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The Case of M and D in Context: Iris Murdoch, Stanley Cavell, and Moral Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT: Iris Murdoch's famous case of M and D illustrates the moral importance learning to see others, including disliked daughters-in-law, in a more favourable light through renewed attention. However, without reading this case in the wider of context of Murdoch's work, we are liable to overlook the attitudes and transformations involved in coming to change one's mind as M does. Stanley Cavell offers one such reading and denies that the case represents a change in M's sense of herself or the possibilities for her world of the kind exemplified by Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. In this chapter, I challenge this reading, suggesting that while it is perhaps not an *exemplar* of the perfectionist outlook as described by Cavell, the case can and should be interpreted in perfectionist terms in light of Murdoch's particular views about: the endless renewability of language through experience, the importance of humility, and the role of love and attention in moral learning. Furthermore, Murdoch's work uniquely sheds light on how we might cultivate this outlook in ourselves and others, and the distinctive role that some novels can play in moral education.

INTRODUCTION

In 'The Idea of Perfection', Iris Murdoch presents her most famous philosophical example: the case of M and D. In this example, a mother-in-law (M) comes to re-evaluate her daughter-in-law (D) after years of privately lamenting that her son has 'married beneath him'. While M has behaved 'beautifully' to her throughout, she thought that D was a silly, vulgar girl with poor taste and worse manners. However, being 'an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, [and] capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her', M worries that she has been snobbish and narrow-minded. After reflecting, M's vision gradually alters. The normative epithets she had previously used in thinking about D's character and conduct give way to a new set. M comes to see that D was 'not undignified but spontaneous, not

noisy but gay'. Importantly, Murdoch specifies that M does not simply start deluding herself about D—in coming to see D as gay and spontaneous, M *learns* something about D (Murdoch, 1964/1970, pp. 17–18).

Some commentators, however, deny that the case of M and D illuminates any more general dimensions of moral learning. Stanley Cavell, for instance, argues that, while M may learn something particular about D by 'overcoming snobbery', M is not transformed in any substantial sense. Cavell writes, 'I do not, from Murdoch's description, derive the sense that in the woman's change of perspective she has come to see *herself*, and hence the possibilities of her world, in a transformed light. Without this sense, the case does not seem to generalise, but to be confined as one of overcoming snobbery in a particular case' (Cavell, 1991, pp. xviii–xix). It is this transformed sense of self and world which Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism aspires to capture.

Cavell is perhaps right that Murdoch's description of the case of M and D when taken in isolation does not *exemplify* the kind of outlook he is interested in. The case yields to a non-perfectionist interpretation, and so might not be an effective *exemplar* of the outlook Cavell has in mind.[1] However, I will argue that a perfectionist reading is recommended by the wider context of Murdoch's early writings.[2] M's changed view of her daughter-in-law illustrates the importance of two distinctive and general aspects of moral learning that Murdoch develops in 'The Idea of Perfection' and elsewhere in her oeuvre. To show this, first, I will highlight the role the case of M and D plays in 'The Idea of Perfection', making clear that it is introduced to challenge behaviourist and non-cognitivist thought, and to bring into view the moral importance of a particular kind of moral learning—learning to see other people justly. Second, I will explore Murdoch's idea of learning to see others justly by reflecting upon her earlier responses to

behaviourism. I will show that coming to know one's own mind requires that we confront the stifling limits imposed by a conventional set of concepts. Throughout this essay, I will follow Murdoch in referring to this process as a 'renewal of language'. Third, I will show exactly how the kind of moral learning of which Murdoch speaks in 'The Idea of Perfection' requires the renewal of language. Finally, I will underscore the role which humility—a distinctive outlook towards oneself and the world—plays in learning to see others justly. With these features of Murdoch's thought in view, I will be in a position to return to the case of M and D, to respond to Cavell's charge, and to display the insights there to be gleaned form Murdoch's discussion of moral teaching and learning.

THE ROLE OF THE CASE OF M AND D IN 'THE IDEA OF PERFECTION'

Murdoch begins 'The Idea of Perfection' with a brief commentary on the practice of moral philosophy itself. She describes a 'two-way movement in philosophy... a movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts. McTaggart says that time is unreal, Moore replies that he has just had his breakfast. Both these aspects of philosophy are necessary to it' (Murdoch, 1964/1970, p. 1). An elaborate and broadly-accepted philosophical theory can function as a gatekeeper, controlling what can and cannot be said within the discourse. This theory can form an unquestioned set of background beliefs. To bring such a theory into question, one must attend to the world in which we live (and eat breakfast) and allow oneself to say ordinary things that are 'unsayable' by the theory's lights. The expression of an obvious fact about our lived experience can achieve this.

The structure of 'The Idea of Perfection' fits Murdoch's description of this 'two-way movement'. She directs our attention towards a familiar situation and describes it in terms which

seem, pre-philosophically, simple and obvious. Doing so, she highlights the philosophical conventions that limit our capacity to acknowledge such facts. In this way, she brings these conventions into question. The case of M and D contains 'simple and ordinary' facts, attention to which invites us to question the 'behaviourist-existentialist' view of the moral life. The philosophical conventions that characterise this view include what I will call *the behaviourist claim* and *the non-cognitivist claim.*

According to *the behaviourist claim*, aspects of our mental lives that are not publicly accessible, such as unexpressed beliefs or desires not manifest in action, are in some sense unreal and cannot be intelligibly spoken of using concepts whose meanings are fixed by public rules of use. These inner events are at best the shadowy inner complements to public sayings and doings.[3] This convention influences what a philosopher considers morally significant. According to *the non-cognitivist* claim, moral concepts are not in the business of describing reality. Instead, they express non-cognitive intentional attitudes directed towards non-moral states of affairs. This philosophical convention limits which judgments can be thought of as meaningful.[4]

A philosophical view committed to these conventions can prevent one from saying a number of 'simple and obvious' things about the case of M and D. First, one cannot say that it matters morally that M changes her mind about D *unless* M's change of mind manifests itself in her outward conduct; and second, one cannot say that M learned something of moral significance. This follows from *the behaviourist claim*. Murdoch stipulates that M's outward conduct towards D was always impeccable and in no way reflected her true opinion of her. This did not change when M's view altered. This is not a case, then, that pertains to publicly accessible objects such as actions or choices, and so (according to the behaviourist claim) falls

outside the scope of moral assessment. If, however, it is 'simple and obvious' that M's changed view of D is morally significant, we have reason to question *the behaviourist claim*.

The second unsayable thing derives from *the non-cognitivist claim*. When M comes to see that D is 'not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay', she exchanges one set of thick moral concepts for another.[5] Murdoch specifies that M makes this change without acquiring any new information about D.[6] Yet it seems simple and obvious that M has overcome a kind of misunderstanding and learned something morally significant about D. One's interpretation of a person can improve, in the sense of becoming more faithful or apt, without the improvement resting on the apprehension of some new fact—one can come to see that certain moral concepts fail to do justice to a person's character or conduct. If this is true, we have reason to question *the non-cognitivist claim*.

The case of M and D acts as a reminder of what we would be pre-philosophically inclined to say about a familiar kind of situation. We want to say that M learns something about her daughter-in-law and that this matters morally, but we are relentlessly prevented from doing so by dominant philosophical conventions. While the case of M and D serves this important argumentative function, it does rather more than this. Beyond reminding us of the reality of moral learning, the case illustrates what Murdoch takes moral learning to be: first, it exemplifies how the renewal of our language enables us to see the world afresh; and second, it illustrates the crucial role of humility in learning. Since it is possible to miss these features when reading the case as a standalone, I will place the example within the wider context of Murdoch's work.

RETHINKING REALISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

The character of Murdochian moral learning can best be appreciated once we understand the form her 'realism' takes. The 'existentialist-behaviourist' philosophers she is responding to in 'The Idea of Perfection' reject particular realist views about private mental contents and moral properties. However, these are forms of realism that Murdoch also finds odious. Murdoch's writing is peppered with cutting comments about ethical intuitionism. In a letter to David Hicks dated 1945, she refers to 'the shallow milk and water "ethics" of English "moralists" like Ross and Prichard' (see Horner and Rowe, 2015, p. 22). After first meeting Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945, Murdoch writes that his theories are 'first rate and just what English philosophy needs to have injected into its veins, to expel the loathsome humours of Ross and Prichard' (Horner and Rowe, 2015, p. 50). While she never further developed her criticisms of intuitionism, I will claim that her rejection of analogous views in the philosophy of mind sheds light on Murdoch's distinctive idea of moral learning.

The behaviourists and Murdoch share one object of criticism: introspection pictured as a source of non-inferential and immediate knowledge of one's own mind. In 'Thinking and Language' and 'Nostalgia for the Particular', Murdoch is wary of the claim that mental concepts can be defined in terms of directly accessed 'introspectabilia', which she describes as inner experiences that 'say themselves' or have 'intrinsic sense' (Murdoch, 1952/1998, p. 45). Murdoch joins the behaviourists in denying that mental contents of this kind play a significant role in our acquisition and ordinary use of mental concepts. However, she resists the behaviourists' skepticism about the 'inner life'; while introspectabilia are the wrong way to think about the relationship between thought and language, Murdoch nonetheless wants to preserve the intuition that we sometimes have experiences that are fundamentally private. These experiences are not immediately given to us through introspection; however it is not a contingent fact that

they are inner rather than publicly manifested.[7] They are private because the individual has yet to do the work required to conceptualize them and thus to make them publicizable.

In 'Thinking and Language', Murdoch reflects on how knowing our own minds can involve a struggle to formulate experiences that are merely imagistic or indeterminate. This struggle can be revelatory, but it can be frustrated when we are unable to find the right words to do justice to what we're trying to understand. Murdoch illustrates this with the example of trying to characterize a past thought such as an impression we had while reading a piece of poetry. If we ask ourselves how we do it, we see that we readily fall into analogies and metaphors of the kind that cover the pages of 'psychological novels and books of art criticism.' She gives as an example a description of her impressions upon reading John Clare's poem *Summer Images*. While she has the sense that her experience of the work transcends what she initially thinks of it, with some effort she is able to appropriate the language of space, of texture, and of movement to formulate that experience: 'a smooth delicate suspense followed by an enormous sense of chaotic expansion at the last line' (Murdoch 1951/1998, p. 37). We could just as easily imagine her failing to find satisfying metaphors and feeling frustrated by more conventional uses of language which fail to capture the particularities of her impression. 'There were four lines and a rhyming scheme' one might say with an awareness that this doesn't even begin to shed light on matters. The metaphorical use of concepts involves taking concepts which are initially acquired in public contexts—smoothness is a concept we learn to apply on the basis of sensory criteria relating to the physical surface of an object—and re-appropriating them for use in unconventionally domains—in this case, to describe one's private impression of a certain assemblage of words.

Murdoch emphasises the extent to which our inner experiences can be difficult to characterise, and our capacity to understand ourselves limited by the 'availability' of certain

concepts. The particularities of a given mental event can demand richer descriptions than are ordinarily available to us. According to Murdoch, we can remind ourselves of what our minds are like—neither immediately present to introspection nor beyond our capacity to render intelligible—by reflecting upon 'the experience of attempting to break through a linguistic formulation grasped as inadequate in relation to an obscurely apprehended content. We know what it is like for a thought to be stifled by a conventional description, or for a verbal summary to replace a memory image' (p. 35).

Thus, Murdoch both affirms the reality of the inner life and denies that it is immediately and directly available to introspection. Self-understanding sometimes calls upon us to reflect—to search for the right metaphors with which to understand ourselves—and can yield surprising outcomes. This possibility suggests that, although self-understanding is not immediate, there is a standard of truth at play in the description of mental events. Coming to understand oneself involves reclaiming language from the 'stifling' effect of conventional descriptions. Renewing our language, we move beyond the limitations set by the linguistic formulations which are readily available to us but inadequate to the task of describing a given mental event. While it might be easier for Murdoch to describe her impression of Clare's *Summer Images* in terms of the poem's public features, , there is room to ask what aspects of her mental life would be distorted or neglected altogether by such a pat description. The activity of renewing our language enables us to bring an obscurely apprehended inner experience into clearer view.[8] Murdoch is thus a realist who sees that self-understanding is a fraught and uneasy achievement, and that we may sometimes lack the conceptual resources with which to illuminate our mental lives.

Murdoch's position on moral knowledge follows the same pattern, navigating the Scylla of non-cognitivist anti-realism and the Charybdis of ethical intuitionism. Intuition is typically

understood as a faculty that enables one to attain non-inferential moral knowledge of either the moral character of particular cases or the truth of general moral principles.[9] Murdoch's view can be contrasted with one that emphasises such self-evidence or immediacy. As in the case of understanding our own minds, Murdoch pictures moral learning as a struggle to find concepts with which to better grasp reality in its particularity. In what follows, I will draw out two distinct aspects of this struggle. First, I will explain what Murdoch means by the renewal of language, revealing how this relates to her views on the perfectibility of thick moral concepts. Second, I will show that coming to see another person as she is calls for the learner to adopt a specific outlook: humility. These features are both present in the case of M and D, and taken together give us reason, *contra* Cavell, to characterise M's transition as a genuine transformation.

RENEWING OUR LANGUAGE AND MORAL LEARNING

In 'The Idea of Perfection', Murdoch refines her earlier discussion of what is required to bring our inner lives into determinate view: the renewal of language. While in 'Thinking and Language', Murdoch emphasises the need to find metaphorical expressions, in this work she argues that reclaiming one's language from convention can also involve refining our grasp of thick moral concepts like 'love', 'spontaneity', and 'undignified'. That is, she introduces a distinction—which mid-20th Century ordinary-language philosophers would have found controversial—between the ordinary understanding of a thick moral concept, and a perfected, more private understanding of that concept. She also makes clear that the precondition of such renewal is the same as for particular acts of moral learning, i.e., the heightening of attention. On Murdoch's view, the process of revising and refining our thick moral concepts is both a 'symptom and an instrument' of moral learning (1964/1970, p. 32).

In this, Murdoch retains the idea that concepts are governed by public rules. When I ask whether or not someone loves me, my investigation is 'subject to some public rules, otherwise it would not be *this* investigation' (p. 25). Rules independent of the individual determine whether or not a line of questioning concerns the concept *compassion*. However, through a personal process of perfecting our concepts, their meaning becomes 'partly a function of the user's history' (p. 26). The meaning I find in a certain thick moral concept and its place in my life is a function of my individual moral struggles.[10]

Consider a concept like 'love'. This is a concept which, Murdoch claims, is perfectible rather than impersonally fixed by some abstract rule connecting word to world. She writes, 'No doubt Mary's little lamb loved Mary, that is it followed her to school; and in some sense of "learn" we might well learn the concept, the word, in that context. But with such a concept that is not the end of the matter.... we have a different image...at forty from that which we had at twenty' (p. 29). While at a very young age, M might have acquired a basic understanding of 'love' from the nursery rhyme, this understanding will become deeper and more complex during the course of M's life. By the time M is forty, she will likely understand that many feelings and dispositions that can look a lot like love but fall short. An ex-lover might follow Mary like Mary's lamb, but if this conduct is unwanted, one would be inclined to deny that this is love. We learn that such a person doesn't really love Mary by deepening and complicating our view and developing an understanding of relevant distinctions (e.g. between 'love' and 'obsession'). It is in this sense that Murdoch claims our concepts are perfectible.

One striking aspect of Murdoch's position is its 'undemocratic' character. She writes, 'if morality is essentially connected with change and progress, we cannot be as democratic about it as some philosophers might like to think' (p. 29). Her picture of the moral life contrasts

dramatically with the view that the world we experience is the impersonal and public world of 'scientific facts'. On R. M. Hare's non-cognitivist view, for instance, moral agency consists in making choices in light of these non-moral facts, thereby affixing a moral prescription to otherwise non-moral descriptions of persons or events. Reality is pictured as uniformly accessible. For Murdoch, by contrast, the world which opens up to one through the renewal of language is private rather than public. She writes, 'moral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up, for different purposes, a different world' (p. 28). One person's world might show no difference between loving and obsessive conduct, while in another person's more perfected view obsession no longer has the look of love. The renewal of one's language transforms one's view on the world.

As in the case of self-understanding, the task of understanding persons or events under their moral aspect calls for imaginative uses of language. This is a form of realism, but one according to which reality is not immediately accessible to us simply as users of ordinary language. Sometimes, we are frustrated by our limited power to represent our inner life to ourselves. When we try to say what we intended in doing *this* or meant by saying *that*, we can run up against the limits of conventional forms of expression. Such frustration can also characterise our relationship to other people. And thus moral enlightenment demands that we transcend the limitations of our conventional habits of use and unrefined understanding of concepts.

This aspect of moral learning is crucial to reading the case of M and D. But before returning to that case, I must discuss a second aspect of Murdochian moral learning: humility.

ATTENTION AND HUMILITY

In ‘The Idea of Perfection’, Murdoch writes, ‘Where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*’ (1964/1970, p. 31). The perfecting of our concepts occurs in what she calls ‘contexts of attention’, where we see that the concepts readily available to us will not do justice to the object or situation we are considering.

The concept of attention recurs throughout Murdoch’s early writings. She explains it as follows: ‘I have used the word “attention”, which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe it to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent’ (p. 34). On Murdoch’s picture of the moral life, the imperfection of our concepts is related to the particularity of reality and the uniqueness of individuals. When the concepts available to us are unable to respect what sets *this* loving relationship apart from *that* obsessive relationship, they are imperfect. The remedy is to *attend* to concrete particulars.

When we dimly apprehend that a significant difference between persons or events is being flattened by our language, attention to particularity is the context in which this limitation can be overcome and obscure content brought clearly into view. When we attend, we look again at the object, and pursue the questions raised in us by those features which resist the descriptions we would immediately apply. ‘Love’ comes easily as a description of relationships like this, but his constant fits of jealousy make me pause and look again. When I attend, I see that these features call for a different description and make me rethink more generally what love is. Murdoch makes clear that coming to understand the object is not a temporally distinct act from the renewal of language. Sometimes, our looking closer forces our concepts to change, so that

learning to see this particular object more clearly involves a general transformation in our conceptual resources.[11]

Attention yields a particular outcome, but it also involves a particular attitude towards oneself and the world: humility, defined by Murdoch as 'selfless respect for reality' (Murdoch, 1967/1970, p. 95). To realise I need to attend, I need to recognise that I am imperfect. The situation of the moral learner 'has built in the notion of a necessary fallibility' (Murdoch, 1964/1970, p. 23). Theories that do not take seriously the perfectibility of our moral concepts—non-cognitivism, for instance—induce complacency, rather than humility. In 'Vision and Choice in Morality', Murdoch writes '[t]here 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'. However, another view is possible: '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' (Murdoch, 1956/1998, p. 88). Humility is a moral outlook in which one respects reality as something which transcends one in its 'mystery'. Transformative acts of attention require a particular outlook, which emphasises 'the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations "taped", the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with the apprehension of the unique' (Murdoch, 1956/1998, p. 87).

Murdoch further indicates the significance of humility in another of her early essays, 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts'. Here, she notes the strong similarities between the discipline called for in the moral life, and that called for in other intellectual pursuits such as mathematics or second-language learning. In such cases, the 'task is difficult and the goal is

distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality' (Murdoch, 1967/1970, p. 89). Humility is necessary if the student is to be appropriately attentive in light of the inadequacy or incompleteness of her understanding of a subject matter. The student of Russian, like the moral agent, must humbly recognise the 'mystery' of that which she seeks to understand and be responsive to the ways in which a translation can be shallow and fail to capture the full meaning of a given expression. An important aspect of this outlook is described by Murdoch in terms of 'love'. We will examine the significance of this claim for moral teaching and learning in what follows; first, however, let's return to the case of M and D.

M, NORA, AND THE PERFECTIONIST OUTLOOK

We can now read the case of M and D in light of Murdoch's overall vision of the relationship between an individual, her conceptual scheme, and the moral dimensions of reality. Earlier, we saw that Cavell denies that this case—particularly the character, M—represents a properly 'perfectionist outlook'. Cavell suggests that M's changed view of D does not involve a transformation in how she sees herself or her world. All that explicitly happens is that M overcomes her snobbery with respect to a particular person. One might, as Niklas Forsberg notes, read M's changed view of D as an outcome of M's own personality. Murdoch describes her as 'well-intentioned', such that we could read her revised opinion of D as the outcome of a virtue that precedes and produces her acts of attention. (Forsberg, 2017b) However, once Murdoch's case is read against the background of her wider oeuvre, it can be seen to illustrate Murdoch's broader conception of moral learning in a way that tells against Cavell's reading. A

contextualized discussion of the case of M and D sheds light on and, moreover, enhances our understanding of what is involved in the perfectionist outlook described by Cavell.

As we saw, the case of M and D is designed with a specific aim in mind. Murdoch seeks to provide us with a simple and obvious example of genuine moral learning that displays the moral significance of the inner life in order to question behaviourist and non-cognitivist philosophical conventions.[12] In spite of this specific objective, her description of the case connects it to her wider views about moral learning. In particular, Murdoch presents M's moral progress as originating from a moment of questioning where she admits that her view of herself and of D might be imperfect.

Murdoch portrays M as saying to herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I *may* be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I *may* be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again' (Murdoch, 1964/1970, p. 17). At this time, M has not yet learned that her view of D is unfair. She only sees that it *might* be unfair and that there may be more to be said about D than she presently recognises. This is one, world-directed, feature of M's outlook.

The second feature is self-directed. It is significant that when M *worries* she might be prejudiced, narrow-minded and snobbish, her suspicions are not yet confirmed or denied. M thus expresses the recognition that her self-understanding, like her view of D, is fallible. In this, we can think of M as pursuing a more just view of D, and also *of herself*.

M expresses humility, that is, a selfless respect for a reality that transcends one's view and must be explored through careful attention. A comparable moral outlook is found in Cavell's discussions of Emersonian perfectionism in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. Cavell examines a number of examples from film and theatre, but gives special attention to Nora from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. He discusses this example in the course of challenging John Rawls on

the ‘conversation of justice’, questioning whether those who have experienced injustice are always in a position to communicate to others their sense of violation. For Cavell, Nora’s relationship with her husband shows how a person might sense they have experienced injustice but find themselves unable to articulate the grounds of this apprehension. Nora transgresses a seemingly insignificant law against forgery for the sake of her husband, Torvald, and her father, but feels violated when Torvald sides with the law against her act of love. Nora’s ‘perfectionist outlook’ comprises her humble recognition of her inability to justify her sense of violation, paired with a sense that the socially-accepted reasons for her to stay with her husband and children are open to question. She decides to leave so that she might ‘find out which is right—the world or I’ (Cavell, 1991, pp. 109–110). Nora’s decision arises from a transformed sense of herself, one that recognises that the moral character of her own departure is not determined by what would conventionally be said by the likes of her husband, but is open to question.

While Nora’s situation is in many ways distinct from M’s, the two women share in respecting reality as that which transcends them. Just as Murdoch presents M as someone who now does not know what to say about herself, so Nora is self-consciously at a loss. Nora apprehends that she has been violated, but does not *know* this. She senses that she must leave her family, contrary to what the world would tell her is her duty as a wife and mother, but she does not yet know who is right, ‘the world or I’. This forms the context for her pursuit of self-education. Similarly, M does not *know* she is a snob, or whether her son married well, but her recognition of ignorance forms the context for her subsequent acts of attention. Moral learning in both cases arises from moments of humility. Unlike Cavell, then, I *do* think that M comes to see *herself* and the possibilities of her world in a transformed light: the light shed by humility.

Cavell's reservations about the case of M and D also derive from his worry that what M learns is simply particular to this case. This reading is admittedly not foreclosed by Murdoch's description of the case, taken in isolation. But if we read the case in context, we see that M does not merely correct an error in judgment; she experiences a transformation at the level of her conceptual scheme. As Murdoch describes the case, M's moment of humility is followed by an act of attention in which 'her vision of D alters', but Murdoch's claim that 'as we look our concepts themselves are changing' suggests we should think that M's very understanding of the spontaneous, the juvenile, the youthful, etc. undergoes a process of refinement which, alongside the metaphorical appropriation of concepts, is constitutive of the renewal of her language (Murdoch, 1964/1970, pp. 17–18). While M had previously understood D's habits of conduct in terms of their lack of 'dignity', she now sees that this description flattens important particularities. Attention to the individual enables M to arrive at a more adequate understanding, just as we might come to see that 'obsession' is a more apt description of a jealous boyfriend's conduct than 'love' (and revise our understanding of love more generally through this particular discovery). In seeing D as spontaneous, M perfects her understanding of how 'the spontaneous' and the 'undignified' should be distinguished from one another and how they illuminate (or fail to illuminate) D's conduct. Thus, *contra* Cavell's interpretation, M's insights do have significance beyond the particular case.

HUMILITY AND TEACHABILITY

Cavell's discussion of learning does shed light on a further aspect of the perfectionist outlook which is absent in the case of M and D: the interpersonal dimensions of humility. While the case of Nora and Torvald depicts a woman who attains a transformed sense of self and world, it also

depicts a man who fails in this. Torvald suffers from what Cavell elsewhere refers to as 'aspect-blindness'. Developing this concept will help us appreciate what is involved in learning from others: a willingness and ability to question one's own evaluative perspective in light of another's views, and a faith that one's interlocutor is capable of insight. Without these attitudes, one is neither capable of conversation nor is one teachable. With this in view, we can enrich Murdoch's picture of moral learning.

Cavell takes up 'aspect blindness' in *The Claim of Reason* in a discussion of the significance of scepticism about other minds. Taking a blink to be a wince of pain is an instance of 'seeing something as something' (Cavell, 1979, pp. 353–354). In such 'interpretations' one exercises an imaginative capacity to discern possibilities that are there to be seen. Cavell explores what is involved in learning to see something under a new aspect, and what can block one from appreciating a novel interpretation. He considers two examples: the duck-rabbit picture and a case of literary interpretation.

The duck-rabbit demonstrates how a change in the appearance of a collection of lines and shading can be brought about by a change in oneself. Rather in the way M comes to see D as spontaneous rather than undignified, one does not come to see a new aspect by acquiring some piece of information. It is something achieved through improved attention to what is already before one. At most, an interlocutor might help by instructing one in how to attend to the picture—she might point out that what one sees as rabbit-ears can be seen as the bill of the duck. This kind of instruction is importantly distinct from providing someone with reasons already accessible from within their present perspective. To know that the instruction 'look at the rabbit's ears—they're the duck's bill' is a good one, one must already see the duck-bill. A failure to see the duck-aspect is not overcome by appeal to reasons 'internal' to a rabbit-seeing

perspective. What is needed is a willingness to be transformed in one's outlook; this involves patient attention to the picture and faith in one's interlocutor.[13]

Cavell realises that the simplicity of the duck-rabbit case obscures an important dimension of aspect perception, namely, the role played by one's background beliefs, commitments, interests, and sensibilities in shaping one's judgements of similarity and difference (see Cavell, 1962, p. 74). I will follow Alice Crary (2007) in referring to this background as a person's 'evaluative perspective'.[14] Our judgement that our interlocutor is intelligible, reasonable or sane presupposes an evaluative perspective that discloses them to us as such. To have faith in another person's insightfulness, even when we are not presently in a position to appreciate their view on matters, requires a willingness to question this background. Cavell's second case illustrates this dynamic.

Cavell presents himself offering an interlocutor an interpretation of the closing image of Hemmingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Cavell takes Hemingway's depiction of this hero dying in a pine forest in Spain as an allusion to Roland's death in *The Song of Roland*, one that implies that 'romantic love has come to bear the old weight of patriotism' (Cavell, 1979, p. 359). Cavell imagines his interlocutor flatly denying the passage can be interpreted in this way. If he takes his interlocutor seriously, this denial would force Cavell to question his way of seeing things and he 'would have to bring under suspicion an unforeseeable range of concepts and judgements in terms of which there are such facts for me at all' (p. 360).

Cavell uses this case to explore how the background that makes one interpretation available can serve to occlude others. The very 'stance of mind that discloses one aspect to us'— 'our positions, our attitudes... our history'—is precisely that which blocks out the other (p. 369). Overcoming aspect-blindness therefore involves a willingness to bring components of

one's evaluative perspective into question. However, as we saw in the duck-rabbit case, one's capacity to recognise the other's instructions as helpful, or reasons as good, is itself dependent on an affective perspective in light of which there are 'facts' to be pointed to in the first place. To learn to see things under a novel aspect, one must be prepared to go beyond 'internal' reasons and put at risk those interests, commitments and routes of feeling that initially conceal this new possibility from view. We find ourselves brought into question by what is alien in our interlocutor's interpretation.

All this is as true of moral reflection as it is of literary interpretation. We can appreciate the ways in which certain moral interpretations of a situation can be occluded from one's view when we reflect on Alice Crary's discussion of sexual harassment in *Beyond Moral Judgment* (2007, pp. 166–171). Sexual harassment is, on Crary's view, an objective pattern which can only be disclosed from within an evaluative perspective which is 'partly constituted by an appreciation of the injustice of sexism' (Crary, 2007, p. 166). Take for example a woman whose male boss persistently and suggestively invites her to join him for drinks. How this scenario is interpreted depends upon the evaluative perspective of the interpreter. To see it as an instance of sexual harassment, one must be able to appreciate the significance of its features in light of an understanding of and concern for gender-based inequality. Firstly, one must recognise that the woman in this scenario would, given her boss's power over her professional life, have reason to worry about offending him with an assertive rejection. She might feel obligated to find excuses and light-heartedly deflect his solicitations rather than issuing a decisive rebuff. The power imbalance makes his conduct coercive and vexatious. This is only intensified by the fact that her standing to protest successfully to others—say, to an external complaints investigator—is itself shaped by the unequal status she has as a woman. An investigator might take the fact that she did

not decisively rebuff her boss as proof against her claim that she was being harassed rather than engaging in a harmless and consensual flirtation. An evaluative perspective that features a concerned recognition of gender-based inequality enables one to distinguish between innocuous banter and sexual harassment in such cases. This distinction is occluded by a perspective that lacks this concerned recognition.[15]

Overcoming aspect-blindness requires one to bring one's own prejudices, concerns and beliefs into question. To join the complainant in seeing her boss's conduct under the aspect of sexual harassment, her interlocutor would first need to acknowledge the possibility that their present perspective is limited. This might mean questioning one's belief that women's inequality is a thing of the past. As Cavell illustrates, seeing things anew can require faith in the possibility that one's interlocutor appreciates something that is beyond one's ken. In this case, that would mean acknowledging that the complainant has insight into her own situation, even if one may not yet be in a position fully to appreciate it. Whether such encounters are occasions for moral learning— whether one is teachable—is a function of the participants' attitudes to one another. This attitude, I will claim, is an interpersonal form of humility.

We appreciate the role of humility in moral learning when we think through what goes wrong in its absence. Cavell describes how aspect-blindness can be expressed and maintained by *ad hominem* judgments. He writes, 'I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other' (Cavell, 1979, p. 368). One adopts an attitude that denies that the other is reasonable, decent or intelligible to avoid acknowledging one's own possible limitations. In some of Cavell's examples, this is expressed as the claim that the other is 'lunatic' or 'monstrous', but there are more familiar epithets which are used in this way—consider the *ad hominem* ways in which feminists are sometimes dismissed.[16] Cavell suggests

that what prevents us from learning from others is our refusal to acknowledge that we are limited in some respect and that the other might help us to appreciate and overcome this. Sometimes, of course, this refusal might be warranted, as when we can see in advance that a given evaluative perspective is decisively shaped by misogynist or racist beliefs. However, in many other cases *ad hominem* deflection expresses a lack of faith in the reasonability or insightfulness of one's interlocutor. We fail to learn because we fail to recognise that our aspect-blindness might be a sign of our own limitations rather than theirs.

We can now return to Cavell's reading of the final scene of *A Doll's House*. Cavell describes how Nora has come to see that she has never been treated as someone with reasonable views of her own. She has been left on the outside of conversation in her own marriage. She says to her husband, 'In eight whole years—longer even—right from our first acquaintance, we've never exchanged a serious word on any serious thing' (Ibsen, 1965, p. 108). Throughout their marriage, Torvald has spoken to her with the expectation that she would only parrot his own views, and not as someone who might bring those views into question. As Paul Standish reminds us, genuine conversation is distinguished from other interactions by the attitude of the participants: it requires an openness to changing one's mind in light of what others say. When an interlocutor is unwilling to have his thought 'shaped, fashioned, sometimes diverted, sometimes rebuffed', he fails to participate in conversation at all (Standish, 2016, p. 122–123). When at last her 'crime'—the forgery she committed to save her husband's life—is discovered by Torvald, Nora secretly hopes for a 'miracle'. While she fears his commitment to honour the law will lead him to condemn her, she secretly hopes he will see her sacrifice as an act of love. But for Torvald, to be able to appreciate Nora's interpretation of her own actions, he would need to

overcome the two obstacles we explicated above: the limitations of his evaluative perspective and the temptation to project his own darkness upon his wife.

Of course, Torvald fails to acknowledge Nora's perspective, and he responds to her invitation to join her in conversation by accusing her of 'madness' and calling her a 'blind, incompetent child' (Ibsen, 1965, p. 110). While Nora's outlook is marked by the humble recognition that she still needs to determine whether or not the world is right to condemn her actions, Torvald is rigidly fixed in his own narrow perspective. Projecting his own blindness on his wife, he is unteachable. He cannot be brought to see things anew.

This discussion suggests that perfectionist moral learning sometimes calls for a kind of humility richer than that which Murdoch describes. The attitude she sketches is one a person adopts towards herself (as limited) and towards reality (as rich in unappreciated particularity). In Cavell's writings, the humility on which moral learning depends also makes conversation possible. It is an attitude towards oneself (as teachable), and towards another person (as one's possible teacher). In 'The Idea of Perfection', Murdoch concedes that contexts of joint attention and conversation can be crucial to our ability to move towards 'seeing more', when by this we mean moving towards seeing what our interlocutor sees. And she even mentions the possibility that M could be helped through conversation with 'someone who both knew D and whose conceptual scheme M could understand or in that context begin to understand' (Murdoch, 1964/1970, p. 32). However, this discussion is distinct from her original detailing of the case of M and D, in which conversation plays no role in bringing about M's conversion—it is mysterious what inspires M to question herself and her view of D. Furthermore, Murdoch does not explicitly describe what would be required for such a conversation to take place, or what it

means for a conceptual scheme to be accessible. We might, however, imagine a revised version of the case of M and D, supplemented by Cavell's insights.

We might imagine the context of M's renewed vision of D as a conversation with her son, S. He is telling his mother about what he finds charming about his new bride. From M's old-fashioned and snobbish evaluative perspective, D is undignified and vulgar, but S invites her to share his rather different view. For M to begin to appreciate D's spontaneity and to understand her son's seeming insensibility to D's lack of refinement, M would need to acknowledge her own fallibility and have faith that S is capable of seeing something in D which M is not yet able to discern. M must therefore be prepared to allow her attention to be directed, and her perspective challenged, by her son. Without interpersonal humility, M would be liable to remain fixed in her narrow perspective and explain her inability to see D in a positive light in terms of her son's compromised judgment ('He's been bewitched by this common woman', and so on). For M to enter into S's view on D, she would require a kind of humility which bears on more than just her self-understanding and respect for reality. She would need to acknowledge her son as a possible source of insight.

I have shown, *contra* Cavell, that the case of M and D indeed illustrates two aspects of perfectionist moral learning. While this might not be obvious if the case is read in isolation, when situated in the context of Murdoch's wider oeuvre, we can appreciate the distinctive character of M's outlook towards herself and the world, and the generality of what M learns when she comes see D as spontaneous rather than undignified. M is able to see D anew because she comes to recognise herself as fallible—conventional, possibly narrow-minded, perhaps prejudiced—and she looks again. The context of attention is, for Murdoch, one in which we reclaim and renew our language, running up against the limitations of our own conventional

ways of seeing things and learning to do justice to the world in its particularity. Murdoch's description of the case, however, does leave out one important dimension of humility—the bearing which it has on our capacity to be taught and to respect other persons as possible teachers—but there is no obstacle to incorporating this insight into Murdoch's account, which is only strengthened by its inclusion. By way of conclusion, I will discuss one of the major strengths of reading Murdoch as a perfectionist: her exploration of techniques for achieving this outlook.

MORAL EDUCATION AND THE MURDOCHIAN 'SUBLIME'

One might worry that a humility-centred account of moral learning is old-fashioned and violates the modern sensibility that children ought to be active in their own education. Áine Mahon touches on this when she notes that students in post-secondary literary studies courses are encouraged to think of themselves as critics whose interpretative task is to 'master' the text (Mahon, 2016, p. 44). We might worry that trying to cultivate humility in students sounds too much like commanding them to doubt themselves and their intellectual abilities. This is a cruel command to issue to, say, young women and persons from racially marginalised groups in a culture that often already cultivates this doubt in them. Some have questioned Murdoch's feminist credentials for this reason.[17] Rather than being vulnerable to this criticism or caught unawares by it, we have evidence that suggests that Murdoch anticipated the ways in which her praise of humility might be misconstrued. In the same breath in which she claims that humility is a respect for the independence of reality, she also denies that it is something akin to self-effacement or 'speaking in an inaudible voice' (Murdoch, 1967/1970, p. 95). We must distinguish between self-effacement—clearly an unworthy educational goal—and in the strength

involved in embracing the ongoing adventure of respecting and responding imaginatively to otherness. If students are to learn to see things anew and risk their own evaluative perspectives, educators must empower them to make themselves vulnerable to this risk. Murdoch's writings are unique in their appreciation of the difficulty beings with our psychological makeup have in humbly attending to a subject matter. She takes this difficulty seriously by exploring educational techniques for addressing it—moral philosophy, she writes, ought to answer the question, 'How can we make ourselves better?' (Murdoch, 1967/1970, p. 78) By way of conclusion, I will focus on a medium that Murdoch saw as particularly well-suited to supporting students' moral development: literature.

While Cavell's work astutely demonstrates the ways in which an evaluative perspective can block interpretations of a text or a form of conduct from view, Murdoch's analysis traces the difficulty of humbly attending to reality to human egoism. Human beings, she writes, are 'naturally selfish' and 'reluctant to face unpleasant realities' (pp. 78-79). 'By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world' (p. 84). This desire for consolation directly impacts our willingness to admit that we've been prejudiced in our views, much less to recognize that our understanding of the world will always be imperfect. Murdoch is frank that the kind of moral learning that takes place in the case of M and D is largely thankless and does little to recommend itself as an activity to our egoistic nature—our own prejudices are an unpleasant reality to face up to, and when we don't already love someone, we often feel unmotivated to attend to them. Given this, it is a mistake to overstate the freedom with which an individual can simply choose to direct a just and loving gaze toward an individual reality.[18] One of the great insights of Christianity, Murdoch

opines, is the recognition that in moral learning, we 'need, and can receive, extra help' (p. 83). With this predicament in view, Murdoch examines the ways in which engagement with literature (rather than prayer) can provide us with this help, inspiring us to love the world in its inexhaustible particularity and to explore it imaginatively.[19] 'As Plato pointed out, beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct…Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession. It invigorates our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul' (p. 85).

The beauty of a work of art plays an important role in attracting a specific form of attention, namely, that involved in aesthetic experience. This attention is described by Murdoch as unpossessive; when beauty attracts us, we are moved to contemplate the work of art as it is, to try to trace its significance by holistically considering its elements, and to see the subject matter as it is represented by the artist. Murdoch describes the attention involved in aesthetic contemplation in terms of 'love', echoing her description of moral attention as 'a just and loving gaze' (Murdoch, 1964/1970, p. 34). Her use of the concept of 'love' can sound esoteric.[20] However, this concept effectively captures an often-overlooked feature of our intellectual lives: the educational function of intellectual passions such as intrigue, wonder, and inspiration. These attractions draw us out of ourselves and motivate us to try to work out what to think about an independent subject matter that strikes us as mysterious, deep, or intellectually promising. Murdoch insists that aesthetic experience is not a matter of being 'hit' by the beauty of a work of art; rather, this being 'struck' by the work is only a prelude to 'a sustained exercise of the discursive intelligence' (Murdoch, 1952/1998, p. 55). Beauty inspires us to want to understand and faithfully describe a given subject matter. While we do not love our daughters-in-law by instinct and we can struggle to find the will to give someone a second chance, Murdoch believes

that beauty more naturally motivates humble attention and so can be used to train students in perfectionism.

Not all beautiful works can help with moral education. A great deal of art is created that Murdoch describes in terms of 'fantasy'; it consoles its audience about the rightness of a given worldview, confirms stereotypes, rewards prejudices, or otherwise gratifies fantasies. However *great* art is both beautiful and presents the world to us truthfully, without cliché or consolation. Murdoch writes, 'good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision' (Murdoch, 1967/1970, p. 86). While beauty welcomes the student into the kind of humble attention characteristic of moral education, this is not all that we need from literature. By examining the kinds of novels Murdoch recommends, we can see what it is about certain novels that makes them more or less well-suited to moral education.

Moral philosophers who narrowly focus on rational decision-making and action have tended to favour literary works that can provide examples that simply and straightforwardly illustrate the application of abstract moral rules. Onora O'Neill, for instance, recommends works that illustrate certain action-types, about which we can practice asking whether we can will that they be universalised. The particularity with which examples are presented is not morally important on O'Neill's account, since details about characters' ways of seeing and the moral texture of their lives are not relevant to the task of exercising rational judgment about prospective moral principles (O'Neill, 1986, pp. 8–9). By contrast, Murdoch celebrates (and aspires to create) works in which the characters are robustly real, free, and individual; she criticises novels which fail in this, citing excesses of form and propensities to solipsism.

Novels which suffer from the first of these vices are those that are sketchy and over-determined by a given moral meaning. In such a work, the characters lack significance of their own—they are introduced merely to illustrate the author's thesis. Murdoch has in mind here 18th century morality tales and allegories such as Voltaire's *Candide*. While a novel ought to have enough form to be aesthetically engaging and avoid becoming a journalistic collection of events (she criticises Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* on these grounds), novels lose their true moral power when they are too formal and self-contained. Such novels give the appearance that persons are themselves simple, tidy, and easily known (Murdoch, 1961/1998, p. 294). They lack realism.

Novels of the second type revolve around one particular character who is totally alone. Murdoch calls this character 'Totalitarian Man', meaning a character who drifts through the world as through an apocalyptic scene from which meaning has fled, and where any significance must derive from his own will. In works of this kind (Murdoch has in mind 20th century existentialist novels such as Sartre's *La Nausée*), 'there are other people, but they are not real contingent separate other people. They appear as organised menacing extensions of the consciousness of the subject' (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 269). The central character might be tormented by *Angst*, but he is deemed virtuous when he refuses the illusion of moral constraint and self-consciously exercises complete freedom. Murdoch writes that, in such novels, there is no real and morally substantial person; there is only the perspective of the existential hero, who is radically substanceless and anonymous. All others become exteriorisations of his psychological conflict.

What Murdoch praises in literature is the presentation of characters who are morally substantial, impenetrable, and capable of upending our judgments. She celebrates 19th century

novels (particularly those written by Walter Scott, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Lev Tolstoy), which feature 'a plurality of real persons more or less naturalistically presented in a large social scene and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals' (p. 271). These are characters who, unlike the existentialist hero, occupy an evaluative perspective that shapes their attitudes, choices, and thoughts about others and mediates their responses to the events of the novel. Reading such works is not a matter of coming to a settled view on what transpires, what the characters are like, and grasping some determinate moral lesson. Rather, it is a process of grappling with the difficulty of the novel's world, revising our judgments, allowing ourselves to be surprised, unsettled, and, as Jane Adamson (1998, p. 103) puts it, to 'bristle with questions'. Works of this kind both challenge readers to make sense of the messy individuals who inhabit them and encourage them to recognise the impossibility of coming to a definitive and conclusive interpretation.

Murdoch describes such works as 'sublime'. She rejects a Kantian understanding of the sublime as 'some vast and wonderful idea being attached to a trivial occasion. Who, one might say, cares what sort of emotions Kant experienced in the Alps?' (Murdoch, 1959a/1998, p. 264). For Murdoch, the sublime is a response to persons and particularity rather than nature and formlessness; it inspires humility rather than awe. Novels can be sublime in that they can bring us to confront the impossibility of achieving a fixed and perfect understanding of characters whose boundless individuality we are nonetheless inspired to love by the beauty of the text. The experience of the sublime is bound up with the motivation to take up the endless task of bringing others justly into view (Murdoch, 1959b/1998, pp. 216–218).

For the task of moral education, Murdoch recommends works that are formally beautiful, and so inspire interest in students, and which naturalistically present characters and so are well-

suited to cultivate humility.[21] Engagement with works of art liken this can engage students' instinctive love of beauty in order to initiate them into a perfectionist outlook. However, the sublime (and the attendant humility it provokes) is not accessible to just any reader. It matters how students are taught to think of themselves as readers and how they understand the task of literary reflection.

In her discussion of the 'event' of reading, Áine Mahon reminds us that not every approach to reading encourages humble attention. Students are often taught to think of themselves as trying to comprehend a text, where success is measured by their ability to paraphrase or to summarise the work. Students are taught to think of themselves as 'absorbing' the text or encouraged to imagine themselves as critics 'appropriating' the text and making it their own. The image of 'absorption' suggests the meaning of a text is like a liquid which can be transferred from the text to the person, like spilled water can be sucked into a sponge. This implies that reading is taking in the (singular) meaning of the text. 'Appropriation' suggests an image of reading which differs only in that the student is pictured as taking on a role in constructing the meaning of the text for herself. In both cases, reading is depicted as a process of achieving a settled interpretation.

Mahon warns that neither 'absorption' nor 'appropriation' captures the way in which reading can call for an attitude of humble respect for the text itself. She writes that both images fail 'to allow that the text under consideration might hold meanings and resonances beyond [our] current horizon of experience, preferring to imagine that [we are] entirely equipped to appreciate all that this particular text has to offer or to withhold' (2016, p. 44). Such an attitude discourages students from acknowledging the richness of literary work, and from acknowledging their own limited view on that richness. What Murdoch calls 'sublime' fiction, however, calls for a reader

to be open to being unsettled, especially in the effort to understand the ambiguous motivations, unexpected actions, and individual evaluative perspectives of the characters one encounters in the text.

Mahon suggests that an alternative image to 'absorption' and 'appropriation' is 'receptivity'. The relationship between the text and the student is not one of mastery, but one in which the reader opens herself to the text as something which might challenge her own evaluative perspective. A receptive reader orients herself towards the text as to a conversation partner, making herself vulnerable to rebuff and exposed to challenges to her (always provisional) interpretation as she engages with the novel. This harmonises with Murdoch's view of literary engagement as practice in humility, allowing students to become acclimatised to the experience of being willingly destabilised by the other. However, Murdoch's discussion of beauty invites us to see that the role of the educator in teaching students to engage receptively with a novel is in part to display the beauty of the text to their students, and to thereby use their instinctive love of beauty to overcome their predilection for consolingly simple interpretations and false unities.

Of course, 'receptive' reading involves openness to risk on the part of the reader. We might help students to develop a more general perfectionist outlook by encouraging them to acknowledge, and to love, the rich particularity of others in the context of reading. The experience of the literary 'sublime' prepares us to 'look again' at disliked daughters-in-law, to take wives seriously when they question the law, to acknowledge the distinction between love and obsession, to appreciate the gravity of sexual harassment in the workplace, and generally to transcend our own limited evaluative perspectives through humble attention and conversation.

NOTES

[1] When we ask whether or not a given example is an *exemplar*, we might ask whether or not it's the sort of example that we'd use in teaching someone what something is called. That is to say, we are concerned with whether the Case of M and D would help a novice to see what is distinctive about the perfectionist outlook, or whether there a serious danger that they would get the wrong idea about what is relevant to projecting that concept to new cases. This possibility can never be eliminated, but we can nonetheless appreciate the danger of using subtle or ambiguous examples as exemplars. Insofar as it's possible to read the case of M and D and think, as Cavell does, that M has merely overcome snobbishness in a particular set of judgments without attaining a transformed sense of herself and the open-ended possibilities for thought, it would not serve as an effective exemplar with which to teach a student about perfectionism.

[2] All the essays I will be drawing on were either published alongside 'The Idea of Perfection' in *The Sovereignty of Good* or were published prior to this. The general period of Murdoch's writing I will cover ranges from 1951—when she presented 'Thinking and Language' at the Aristotelian Society—to 1967—when she gave 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts' as a Leslie Stephen Lecture at the University of Cambridge.

[3] According to Stuart Hampshire, the inner or mental has a 'parasitic and shadowy nature'. He writes, 'The play of the mind, free from any expression in audible speech or visible action is a reality, as the play of shadows is a reality. But any description of it is derived from the description of its natural expression in speech and action' (quoted by Murdoch, 1964/1970, p. 5).

[4] Murdoch's characterisations of philosophical positions tend to be broad and are meant to capture a variety of distinctive positions that share in some general characteristic. The 'existentialist-behaviourist' view covers R. M. Hare, A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson, and others who exclude moral judgements from the realm of the cognitively meaningful and deny that moral philosophy should concern itself with the inner life of the individual.

[5] By 'thick moral concepts', I mean a concept such as 'kindness' that has both evaluative and descriptive content in an inextricably-interwoven unity. This is a subset of evaluative concepts to be distinguished from 'thin' moral concepts such as 'right' or 'good' that have evaluative content but do not further describe their objects. It is on the one hand anachronistic to speak about Murdoch's views in these terms, since the distinction was first made by Bernard Williams in 1985. On the other hand, Murdoch has an inclusive understanding of what a moral concept is, embracing terms like 'love' that can be used both to characterise a relationship and also to endorse it. She also sets 'good' apart from these descriptive moral concepts, following G. E. Moore in noting that 'good' is 'indefinable'. I do not think it mischaracterises her thought to use the thick/thin distinction in describing her views.

[6] To ensure that M changing her mind about D is not attributed to M having acquired new information about D, Murdoch invites us to imagine that D has either died or gone overseas. We are to imagine that M and D have not had any conversations or interactions that might have served to challenge M's prior assessment.

[7] In these papers, Murdoch is specifically responding to the behaviourist suggestion that mind is fundamentally public, rather than private and inner—in *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle argues that mental concepts are ordinarily applied according to public criteria such as speech

and behaviour, and can be understood in terms of dispositions to behave thus-and-so. This suggests that mental episodes that happen to be private are only contingently so. It is important to note that in challenging this position, Murdoch is not challenging the private language argument as such. Elsewhere, she approvingly writes: 'Wittgenstein is not claiming that inner data are "incommunicable", nor that anything special about human personality follows from their "absence", he is merely saying that no sense can be attached to the idea of an "inner object". There are no "private ostensive definitions"' (Murdoch, 1964/1970, p. 12).

[8] In 'Thinking and Language', Murdoch writes that this is 'par excellence the task of poetry' (Murdoch, 1951/1998, p. 36).

[9] For example, W. D. Ross maintains that one can directly intuit the truth of principles of *prima facie* duty.

[10] On this points we hear echoes of Cavell's own descriptions of conceptual 'tolerance'. While it is a feature of our language that how we project a given concept to new cases is open-ended—a concept like 'feeding' can be projected from cases of feeding the kitty to cases of 'feeding wire into the casing' in a manner that evocatively sheds light on the latter activity. The concept of 'feeding' brings with it connotations and associations that would be absent were we to instead describe the wire-activity in terms of 'putting.' However, there is a limit on how 'tolerant' a concept is, and some similarities between cases won't be sufficient to justify a given projection. Cavell writes, 'Both the "outer" variance and the "inner" constancy are necessary if a concept is to accomplish its task—of meaning, understanding, communication, etc. and in general, guiding us through the world, and relating thought and action and feeling to the world' (Cavell, 1979, p. 185).

[11] For a discussion of the unity of learning that a particular concept applies here and acquiring an enriched understanding of that concept more generally in Murdoch's thought, see Laverty, 2010.

[12] Niklas Forsberg notes the ways in which Murdoch's goal-oriented construction of the case of M and D can work against its power to present us with a forceful vision of transformative moral learning. He writes (2017b, p. 366), 'there is a risk that the very success of a thought-experiment—like Murdoch's M and D—may stand in the way of a true appropriation of precisely the line of thinking that it wishes to bring into view'.

[13] Cavell claims that in inviting someone to join us in an a given evaluative perspective, we strike 'bedrock' with respect to the reasons that can be given to support an interpretation—the time for giving reasons has come to an end, and we must hope that our interlocutors take the next step on their own. Teaching, in such cases, is more like awaiting conversion in the other rather than working to bring it about (Cavell, 1979, pp. 357–358).

[14] Compare Murdoch's description of a 'total vision of life' in 'Vision and Choice in Morality': 'When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessment of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny; in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation' (Murdoch, 1956/1970, p. 80–81). What Crary calls one's 'evaluative perspective' similarly shows through in how one thinks, converses, responds to situations, and acts.

[15] Drawing from Catherine MacKinnon's classic writings about sexual harassment, Crary notes that our capacity to recognize sexual harassment as a distinct form of gender-based injustice is

itself dependent on our recognition that particular forms of conduct 'use and help create women's structurally inferior status', and so upon our recognition that women in fact occupy a structurally inferior status. Crary describes MacKinnon's strategy in Cavellian terms; she writes, 'In this way—by attempting to shape the concerns that we bring to bear in thinking about specific forms of sexual conduct—MacKinnon attempts to get us to register the phenomenon of sexual harassment. She effectively suggests that we need to transform ourselves in ways that equip us to look on familiar aspects of social life in a new evaluative light if we are to properly understand what lies before us' (Crary, 2014, pp. 95-96).

[16] 'Feminazi' and 'social justice warrior' are terms applied to women who, it is implied, are too angry, militant, and self-righteous to judge objectively.

[17] Sabina Lovibond has criticised both Murdoch and Simone Weil for their celebration of 'passive', traditionally feminine virtues such as humility and attention (See Lovibond, 2011 and Hämäläinen, 2015).

[18] Forsberg discusses this issue at length, worrying whether Murdoch's own descriptions of the case of M and D overstate the extent to which M 'chose' to attend to D, as if moral attention were a technique that we might simply elect to take up. We can see that this is not how we should understand the situation when we reflect on the origins of the concept of attention in Murdoch's thought: Simone Weil. In Weil's writings, this concept is meant to carry the connotation of a waiting which may or may not be met with grace and find that we no longer have a choice about what to think. Forsberg writes, 'We need to attain a sense of M coming to see D more clearly, where she is better characterized as drawn to, or pulled towards, a better understanding, than seeking it' (Forsberg, 2017b).

[19] David Bakhurst explores literature's role in moral education in 'Practice, Sensibility, and Education' (2019), emphasising its power to cultivate 'conversational virtues': attentive listening and open-mindedness. While Bakhurst is adamant that one can be illiterate or poorly read and still have an outlook which is conducive to conversation and moral learning, literature is nonetheless well-suited to helping us to see beyond the conventional and habitual and embrace mystery, ambiguity, and complexity. Bakhurst anchors his view in Murdoch's discussion of 'unselfing'. Literature is able to support attention to the particularity of reality and stimulate a fresh vision by taking us outside of ourselves and our self-absorbed preoccupations. What Murdoch calls the 'fat relentless ego' distracts us from the need to attend to others, but just as the sight of a kestrel flying outside our window can pull us out of a self-absorbed train of thought, so a good novel can draw our focus away from selfish preoccupations. This is doubtless true. However, more might be said about Murdoch's view of what makes a given work suited for the cultivation of a perfectionist outlook and what is involved in morally transformative reading.

[20] Niklas Forsberg discusses this topic at length in 'Iris Murdoch on Love,' claiming that Murdoch's use of love is meant to highlight features of that passion that are obscured by non-cognitivist or overly rationalist philosophies. We neither think of love as a matter of arbitrary preference or choice, nor as something justified by a set of personal qualities one might cite as reasons for love. Instead, Murdoch's discussion highlights the extent to which love of another can involve an unselfish interest in knowing the other, paired with a recognition that we don't have this other person figured out. This realist attitude inspires us to really look and try to see the object of our love. Forsberg writes, 'Love can lift us from ourselves, and the reality of the individuality whose beauty attracts us enables us to stay with it, her, him. Love, as the tension between the imperfect soul (i.e., human beings) and the magnetic perfection (the idea of the

Good, the idea that there is a way to speak about and understand a particular individuality truthfully), is seeing' (Forsberg, 2017a).

[21] We do not need to think that the kind of novels she discusses exhaust 'sublime' fiction—a moral education through literature might focus on more contemporary and less canonical novelists.

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