

*The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil* by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

Attention, Iris Murdoch tells us in ‘The Idea of Perfection’, is “the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.” (Murdoch 1999: 327).<sup>i</sup> She takes this to be *the* characteristic and proper mark of moral agents, a claim that is both descriptive – a claim about what in fact characterises us as agents – and normative – a claim about how we should act, what we need to do more of in order to become better moral agents.

Silvia Caprioglio Panizza follows Murdoch in making both of these claims. Her new book *The Ethics of Attention* is an extended discussion of the role and importance of attention within our moral lives. Panizza here draws on the work of Murdoch and Simone Weil to explore the nature and moral importance of attention. This commonplace and recognisable activity, she suggests, is both essential for accessing moral truth and also morally significant in and of itself. Moreover, it is “fundamental to morality” (16) in that many of the other things we care about morally (such as moral knowledge and moral motivation) are well-understood as depending on attention.

The first chapter outlines Panizza’s conception of attention and makes a case for its moral significance. Her basic understanding of attention is that it is a “truth-seeking engagement of the individual with reality” (24), though she stresses that this is a non-exhaustive characterization of it. This notion of attention as engagement underlies her explanation of why attention is inherently morally significant: it is morally significant, she suggests, *because* in attending we engage with reality, with truth, rather than with our own selfish concerns and desires (2, 6, 15). Here she tries to hold together two thoughts: firstly, that attention thus conceived is the everyday phenomenon, not a technical philosophical construct. Secondly, that attention is an essentially moral phenomenon intrinsically connected to truth (that is, that it involves actual engagement with reality). The more the latter is emphasized, of course, the harder it becomes to see it as the common everyday phenomenon. In the everyday sense of ‘attention’, we tend to think that it can be prejudiced or misleading, as when the misogynist looks at women and sees them as childlike or mere amusements. Such ‘looking’ would not count as *attending* in Panizza’s sense, precisely because the prejudiced framework in which it takes place precludes it from being a ‘truth-seeking engagement with reality’.

What is it that typically prevents us from engaging with reality truthfully? Panizza’s answer, following Weil and Murdoch, is ‘the self’ – our willingness to deceive ourselves into seeing things

in ways that flatter or protect our egos. The second and third chapters thus go on to explore the role of the self in attention. Panizza starts from the observation that when we attend to something it becomes salient to us, and that this is at the expense of other potential objects of awareness, including the self. As we attend to another person, for example, our own desires, plans and so on drop into the background: they no longer seem so important. On one view, which she terms the ‘Tame View’ (64), attention is perfectly compatible with *a* self. Indeed, the self is essentially involved in attention, since our concepts, experiences and so on always shape our attention. On this view, attention is incompatible with selfishness (71) or self-centred fantasy (67), but not with the self *per se*.

On the second view, which she terms the ‘Radical View’, attention is not merely incompatible with selfishness, but with the self as such: “in attention there really is no self” (91). Panizza is clearly most drawn to this view, though she does not rule out the Tame View. It would have been good to hear more about precisely what the Radical View amounts to and what could be said in its favour but that isn’t provided here, so it is somewhat difficult to evaluate. One way in which Panizza fleshes out the Radical View is by saying, along with Weil, that proper attention is “not tampered with by the subject” (98). I had difficulty imagining quite what this would mean, if not that the self’s distorting influences (fantasies) are removed. Moreover, this claim seems to be in tension with many of the other ideas Panizza mentions with seeming approval, such as cognitive penetration, the idea that attention is active, or the notions of salience and affordances. Is it a denial that our concepts really do structure perception? How can we understand salience if it is not salience *to* a particular individual? In what sense is attention active if not that the individual actively attends? These questions go largely unanswered. I don’t think that these questions are unanswerable, but they are significant worries for the Radical View, so it would have been nice if more of an attempt had been made to address them.

Having raised these doubts about the role of the self in attention, Panizza asks in chapter four about the extent to which attending to the self is legitimate or even possible. As she notes, in many cases self-knowledge seems necessary “to give attention a better chance” (111), so it would seem problematic if her view ruled out access to such self-knowledge. For example, in Murdoch’s case of M and D, a mother-in-law, M, who feels hostile towards her daughter-in-law, recognises that she’s being snobbish and jealous, and this is what prompts her to ‘look again’ at D and come to a truer and more just understanding of her (Murdoch 1999; 312-3). Without this self-knowledge, M might not understand where or how she’s misunderstanding D and might not be able to see how she might attend to her more truthfully. Panizza’s solution here is to suggest that the best way

to gain self-knowledge may not be to attend directly to the self, but to get it via outward-directed attention: the kind of self-knowledge that can help us attend properly, she suggests, “is obtained *through an effort to attend to the object*” (127).

Again, I found this a less than fully satisfying response. It is certainly true that self-indulgent dwelling on oneself seems problematic, and that our thinking about ourselves is often particularly prone to fantasy; it can be very difficult to recognise our own flaws and limitations, especially when they’re moral. But this needn’t necessitate quite such a rejection of self-directed attention as Panizza assumes. Moreover, if all self-directed attention really is forbidden, it’s not clear that we *could* come to have self-knowledge. Panizza thinks that the notion of transparency helps here, and she is surely right that ‘looking in’ (at oneself) is not the same as ‘looking out’ (at others). Yet even if it is true that I can only answer the question ‘what do I believe about X?’ by turning my attention towards X, I surely need to at least ask myself the *question* ‘what do *I think about* X?’ in order to gain self-knowledge rather than mere knowledge (or belief) about X. And this question seems to be primarily a question about myself, a question requiring self-directed attention. Looking towards X in answer to *this* question in turn seems at least somewhat different to looking towards X in order to answer the question ‘what is X like?’ – my attention is in some sense also directed at myself, at least at ‘how X appears *to me*’.

Panizza takes Murdoch to be a fellow-thinker regarding self-directed attention, and her case for rejecting direct attention to oneself depends largely on her reading of Murdoch’s work. But it is not so obvious that Murdoch’s rejection of self-concern and selfishness need have this implication. In the M and D case, again, it is hard to see how M could come to have the recognition that she is snobbish and jealous without attending to some extent to herself (for example, by paying attention to the ways that interacting with D makes her feel). Panizza does quote many passages where Murdoch warns the reader about the falsifying dangers of the self (or ego). But many of those passages are a little more tentative than they may at first appear: things can be risky without therefore being ruled out altogether (attention itself, Murdoch tells us, is a difficult task). For example, Panizza quotes Murdoch:

In such a picture sincerity and self-knowledge ... seem less important. It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny often merely strengthens its power. ‘Self-knowledge’, in the sense of a minute understanding of one’s own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion. (Murdoch 1999: 354-5; quoted in Panizza p. 114)

Murdoch is clearly sceptical about the specificity and importance of self-knowledge here. However, her claims are also highly caveated. Self-knowledge, she notes, is *less* important than on her opponent's picture, not totally unimportant. Attending to oneself *can* have bad outcomes (strengthening the fantasy mechanism), but *not always* (merely *often*). Self-knowledge, in a fairly specific sense ('minute understanding of one's own machinery'), is merely *usually* a delusion. Whilst Murdoch clearly thinks that attending to the self is extremely fraught with dangers, it is not obvious that she therefore wholly rejects the possibility and desirability of doing so.

Chapters five and six turn towards moral perception and the connections between attention, perception and action. Panizza conceives of attention as enabling successful moral perception, which itself motivates us to act. We only fail to be motivated by what we see if we're not in fact actually attending. Panizza's key example here is animal suffering. If we really attended to it, she suggests, we would see it as morally significant – we would see animals in pain as creatures needing soothing, for example, and not as potential meat to be eaten. And this would manifest in the relevant action. Attention, Panizza emphasises, is active, and itself "includes a motivational element" (150). If we engage in this difficult task of attention and allow the world to move us, we will find that we are moved to act accordingly. Once one sees the terrified cow as needing reassurance, for example, the question of whether to have steak for dinner will simply not arise. I found this image of moral motivation very appealing, and it makes good sense of Murdoch's idea that what we aim for ethically is obedience to reality, not freedom (Murdoch 1999: 331-2). Those sceptical of such a conception of moral motivation will not find much to persuade them here, but for those already drawn to this picture, it provides a helpful discussion of what that might look like.

Philosophical discussions of attention are still in somewhat early days, at least within ethics, so this book is a welcome addition to those discussions. It also helpfully identifies many of the key questions that those interested in attention will have to answer. At various points, however, the answers to the questions or the reasons one might have for holding them were much less clear. At times the book reads more as a series of intersecting reflections on Murdoch, Weil and attention rather than as a systematic account of attention, an argument for its role and significance, or an exegetical examination of the idea in Murdoch and Weil. Readers who are not already well-acquainted with Murdoch and Weil may struggle here. Whilst in some respects this is a shortcoming, it is also an advantage, and some of the best parts of the book come in the more incidental passages. There's a wonderful discussion of the role of fantasy in *Madame Bovary*, for example (80), and the book ends with a delightful coda meditating on effort and letting go in

swimming and attention, two interests that Panizza shares with Murdoch. Overall, then, the book is well worth reading for those interested in Murdoch, Weil and attention.

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<sup>i</sup> *Existentialists and Mystics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999)