Person.

Absent from Velleman’s discussion is a recognition that Murdoch is not just a strange bedfellow to enlist in defending his Rationality View (given her many critical remarks on Kantian ethics)—she’s an outright rival. In what follows, I argue that Murdoch defends a competing view that represents love at its best as an appropriate response to a human being *realistically understood*. To see what this means, we first need to distinguish between biological and imaginative conceptions of humanity and to see why we should think that some ways of elaborating the concept ‘human being’ are unrealistic.[[18]](#footnote-18) For Murdoch, I argue, the realism connected with love is both unflinchingly realistic about what the other person is really like, but also attends to them in the compassionate and tolerant ways appropriate to beings of our kind: messy, historical, eccentric human beings. This mode of loving attention is opposed to censoriousness and moralism in a way that captures the spirit of the critique of the Qualities View just described. Murdoch provides us with a powerful explanation of why the realism of love is so challenging, but also helps us to see what it is about many of our encounters with others in our day to day lives that occludes their humanity from us and thereby prevents us from loving them as well as we might.

## **Non-Biological and Imaginative Conceptions of Humanity**

One of Murdoch’s perennial concerns in her philosophical writings is with the fact-value distinction. Her earliest critical reflections on Hare’s universal prescriptivism challenge the way he distinguishes between the morally-neutral realm of empirical fact and the evaluative significance that individuals place on those facts through moral decision-making. On that picture, perception and thought about what is the case engage ordinary non-moral concepts and put us in touch with non-moral facts that are available to anyone. By contrast, goodness, rightness, and justice only come onto the scene when an individual deliberates about action. Their application to action-types or states of affairs is a matter of choice. Individuals differ from one another morally because they subscribe to different principles attaching different moral labels to different sets of non-moral facts.

Murdoch invites us to see that what morally individuates us runs much deeper. She writes, “Moral differences can be differences of concept as well as differences of choice. A moral change shows through in our vocabulary. How we see and describe the world is morals too—and the relation of this to our conduct may be complicated” (Murdoch, 1957/1998, p. 73). For her, an individual’s moral outlook is not exhausted by how they use words like ‘good’ and ‘right’, and we don’t all inhabit the same world of empirical facts. We are set apart from one another by our “total vision of life”, a personal way of seeing and understanding matters that is manifest in the particulars of our reactions, thought, and speech.[[19]](#footnote-19) This includes how we comport ourselves; the stories we tell (including how we narrativize our own lives); how we conduct ourselves in conversation; the images and ideas that occur to us privately and by spontaneous association; the descriptions we think ring true; what we find funny, praiseworthy or attractive; and other subtle elements that together constitute what we are like as individuals (Murdoch, 1956/1998, p. 80-81).

There is, according to Murdoch, a connection between a person’s total vision of life and the “inner complexity” that a given concept has for that person. We don’t all share the same concept of bravery. What we’re inclined to say about it, what associations it has for us, when we approve of it or disapprove of it, and what emotional responses it elicits from us can all differ dramatically from person to person. For example, consider someone for whom bravery is a requirement of manhood but unnecessary and surprising in women. The image of another man allowing a woman to stand up to a threatening off-leash dog to protect him might make this person both laugh, finding it cute when women “act all tough,” and shake their head in disapproval at a man failing to “be a man.” This person would differ from me conceptually, morally, and in their vision of life—we would not share an understanding of the relationship between genders, roles, and virtues, and this would show through in my very different reaction to and construal of the off-leash dog scene. A shift in these aspects of the person’s total vision of life would show through in changes to the “inner complexity” of their concept of bravery and in their storytelling, thought, conversation, and reactions. Importantly, these differences are not just a matter of choice—our visions and concepts are formed in particular socio-cultural environments and change over the course of our personal history.[[20]](#footnote-20) Murdoch notes that “we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty” (Murdoch, 1962/1998, p. 322).

Diamond doesn’t directly cite Murdoch when she distinguishes between biological and imaginative concepts in “The Importance of Being Human”. Nonetheless, she represents the concept of a human being as one with a similar inner complexity and connection to vision as Murdoch attributes to ‘bravery’.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is not an empirical concept in the sense that Murdoch was resisting (a morally-neutral tag for a species of animal the description of which belongs to the natural sciences).[[22]](#footnote-22) For Diamond, that mode of analysis obscures the way that an imaginative conception of being human informs our thought, experience, reactions, and practices. She writes, “Any moral psychology is incomplete if it leaves out the ways imagination enters acts (and thoughts and talk) and the understanding of those acts (and thoughts and talk)” (Diamond, 1991, p. 41). A conception of what it means to be human informs the texture of our lives with others and marks a major way that we differ from one another and from ourselves over time.

Diamond illustrates what she means by appealing to the changes that Scrooge undergoes in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. It is not the case that Scrooge learns some new fact about others that leads him to treat them with greater generosity by the story’s end. It is not the case that he becomes committed to a new moral principle connecting already available facts about others’ needs with a duty to help. On Diamond’s view, what Dickens portrays is a transformation at the level of Scrooge’s imaginative sense of humanity; after his evening of ghostly encounters, his newfound generosity has in it an awakened sense of “the vulnerability of children, the intensity of their hopes, the depths of their fears and pains, their pleasures in their play, their joy in following stories—all this touches Scrooge, and its touchingness is in his generosity towards children” (p. 42). This does not exhaust what comprises Scrooge’s renewed conception. The redeemed Scrooge’s concept ‘human being’ has tremendous inner complexity meaning that it could also be elaborated in terms of, for example, our fellowship in mortality (p. 50).

Diamond’s aim in “The Importance of Being Human” is to show that others’ humanity does not figure for us as a fact among facts that enters into moral reasoning in the manner criticized by anti-speciesist moral philosophers like Peter Singer. Diamond’s characterization of the concept ‘human being’ also gives us a framework for recognizing that, far from one Rationality View and its supplement, Velleman and Murdoch articulate meaningfully different views that part ways on the question of how others imaginatively figure for us when we love them. Both represent love as an appropriate attitude towards someone we see as a human being, and neither treats this as the recognition of a morally-neutral empirical fact about species-membership. Neither thinks that a being is appropriate to love just because they are a furless bipedal mammal. For both, it is appropriate to open our hearts in love to a being who figures for us as a human being in a richer imaginative sense. Importantly, however, Velleman and Murdoch differ about what that relevant sense is.

## **Personhood, Love, and Limited Appeals to Murdoch**

The internal complexity of the concept ‘human being’ and its interpersonal diversity ensures that the kinds of formulations offered by Diamond in her discussions of Dickens and Scrooge are neither universal nor exhaustive of how that concept might be elaborated. She notes that Kantian ethicists give “a central importance to an imaginatively shaped notion of ourselves as rational beings” (p. 39). The others’ rational will is not part of the empirical world alongside kitchen sinks and the nose on my face; rather, seeing human beings as autonomous agents means having an imaginative outlook on the world that discloses some behaviour as intelligible rather than just causally explicable (p. 46). For Velleman, seeing the other in this light is our grounds for both respecting them as beings with rational wills *and* loving them (although we don’t necessarily love everyone we respect). On his view, Kantian ethics don’t insert a sharp wedge between the impartiality of morality and the preferential character of love; the two are actually close cousins. They are both responses to the other’s value as the possessor of a rational will.

What distinguishes love from respect is the way that loving another person affects us. In respecting someone qua rational will, we are subject to a “negative motivational force” that places “a constraint on our use of him as a means to desired ends” (Velleman, 1999, p. 360). Respect is a check on self-love in that it arrests some of our selfish motives to bring about or avoid outcomes. Love is grounded in the same recognition, and, like respect, it arrests something in us. It moves us to attend to the beloved and see them accurately in a way that we don’t ordinarily do by arresting our inclination to emotionally protect ourselves. While we ordinarily “draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from being affected by” the other, love “disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other” (p. 361). Our recognition that someone is actuated by moral reasons justifies the suspense of our ordinary defensive inattention. In love, we risk the pain of emotional intimacy (for example, by empathizing with someone who’s pain then becomes our own)—in this way, we can distinguish it from distortive sentimentality and see it as compatible with an ideal of truthfulness.

While it is in principle appropriate to love any rational being, Velleman recognizes that we obviously don’t love everyone we see as Kantian persons. Love is a response to the same value in the other that inspires respect, but respect doesn’t always go hand in hand with emotional vulnerability. One might see they should keep their promise to someone whose feelings they take no personal interest in. Velleman explains this by appealing to the different routes that our recognition of the other’s value can take. Respect is occasioned by something we know about the other intellectually, it is presupposed in finding their behaviour intelligible; by contrast, in love we respond to the same value as it is *experienced* through the other’s empirical persona—the idiosyncrasies of how they comport themselves and live their lives as individuals—when this is itself seen under the aspect of their value qua possessor of a rational will. When a person’s value is manifest to us through their individuality, respect gives way to love. According to Velleman, empirical personae differ on the basis of how value-manifesting they are. He writes:

Whether someone is lovable depends on how well his value as a person is expressed or symbolized for us by his empirical persona. Someone’s persona may not speak very clearly of his value as a person, or may not speak in ways that are clear to us (Velleman, p. 372).

This is a natural thought if we take the attitude characteristic of love to be the dropping of emotional defenses. Velleman perhaps means that how someone carries themselves—the decency displayed in how they respect others in conversation or in navigating public spaces—can make their responsiveness to moral reasons more obvious to me and thereby inspire me to trust that allowing myself take things personally won’t expose me to pain of feeling seriously wronged, insulted, or neglected. In addition to presenting love as continuous with moral respect, Velleman’s view goes some way to showing that it is minimally prudent—we should not expose our hearts to those we believe would be likely to hurt us.

This doesn’t, however, seem to fully close the gap between those whose comportment we experience as that of a decent person and those we love. I’m inclined to deny that I necessarily love someone who demurely makes way for others in the grocery store, even when I experience this as a clear manifestation of their respect for others—nothing in the thought “what a nice lady” implies that I see this person as an individual or would resist devaluing her if I discovered that she chews with her mouth open or that we stand on opposite sides of a political divide. Velleman’s view also seems to foreclose the possibility that we might love someone whose decency we seriously question (much less characterize this as exemplary of love at its best rather than a marginal case). In these respects, the Personhood View differs Murdoch’s; these differences can be explained in terms of how each characterizes what a human fundamentally is, what makes them lovable, and how we respond to that value. This has ramifications for what their respective accounts are true to. While Velleman’s view aptly describes the somewhat prudential—dare I say, *rational—*way that many of us love in practice, Murdoch recommends a perfectionist ideal that few would characterize as *rational* but she would call *good*.

Velleman claims to be inspired by how Murdoch connects love with attention and the suspension of selfishness.[[23]](#footnote-23) She describes our capacity for love as a capacity to see how things really are, writing that, “Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality” (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 216); elsewhere she claims that when a mother-in-law justly and lovingly attends to her daughter-in-law, she sees her “as she really is” (Murdoch, 1962/1998, p. 329). For Velleman, this is taken to mean that others’ emotions, needs, and interests are revealed to us when we attend to them lovingly, our ordinary self-protectiveness arrested. In love, I really look and I come to see the other accurately, discovering facts that it might be painful or morally demanding for me to learn.

Despite their common use of the concept ‘attention’, however, Velleman’s characterization of love as a special case of respect for the rational law seems to directly contradict Murdoch. In a paper that he cites (Murdoch’s “The Sublime and the Good”), she is explicit about what she takes to be the shortcomings of Kantian ethics. She notes that love is very like Kantian *Achtung*—both confront us with a conflict between our ordinary inclinations and something authoritative that calls upon us to rise above those inclinations (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 208). She claims that the concept of *Achtung* is “pregnant with something marvellous.” This is, however, where her praise ends and her critique begins. Respect for the moral law cannot illuminate the experience of love because “Kant is afraid of the particular, he is afraid of history.”[[24]](#footnote-24) What inspires *Achtung* is not “whole particular tangled-up historical individuals” but “the universal reason in their breast” (pp. 213–215).[[25]](#footnote-25)

Velleman attempts to show that this tension is only apparent. This becomes clear, he thinks, when we notice that:

[Murdoch] underestimates the extent to which the object of Kantian *Achtung* can be a universal law embodied in a particular person, or the object of love can be a particular person as embodying something universal. In short, I think that Murdoch underestimates how near Kant was to the mark (Velleman, 1999, p. 343n.16).

But does that really bring Kant any nearer to answering Murdoch’s concerns? I follow both Elijah Millgram and Mark Hopwood in answering ‘no.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Velleman allows that we discover a person’s rational will *through* the “manifest person, embodied in flesh and blood and accessible to the senses”, or rather, their “empirical persona” (p. 371). He nonetheless identifies the human being’s “true self” with their “best self” and with their rational will. Murdoch objects to precisely the claim that the reality of a human being transcends the particularities of her (often messily irrational) empirical persona and resides in something clean, tidy, and formal. Murdoch describes love as “the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real” but is eager to dislodge the Kantian answer to the question “Wherein does the reality of a person reside?” Her contemporaries—prescriptivists and existentialists who each in their way owe a debt to Kant—emphasize the human being’s freedom to determine the substance of her own being through decision-making and the adoption of universal principles. Murdoch balked at this. Human beings don’t differ from one another only with respect to their principled commitments. As we’ve already seen, they differ because they have idiosyncratic “visions of life” and understandings of concepts. This aspect of Murdoch’s thinking has received considerable attention in secondary literature.[[27]](#footnote-27) Less discussed is the fact that, for Murdoch, individuals also differ because they’ve undergone different formative histories that have shaped their personal predilections for fantasy, understood as the psyche’s primary strategy for insulating itself from difficult realities. In “The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts”, she writes that “The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself” (Murdoch, 1967/1998, p. 364). Elsewhere, she approvingly turns to Freud, writing that, “He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control” (Murdoch, 1969/1998, p. 341). For Murdoch, seeing others in light of this conception of the human condition is a form of both realism and love.

This marks a departure from how Velleman deploys Murdoch, but also highlights something that is overlooked in common readings of the connection between love and realism in Murdoch more generally. On a standard view, love is connected to learning facts about the other person—these might be, as Velleman would have it, the sorts of painful truths we’re tempted to avoid or sugar-coat. On James H. P. Lewis’s gloss, love inspires us to discover the others’ qualities in the fullness of their rich particularity rather than as generic traits (Lewis, 2023, pp. 1686–1687). Turning away from accuracy and depth, Mark Hopwood characterizes love’s realism as a respect for the others’ independent existence; when I love someone, I acknowledge the limits and fallibility of my understanding of them and accept that they “have lives of their own, with thoughts and desires that are hidden” (Hopwood, 2017, p. 491). These readings capture important aspects of Murdoch’s thought but miss a further sense that ‘realism’ has for her. As a result, they overlook an important part of her story of how we see someone when we love them and what predilections for selfishness this arrests in us. We can fill out this story by asking what the importance of being human is for Murdoch and how this connects to love’s realism.

## **History and Compassion, Eccentricity and Tolerance**

For Murdoch, I can fail to see another person realistically because I am unwilling or unable to cede a consoling but unrealistic picture of what a human being is: totally free and responsible for who they are and what they do; appropriate to morally judge against determinate moral standards in all aspects of life. For her, a human being is: a messy, historical, eccentric individual (Murdoch, 1959b/1998, p. 262). By reflecting on the connections between realism about this and attitudes like compassion and tolerance, we can appreciate why love at its best embraces those who might look “unworthy” or imprudent to love and is averse to moralism. Importantly, her writings also allow us to tell a story about why we struggle to achieve this demanding ideal in practice and why we ordinarily love rather more selectively. While Velleman points to the difficulty of experiencing others’ empirical personae as clear manifestations of their possession of a rational will, Murdoch believes that we too readily see others as free and responsible decision-makers in ways that can occlude their humanity.[[28]](#footnote-28) The image of the human condition that Murdoch offers us is significant in part because of how it emphasizes the limits of our freedom and responsibility.

For Murdoch, there is some truth to the idea that “when I deliberate the die is already cast. Forces within me which are dark to me have already made the decision…I can only choose within the world I can *see*” (Murdoch, 1962/1998, pp. 328–329). We can only choose what seems like the right thing to do in light of how matters seem to us, and we can’t always tell if how things now seem is how they really are (rather than, say, wishful thinking or an over-simplification). Murdoch emphasizes the importance of thinking “in terms of *degrees* of freedom…We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy” (Murdoch, 1961/1998, p. 293). This does not, however, mean that freedom is an illusion—Murdoch is wary of the many faces that determinism can take.[[29]](#footnote-29) Rather, we need to understand it in terms other than decision-making and action: attention. For Murdoch, we are free to the extent that we can try to transcend the present limits of our vision to see the world as it is rather than as we’d like it to be.[[30]](#footnote-30) Seeing freedom as a matter of degrees, as never absolute and never absolutely obliterated, is a form of realism.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is unrealistic to judge another person’s actions as if in the moment they could have done otherwise than act in light of their present understanding.

To see the significance of thinking of human beings as historical, as Murdoch recommends, we should notice the role that personal history plays in forming the private stock of neuroses that determine how one’s vision of the world is blinkered.[[32]](#footnote-32) We are each of us formed by childhoods and life experiences that make us more or less dependent on ego-protective defense mechanisms and more or less susceptible to fantasies of omnipotence and control, self-importance, false rosiness and silver linings, moral black and whites, and so on. We are not powerless in relation to these—in Murdoch’s famous case of M and D, she presents someone who notices that she’s probably seeing her daughter-in-law in a manner distorted by jealousy and renews her attention with a will to see her as she really is (difficult as it may be to give up the comforting idea that her son has married badly) (Murdoch, 1962/1998, pp. 312–313). But being historical means that all of us are saddled with formative upbringings we did not choose, for better or for worse.

The reading of “historical” I recommend makes it possible for us to understand why Murdoch connects love, compassion, realism, and “truthfulness” about the human condition (Murdoch, 1967/1998, p. 371). For Murdoch, compassion is one of the many names we give to love (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 218). It is how we see someone when we don’t falsify the control that they have over who they presently are or minimize the challenge of coping with the neuroses they’ve acquired over the course of their life. We might say that this realistic vision of human freedom and history can enter into how we perceive both moments of effortful resistance and moments where fantasy wins out. I can be touched by the beauty of someone surrendering their treasured view of themselves as an aggrieved victim and admitting the part they played in a fight with a friend just as my heart can break for someone whose desperate inability to admit fault leads them to push others away rather than apologize. Realism enables me to see someone’s worst flaws and most egregious behaviour against the backdrop of a history I may or may not know anything determinate about. That someone had a formative history is not an empirical fact I must learn; rather, it is presupposed by a realistic vision of them as human. This makes a difference to how their imperfections figure for me. Murdoch notes that a loving person can see what is sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil as a touching expression of the others’ humanity (Murdoch, 1969/1998, p. 354). Murdoch is thus able to capture the appropriateness of loving someone we don’t think of as particularly charming or virtuous and the possibility of doing so in moments when we wouldn’t describe their rational personhood as clearly manifest. Compassion is appropriate to imperfect historical beings saddled with neuroses they cannot simply choose to get over in an instant.

The strength of Murdoch’s view is revealed when we reflect on what it means to be *un*realistic and why this is so tempting. When the other’s formative history does not enter into how I see them, I am liable to exaggerate their responsibility and powers of self-control. I might imagine that we all live in the same realm of publicly available empirical facts and that we make decisions freely in light of them. Evil-doing is liable to figure for me as the rational moral agent’s clear-sighted failure to (ethically speaking) pull himself up by his own bootstraps, and I am liable to stand in self-righteous contempt of those I see as bad people. We need a realistic conception of the human condition because this is not only a *possible* way for us to see others: philosophers’ boot-strapping model of moral agency it is itself a temptingly consoling fantasy.[[33]](#footnote-33) This is in part because, Murdoch notes, we struggle to accept the “chanciness” of life (Murdoch, 1967/1998, p. 371). On the reading I'm recommending, this means that we are tempted to deny our shared vulnerability to the circumstances and experiences that form us, and so we struggle to take to heart that “There but by the grace of God go I.”

With this, Murdoch gives us part of a story explaining why love is appropriate to all human beings, but in practice only extended to some. It may be that when we meet rather nice people, we are not tempted to close our hearts to them in self-righteous contempt (although there might be other forces at play that inhibit loving attention). But it is also not the case that every person whose imperfections are writ large to us poses the same challenge. The struggle to see someone in light of a realistic conception of the connection between the present and the formative past can differ in levels of difficulty based on whether we share a history, and based on one’s own historically-formed neuroses. While I don’t need to know the details of someone’s past to regard them with compassion in the present, having some sense of a person’s biography is an effective tool for reminding myself that they are human in that way. It can be more tempting to harden my heart in contempt against a stranger who breaks into my car at night than an alcoholic brother who does the same but whose difficult childhood I am all too familiar with.[[34]](#footnote-34) Furthermore, when we appreciate that the denial of life’s chanciness is itself a consoling fantasy, this helps us to see that some may be more powerfully attracted to this fantasy than others (given their own personal histories and neuroses). Life predisposes some of us towards thinking in moral black and whites and does not equally prepare each of us to love compassionately.

Murdoch’s elaborations of the concepts ‘love’ and ‘human being’ are not exhausted by compassion and history. On her view, human beings are also *eccentric* and love can mean having a realistic sense of the difference between moral defects and mere idiosyncrasies. While we sometimes call this “tolerance”, Murdoch thinks that word is an unsatisfyingly modest name for what is really love (Murdoch, 1959b/1998, p. 283). A loving person regards others with “agnosticism” about the existence of a yardstick (particularly, one based on one’s own tastes, cultural outlook, or moral sensibilities) by which all attempts to live well might be measured.[[35]](#footnote-35) When someone differs from us, it is tempting to see this difference as a reason to morally criticize or condemn that person.

We often see these forms of judgment exchanged by those on two sides of a generational divide. The white-haired gentleman with his chivalrous solicitude towards women can be an easy target for a modern feminist to condemn as patriarchal—sometimes, such a person’s behaviour does indeed cross a line. But sometimes it’s fitting to shrug and say “well, that’s just his way. What’s the harm in paying the check so long as he doesn’t mean to hold it over anyone’s head?” A concerned mother might find her jaw hit the floor when her son returns home from a friend’s house with a blue mohawk and condemn his decision (“What have you done?! You look like a freak!”) Or (in a tone familiar to anyone who’s surprised a loving parent with a bold new style choice) she might say “Well, that’s different!” The tolerant feminist and the tolerant mother see these behaviours in light of a realism about human diversity and the possibility that a person can be true to their own “vision of life” while making choices very different from one’s own. Murdoch writes that a tolerant person “displays a real apprehension of persons other than [oneself] as having a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves” (Murdoch, 1959b/1998, p. 271). For Murdoch, we can differ from one another without one of us being in the right and the other being in the wrong; there is no way of life that we all must converge upon.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Tolerance is not just the *suffering* of difference (where I ultimately think I’m right, but will put up with your wrongness). The realism that goes with tolerance prevents us from seeing difference as something ugly or offensive to be endured through gritted teeth. Like Prine’s laundry list of unflattering descriptions of Dement, the tone in which we acknowledge what someone we really love is like (warts and all) is teasing, affectionate, or shrugging—it tracks the usual ways we inflect “to each their own” when a loved one pours ketchup on their scrambled eggs or doesn't laugh at our jokes. It’s their life, they have a right to lead it how they see fit, and I can imagine that it has something going for it. For Murdoch, “Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness” (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 216). I can call a spade a spade when it comes to eccentricity when I see it in light of a realistic understanding of human diversity.

This is another facet of what makes love an “extremely difficult” discovery of reality (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 216). Murdoch believes that we are attracted to the fantasy that human “visions of life” can be measured, compared, and rated by their proximity to some determinate ideal (perhaps one defined by oneself). As Murdoch puts it, we wish that there were some “prefabricated harmony” or “social totality within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled” (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 216). This is a fantasy of a determinate, perfect moral order. It consoles us—consolation is, for Murdoch, the primary role that fantasies play—because we “fear the real existing messy modern world, full of real existing messy modern persons, with individual messy modern opinions of their own” (Murdoch, 1959b/1998, p. 274). This is the fear expressed by someone prepared to declare unconventional persons “freaks”, “monsters”, “idiots”, or “perverts.”[[37]](#footnote-37) While Murdoch doesn’t discuss intolerance in specifically social terms when writing about love and realism, in the 1960s she wrote in vehement opposition to her contemporaries’ moral criticisms of homosexuality, insisting that they were moralizing over a matter of mere difference. Where they saw psychologically diseased people incapable of healthy, non-predatory relationships, she saw individuals struggling to love unselfishly *as we all do*—and sometimes experiencing “the same entire and unselfish devotion of body and soul to another which is characteristic of heterosexual love at its best” (Murdoch, 1965, pp. 70–73).

Once again, we can explain our distance from the ideal of love Murdoch describes in the terms that she provides: neurosis and personal history. What sets another person apart from me does not necessarily arouse neurotic revulsion in me. Sometimes, I experience the other as both different from myself and charming for this reason—I can enjoy that they don’t speak from a familiar script and conversation with them takes unexpected turns; their offbeat sense of humour can be refreshing; I can find beauty in their manners when they are warmly solicitous in situations when I would be more reserved. Human individuality can inspire and sustain attention like a great work of art. Whether we moralize over others’ idiosyncrasies is a function of a complex set of factors including what constitutes our normative sense of decency, acceptability, and sanity; the context in which we encounter difference; and whether my personal history predisposes me to a neurotic aversion to deviation. What individuates a person doesn’t necessarily violate our normative sense of normalcy, and this sense is by no means universally shared—Murdoch did not share her contemporaries’ moralistic response to homosexuality! It seems like context also makes a difference to whether we find ourselves inclined either to reach for our moralistic yardsticks or to declare something a quirk. A person’s head-to-toe tattoos might tempt a new acquaintance to pass judgment on them off the hop, but this could be counteracted by the actual circumstances of the meeting. For example, if the tattooed person took care to make the newcomer feel welcome at a social gathering they’d felt shy about attending, they might opine, “Good guy—just a bit of a *character*!” Finally, insofar as Murdoch invites us to think of the fear of moral messiness as a neurosis, we have reason to think that its potency differs on the basis of personal history. Some of us are by temperament less freaked out by “freaks” (perhaps having experience being a maligned outsider, or perhaps having fallen into the company of a diverse cast of kindly oddballs throughout our lives). The fantasy of the universal yardstick doesn’t tempt everyone equally and in every encounter—I love selectively in part because tolerance sometimes comes naturally, but is at other times a difficult attainment.[[38]](#footnote-38)

## **Conclusion**

The difficulty of realizing that someone else is real is not just the difficulty of accepting my own epistemic limits with respect to the other. It is not just the difficulty of seeing someone accurately when there are emotionally demanding facts I fear discovering. And it is not just the challenge of recognizing others as possessors of rational wills (if this is to be thought of as a challenge in the first place, rather than part of the moral bootstrapping fantasy). The difficulty of love can be a direct function of what the reality of the human being consists in, and what in us is averse to being realistic about this in our encounters with others. Murdoch’s conception differs from Velleman’s in that she offers a different elaboration of the non-biological concept ‘human being’ than Velleman and so a different picture of what in us is loveable. For her, the other’s concrete way of being is not a symbol that points beyond itself to their loveworthy rationality; the vulnerable, messy, and eccentric human individual is loveable as such.

Furthermore, what is overcome in ourselves when we love someone is not just a prudential propensity to avoid being emotionally affected by others, as Velleman claims. For Murdoch, our motives are messier, more complicated, and less straightforwardly reasonable than this. “The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis” (Murdoch 1959b/1998, pp. 268–9). Our normative sense of normalcy and horror at the moral disorderliness, chanciness, and vulnerability of human existence are just a few of the dynamics that must be resisted if we are to love others as they really are. This by no means exhausts the ways that conventionality and neurosis operate in us.[[39]](#footnote-39) What they illuminate is why tolerance and compassion are sometimes the outcome of a sincere struggle to retain a loving sense of the others’ humanity and to resist the powerful allure of self-righteousness, hard-heartedness, and black and white thinking. Murdoch invites us to see this as a *moral* struggle no less important than those that attracted the notice of her rationalist moral philosophers like Hare.

Returning at last to the question of love’s rationality, this brings us to a view that looks rather different than the Qualities View or Personhood View. What makes love fitting to its object is not the beloved’s love-worthy charms and virtues—love at its best is not a meritocratic judgment sensitive attitude. That I see you as charming and virtuous might explain why I find you *easier* to love (since you don’t activate the neuroses that inspire contempt and intolerance). But Murdoch does not think that love is ideally attuned and responsive to the other’s merits and is averse to self-righteous condemnation and intolerant fault-finding in equal measure. Far from being open to the moralism objection, Murdoch is an ally to the objectors.[[40]](#footnote-40) Her view is structurally much closer to Velleman’s Personhood View. But whereas he saw love as continuous with Kantian respect, Murdoch differs in where she locates the value that love responds to. To love a human being for who they concretely are as individuals—messy and off-puttingly strange as that may be—is meaningfully different than valuing the autonomy symbolized by their empirical persona. It suggests there is a something of fundamental value beyond rationality and that love is our name for our recognition of that value. In these two respects, Murdoch’s view differs from those designed to show that love ideally occupies a harmonious place within a picture of the moral life that treats rationality as the highest good.

Establishing that Murdoch’s view is distinct does not, of course, establish its truth. She herself was well aware of philosophers’ limits when it comes to this—in “Metaphysics and Ethics,” she asks “Can the moral philosopher, once he stops being critical and begins to be positive, establish anything at all in the nature of a universal truth?” before responding “no” (Murdoch, 1957/1998, p. 75). A part of the difficulty is internal to the activity of describing what is best in ourselves—“any picture is likely to be half a description and half persuasion” (ibid.). Of course, her characterization of love is not meant to describe everything we might ordinarily call ‘love’ and cannot be refuted simply by pointing to “counterexamples.” Our criteria for assessing moral ideals are not so straightforward. We might ask: whether we are persuaded that Murdoch’s vision of love is an ideal worth struggling towards; whether we find it illuminating to think of our attachment to convention and neurosis as impediments to loving others as we should; whether it is inspiring to think in the perfectionist terms Murdoch offers or whether our distance from perfection induces shame and despair; and whether the ideal she describes points us towards exemplars we might look to (some of Murdoch’s remarks about love are in praise of novelists like Tolstoy and George Eliot (Murdoch, 1959b/1998, p. 272)).[[41]](#footnote-41) An important test of the view’s attractiveness might be whether it tracks and illuminates differences between different instances of love that we think it is meaningful to mark. I conclude by suggesting that it does.

One can love someone who is a human being in the biological sense but, lacking a realistic imaginative conception of what it means to be a human being, their love can fail to be directed towards the other *qua* messy, historical, eccentric individual. We are sometimes critical of a person’s grounds for loving when they love a fantasy of a person rather than the real human being themselves (warts and all). This is disclosed to us when we notice that their love is conditional and that what conditions it is either a lack of compassion or an intolerant failure to accept the other’s right to differ.[[42]](#footnote-42) These are two very familiar reasons we have for questioning whether a love was *really* love, and they characterize two familiar, degenerate forms of love. The first, the idealizing sort of love, is dependent for its survival on maintaining an unrealistic view of the other as perfect; it withers into bitter disappointment and contempt when the fantasy image of the other’s perfection is shattered by the slightest misstep. The second love depends for its survival on seeing the other as an extension of oneself, as sharing in one’s own vision of life and sensibilities or having desires that coincide with one’s own. Such a person experiences their beloved’s failure or refusal to conform as betrayal or abandonment—in extreme cases, they might take themselves to be therefore justified in punishing or coercing their beloved to bring them back in line. In both cases, the lover’s inability to tolerate difference and imperfection in the other gives us grounds for thinking of their love as deficient or even questioning whether it is worthy of being called by that name at all. Murdoch’s view illuminates why high pedestals and high control make us question the credentials of a putative love, enabling us to notice that they are not directed towards love’s proper object: a real human being, realistically understood as such.

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1. Niklas Forsberg 2017c. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zangwill 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jollimore 2011; Lewis 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Forsberg points out, some accounts call love an emotion and take this alone to show that it is therefore not reasons-responsive—a view that itself presupposes a particular, contestable conception of what an emotion is (Forsberg, 2017c, pp. 32–33). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hare, 1952; Hare 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As Harry Frankfurt writes, “A declaration of love is a personal matter…the person who makes it does not thereby commit himself to supposing that anyone who fails to love what he does has somehow gone wrong” (Frankfurt, 1998, p. 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Oksenberg Rorty, 1986; Keller 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A central focus of James H. P. Lewis’s “The Aesthetics of Coming to Know Someone” (2023) is to address the issues that arise when one asserts that reasons for love are universal, including the “trading up” objection, the “promiscuity” objection, and the “inconsistency” problem. Lewis proposes a “Rationality View” of love meant to answer each of these challenges by denying that the qualities that rationally ground love are simple and generic (e.g., a good sense of humour). He argues that they are, rather, complex and particularized by how they are instantiated in one’s beloved (e.g., *her* sense of humour, which is distinguished by its dryness, tendency to “punch up,” and her socially intelligent capacity to gauge when deploying it is appropriate) (Lewis, 2023, p. 1687). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Velleman 1999; Setiya 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Velleman 1999; Jollimore 2011; Wolf 2014; Hopwood 2018; Yao 2020; Lewis 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example, moral particularists like Jonathan Dancy challenge the claim that the rationality of moral judgment depends on the universality of moral reasons. Alice Crary’s work challenges dominant notions of “objectivity”, “rationality” and “argument” pervasive among non-cognitivist moral philosophers like Hare. See especially Crary 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Prine, John. In Spite of Ourselves (feat. Iris Dement). Oh Boy Records, 1999, Accessed October 9, 2023. <https://open.spotify.com/track/1k691v8ChLgDiuLLKnjyj6?autoplay=true> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In what follows, I will speak of the characters they play in this song as ‘Prine’ and ‘DeMent’ for the sake of simplicity; the two musicians were not actually a couple. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Pacovská draws her example from *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elizabeth Bennet responds with astonished judgment when she learns that her friend Charlotte Lucas has agreed to marry the rather ridiculous Mr. Collins. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In this, Pacovská rejects Jollimore’s claim that we cannot love someone we don’t have an overall positive opinion of. He argues that a loving attention must see the others’ flaws as “insignificant or irrelevant” in relation to their positive qualities, which the lover foregrounds (Jollimore, 2011, p. 47). For other defenses of the compatibility of love and a negative opinion of the other, see Beran 2019; Yao 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For further discussion of the tension between loving someone and making lists of their qualities to justify one’s love, see Forsberg 2017a. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. David Velleman (1999), “Love as a Moral Emotion,” *Ethics* 109(2): pp. 338–374. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In this respect, the view I attribute to Murdoch is also distinct from the humanity-based view that Setiya articulates in “Love and the Value of Life” (2014). His view is meant as a modification of Velleman’s Personhood View designed to widen the scope of appropriate love to embrace human beings like infants who are incapable of respect for the rational law (Setiya, 2014, p. 262). He does not, however, elaborate the concept ‘human being’ in the non-biological way that Murdoch does, nor does he elaborate his own view of love with reference to Murdoch. In fact, Setiya has elsewhere expressed his sense that Murdoch’s views on love are paradoxical, apparently distant from our ordinary understanding of love, and that he does not see how to make sense of the connection she draws between love and truth (Setiya, 2013, p. 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Forsberg recommends that we avoid hearing “vision” as just an ocular metaphor—one that might be taken to link Murdoch’s work to contemporary discussions “moral perception”. He claims that “Vision” describes “the way we see the world; or our horizon as it were…it is possible to reach for words such as ‘worldview’ here” (Forsberg, 2022, p. 116). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For further discussion of the significance of history in Murdoch’s thinking, see Hämäläinen 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Diamond is elsewhere in her writings clear that Murdoch has been a profound influence on her thinking and discusses her thought explicitly in numerous places. See especially Diamond 1988; Diamond 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Diamond’s interlocutors in her paper are direct inheritors of the style of thinking that Murdoch challenged in “Vision and Choice in Morality”. Peter Singer is a moral individualist; he is committed to the view that merely being human cannot figure as a reason for affording some species members a higher standard of treatment than others, and that one must appeal to properties contingently possessed by individual species-members like sentience or rationality (Diamond, 1991, p. 52). Singer’s view is informed by his inheritance of R. M. Hare’s universal prescriptivism, which Murdoch criticizes in “Vision and Choice in Morality”. For a discussion of Singer’s indebtedness to Hare, see Singer 2002; Southan 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In what follows, it will become clear that Murdoch has a very different understanding of how the self or ego can undermine love. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On Murdoch’s view, this issue is shared between Kantian ethics and aesthetics. She writes that in *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant idealizes “simple clean things not tainted by any historical or human particularity” and in his ethics, “the ideal is the same” (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 214). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This criticism closely mirrors a more contemporary critique of Velleman’s Personhood View; in “Grace and Alienation,” Vida Yao argues that sidelining a person’s rich individuality and loving them for their bare personhood would be objectionable to the beloved themselves, who could rightly note that they are not being loved for who they really are as an individual (warts and all) (Yao, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Elijah Millgram forcibly points this out in “Kantian Crystallizations,” where he notes that the attention Murdoch defines love in terms of is not the sort of thing likely to reveal someone in their Kantian personhood. He writes, “It is not what you see, most of the time, when you look attentively at a person. People tend to look most rational when they are seen superficially and from a distance; the closer and the more attentively (the more lovingly) you look at them, the more quirkiness, mechanism, stubbornness, emotional flab, psychological cans of worms, overall flakiness, lack of reflectiveness, inability to track reasons, and inability to appreciate value you will discern” (Millgram, 2004, p. 512). Moreover, it seems that when we are seeing the other in light of their rationality, we are most likely to be selfishly defending ourselves against really seeing them in the very ways that Velleman contrasts with love. For further discussion of this, see Hopwood 2017, pp. 482–483. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See for example Forsberg 2018; Mason 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Millgram points something like this out when he writes, “Velleman explains Murdoch’s thought by pointing out that ’many of our defenses against being emotionally affected by another person are ways of not seeing what is most affecting about him', and I worry that this misuse of the Kantian ideal is too likely to function as just such a defense” (Millgram, 2004, p. 513). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Murdoch is opposed to various worldviews that she considers excessively deterministic, having in mind “a great variety of views deriving from a study of Marx, Freud, the behaviour of calculating machines, and so on” (Murdoch, 1957/1998, p. 71). For a discussion of her opposition to economic determinism, see Jamieson 2023, pp. 181–182. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. According to Niklas Forsberg, we should be wary of treating these efforts to attend as still yet another moment of decision-making and action. The concern here is with occluding the role that grace plays in self-transcendence—we do not succeed because we have the capacity to inquire after a more truthful understanding of the other but because we are open to be reached by the other (Forsberg, 2017b). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This distinction is important in that it shows that love does not unrealistically represent the beloved as a pure victim of bad luck and totally deny their agency—it can thus answer the worry that compassionate love is patronizing and so objectionable to the beloved. Yao objects to describing the highest form of love as compassion for this reason, noting that while it makes it easier to love someone warts and all, it does so in a way that is humiliating, insulting, and smugly overbearing (Yao, 2020, p. 14). To see oneself and others as having formative but non-determining histories does not, however, imply that people are divided into those with hard lives and pure victimhood and those of us who pity the victims for their special condition. Murdoch thinks that we are all benighted fantasy-prone creatures and that we all struggle to see things as they are. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Murdoch later elaborates this by drawing on Freudian theory, noting that the psyche can be seen as “an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand and control” (Murdoch, 1969/1998, p. 341). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This view of philosophy is germane to Murdoch’s thinking. In “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”, Murdoch famously notes that it can be difficult for a philosopher to tell whether “one is saying something reasonably public and objective, or whether one is merely erecting a barrier, special to one’s own temperament, against one’s own personal fears. (It is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher: what is he afraid of?)” (Murdoch, 1969/1998, p. 359). Philosophies that picture the human being as a rational and free self-maker can from a certain angle begin to look like the crystallization of a common psychological defense against reality in Murdoch’s sense of the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Of course, the fact that an upbringing was “shared” can have the opposite effect if one assumes that “shared” history means “the same” history. If *I* went through the same ordeal of having an abusive father and *I’m* not struggling with the same vices as my sibling, it can be tempting to conclude that we were both equally free to avoid those vices (and we thus differed only in our choices). This attitude might express a failure to recognize that those nearest to us are nonetheless distinct people with separate histories, both in the sense of containing events unique to them and in the sense that *how* they experienced and were formed by “shared” events might differ. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. In this we see that just as reflecting on Murdoch’s vision of the human being can give us a different understanding of realism, it can also inflect how we understand her use of ‘humility.’ While Hopwood emphasizes the connection between humility and the recognition of my epistemic limits in relation to a separate other, the humility of tolerance involves recognizing my limits as a moral benchmark. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In this, I part ways with readers of Murdoch who claim that for her, the idea of perfection is the idea of a moral vision that we’d converge upon were we ourselves perfectly unselfish beings. See for example Jordan, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For further discussion of this, see Jamieson 2023, pp. 112–113. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. This should not be taken to be an exhaustive explanation of love’s selectivity. Thinking with Murdoch, we might reflect on further ways that the other’s humanity might be lost on us. For example, we can struggle to find someone worthy of loving attention when their eccentricities are systematically obscured from our view, something that can be accomplished by workplaces like fast food restaurants that force employees to speak from scripts, to don uniforms, and to work at such a fast pace that there’s no time to deviate from or embellish upon strict operational procedures. Under such circumstances, their individual sensibilities, interests, and values—their humanity we might say—can be hard to notice. It can, however, burst through the clouds and touch us in moments when, for example, a worker’s sense of humour infuses how they intone customer service banalities like “how can I help you?” with an irony that hints that they have a critical perspective on their position or the products they sell. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Christopher Cordner elaborates on the “enemies of love” Murdoch describes, noting that we can fail to see individuals as they really are because of “Greed and selfishness, pride, mean-spiritedness, and anxiety about our own worth”—in short “different aspects of the ego.” Similarly, “convention (social, cultural, political, and intellectual systems and structures) can determine our thinking in such a way that we aren’t receptive to the individual themselves” (Cordner, 2022, p. 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Murdoch is one of the authors that Pacovská draws on in “Love and the Pitfall of Moralism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. For discussion of how Murdoch introduces perfectionist ideals as “regulative ideas,” see Jamieson 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In claiming that love is ideally unconditional, I don’t mean to attribute to Murdoch the claim that there is no condition under which an ideally loving person might alter the form of or end their relationship with. Similarly, she does not claim that lovingly attending to someone met in passing means thinking one should date or befriend that person. Our decisions to pursue, maintain, or end relationships will be affected by our capacity to see the other with tolerance and compassion (e.g., I may be more likely to welcome a strange newcomer into my social circle if I am not intolerant of his peculiarities). However, we also have practical reasons for making these decisions (e.g., this new acquaintance and I don’t have shared interests and do not converse with ease). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)