

Love, Respect, and Individuals: Murdoch as a Guide to Kantian Ethics

Melissa McBay Merritt

University of New South Wales

There is a shimmer on a child's hair, in the sunlight.
There are rainbow colours in it, tiny, soft beams of just
the same colours you can see in the dew sometimes.
They're in the petals of flowers, and they're on a child's
skin. Your hair is straight and dark, and your skin is very
fair. I suppose you're not prettier than most children.
You're just a nice-looking boy, a bit slight, well scrubbed
and well mannered. All that is fine, but it's your existence
I love you for, mainly.

—John Ames, in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

1. Introduction

I begin with a puzzle about the Kantian notion of recognition respect — the respect due to any person regardless of merit (moral or otherwise).¹ It is sometimes thought that the object of respect, so conceived, is not the particularity of the person but rather the mere personhood of the person: what any person shares with any other person, simply *qua* person. And so, it might seem, that recognition respect cannot be a matter of respecting *individuals*. Robin Dillon suggests as much, when she rejects Kantian ethics in favour of the ethics of care: to respect others in the Kantian way is to regard them as 'intersubstitutable, for it is blind to everything about an individual except her rational nature, leaving each of us indistinguishable from every other' (Dillon 1992, 121). Call this the intersubstitutability problem.

Kantians, however, take recognition respect to have quite the opposite implication. The idea that anyone is owed respect simply *qua* person can be traced to Kant's ontological distinction between persons and things, which figures in his argument for the Formula of Humanity. Things may be used as mere means; and the pen that I use now may be substituted for another that suits these purposes just as well. But persons are 'ends in themselves', and have value independently of anyone's discretionary purposes. Since A cannot treat B however A likes, however suits A's purposes, persons constrain choice and are proper objects of respect. Expositing this argument,² Jens Timmerman explains: 'Persons are not merely subjective ends that have value relative to the agent with his contingent tastes and liking, but objective ends, beings whose existence is valuable as such, which makes them individual and non-interchangeable' (2006, 75).

¹ The source of this label is Darwall (1977); see also Darwall (2008).

² At *Groundwork* (4:428). References to Kant's texts follow volume and page of the German Academy edition; translations are drawn from Kant (1996), with some modifications. These abbreviations are used: G = *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*; CJ = *Critique of Judgment*; CPrR = *Critique of Practical Reason*; MM = *Metaphysics of Morals*.

But while it may be intuitive that Kantian ideas about recognition respect and the dignity of persons should rule out treating persons as interchangeable, Kant in fact never says exactly this. So there's perhaps healthy scepticism that this intuition is unfounded. What exactly entitles a Kantian to talk about respecting non-interchangeable *individuals*?

The answer, I propose, can be drawn from appreciating the deep confluences between Kant and Iris Murdoch in ethics. Murdoch takes love to be the fundamental moral activity, and she conceives of love as a kind of attention to individuals. Ultimately, a Kantian answer to the intersubstitutability problem requires that we recognise the centrality that Kant accords to love in his later ethics — the Doctrine of Virtue of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Love is central to the positive expression of virtue by Kant's lights and this fact ought to govern our understanding of what recognition respect could be. Perhaps the simplest statement of my thesis is that the attitude of respect *in a virtuous person* could not be at all as Dillon paints it.³ To elaborate my thesis a bit more: respect in the virtuous person cannot be blind to the individual, because it is not independent of the possibility of love, where love involves a certain gladness in the existence of other individuals.⁴ These ideas, I think, are alive and well in Kant and Murdoch alike.

I am not the first to suggest a deep connection between Kant's and Murdoch's ethics, though they are traditionally assumed to be profoundly at odds with one another.⁵ But Kantians who have drawn sympathetically on Murdoch have not done so from a concern to address the intersubstitutability problem. David Velleman (1998) takes up Murdoch's call to acknowledge the moral significance of love by taking love to be akin to Kantian respect: they are two phenomenologically distinct ways of appreciating the value of persons. Carla Bagnoli goes for a stronger assimilation of Kantian respect and Murdochian love, contending that they 'exhibit a similar phenomenology' and 'rest on a common conception of moral deliberation' (2003, 507). However, both Velleman and Bagnoli fail to register Murdoch's distinctive view of the nature of

³ It should be perfectly apt to draw conclusions about Kantian recognition respect by considering what it is for the virtuous person to engage this attitude: for Kant doesn't elaborate explicitly on the notion of recognition respect prior to the Doctrine of Virtue of the *Metaphysics of Morals* — it remains implicit in the *Groundwork*, and the second *Critique* account focuses on respect for the *moral law* (not actual persons). On the differences between respect for the moral law, esteem respect for persons, and recognition respect for persons, see Darwall (2008) and [omitted].

⁴ This is a conception of love in the agapic tradition, as Setiya (2014) points out. Baron (2002, 397) does not think that respect requires love, but considers plausible that 'if we were to be incapable of love, we would be incapable of respect': this is something like my view.

⁵ Representative examples of the default view include Blum (1994, 12-61), and Antonaccio (2000, *passim* but cf. 11). For challenges to the default view, see Bagnoli (2003 and 2012, 218-219), Velleman (1999 and 2008), and, somewhat tentatively, Brookes (2012b, 48 and 68). Grenberg (2014) also sees a close connection between Kant and Murdoch on love, and Grenberg (2013) draws on Murdoch's notion of attention to elaborate Kant's notion of common moral experience.

moral activity and *as a result* fail to appreciate the guidance that Murdoch can provide on how to address the intersubstitutability problem.⁶ Or so I will argue.

I begin with Murdoch's account of love in *The Sovereignty of Good* (SG), showing how it leads to her distinctive claims about the 'privacy' of moral activity. Kantians who are sympathetic to Murdoch will naturally be worried by these claims. I consider, and reject, certain ways in which Kantians might be tempted to assuage these worries. Instead, I draw out the full implications of Murdoch's claims about the privacy of moral activity, and argue that they are not fundamentally at odds with any Kantian ethics that takes its cues chiefly from Kant's Doctrine of Virtue.

2. Murdoch on love

What does Iris Murdoch mean by 'love', and how does she argue for her account of it? In briefest overview, she takes love to be a virtue, and as such an ideal of perfection. She begins with what she presents as a bit of common sense, a 'simple and obvious fact' that 'love is a central concept in morals' (SG 2), and complains that widespread commitments in the philosophy of mind have made the value of love 'non-expressible' (SG 1). These commitments yield an account of the nature of moral activity that is both psychologically implausible and morally unendorsable, Murdoch thinks. She is after a different conception of the nature of moral activity, one she arrives at by taking up the simple and obvious fact in question. For Murdoch, love is *the* central concept in morals, *the* fundamental moral activity, as emerges in the overarching thesis of *Sovereignty*.⁷

the central concept of morality is 'the individual' thought of as knowable by love, thought of in light of the command 'Be ye therefore perfect'. (SG 29)

Murdoch is not saying that all moral activity *is* love: 'Often,' she acknowledges, 'for instance when we pay our bills or perform other small everyday acts, we are just 'anybody' doing what is proper or making simple choices for ordinary public reasons; and this is the situation which some philosophers have chosen exclusively to analyse' (41). Philosophers have been rooting around in the penumbra, in other words, wherein lies not only perfunctory bill-paying, but also, I

⁶ Maybe they are simply not impressed by the intersubstitutability problem: Velleman (1998, 367-8) dismisses Dillon's worries and Bagnoli (2003, 504n41) endorses his reply — both far too quickly, in my view. I will return to this. The intersubstitutability problem continues to be pressed on Velleman from other quarters as well: e.g., Kolodny (2003, 178).

⁷ It can seem as though love is eclipsed by humility by the end of *Sovereignty* (SG 101); or it might seem, from those same remarks, that humility is not itself a virtue but a kind of precondition for it. And since human love is subject to all manner of degradation and 'can name something bad', the concept *good* is sovereign over all. Yet Murdoch still takes a certain ideal quality of love to be, for all intents and purposes, 'identical with goodness' (SG 99).

should think, things like making way for one another on the sidewalk, or taking turns to speak, and whatever other conduct reflects attitudes of civility and respect. But if love is the fundamental moral activity, then anything else we might think of as belonging to a picture of what it is to be morally active will need to be understood in relation to the ideal of love mentioned in the thesis. Love is not a fact about human life that needs to be *accommodated* by ethics; for Murdoch, we don't have a picture of moral life at all without it.⁸

2.1 Value and reality: the received view

Let's begin with the received view that Murdoch argues is unable to countenance the centrality of love to moral life. Though it encompasses a range of philosophical positions (and central features of it remain philosophically in play today), it has two basic aspects. One side is an 'existentialist' or neo-Kantian view of value as a function of the will. The appeal of this idea, Murdoch remarks, is that moral judgments can be understood as expressions of commitments rather than as 'weird statements' about strange normative entities (SG 4). These are familiar ideas today: they survive in constructivism, as well as expressivism and other forms of metaethical non-cognitivism, and for much the same rationale. The upshot is that valuing is not a matter of being *compelled* by anything, as we quite obviously are when we love.

The other side is the behaviourist view of reality as essentially *public*, and available for shared observation. Murdoch's point, in simplest overview, is that love is a counterexample: perfectly real, but not public as the behaviourist analysis requires. She focuses on the behaviourist theory of concepts, whereby everything essential to the meaning of a concept is rooted in the public conditions of its use (again, ideas that remain familiar today, even if behaviourism as such is no longer a going concern).⁹ Stuart Hampshire is the representative behaviourist, and Murdoch focuses on his discussion of 'mental concepts' — concepts of mental activity, broadly construed. Hampshire, acknowledging that mental concepts seem to refer to private goings-on, asks after the conditions of application of such concepts. Such concepts, he proposes, require (what he calls) a 'genetic analysis', on which we learn what it is to decide '[b]y

⁸ See also Murdoch's 1959 'The Sublime and the Good', where she contends that love *rather than respect* is the 'essence' of morals (Murdoch 1997, 205-220) — a retort to what she takes to be Kant's command to respect not individuals but 'the universal reason in their breasts' (215). In that essay she advances her conception of love as 'perception of individuals' and 'the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real' (215). This conception of love carries over into *Sovereignty*. But in *Sovereignty*, Murdoch consistently distinguishes the neo-Kantianism that partly constitutes her target from Kant's own ethics, and suggests that there is a reading of Kant's ethics that reveals it to differ chiefly in 'tactics' rather than in substance from her own (SG 30).

⁹ As Setiya (2013) points out.

watching someone who says ‘I have decided’ and then acts’ (SG 12)¹⁰ — where these lessons cast shadows that accrete, over time, to form the inner world.¹¹ The inner world is a construction of some kind, less than fully real. One need only learn the relatively fixed marks of the public context of a concept’s use to count as a fully competent possessor of the concept in question.

Murdoch pushes back against this by expanding the set of mental concepts to be considered for such an analysis. If the behaviourist would test the model on *decide*, she asks for it to be tested on *repent* and the concepts of the virtues, both conventionally classical (*justice* and *courage*) and conventionally Christian (*love* and *humility*). But she focuses overwhelmingly on love, which she presents through her story of M and D.

2.2 M and D

M is a mother-in-law who ‘feels hostility to her daughter-in-law’, D (SG 16) — a hostility manifest in the way in how she *finds*, or pictures, D to be: ‘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’ (16-17). M herself ‘is a very ‘correct’ person’, so she ‘behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way’ (17). Time passes, and D is out of the picture — perhaps D has died, or the couple has emigrated: ‘the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M’s mind’ (17). M is ‘an intelligent and well-intentioned person, person capable of self-criticism’: she recognises that she is ‘old-fashioned and conventional’, probably ‘prejudiced and narrow-minded’, and ‘certainly jealous’: she resolves to ‘look again’ (17). Gradually, and with some kind of effort, her ‘vision of D alters’: ‘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’ (17). The story is told so that this reassessment responds to no change in D’s behaviour. Nothing changes in M’s outward behaviour, as far as D goes, either. Whatever this story illustrates M as *doing* is not the sort of activity that is open to public view.

This story is Murdoch’s first line of reply to Hampshire’s idea that mental concepts require a ‘genetic analysis’. But what are the mental concepts at issue? The story dwells on the descriptive-evaluative concepts engaged in M’s seeing D in this or that light: e.g., ‘M stops seeing D as “bumptious” and starts seeing her as “gay”, etc.’ (22). And while M’s engagement of concepts like *bumptious* and *gay* is surely relevant to the quality of her own mindedness, these

¹⁰ Likewise with emotions like anger and jealousy: ‘What identifies the emotion is the presence not of a particular private object, but of some typical outward behaviour pattern’ (SG 13).

¹¹ See Hampshire (1972, 160-167) for the representative claims.

concepts are not themselves concepts of M's mental activity, at least not directly.¹² The mental activity at issue is Murdoch's notion of *attention*, which takes some kind of effort and is perfectly well something that M *does*. In this case, at least, it brings about an alteration in how she pictures D: 'What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly' (22).¹³

We might wonder about that disjunction — *justly or lovingly* — which seems to function appositively. For this bears on my overarching question about the relation between respect and love in a Kantian ethics worth the name. Many will think of respect as an attitude that anyone is due, and thus a matter of justice, while denying this, perhaps on grounds of common sense, of love. Love is selective, the thinking goes, respect is not.¹⁴ And so while I am required to respect everyone, I may love some of those others — which others is up to me, or up to chance. Love belongs to the realm of the discretionary and the contingent, not the binding and necessary. But this, it will turn out, is neither Murdoch's nor Kant's conception of love. Let that stand as a signpost for now.

2.3 The privacy claim

The story shows M *really doing* something — but something that has no necessary connection to outward behaviour. 'Here there is an activity with no observers' (SG 22). This leads Murdoch to contend that M's activity is, in some sense, 'private'. I will call this the *privacy claim*. As I see it, the privacy claim has three important implications. The first has already been indicated: M's activity is neither manifest in outward behaviour (it is not 'out there' for anyone to see), nor essentially linked to outward behaviour (it is not 'what it is' owing to any relation in which it might stand to outward behaviour). The second and third implications are somewhat less obvious. To draw them out, consider the remark where the privacy claim is introduced:

M's activity is peculiarly *her own*. Its details are the details of *this* personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately. M could not *do this* thing in conversation with another person. (SG 22)

What is 'this thing', and why can't it be done in conversation with another person? There are other things that M could be doing that may be related to her doing 'this thing' — activities that

¹² I presume this is why Murdoch calls them 'secondary moral words' (SG 22).

¹³ For Murdoch, *attention* is a success term (see Blum 2012): thus the extent to which M attends to D is the extent to which she sees her justly or lovingly. Murdoch borrows the term *attention* from Simone Weil (SG 33; see also 39, 49, 101 on Weil's influence).

¹⁴ Velleman (2008) invokes the selectivity of love while avowedly drawing on Murdoch; Setiya (2013, 19n48) points out that the view is not Murdochian. See also Swanton (2011, 247ff.) for the companion point that the view could not be Kantian, either.

may support M's doing 'this thing' but nevertheless need to be distinguished from it. Suppose that M talks to a friend, F, about D: F points out certain things, both about D and about M herself, that help M see D in a new light. Murdoch explicitly allows that M might be helped by conversation of this kind, as she acknowledges that '[u]ses of words by persons grouped round a common object is a central and vital human activity' (31). But whatever *that* vital human activity is, it is not the one the M and D example is meant to put on view.

M's activity is 'private' because she can only do it for herself, and by herself. This is the second implication of the privacy claim, which shows it to be akin to familiar, and rather uncontroversial, Enlightenment ideas about the originality of judgment. One can acquire information through testimony, and be instructed in truths and precepts; but nothing of value stands to be gained from this unless these gifts are incorporated into one's own understanding, of which one can make independent use.¹⁵ Ultimately, we have to see for ourselves how things are: no one can do this for us. M's attention to D is like this. So while there is something that M can do in conversation with F, *that* activity — whatever it is — cannot itself be the alteration of her vision.

But if this were all that was at stake, we would miss what is unfamiliar and challenging about Murdoch's account of moral activity. The third implication is that there should be some sense in which only M can know what she is doing. On the behaviourist analysis, we need only go looking for common marks in the determination of the public context that gives any talk of (say) *deciding* its sense. But if M's activity is not out in the open, any account of *what it is* she is doing cannot be understood along such lines. Is love a mental concept, and does it admit of genetic analysis, Murdoch asks? If it did, then we would know what it is to love once we have mastered the use of the word 'love', which is a public skill: 'No doubt Mary's little lamb loved Mary,' but this does little to teach us what it is to love (SG 28). Switching gears, Murdoch then speaks of love as a *value* concept and contends that such concepts can only be grasped 'in depth': in the thick of the engaged activity itself (28). A person's grasp of what it is to love will under any normal circumstances deepen, or at least become more nuanced and complex, over time. Courage provides Murdoch with a vivid example: 'we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty' (28), as we 'come to distinguish a self-assertive ferocity from the kind of courage which would enable a man coolly to choose the labour camp rather than the easy compromise with the tyrant' (93).¹⁶

¹⁵ Locus classicus texts include Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (I.iv. §§23-25) and Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (A133/B172).

¹⁶ *Repentance* furnishes a similar example (SG 25).

This brings us into the ballpark of the third implication of the privacy claim — only the compelling example makes the whole idea go down suspiciously smoothly. So let's consider the statement that best encapsulates the third implication of the privacy claim:

We do not simply, through being rational and knowing ordinary language, 'know' the meaning of all necessary moral words. We may have to learn the meaning; and since we are human historical individuals *the movement of understanding is onwards into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit*, and not back towards a genesis in the rulings of an impersonal public language. (SG 28; emphasis added)

M's activity, and the understanding that guides it, is peculiarly her own. Hence her activity might be essentially singular, not actually sharing anything in common with anyone else's activity. This is the third implication of the privacy claim. As I see it, it raises a question that occupies Murdoch for the remainder of *Sovereignty*: why think that there is any multiply exemplifiable form of thought that makes M's activity what it is?

Presumably the categorical imperative is meant to be a multiply exemplifiable form of thought if anything is. With this we enter into territory where the prospect of finding deep confluences between Murdoch's and Kant's ethics looks quite dim. Murdoch seems to say that moral activity is essentially singular; Kant seems to say that moral activity necessarily instantiates a timeless form of thought. And Kant might have the upper hand here. Murdoch wants to argue that love is the central moral activity, and yet the privacy claim seems to deny that there is any common core to what 'loving attention' involves. She speaks of continuous, progressive effort: 'The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are "looking", making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results' (SG 42). These are efforts of obedience to reality; but the direction of one's attention, it seems, might be quite arbitrary. Does anything and anyone deserve such efforts of just and loving attention?

2.4 Kantian ideas in *Sovereignty*

One response to this worry — one that tempted me for a long time — is to point to the Kantian ideas about fundamental value that seem to be at work in *Sovereignty*. 'Of course a good man may be infinitely eccentric,' Murdoch allows, but he is not living in a fantasy world: 'he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims' (SG 57). A little later, Murdoch elaborates, remarking that great art can teach us something morally valuable, namely 'how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self' (SG 64). These

are familiar ideas, rooted in the Kantian ontological distinction between persons and things.¹⁷ What Murdoch stresses, though, is that we do not learn this lesson in one go, because one day we gasp at the bold fragility of an orchid, or find ourselves moved to tears by a Giorgione. The understanding that here is a person, and not a thing, admits of degree: we learn the lesson progressively, with continuous effort. ‘The *more* the separateness and differentness of other people is realised,’ Murdoch elaborates, ‘and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the *harder* it becomes to treat a person as a thing’ (SG 64; my emphasis).

Murdoch certainly is drawing on Kantian ideas about the value of persons. But how are these ideas put to work? The Kantian who reads Murdoch sympathetically might think that they are pressed into service to block the worries about arbitrariness that arise with the privacy claim. Here’s how that interpretation might go. First, we observe that love seems to be a paradigmatically private activity, if anything is. For it is quite natural to think that the quality of consciousness involved in loving is essentially singular, even when the beloved is one and the same. The mother’s love is not the father’s love, though they both love the same child deeply, and (as we commonly say) ‘equally’. Arbitrariness is avoided because we are all required to appreciate one timeless and universal value: the objective and unconditioned value of persons. The privacy claim simply acknowledges that we can only appreciate this value in the thick of some set of contingent attachments, which give the activity, in each case, its singular valence and texture.

The chief problem with *this* Kantian reading of Murdoch is that it aligns the privacy claim with contingency.¹⁸ There is something we are all doing when we love; and that *something* is the necessary and universal aspect of this activity. It is the morally significant bit, the requisite appreciation of a timeless and universal value. The privacy claim then deals with the contingent bit, the particular attachments that could perfectly well be otherwise. David Velleman’s work on love falls into this category. For Velleman, respect is the ‘required minimum’ response to the value of persons, and love the ‘optional maximum’ response to this value (1999, 366). Both are ways of appreciating a timeless and universal value, but love has a distinct phenomenology, in which the beloved does not figure as an interchangeable ‘anyone’. Velleman’s account also

¹⁷ For Kant on the enjoyment of (natural) beauty as morally salutary, see MM 6:443; and as a sign of good character, CJ 5:298-9.

¹⁸ This Kantian reading of Murdoch might also fail to take the full measure of her views about the deep kinship between morality and art: for art does not solely open our eyes to the details of *human personalities*. Murdoch, moreover, conceives of love as ‘attention to individuals, human individuals *or individual realities of other kinds*’ (SG 36-37; my emphasis). I am not sure how serious this problem is in the end, since — as we have just seen — what any good man must be aware of in his surroundings is ‘the existence of other people and their claims’ (SG 57). Thus love of *human* individuals must be paradigmatic. Exploration of the complexities arising here would require a separate study.

draws a distinction between *appreciating* the value of persons and making a *judgment* about it. Respect and love are phenomenologically distinct modes of *appreciating* the value of persons. The *judgment* about this value is effectively that every person has it: it is universal. And yet to be a member of the class of persons is to be an entity that ought to be treated as an individual rather than as a member of a class.

On this view, a *judgment* about the value of persons promises to correct for what may be misleading in the *appreciation* of this value. And *love* seems to be the mode of appreciation that would be principally subject to such correction: for the beloved does not *register* as an interchangeable ‘anyone’, even though there is some sense — on this view — in which he *really is*. Respect would not be subject to the same correction from judgment, inasmuch as the respectee *does* register as just ‘anyone’. Thus Velleman effectively subordinates love to respect — despite his intention to take his cues from Murdoch (1999, 342). Velleman may aspire to accord love a certain centrality in ethics by contending that it is only through love that we can *fully* appreciate the value of persons; but by taking love to be essentially selective (as respect is not)¹⁹ he undermines his entitlement to any such claim, since love’s selectivity is what would subject it to correction from judgment on this view. Thus while Velleman dismisses Dillon’s worries about intersubstitutability on the grounds that she fails to distinguish judgment and appreciation of value (1999, 367-8), there is in the end no obvious reason to think the distinction addresses the problem.

I have been arguing that Murdoch arrives at a distinctive view of the nature of moral activity *because* she takes love to be the focal moral activity. The lesson from love is that moral activity is essentially singular: this is the third implication of the privacy claim. Prima facie, this is among the most unKantian ideas in Murdoch. So it is no surprise that the Kantian reading of Murdoch under consideration fails to take its measure. But take its measure we must, if we are to stand any chance of correctly appreciating the connections between Kant and Murdoch — which I think run deep — without distortion to either.

2.5 The singularity of moral activity

Murdoch remarks that her point about the singularity of moral activity is not entirely new, and suggests that her view — indeed the whole project of *Sovereignty* — ‘might be put by saying: moral terms must be treated as concrete universals’ (SG 28-29). This remark about the concrete universal has been almost universally ignored by Murdoch’s commentators.²⁰ And perhaps for

¹⁹ See note 14.

²⁰ It is mentioned in passing by Antonaccio (2000, 122), Brookes (2012b, 43) and Clarke (forthcoming). Bagnoli (2012, 221-223) offers a more extended discussion, which I dispute below (n24).

good reason: it is a difficult idea with a murky history; to take it up is to risk explaining the obscure through the more obscure. But let's take a closer look.

First, the remark says something about treating moral *terms* as concrete universals. Which moral terms? She has been talking about concepts of mental activity: at first, tracking Hampshire, of things like *decide*; and then, speaking for herself, of *love* and *justice, courage* and (ultimately) *humility* — that is, concepts of the virtues, as continuous ways of being actively minded. These are presumably among the moral terms to be 'treated as concrete universals'. What could this mean? Let's begin with what we already know. M's activity is love; and it is peculiarly her own, the details of this personality, and so forth. Hence I suggested that, by Murdoch's lights, moral activity is essentially singular. Thus when Murdoch says that moral terms should be treated as concrete universals, she may mean that (for example) the term 'love' names resembling particulars.²¹ The mother's love is not the father's love, and Socrates's wisdom is not Plato's wisdom: there is some sense in which they resemble one another, but they do not literally share anything in common.

Let us consider this point in relation to Murdoch's overarching thesis. The idea that moral activity is essentially singular is perhaps intuitively captured by the claim that love is the fundamental moral activity, and that love is knowledge of the individual: that's the first element of her thesis. The second element is that this knowing is to be conceived under a command of perfection. This does not undercut the singularity of moral activity. Consider what Murdoch has to say about artistic effort. Any good artist is 'obedient to a conception of perfection' and constantly relates his efforts to it in what *seems* an external manner' (SG 61; my emphasis). It can seem as if the artist looks to a standard that obtains independently of his own efforts. 'One may of course try to 'incarnate' the idea of perfection by saying to oneself 'I want to write like Shakespeare' or 'I want to paint like Piero' — and then, it would seem, one has a standard by which to measure and guide one's own efforts, a standard that is surely in some sense independent of one's own efforts, if one writes novels in London in 1977. But in the end 'of course one knows that Shakespeare and Piero, though almost gods, are not gods, *and one has got to do the thing oneself, alone and differently*' (61; my emphasis). And yet at the same time Murdoch denies that the greatness of a Piero or Shakespeare is 'something peculiar and personal like a proper name' (94). There is some kind of unity to their efforts, though it cannot be understood by appeal to a determinate form or idea that is instantiated in each case. 'The great artists are 'great in ways which are to some extent similar, and increased understanding of an art reveals its unity through its excellence' (SG 94).

²¹ I.e., it names all the lovings (or the wisdoms, or the courages). Such abstract particulars are called 'tropes' in contemporary metaphysics; Loux (1996, 79-89).

The notion of a ‘concrete universal’ has roots in Hegel’s logic; it was taken up by F.H. Bradley in *Ethical Studies*, and developed further by other British Idealists, particularly Bernard Bosanquet. It seems to have meant various things in various places. And Murdoch is not explicit which of these sources she has in mind.²² However, one basic point about the concrete universal seems directly relevant to what we have been considering thus far. A concrete universal does not exist apart from its instances.²³ If this seems puzzling, consider the sense in which an *abstract* universal might be said to exist independently of its instances. An abstract universal can be completely grasped: we need only know the formula, the definition, the logos. The geometer has a perfectly determinate grasp of trianglehood as such, which guides her work of reasoning with diagrams. Many features of the drawn figure must be studiously ignored; only aspects of the drawn figure are properly available for consideration as she carries out her demonstration. Her work with the diagram depends upon her prior, and independent, grasp of trianglehood as such. The abstract universal guides from without. So when Murdoch says that moral terms must be treated as *concrete* universals, she denies that moral activity could be anything like this.²⁴

Again, which moral terms are to be treated as concrete universals? In the first place, as I have suggested, she must mean the terms for the virtues — chief among which seems to be love. But what about the term ‘person’? Surely it is a moral term, too. But it does not refer — at least not directly — to an activity. Yet it is bound up with the concept of love. Here we come to the centre of Murdoch’s ethics, and find her drawing upon Kantian ideas about the value of persons. ‘Love’ is a moral term referring to the focal moral activity. Love is knowledge of the individual. Although these individuals are not exclusively *human* individuals for Murdoch, it is nevertheless abhorrent to think of loving an abstraction. Love is a way of being compelled by the existence of *someone*, in the paradigmatic case. We are not compelled by an abstract formula of personhood: for this is not an entity that *exists*. By claiming that her thesis could be reformulated in terms of the concrete universal, Murdoch nods to the nominalist rejection of the existence of

²² On the notion in British idealism, see Mander (2011, 294-5 and 313-321) and Candlish (1978). For an assessment of its roots in Hegel, see Stern (2007).

²³ See Bradley (2006, 163): ‘The good will (for morality) is meaningless, if, whatever else it be, it be not the will of living finite beings. It is a concrete universal, because it not only is above but is within and throughout its details, and is only in so far as they are.’

²⁴ Bagnoli (2012, 222) takes Murdoch’s invocation of the concrete universal to entail that one has ‘a more abstract and empty concept of love’ at twenty, and hence a more concrete and contentful one at forty. But this reading misses Murdoch’s point about the knowledge of a value concept is possible only ‘in depth’ (SG 28). The upshot of this, I am arguing, is that there no guidance to be had from outside of the engaged activity itself, through an independent grasp of an abstract articulation of a form of thought. Bagnoli’s idea that we move from a more abstract to more concrete understanding of a concept seems to posit just such guidance. Furthermore, surely a person’s understanding of what it is to love is *always* concrete; and if all goes well, one will know *better* what it is to love at forty than one did at twenty. Murdoch does not understand this development as a gradual padding of an originally sparse and abstract conception.

abstract universals. I am not sure if she means, with this, to take a position in fundamental ontology as such; her point can be read as simply denying that moral activity can be guided from without, by relating one's efforts to an abstract universal. To treat the moral term 'person' as a concrete universal is to deny that one can have a practically determinate thought about the value of persons that is independent of one's capacity to love a real person. Together in one breath, the concepts of love and person are 'infinitely to be learned' — which is just what Murdoch indicates that she means when she invokes the concrete universal (SG 28).

3. Kant and Kantian ethics

Now we need to consider how much of Murdoch's ideas about love and the nature of moral activity plausibly figure in Kant's Doctrine of Virtue. As we do this, let us briefly revisit Velleman's synthesis of Kant and Murdoch, wherein love and respect are phenomenologically distinct modes of appreciating one and the same value. Velleman, it turns out, invokes Murdoch's notion of attention to distinguish love from respect: 'the people we love are the ones we succeed in *perceiving* as persons, within some of the human organisms milling about us' (2008, 199). This implies that the people that we do not love — the people that, if all reasonably goes well, we at least respect — we do not succeed in perceiving as persons. Reminding us of the distinction between the judgment and appreciation of value, Velleman remarks that 'we certainly believe in the personhood of everyone, even without vividly perceiving it' (2008, 200). And so, on this view, we do not respect *individuals*: we respect entities that we judge or 'believe' to be persons. This should be a devastating concession to make if we are after a Kantian ethics that avoids the intersubstitutability problem.

But there is something right about what Velleman is saying. Suppose a stranger is coming your way down a narrow stretch of sidewalk: there is a sense in which this person figures as just anyone. You are not 'really looking' at this person, à la Murdoch. Perhaps you are in a hurry, and disinclined to be the one to step out of the way so that the other can pass, even though you may have the better opportunity to do so, given the obstacles on the sidewalk and the timing of the encounter. You remind yourself that it is not right to assume that your need to get somewhere is more pressing: it is not *respectful* to barge through, without caring that there is another person, also headed somewhere, also needing to get through the same tight space. You face a kind of practical problem, and recognising that here is a person (rather than a ball, or a dog) calls for certain kinds of concrete response.

I mean to have described something familiar here. I also take the familiar picture to be somewhat depressing. The other person figures as a problem: you'd really rather he weren't

there right now. In all normal cases, this is a mild preference. And while it should not be confused with the heinous preference that the other person did not *exist*, we also cannot say that you are rejoicing in his existence. Following Velleman, we would have to say that he presents you with a problem that needs to be dealt with — dealt with in a manner appropriate to the *belief* that here is a person rather than a thing. My point is quite simple: recognition respect in the virtuous person cannot be like that. What is missing is love.

Virtue — as Kant and Murdoch both stress — is an ideal: a standard of perfection, which we can in some sense grasp from our position of imperfection, but can never fully realise.²⁵ For Kant, virtue is the mindedness that follows from the free adoption of two morally obligatory ends: one's own perfection, and the happiness of others. This leads him to distinguish self-regarding and other-regarding dimensions of virtue. He also distinguishes 'narrow' and 'wide' obligations of virtue. The narrow obligations are effectively duties of recognition respect: that one acknowledge oneself, and others, as persons. Duties of recognition respect are articulated negatively, in terms of prohibitions that constitute their violation.²⁶ In our example, you have not violated duties of recognition respect. Now, Kant says in several different ways that avoiding violating duties of recognition respect is not to be confused with virtue. First, a person could avoid treating another as mere means and yet 'still be indifferent to them' (MM 6:395). Virtue requires that we take an active interest in the humanity of oneself and others. Second, for Kant the other-regarding dimension of virtue is articulated in terms of duties of *love* to others.²⁷ If you are arrogant in your demands, if you defame and mock others — all ways of violating duties of recognition respect — then you are vicious. But meeting the duties of recognition respect is compatible with what Kant calls *Untugend* or mere non-virtue.²⁸ Positive virtue requires more than respect, in other words: it requires love as an abiding frame of mind.

These observations challenge the assumption that respect is the fundamental moral attitude in Kant's ethics, at least when the Doctrine of Virtue is taken into account. Kant's order of exposition corroborates the point: duties of love to others — the positive articulation of the other-regarding dimension of virtue — are presented before anything is said about recognition respect.²⁹ If Kant conceives of virtue as the mindedness that follows from the free adoption of the two morally obligatory ends, then the love at issue is presumably to be understood in dispositional terms, as a kind of abiding affective propensity. Since Kant presents this love in

²⁵ On virtue as an ideal: MM (6:383, 396, 409), CPrR (5:83).

²⁶ MM §§37-42 (6:462-66).

²⁷ See the heading at MM 6:448.

²⁸ MM (6:464; also 6:384 and 390).

²⁹ Duties of love to others are articulated in MM §§23-35 (6: 448-458); duties of recognition respect at §§37-44 (6:462-468).

relation to the Biblical command to love one's neighbour as oneself, calling it the 'ethical law of perfection' and presenting it as a 'duty of all human beings to toward one another' (MM 6:450), the love at issue must be an agapic welcoming of some sort. Love in this sense is a dispositional readiness to cherish or welcome those with whom one shares a present. This readiness colours or imbues A's attitude of respectful comportment to B, making it what it is as an expression of virtue. Thus even where it would be inappropriate to actively love another person — for example, when passing strangers on a walk through the city — there should still be a readiness to do so, and this readiness should characterise what is distinctive about the virtuous person's consciousness in her respectful comportment to others. This, I take it, is a plausible upshot of Kant's presentation of love in the Doctrine of Virtue: let's look further at the textual evidence.

3.1 Love in the Doctrine of Virtue

There is some question about whether love and respect in fact figure as *feelings* in Kant's Doctrine of Virtue. Kant begins by saying that they are feelings that accompany the fulfilment of duties of virtue to others (MM 6:448); but soon thereafter he appears — at least in the standard English translation — to deny that the love at issue is a feeling (6:449). However, in fact he only denies that this love is an 'aesthetic' feeling (*ästhetisch*); the love of Biblical command cannot be a matter of taking delight in another's pleasing qualities, he explains (6:449).³⁰ With this he points to the possibility that the love at issue may not be the ordinary feeling of love that most of us are most familiar with. This is the point that I want to explore briefly first.

Is the love proper to the Kantian ideal of virtue plausibly a certain quality of consciousness? This was effectively Murdoch's question when (in an earlier essay) she disputed Kant's claim that ordinary 'pathological' love cannot be commanded: it can and must be commanded, she retorted, since quality of consciousness matters.³¹ But quality of consciousness *does* matter for Kant, too, as we can see if we turn to another set of claims in the Doctrine of Virtue. There are certain given dispositions of feeling — 'receptivity to concepts of duty', as he puts it — that we are under no obligation to acquire (since they are natural, given endowments — and anyone without them would be 'morally dead'), but are under full obligation to *cultivate* (6:399-400). Love of one's neighbour, or love of human beings, is included among these dispositions (6:399, 401). How do we cultivate this natural disposition of feeling? Through benevolence, or willing another's good. Since willing (as opposed to mere wishing) is mustering all of the resources in one's power to a certain end (G 4:394), benevolence will normally be a matter of doing good to others, or *beneficence* (MM 6:402). Now, Kant is clear that he does not

³⁰ As Kant says elsewhere, a command to feel 'pathological' love is an absurdity (CPrR 5:83).

³¹ See 'The Sublime and the Good' (Murdoch 1997, 219-220).

confuse the do-gooding with love. Rather, he says that the practice of beneficence produces love: ‘your beneficence will produce love of them in you (as a skill [Fertigkeit] of the inclination to beneficence in general)’ (6:402). *This* — the cultivation of the natural endowment of love of humanity — is the commanded love at issue (6:456-7).

He is plausibly pointing to a certain quality of consciousness. Otherwise it would be enough to say that we are required to do good to other human beings. Instead Kant says that love is a kind of concomitant of the fulfilment of this duty (6:448). When Kant suggests that beneficence comes first, and love of this sort follows as a result, he does not mean to eschew the importance of one’s quality of consciousness. Rather, he means to acknowledge that one *does* have to adopt the morally obligatory end at issue — that this is in some crucial sense prior. However, this allows for the possibility that any person’s comprehension of what this *concretely requires of her* can only deepen, and hopefully become more intelligent or skilful, over time. And this deepening of one’s understanding of what it is to take an interest in another’s happiness is quite plausibly nothing other than the sort of development of a person’s understanding of what it is to love that Murdoch took to be crucial.

One might complain that it is one thing to say that ‘quality of consciousness’ matters to Kant, and quite another thing to say that this ‘quality of consciousness’ necessarily involves *love* in any recognisable sense. Here it is worth observing that Kant’s view of love as a concomitant to genuine benevolence bears comparison to the Stoic invocation of *eupatheiai* — the ‘good emotions’ proper to virtue — as concomitant expressions of correct judgments of value.³² The Stoics stress, perhaps even more than Kant, that virtue is an ideal: thus what figures as part of the emotional life of virtue might be somewhat unrecognisable to us. I have been arguing that agapic welcoming is central to the temperament of virtue by Kant’s lights. What this involves might be partly comprehensible to us within a certain range of circumstances, even if we recognise that we more often like the person in the sidewalk example. Most of us still know what it is like to regard others — sometimes complete strangers — with an open gladness that they are there. However, many people will also say that such an attitude is not always appropriate: is a tyrant, or a torturer, to be so loved? Murdoch notes the difficulty (SG 59, 71) and suggests thinking of the love inflected as mercy (65) or compassion (71). Still, these are limiting cases that threaten to alienate us from whatever we can grasp about the agapic ideal in the central cases, where love more readily figures to us as fitting and due; and some will, no doubt, take this as grounds to reject the agapic ideal entirely. But Murdoch, at any rate, takes it

³² See Graver (2007, 48-58); there are three general kinds of *eupatheiai* (joy, wish, and caution), with love (*agapēsis*) figuring in some Stoic accounts under wish (*boulēsis*), along with various notions of good will (*eumenia*, *eunoia*) and welcoming (*aspasmos*).

that the central cases are comprehensible to us with sufficient richness to give us our bearings for a progressive perfection towards the ethical ideal: this is part of her point, I take it, when she presents the story of M as a familiar and everyday example.³³

Whether Kant takes this view, or something like it, is less clear. But since Kant takes love of humanity as a disposition to be cultivated, and rendered more skilful over time, perhaps he means to allow for something like Murdoch's point: i.e., that a loving comportment towards others in the central cases would, with proper cultivation, expand gradually to cover the more challenging cases, and finally the tyrants and torturers at the limit. For Kant *does* suggest that he takes the ethical ideal to be virtue as the holiness illustrated by Jesus (CPrR 5:127n), who is portrayed in the Gospels as capable of the mercy and compassion that Murdoch evidently has in mind. Moreover, Kant takes the Christian ideal of virtue as holiness to have an advantage over the Stoic ideal of virtue as the wisdom of the sage: for the sage is supposed to have transcended human nature, and Kant complains that pointing to such a genuinely unattainable ideal makes us moral fantasists (CPrR 5:86, 127n; see also 27:609-610). We might of course ask ourselves whether the Christian idea of virtue as holiness is any more genuinely attainable; but if what I have been arguing is correct, Kant has the resources to make the case in something like Murdoch's terms.

3.2 Existing individuals

What remains is to consider whether anything like Murdoch's claims about the singularity of moral activity are applicable to Kant's Doctrine of Virtue. For Kant, most people would say, the fundamental moral activity can only be deliberation according to the moral law, the manifestation of a multiply exemplifiable form of thought. This is certainly the picture of Kant's ethics we have from the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. Does it follow that there is nothing akin to Murdoch's privacy claim in Kant, nothing like her idea that 'moral terms must be treated as concrete universals'? Once again, the Doctrine of Virtue calls some of our most durable assumptions about Kant's ethics into question.

I want to draw attention to a remarkable passage where Kant explains that we have duties only to actually existing human beings. The local point of these remarks is to clarify that

³³ The final phrase of the Murdoch's overarching thesis quotes Matthew 5:48 (the Sermon on the Mount), where Jesus recalls the common saying that one should love one's neighbour as oneself. The instruction could mislead: if one loves one's neighbour because he is 'near' and has interests bound up with one's own, then one will fail, really, to love him at all. And so Jesus commands us to love *our enemies*, so that we might learn what it is to love. This is understood in terms of the command 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect'. Can we have a practically determinate thought about the divine standard of perfection? Surely not. The command to love our enemies simply provides an orientation to our efforts.

we do not have duties *to* non-rational animals, inanimate nature, or even God — though we may have duties ‘in regard to’ these entities. But I am interested in Kant’s elaboration of the positive point:

[T]he constraining (binding) subject must, *first*, be a person; and this person must, *second*, be given as an object of experience, since the human being is to strive for the end of this person’s will and this can happen only in relation to each other of two beings that exist (for a mere thought-entity [Gedankending] cannot be the *cause* of any result in terms of ends). (6:442)

By ‘thought-entity’, Kant means something that cannot be encountered in any experience.³⁴ Now, as we already saw, Kant says that indifference is not compatible with virtue: it is not enough to avoid treating persons as mere means to one’s discretionary ends; one has to take an active interest in this humanity. Thus Kant says that the Doctrine of Virtue is united in the ‘duty to make the human being as such’ one’s end (6:395). And surely the ‘human being as such’ is a thought-entity, somewhat as the ‘triangle as such’ can only be a thought-entity: in experience, we encounter particular human beings and particular triangles. What happens to our assumptions about Kant if we take the ‘thought-entity’ at issue in this passage to be ‘the human being as such’? The result, I contend, is something akin to Murdoch’s point that moral terms must be treated as concrete universals.

I can only make this case briefly here. And to do so I will need to draw attention to another detail: Kant typically glosses virtue as a certain ‘strength’ of a person’s moral ‘resolution’ (6:384, 390, 409, 477). Strength is something that admits of degree: and it is tempting to think that Kant means something like pure willpower — so that the virtuous person can overpower all of the temptations leading him astray. If we think of virtue in these terms, we have the neo-Kantian picture that Murdoch rejects as incompatible with the simple and obvious fact that love is a central concept in morals. But if the ‘resolution’ is to make the human being as such one’s end, the ‘strength’ at issue might not concern brute will power, but instead some comprehension of the value of persons.

Murdoch stresses that this understanding admits of degree. We do not appreciate the value of persons simply by getting the fundamental moral ontology right — by knowing a person from a mere thing. While you know that it is another person coming your way on the narrow stretch of sidewalk, and not a ball or a dog, we should not say (in the story as it was told) that you have a perfect grasp of this value. And this is why Murdoch points to *love* as a value concept that can only be grasped ‘in depth’ (SG 28): there is no guidance to be had from an abstract

³⁴ See, e.g., A447/B475 or A489/B517 for this usage.

universal that can be comprehensively grasped, independently of the concrete activity of love itself. The only guidance to these efforts comes from within the activity itself, as we are moved and compelled by actually existing persons.

Of course there is a sense, for Kant, in which personhood can also be treated as an abstract universal: there is a sense in which we can grasp completely what it is to be person, and not a thing. But *as* a moral term, relevant to the struggle to be good, it must be treated as a concrete universal by Kant's lights, too. For Kant says that only real, existing persons 'can be a cause of any result in terms of ends'. And if the 'end' at issue is virtue, then the upshot is plausibly that only attention to real existing persons can guide one in the effort to be good. If so, then by Kant's lights moral activity must fundamentally involve attention to non-interchangeable individuals — be this with respect, or love.

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