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CR: The New Centennial Review, Volume 23, Number 3, Winter 2023,  
pp. 45-69 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press



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# “Loving Attention” in Murdoch, Smith, and the Ethics of Care

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At some point in our lives, we have all needed care and we have all given care to others. Since the functions of care are usually and preferentially performed by women—often at the expense of their own personal development, job opportunities, and social protection—in recent decades, care ethics has emphasized the need for care to be a shared responsibility. For example, Carol Gilligan, one of the founders of care ethics, said, “Within a patriarchal framework, care is a feminine ethic. Within a democratic framework, care is a human ethic” (Gilligan 2011, 22). Virginia Held, another major figure in this moral current, also extends the scope of this theory to all human beings: “The central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility” (Held 2006, 10). Caring is a complex process. Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher suggest that there are four stages in this process: (1) caring about, (2) caring for, (3) care-giving, and (4) care-receiving (cf. Tronto and Berenice 1990).<sup>1</sup> They also

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CR: *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2023, pp. 45–70. DOI 10.14321/crnewcentrevi.23.3.0045. ISSN 1532-687x.  
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suggest a broad definition of care: “On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher and Tronto, 1990). With this definition, Tronto and Fisher emphasize that caring is an issue of interest to all of humanity, in which the relationship to society, to other living beings, and to the environment needs to be rethought in terms of caring.

In this way, over time, the core elements of this ethics begin to be more clearly defined. Care ethicists have rescued elements of the moral life that modern moral theories have neglected, such as caring, empathy, responsiveness to needs, compassion, and others. Modern theories focus on actions and principles and do not take into account attitudes, affections, and moral perception. In contrast, the ethics of care is a relational ethics. The moral agent is expected to be responsible for the others (to the exclusion of none), and to this end must be informed about their needs, desires, and beliefs. And although Carol Gilligan is usually credited with having pioneered the challenge to dominant modern moral theory and the emphasis on the moral value of care, this article goes back a little further, since in the 1970s Iris Murdoch, dissatisfied with dominant moral theory, made a similar critique.

The advantage of returning to Murdoch is that she brings to the fore two elements that seem to us to be the keystones of an ethics of care and that are sometimes overlooked: One is the moral perception, and the other is the attention to the particular that entails the recognition of the other. Murdoch develops these concepts by delving into the role of attention, affect, and imagination in morality. Another advantage of the return to Murdoch’s work on this issue is one that has not yet been explored, but that we believe will be extremely useful in shedding new light on the fundamental structure of this new approach. This is the important overlaps between Murdoch’s moral proposal and that of Adam Smith. Although these authors belong to very distant ages and traditions, Smith proposed an interesting sentimentalism that highlights the same keystones. A number of thinkers have already seen British moral sentimentalism as a relevant precursor to an ethics of care (particularly Hume). In

this article, however, we want to be more specific and use theories as different as Murdoch's and Smith's to show and explain two fundamental elements of moral deliberation within the care approach: the importance of moral perception and of attention to particularity as a means of recognition and care.

In the first section, we briefly present the essential elements of Murdoch's ethics. In the second section we do the same for Adam Smith, in order to show in the third section both their similarities and the analysis they inspire. Although these coincidences may at first appear to be accidental due to the distance between these authors, they cease to appear so when we realize that these authors conceived of morality in a relational way, which is one of the indispensable elements of the ethics of care. Studying the proposals of these philosophers, then, reveals some of the essential features of a viable ethics of care.

### IRIS MURDOCH (1919–1999)

In Iris Murdoch's philosophical works, attention is a central concept. In *The Sovereignty of Good* (SOG), Murdoch (1970) points out that the main task of the moral agent is to perceive the other as a particular reality through *loving attention*. For her, the concept of attention is fundamental because she believes that "this is the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent" (SOG 33). She clarifies the source of this idea: "I have used the word 'attention,' which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed toward an individual reality" (SOG 33).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, regarding attention, Simone Weil claims:<sup>3</sup>

The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: "What are you going through?" It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason, it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. (Weil 1977, 51)

Therefore, Murdoch’s “loving attention” means understanding the other person’s needs and taking responsibility for them by asking, “What are you going through?”<sup>4</sup> It is not a matter of following a moral principle and acting accordingly, but of giving adequate attention to the needs of the other person in his or her particularity. Loving attention “requires not allowing one’s own needs, biases, fantasies (conscious and unconscious) and desires regarding the other person to get in the way of appreciating his or her own particular needs and situation” (Blum 1994, 12). This is an impossible moral achievement for the dominant theories of modernity for at least two reasons. The first is because they do not pay sufficient attention to understanding the needs of particular others (since they require the agent to consider everyone the same, meaning that the interests of all are given equal weight), and the second is because they are concerned only with the actions that their moral principles and rules permit. Murdoch, however, in “The Idea of Perfection” gives the example of a case where action is not relevant:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very ‘correct’ person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. (SOG 16–17)

Over time, M may develop a hardened sense of dissatisfaction with D. However, M in the example “is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her” (SOG 17). M can tell herself—Murdoch argues—that she may be biased and should look again. By looking closely again, she can change the way she sees D. Gradually, in Murdoch’s example, M changes her perception of D through attention. If we assume that D is absent or dead during this process, it becomes clear that the change is not in M’s behavior but in her mind. In fact,

“D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on” (SOG 17). In criticizing moral theories such as Kantianism, for which action is the paradigm of moral activity, Murdoch uses this example to show that morality has other and more relevant issues. The moral change that occurs in M is not visible and does not affect her outward performance; it is, as Murdoch says, a private event. Morality for Murdoch thus focuses on the importance of emotions, attitudes, and moral perception.

In the example of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law decided to behave well toward her daughter-in-law. One might consider the mother-in-law’s private thoughts to be of little consequence and morally irrelevant, but Murdoch points out that if we change the way we see others, it will directly affect how we act toward them. Morality, then, would be a matter of “vision.” To see someone in a “just and loving” way is to see him or her as he or she really is. Thus, egoistic perceptions are left behind and a perception influenced by love comes to the fore: Love allows us to access and understand the other for who they are.

In Murdoch’s moral theory, emotions are important. Regarding love, Murdoch argues, “We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central” (“On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” [GG]: Murdoch 1999, 337). Love helps us to know and appreciate others. According to Christopher Cordner, “In bringing love back into moral philosophy, Murdoch is not just pasting back into moral philosophy a specific emotion or affect or topic that had dropped from view. She is radically re-orienting moral philosophy itself” (Cordner 2022, 171). It is commonly said that love obscures our vision of the beloved. Murdoch argues that whenever this happens, it is a false love. The best possible view of a person is that obtained by an attentive gaze that is truly loving, and this occurs when the view is not distorted by, for example, prejudice. There is also, as Blum points out, the case of someone who knows another person very well, in the sense of knowing many details about them (such as the fact that they like chocolate). But this is not what Murdoch means by loving attention. Julius King, a character in Murdoch’s novel *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* (1970), has the ability to pay very

close attention in order to manipulate and harm others. But his attention is neither loving nor fair.

For Murdoch, the Good is the object of both knowledge and love (in fact, these two notions are linked: In “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” she states: “To love, that is, to see” [GG 354]). Murdoch conceives of the Good in the Platonic sense, as that which is sought and loved. Thus, “we achieve that understanding through knowing and loving the good in good particular things (including persons but also art, nature and ideas), then ascending to an understanding of Good itself” (Blum, 2022).

Attention, as we have said, is directed by love. To attend is to look outward, away from the self, which reduces everything to a false unity (cf. GG 354). Weil already pointed out in *Gravity and Grace* that “attention alone, that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears, is required of me” (2002, 118). To achieve an adequate perception of others, one must be attentive to their particularities and to bracket out the self. According to Murdoch, this is possible thanks to the faculty of imagination.

Imagination allows us to take responsibility for others insofar as we can imaginatively put ourselves in their place. The opposite of imagination is “personal fantasy,” and this, according to Murdoch, is the main enemy of morality. The philosopher explains:

whereas I want to see the contrast more positively in terms of two active faculties, one somewhat mechanically generating narrowly obsessive banal false pictures (the ego as all-powerful) and the other freely and creatively exploring the Word with a will toward the expression and elucidation (and in art and religion, celebration) of what is true and deep. (Murdoch 1992 [MGM], 321)

The faculty of imagination allows us to perceive the truth, while fantasy is a source of deception and a way of denying reality. Fantasy is when the agent distorts reality with his own needs. Fantasy does not help us to truly understand others, and for this reason Murdoch identifies it as the main obstacle to moral judgment. She asserts: “The human mind is naturally and largely given to fantasy. Vanity (a prime human motive) is composed of fantasy. Neurotic or vengeful fantasies, erotic or guilty or fearful fantasies can imprison the mind,

impeding new understanding, new interests and affections, possibilities, of fruitful and virtuous action” (MGM 322). We are addicted to this life of fantasy, but the faculty of imagination can restore our ability to truly see what is in front of us in a clearer and more just way. Overcoming these obstacles is a true moral achievement. Ultimately, it is attention and imagination that enable us to access the moral reality of the particular other.

Imagination is the opposite of fantasy, for, as the philosopher affirms, “I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort” (SOG 35–36). Thanks to this faculty, one can say to oneself, “Be more sympathetic, imagine her situation, see it from her point of view” (MGM 322). Imagination is a moral discipline of the mind that, in the context of reflection, elaborates a distinction and defines a concept in order to see beyond it. Indeed, imagination has to do with the senses, with imagining and grasping. Images and metaphorical formulations play a powerful role in our understanding of morality. The metaphor of the good, for example, involves the attainment of this higher knowledge.

Murdoch believes that moral philosophy has conceived of morality as a matter of actions, reasons, and principles. Obviously, all these are important, but none exhausts morality. For Murdoch, the concept of love must also be considered when talking about morality. “Love,” she notes, “is knowledge of the individual. M confronted with D has an endless task” (SOG 27). And “as soon as we begin to use words such ‘love’ and ‘justice’ in characterizing M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture of her situation the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection” (SOG 23).

For Murdoch, the understanding of the reality of the other is a gradual process until there is a complete understanding. Moral challenges also differ from person to person because “each agent encounters different people, but also because the task and challenge of knowing differs for each agent in relation to each other person” (Blum 2022). Murdoch thinks of persons not as a group or as examples of a category, but as particular persons. For her, proper moral judgments focus on the particularity of the other as the object of moral attention and concern.

Moreover, loving attention is a moral achievement that allows us to be in contact with certain other persons and to respect their differences. The example



of the mother and daughter-in-law shows that it is possible to initiate a process of moral growth in which moral judgment is purified by attention and imagination. This process leads us to respect the otherness of the other person. In this example, the agent (mother-in-law) is not guided by a moral principle, but she acts out of the nature of her relationship with the other person (her daughter-in-law). Usually, according to Murdoch, we project onto other people problems that are not real. Therefore, in her proposal, moral deliberation is not reduced to conceiving moral life in terms of moral principles and actions, but rather to looking at others with an attentive and loving gaze.

For Murdoch, we are in a constant state of moral formation. As she says in her novel *The Sea, the Sea*: “Judgements on people are never final, they emerge from summings up which at once suggest the need of a reconsideration” (1978). Morality is something that is always happening. We must silence our ego in order to fully grasp the reality of others. But this is a rare moral accomplishment. Murdoch describes three different stages of attention with their respective obstacles: (i) A moral agent may be unaware that she needs to make more effort to pay adequate attention (e.g., a moral agent may not be aware of the other person’s distress and this relevant element will not be part of her attention). (ii) It may be the case that the moral agent is unable to focus on the other person beyond a very superficial layer. The moral agent may actually try to pay attention but ultimately fail. (iii) It may be the case that the moral agent succeeds in directing her attention to the other person but does not achieve *loving attention*. Her own fantasies, for example, may prevent her from seeing the other person as she or he really is. Consequently, it is only when these obstacles have been overcome that the moral agent will attain loving and just attention.

#### ADAM SMITH (1723–1790)

Adam Smith, best known today as an economist and author of *The Wealth of Nations* [WN] ([1776] 1981), was a renowned moral philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment. His major work, for which he became famous and which he reedited five times during his life, was called *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [TMS] (Smith [1759] 1982). For various more or less fortuitous reasons, this

book was rather forgotten after Smith's death. It was rediscovered in the 1980s and has been the subject of intense study in the last few decades. Smith was a moral sentimentalist, so for him the perception of good and evil is primarily through affection. In his work, he explains how, through sympathy (a concept close to what we now call empathy<sup>5</sup>), a spectator puts himself in the place of the agent in order to feel and understand his behavior "from the inside." Sympathy consists of an act of imagination, an exchange of perspectives in which the spectator puts himself in the position of the agent, taking on all the details of his personality and situation. In this way, the spectator can imagine what the agent feels for behaving as he does, and know whether he (the spectator) would have done the same. If it seems to him that he would, he supports and shares the agent's behavior—that is, he approves of it. If it seems not to him, he disapproves of it.

However, the emphasis this ethics places on feelings does not make it relativistic. In addition to sympathy, another central concept of this theory is the "impartial spectator."<sup>6</sup> This is at first an imaginary figure, but gradually, through moral development, we internalize it until it becomes our own conscience. With the figure of the impartial spectator (or the "man in the breast"), Smith, like Murdoch, underlines the sense of vision as an adequate image for understanding morality.<sup>7</sup> For example, in relation to moral deliberation, Smith states:

As to the eye of body, objects appear great or small, not so much according to their real dimensions, as according to the nearness or distance of their situation; so do they likewise to what may be called the natural eye of the mind: and we remedy the defects of both these organs pretty much in the same manner. (TMS III.3.2)

The figure of the spectator is also important because Smith describes it as "impartial." By this he means that when someone makes a moral judgment as if he were judging as an impartial spectator—when he puts himself in the agent's place to see whether the agent's feelings are consistent with what he would feel in the situation—he does so not as the particular person he (the real person) is, but by trying to bracket out his own biases and interests, his personal prejudices and vulnerabilities, in order to see and judge the agent as

if he were an impartial spectator. Consequently, for Smith, the true measure of virtue, or the proper moral judgment, is not determined by the subjective feelings of a particular individual, but by “the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator” (TMS VII.ii.1.49), who is the impartial spectator within oneself.

Thus, Smith’s figure of the impartial spectator guarantees impartial moral judgment. In TMS, this amounts to an impartial gaze, undistorted by the self and its needs. However, although impartial, the spectator’s gaze is not cold; it is not an ideal and abstract observer applying rational principles as in modern ethics. The spectator’s perception is achieved through imaginative identification with the other (sympathy), since we do not have direct access to the other’s mind. Everything begins with an act of imagination:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (TMS I.i.1.2)

This is the so-called sympathetic identification, through which the other is initially perceived and whose image is later improved and corrected through successive attempts to attend to more details and form a more accurate representation of the situation. For the same reason, the spectator not only considers a specific action or attitude of the agent, but also attends to his or her speech, facial expression, and body language (see Fleischacker 2012, 295–97; Fricke 2012, 221–30). Indeed, he must try to capture “every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer . . . [to] all its minutest incidents” (TMS I.i.4.6). Furthermore, and in addition to the details of the situation itself, the spectator must also consider the social and cultural context in which the agent operates, which will shape the expectations we have of his or her behavior.

The different situations of different ages and countries are apt . . . to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them, and their sentiments

concerning the particular degree of each quality, that is either blamable or praiseworthy, vary, according to that degree which is usual in their country, and in their own times. (TMS V.2.7)

The same goes for the different professions and states of life,<sup>8</sup> and the particular relationship that may exist between the agent and the spectator. The gaze can never be completely neutral. We “look” differently at our son than at a stranger. This is why Smith says that we naturally pay more attention to what is closest to us, to what habitually surrounds us (TMS VI.ii.2.4).<sup>9</sup> Finally, the last step in completing the information is the exchange with other people’s perspectives.<sup>10</sup> Thus, moral perception begins with the attentive gaze of the spectator then, naturally, his attention demands the imaginary exchange of situations with the agent in order to “see” him better (understand him from the inside).<sup>11</sup> Then comes the exchange with third persons, with other disinterested spectators whose view of the situation may differ from one’s own. Finally there is the imaginary exchange with the figure that will set the moral standard and that has been gradually built up in us through experience, effort, attention, and consideration and reconsideration of the objects of judgment. This is the impartial observer within, whose sympathetic feelings are the only ones capable of giving the measure of virtue or approaching a more complete and accurate—more just—view of the other.

As already noted, this impartiality (absence of bias, emptiness of self) does not preclude our gaze from being primarily affective, since it proceeds from sympathetic identification. This element is crucial in bringing out one of the most distinctive and important features of Smith’s ethics: the recognition and appreciation of each individual for himself. Thus, Smith says:

When a single man is injured, or destroyed, we demand the punishment of the wrong that has been done to him, not so much from a concern for the general interest of society, as *from a concern for that very individual who has been injured*. (TMS II.ii.3.10, our emphasis).

We care about the individual because we identify with him and react as if the harm had been done to us. Concern for the individual comes not from concern

for the whole, but from indignation at seeing him treated in a way we would not accept ourselves, because that is not how people should be treated. Smithian sympathy favors concern for each individual. Sympathetic identification prevents overlooking harm, accepting compensation that does not benefit the offended, or sacrificing the few for the good of the many. Through sympathetic identification, we affectively perceive and recognize the value of the other and therefore demand respect for him or her.

All of this, which in the Smithian framework might be called the “sympathetic impartial perspective,” shows that for the Scottish philosopher, in contrast to major modern moral theories, moral activity is not reduced to, nor judged exclusively by, external action. Sympathy, the vehicle of moral judgments, is a spontaneous human tendency that we cannot avoid, so that we are always immersed in sympathetic processes. To explain briefly, Smith uses the term “sympathy” to refer first to the imaginative exchange in which the spectator projects himself into the agent, identifying as much as possible with him and his situation in order to grasp what the agent is feeling at that moment. Smith believes that the agent also engages in this imaginative exchange with the spectator, and that both look at themselves from the other’s shoes. Moreover, since we all have this tendency to sympathize and to be sympathized with in order to feel that we share feelings (this is what Smith calls the “pleasure of mutual sympathy,” which implies that we approve of each other’s feelings), we both strive to “see” the situation as the other might see it to align our feelings as much as possible. This is called the sympathetic process, which involves efforts to attend better, change perspectives, sharpen sensitivity, reinterpret, and so on, in order to converge in feelings. For Smith, this concordance is already the normative judgment that entails moral approval, which he will also call sympathy.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the sympathetic process extends from perception to judgment; it is performed at each encounter and each time anew. Moral activity is continuous and involves rational and affective consideration and reconsideration of attitudes, actions, and situations. Its outcome is a moral judgment, which may or may not be followed by action, although it always gives way to some attitude or disposition toward the other, toward oneself, or toward the situation.

Consequently, Smith's sympathetic process does not culminate with the identification of the spectator with the agent. Identification provides information, context, and all the details necessary to form an adequate picture of the agent's internal and external situation. But just as the spectator naturally sympathizes with the agent, so the agent also imaginatively identifies with the spectator. And since we all want others to approve of us, when we perceive that this is not happening, we "go out of ourselves" to look at ourselves from the outside, through the eyes of the agent, to find out what it is that he cannot identify with. This psychological tendency to please is what naturally leads us to look at ourselves more objectively and to identify those prejudices, attachments, or biases that distort our view of others (TMS I.i.4.6–8). In this way, the first judgment or the first impression that we have of the other needs to be reconsidered, rethought, and reinterpreted. In each of these sympathetic exchanges we learn to perceive the other more fully, to recognize the weaknesses or blind spots of our own eyes, and to see the other in the best possible light (with the greatest "sympathetic impartiality" we can achieve). In this sense, we are responsible for improving our gaze, for just as "imagination produces our sympathies from the ground up, . . . [by] our conscious efforts to see ourselves in each other's shoes . . . [this gives] us far more control over how we sympathize, and with whom" (Fleischacker 2012, 294).

In this description of the internal moral process, Smith also shows the continuity of the formation of our moral selves. The sympathetic and impartial gaze of the spectator is not innate. We acquire and improve it in a process of constant effort, openness to the other, and steady denial of the instinctive human tendency to overvalue the self. Smith holds a developmental view of the moral self. Its existence begins when we are first confronted with other moral agents and feel their disapproval of our behavior or attitudes. This is when we first step out of ourselves to look at ourselves through the eyes of the other, and we truly "see" ourselves for the first time (thus approve or disapprove of ourselves). This is the moment when moral self-formation begins.

It thus enters into the great school of self-command, it studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline

which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection. (TMS III.3.22)

Then, over the years and with constant practice, the best students of this “school” (which is ultimately the school of virtue) develop and refine the habit of looking at everything with “the eyes of the impartial spectator” (cf. TMS III.3.25). This is the habit of an attentive and sympathetic gaze that seeks to understand the other, leaving aside our own prejudices and self-interest. In short, the gaze of the impartial spectator within is the best informed (TMS III.2.5) and best formed (TMS III.2.6) gaze a human being can achieve. But to reach this point, there are several obstacles to overcome. The first and most obvious is our natural self-preference, which manifests itself in the tendency to overvalue ourselves and those closest to us. We have a tendency to be biased in how we pay attention to different people, how we feel about them, and consequently how we judge them.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Smith insists, “It is only by consulting [the impartial spectator within] that we can ever see what relates to ourselves in its proper shape and dimensions; or that we can ever make any proper comparison between our own interests and those of other people” (TMS III.3.1). The gaze of this spectator has the virtue of correcting that inevitable partiality of our gaze, in the face of which “objects appear great or small, not so much according to their real dimensions, as according to the nearness or distance of the situation” (TMS III.3.2). We correct the gaze by imagining first how the same situation would be seen from the other’s point of view (e.g., in an argument, from the opponent’s point of view), and then from the eyes of a disinterested third party, someone who is not related to either of us and who can judge impartially between the two (cf. TMS III.3.3). These are the eyes of the impartial spectator, which we gradually internalize through habit and experience. It is a conquest that involves effort, for “we are always so much more deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves than by whatever concerns other men” (TMS III.3.4), and only by identifying our gaze with that of the impartial spectator can we correct these “natural misrepresentations of self-love” (TMS III.3.4).

The distortions of our spontaneously egocentric perspective are more difficult to counteract when we are invaded by violent passions (TMS III.4.1–3)<sup>14</sup>

and VI.iii.11–13); when we become self-absorbed and stop paying attention to others and the outside world (TMS III.3.38–41); and when our habits or the habits of our society prevent us from seeing things differently,<sup>15</sup> among other things. Habits stiffen the interpretation of what we see, making it difficult for us to step back, reconsider, see better, and change the way we think. In a very eloquent example explaining infanticide in classical Greece, Smith points out:

Uninterrupted custom had by this time so thoroughly authorised the practice, that not only the loose maxims of the world tolerated this barbarous prerogative, but even the doctrine of philosophers, which ought to have been more just and accurate, was led away by the established custom . . . Such a thing, we hear men every day saying, is commonly done, and they seem to think this a sufficient apology for what, in itself, is the most unjust and unreasonable conduct. (TMS V.2.15)

## MORAL PERCEPTION AND RECOGNITION

Iris Murdoch and Adam Smith belong to very different traditions of thought. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no mention of Smith in Murdoch's work, and that very few authors have drawn a connection between Smith's and Murdoch's moral proposals. Samuel Fleischacker is one of these few, for he observes, albeit briefly, "Smith's work fits in with the view of Iris Murdoch, who understood moral philosophy as consisting in the attempt 'to fill in a systematic explanatory background to our ordinary life' (1970, 45)" (Fleischacker 2020). We agree with Fleischacker, but we go one step further and suggest that these two authors are also important precedents for the moral perspective specific to the ethics of care. Indeed, two key elements in these philosophers' theories are also essential features of any ethics of care, although not always as stressed as in Murdoch and Smith. These elements are (a) the centrality of moral perception and (b) attention to the particularity of the other as a means of recognizing their worth, and thus of adopting a caring attitude.

Concerning the similarities between Murdoch's and Smith's ethics, especially those that make an ethics of care possible, a salient idea is precisely the one that Fleischacker highlights: Moral activity is not reducible to external action or to



the deliberating/acting binomial.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, for these authors moral activity is extended in time and may or may not include a decision to act. Carla Bagnoli, describing Murdoch's ethics, points out that in moral activity there is continuity between the executive and the nonexecutive aspects, because in addition to decision and action it includes all “mental processes like thinking and rethinking, considering and reconsidering, imagining and theorizing, in a word: deliberating” (2011, 205). For Murdoch, good choices depend on good perception and evaluation. Descriptions are always accompanied by emotions, the interpretation of which generates the successive interpretations we make of the situation. Thus, accurate representations and descriptions are never given, but achieved: We are morally responsible for our interpretations, because they are *genuine moral activity*. The same can be said of Smith and the sympathetic process. It involves the affections; it begins with perception and opens up to the consideration of context, information, weighting and reweighting as different perspectives are considered, until a judgment is reached. But judgments are always provisional, open to new considerations. This whole process, which may or may not culminate in action, is a moral activity because judgment is being constructed as one strives to eliminate one's personal biases and to bracket the distortions of the natural misrepresentations of self-love (which coincide with what Murdoch calls “personal fantasies”).<sup>17</sup> And because it is a moral activity, it is a voluntary process for which we must take responsibility.

Another feature these authors share is the centrality of the imagination to this process. It is through the imagination that we gain access to others, for—in Smithian theory—“the act of sympathetic understanding is a creation of order in the observer's perception by means of an imagined rationale for the observed behavior. As agents or moral beings, other people are, therefore, the creation of our imagination” (Haakonsen 2002, xiv). In Murdoch this is similar, for “constructive activity of imagination [that] ‘introduces’ value into the world which we confront,” and “reality is made normative through the patient and humble exercise of imagination” (Bagnoli 2011, 208–9). But it is not an imagination in a vacuum, for it is always exercised “against a background of shared practices”: Every action takes place in a context, is embedded in a social, cultural, and historical situation, and is anchored in a network of interpersonal relationships in which the particularities of each individual must be taken into

account. Similar to virtue ethics and in contrast to modern ethics, Murdoch and Smith presuppose the historicity of the moral self. Moral life is continuous and developmental, allowing for moral progress.<sup>18</sup>

The centrality of the imagination, the continuity of moral activity, and its possibility of constant progress give a broad picture of how these two authors conceive of morality. This conception coincides with that of the current ethics of care. Within this general framework, however, Murdoch and Smith emphasize two elements, the appreciation of which contributes to a more precise understanding of the fundamental structure of the care approach. The first is the moral perception, or the perspective that makes this perception possible, which Murdoch calls “loving attention” and Smith, who according to our interpretation refers to the same thing, identifies with the “sympathetic feelings of the impartial spectator” (i.e., the perspective of sympathetic impartiality). The second element is a necessary consequence of adopting such a perspective and grasping the particularity of each individual: the recognition of the value of the other person and the attitude it is appropriate to have toward him or her.

The ethics of care, like Murdoch and much earlier Smith, sees personal relationships as the primary domain of morality. According to Murdoch, everything begins with “loving attention.” We have already seen that she borrows the concept of attention from Simone Weil, and that both refer to the attitude by which people can access moral reality through a cognitive and perceptual process. But Murdoch adds the adjective “loving” to the attitude of “attention.” For her, this implies a “just and loving gaze upon an individual reality” (SOG 33), not just a more accurate gaze that gathers more information, but a gaze that includes goodwill toward the other person.<sup>19</sup> This disposition to look at the other with loving attention is the disposition of the moral agent that Lawrence Blum identifies as a distinct forerunner of the ethics of care. He asserts that “loving attention as a core moral capacity influenced the development of care ethics” (Blum 2022). As we interpret it, this is the same sympathetic-impartial perspective that Adam Smith developed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

On the other hand, according to Smith, the correct moral judgment, in the sense of adequate to reality or undistorted, is that made with the sympathetic feelings of an impartial and well-informed spectator. The “impartial and well-informed spectator” corresponds to the attentive gaze, the one that

tries to bracket its own prejudices and blind spots in order to come closer to the best possible view of the other. But the gaze is not only attentive, it is also sympathetic. A cognitive understanding of the other’s situation is not enough for Smith, for as Jacqueline Taylor says, sympathetic identification also makes us affectively aware of the other and his or her vulnerabilities (2016, 358). The knowledge and consideration of the other, as in Murdoch’s “loving attention,” are nourished simultaneously by the intellect and the affections. This attentive gaze of the impartial spectator, like Murdoch’s attention, represents an active moral engagement of the spectator with his object (the agent). For example, in the very first paragraph of TMS, Smith states: “How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it” (TMS I.i.1.1). Others are not indifferent to us; we care for them for their sake, not (always or necessarily, and never exclusively) for instrumental reasons.

Another attribute of this gaze is that it can be improved. “Loving attention,” or the sympathetic-impartial perspective, is the instrument for seeing more clearly, for seeing the other justly and lovingly, as he or she is. It is the means for moral perception. Therefore, sympathetic impartiality is an attitude to be cultivated through the practice and conscious effort of clearing one’s gaze. Murdoch speaks of the “continuous and sustained effort of counteracting the products of egocentric and selfish fantasies” (Bagnoli 2011, 218), and Smith of the school of self-command, in which the agent “studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection” (TMS III.3.22). But loving attention (or sympathetic impartiality) is not only the instrument of the moral process; it is also its result (Bagnoli 2011, 218) and the most important moral achievement, for only with a clear vision—which is the result of moral imagination and moral effort—can we have a proper appreciation of the situation.<sup>20</sup>

The second point that we wanted to emphasize from Murdoch’s and Smith’s proposals, because of its direct relationship to care, follows naturally from the first: A proper assessment of the situation enables one to grasp the moral value of what one observes. Thus, according to Blum, loving attention makes possible

“fully recognizing and acknowledging that a given other person is as real as oneself” (Blum 2022). “As real as oneself” means, on the one hand, that one grasps his or her distinct otherness and difference from oneself, and, on the other hand, that one sees him or her as a person with dignity.<sup>21</sup>

By attending to the other in their particularity, with knowledge of their specific situation, we spontaneously identify with them (Smith’s sympathetic identification). It is through this imaginative exercise that we recognize our “common humanity” (WN I.viii.16, I.viii.24, I.viii.28, IV.vii.b.54) and come to realize our deep connection to one another (Taylor 2016, 368). For this reason sympathy, by leading us to see the other as someone equal to ourselves, makes us understand that the other person is someone who “cannot be treated in a certain way” (respect for his or her dignity) and who “should be treated differently” (care). Consequently, the attitude of respect and care that follows from perceiving and recognizing the value of the other does not depend on my special relationship with him or her, nor on my special affection, for, as Smith says,

It is to be observed, however, that this concern does not necessarily include in it any degree of those exquisite sentiments which are commonly called love, esteem, and affection, and by which we distinguish our particular friends and acquaintance. *The concern which is requisite for this, is no more than the general fellow-feeling which we have with every man merely because he is our fellow-creature.* (TMS II.ii.3.10, our emphasis)

We care for each individual for him- or herself, because we recognize in him or her another “I” with a moral value like the one I feel I have, and for whom I therefore demand the same respect and the same care as I demand for myself. For this reason,

In the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments, he may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should juggle, or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of fair play, which they cannot admit of. This man is to them, in every respect, as good as he: they

do not enter into that self-love by which he prefers himself so much to this other, and cannot go along with the motive from which he hurt him. They readily, therefore, sympathize with the natural resentment of the injured, and the offender becomes the object of their hatred and indignation. (TMS II.ii.2.1)

As we can see, the loving attention or sympathetic impartiality that allows us to perceive the individual reality of the other is the source and foundation of recognizing the value of the other, from which both the attitude of respect and the attitude of care follow. The moral gaze is the starting point of Smith’s and Murdoch’s proposals. It is also, although this has not yet been sufficiently emphasized, the starting point of morality in this new paradigm represented by the ethics of care.

## CONCLUSION

When we look at the other with loving attention, we capture the uniqueness of the other, the unrepeatable, and value him or her for their own sake. This capturing of the particular is undoubtedly a central feature of the ethics of care, in contrast to modern ethics, as Lawrence Blum rightly points out: “Care ethics emphasizes attentiveness and concern for the other person in her particularity, informed by knowledge of the specific needs, desires and situation of that other person, in contrast to emphasizing a universal category such as person or human being as the appropriate target of attention and care” (Blum 2022). However, by studying Murdoch and Smith in relation to this topic, we can go deeper into this “capturing of the particular.” First, we realize that it depends on the type of gaze of the spectator, or the perspective from which the other is observed and judged. Specifically, we conclude that for a viable ethics of care to take shape, it is not enough to pay attention and gather information about details, but one must also look lovingly or sympathetically. The moral gaze must necessarily include an affective element or an element of goodwill toward the object of the gaze. On the other hand, we have also realized that this gaze is a voluntary disposition. It is a habit that can be acquired and can (and should) be improved over the course of a lifetime. This habit, which is seldom stressed in moral theories, is nevertheless central to moral life: “We make choices within

the world we see, and what (and how) we see is itself an integral part of the quality of our moral consciousness” (Blum 1994, 4).

A first consequence of stressing the role of the moral gaze in capturing the particularity of the other is that it renders implausible the undifferentiated application of principles. Justice cannot consist of treating equally those whom we perceive to be so different. Therefore, if we see each individual in his or her particularity and treat him or her as such, such treatment cannot be impartial. In an ethics of care, the treatment of persons must be partial, although it cannot, of course, be arbitrary. What is required is a morally justified partiality, which is quite different from the modern moral paradigm and much closer to how we treat each other in our daily lives.<sup>22</sup> This “justified partiality” poses a major theoretical challenge for the ethics of care, but Smith’s and Murdoch’s proposals may shed light in this direction.

Finally, a loving gaze is also a gaze that values and recognizes the other for himself or herself. If the gaze is a loving gaze, it will not accept that the other person is being instrumentalized, discarded, or treated with disrespect. From this sympathetic-impartial perspective, the other is perceived as having a value that requires appropriate treatment. It is recognized that the other, whatever his or her particular characteristics, is not inferior to the rest, and therefore it is not permissible to treat him or her as if he or she were inferior. And this is another interesting ramification of this ethics: The loving gaze recognizes the equality of all members of society without discrimination. This equality means the “equal value” of all, justified neither by the possession of special qualities (rationality, sensibility, social belonging, etc.) nor by religious or metaphysical beliefs, but recognized in moral perception and manifested in every personal apprehension.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the attentive and loving gaze would lead us to recognize the equal value of the other, and therefore to demand the same respect and care for him as we demand for ourselves.

## NOTES

The authors acknowledge the support of ANID (National Agency for Research and Development of Chile), Fondecyt projects numbers 1210179 and 3220863, during the period of research and writing of this article.

1. Tronto points out that in order to think about democratic care, there is a fifth stage of care, which is (5) caring-with. This stage requires that the needs for care and the ways in which they are met be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all.
2. Murdoch's bibliographical collection contains 21 books related to Simone Weil: 15 copies of her works, four selections of texts, and two books on the figure of the French philosopher. This bibliographical collection is housed in the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University in London.
3. According to Simone Weil, “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. . . . Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it” (Weil 1951, 111). Developing attention is the key feature in cultivating a deep life.
4. Care theorist Nel Noddings, another heir to Simone Weil, will also argue that the fundamental question of morality should be precisely “What are you going through?” See Noddings (2002, 17).
5. For instance, see Fleischacker (2012) and Ilyes (2017).
6. Etymologically, the term “spectator” comes from *spectare*, which means to observe or look attentively. Note that it includes “to look” and “to pay attention,” two crucial concepts in the Murdochian ethics.
7. So much so that his moral proposal was described at the time as a kind of “moral optics.” This qualification pointed to the analogy between the process by which we correct and obtain more accurate moral judgments and the process by which we obtain visual judgments. “[Sympathy and mere feeling] operate in different directions, and produce different results. I shall illustrate this subject by the analogy of physical optics, because there seems to be an analogy between the process by which correct moral judgments are obtained, and the process by which visual judgments are obtained. I think Smith's view might very properly be called a species of Moral Optics—a science in which an attempt is made to show how our primary judgments in regard to morality are corrected by means to sympathy” (Ferrier 2015, 105).
8. “We expect in each rank and profession, a degree of those manners, which, experience has taught us, belong to it” (TMS V.2.4); or the characteristics of a young person in contrast to those of an older person (TMS V.2.4).
9. Although he says this in a different context, it can plausibly be extended to the whole sphere of praxis. See also TMS III.3.13–16.
10. “We must endeavour to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them” (TMS III.2.3).
11. “Whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of the situation, in the breast of every *attentive* spectator” (TMS I.i.1.4, our emphasis).
12. The term “sympathy” in Smith has several meanings. First, it denotes a phenomenon similar to the current term “empathy.” However, Smith also uses this term to denote our affective response to the awareness of the concordance of feelings achieved after

the sympathetic process (mutual sympathy), which in his ethics corresponds to moral approval (see especially TMS I.iii.1.9). For an analysis of Smithian sympathy, see Carrasco (2011).

13. This partiality is natural and unavoidable. But spontaneous partiality is often unjust. It is the impartial spectator who corrects our gaze, enabling us to achieve “proper partiality” through continuous sympathetic processes. This is what Adam Smith, Iris Murdoch, and now the ethics of care seek to find through appropriate moral deliberation.
14. “The violence and injustice of our own selfish passions are sometimes sufficient to induce the man within the breast to make a report very different from what the real circumstances of the case are capable of authorizing” (TMS III.4.1).
15. “They have been familiarized with it from their infancy, custom has rendered it habitual to them, and they are very apt to regard it as, what is called, the way of the world, something which either may, or must be practised, to hinder us from being the dupes of our own integrity” (TMS V.2.2).
16. The action would be like the tip of the moral iceberg. This is an excellent indicator of the existence of an iceberg below, but not a necessary condition for its existence. An iceberg without a tip is still an iceberg.
17. Other obstacles to a proper judgment mentioned by both authors are the violence of the passions, the frivolity of judgment (thoughtlessness or lack of attention), cultural prejudices, apathy, etc. All of these, however, would be resolved by the “attention” defined by Simone Weil and quoted earlier: “The soul empties itself of all its contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (Weil 1977, 51).
18. In general, the ethics of care critiques dominant modern moral theories. Some scholars, such as Michael Slote, argue that care ethics has an antecedent in Aristotle’s virtue ethics. Other scholars, such as Tronto, do not share this view (Tronto 2013). However, they all question modern ethics.
19. Remember Julius King, from Murdoch’s novel *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*, who, as we have explained, could pay great attention to manipulate and harm others.
20. Note that when we speak of an attitude that is cultivated and improved by practice, which is the instrument and the result of the moral process, we are speaking of a moral virtue.
21. Interestingly, this simultaneous grasp of her total difference and her total equality with me is the condition Fleischacker identifies for the emergence of human empathy. Once again, we can see the connection between the processes described by Murdoch and those described by Smith (Fleischacker 2019).
22. See Carrasco (2015) and Alegría (2019).
23. In this respect, the ethics of care is again reminiscent of Adam Smith, for whom sympathy is also a driving force for recognizing the other as an equal (see TMS II.ii.2.1).

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