**Attention**

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**Introduction**

Attention, for Iris Murdoch, is a central concept in more than one sense. On the one hand, it appears to be one of the keys, if not the key, to goodness, the task of the moral subject, and the pre-requisite for right action. On the other, attention can function as the hinge around which Murdoch’s general ethical worldview (including psychology and metaphysics) can be made to revolve, and through which it turns away from the mainstream contemporary philosophy of her time. Overwhelmingly inspired by Simone Weil, Murdoch presents attention as a truth-seeing and truth-discovering attitude and activity, animated by Platonic eros.

Murdoch signals the significance of attention at various places throughout her work: ‘the view which I suggest … connects morality with attention to individuals’ (IP 329). Morality is connected with attention, and attention is connected to the moral subject by being ‘the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent’ (IP 327). Attention both characterises the active moral agent, and it is what the moral agent should aim at­—the guiding task of moral improvement. The reason for such centrality of attention in morality is that attention is what reveals reality, and reality is a normative concept (IP 329), for various reasons: reality can make moral demands on us; the apprehension of reality is good in itself, contrasted with idle, fearful, or self-concerned fantasy; and finally, the capacity to apprehend reality is not a neutral, passive form of perception, but reality is only revealed to us through the moral effort of openness, unselfing, and creative imagination. Attention is what connects us with the world, where we belong.

To a large extent, Murdoch’s articulation of attention can be understood as morally significant in its own right, but it is even more striking if we read it in the context of Murdoch’s meta-ethical views, in particular on the background of two of Murdoch’s distinctive ethical positions: the ethical importance of the inner life and moral realism. In relation to the former, assigning a moral role to attention fits with one of Murdoch’s key goals, that of showing that the inner life can be morally important, not only as leading to ‘outer’ action, but also in its own right, unconnected to action; in fact, it shows that morality really starts there. In relation to moral realism, attention is what reveals a reality that is not only morally relevant, but a *moral* reality—which for Murdoch includes both the Good (always imperfectly grasped) and various moral facts and properties.

This chapter is divided into two parts. While both seek to explain how Murdoch understands attention, the first is more exegetical, the second more interested in what we can do with Murdoch’s concept. In other words, I will ask two questions: What is attention for Murdoch, and How is it exercised? The two aspects are of course inseparable, but in order to understand Murdoch’s emphasis on attention and its importance in the moral life, we need to get clearer about Murdoch’s use of the word, signal some difficulties, and then figure out to what extent and in what ways Murdoch’s attention can guide us in our moral struggles.

In the course of addressing these questions, I shall make reference to another philosophical mind, that of Simone Weil, at various places. The original foregrounding of attention as the main task of the individual and its key ethical import is due to Weil, who some decades before Murdoch was reflecting on the normative power of reality and truth, and on the demands they make on the individual. Attention was Weil’s answer, but embedded in yet a different kind of metaphysics, a religious one in which the value of all reality is justified by its origin in God. Whether this view can be adopted, almost intact, by a secular morality is a long and difficult problem, and Murdoch’s philosophy is, I believe, at least the best attempt at doing so that we have. Murdoch first acknowledges her debt to Simone Weil in ‘The Idea of Perfection’, where she claims that the word ‘attention’, as she has been using it, is ‘borrowed’ from Weil (IP 327), and in the opening pages of ‘On God and Good’ Murdoch states that, in what follows, her ‘debt to Simone Weil will become evident’ (OGG 340). Weil is present more as an inspiration, and less in the form of critical engagement. Yet the absence of God in Murdoch (despite her idea of the Good as absolute) and her more compromising view, perhaps more sympathetic to human fallibility, lead to some differences with Weil which I will highlight below.

**What is attention?**

Given the importance that Murdoch bestows upon attention, and the impact that the concept has had on Murdochian scholarship, it is necessary to spend some time investigating what exactly Murdoch means by it. This involves some sifting and re-arranging, since Murdoch does not provide a definition of attention. This is not a complaint: Murdoch’s method does not proceed in the standard ‘analytic’ way of definition-elaboration-revision-consequences; nor does she seem interested to offer specialised concepts to be used in a narrow field. Yet, singling out the concept of attention and understanding its role in ethics will require us to do some of this work, mindful of these two caveats, and following her spirit at least insofar as the goal is to know how we can not only understand attention, but also at the same time live more attentively.

*A technical concept?*

‘Everyone knows what attention is’ famously wrote Williams James (1891), yet after years of reading Murdoch I am not so sure. Perhaps too much focus on a concept, or a phenomenon, makes it lose its familiar intelligibility, but there are intricacies in attention that deserve some reflection, at the cost of losing familiarity. The question we shall consider in this section, indeed, is whether Murdoch’s attention is exactly the same as what we talk about in ordinary language, and whether it is the same as the concept used by psychologists, in what is now a flourishing field of ‘attention studies’.

In psychology and in empirically informed studies in philosophy of mind, the central feature of attention is its selectivity. Discussions revolve around the nature of such selectivity, the processes involved in it, and the purpose and outcome, but the central aspect of selection remains. In psychology, most of the studies of attention concern visual attention, the selection of objects from the visual scene (see Pylyshyn and Storm 1988), often considered to be beyond the subject’s control. Phenomenologically influenced accounts too take an interest in the selectivity of attention; Sebastian Watzl (2017) describes attention as a ‘spotlight’ that makes objects salient, prominent and sharp, operating as an organizational feature of experience. Another significant question in this field concerns the relationship between attention and consciousness (e.g. Prinz 2011; Koch and Tsuchiya 2007).

Ordinary language is, as its wont, looser in its boundaries. The moral element of attention typically emerges when attention is declined in its person-describing attribute—‘attentiveness’—but less often when attention is taken as an action. We have no problem understanding how someone who is attentive to others, and has the disposition of attentiveness, can be morally praiseworthy.[[1]](#endnote-1) But when we attend, or ‘pay attention’ to different objects around us, in ordinary language, we may select them based on interests and motivations which can be morally neutral (I pay attention to the cake in the oven to know when it’s time to take it out) or straightforwardly bad (paying attention to our enemies' weak spots and failures); or we do not select our objects of attention at all, and are ‘captured’ in our attention by external stimuli which, again, often seem morally irrelevant (a book falling off the sofa as we doze off).

Murdoch’s attention seems to stretch to embrace most of the meanings and uses of attention just mentioned. In relation to the psychological concept, Murdochian attention is certainly broader. While sometimes attention in Murdoch involves selectivity and resulting exclusivity, in other cases it is precisely the opposite. In psychology, it is essential that attention has a specific object or a limited number of objects. Murdoch embraces the sense of human limitation that we can draw from the psychological picture—we cannot attend to everything all the time, so what we do attend to matters—but goes well beyond attention as selectivity. Her concept, in fact, can be divided into two distinct aspects, which we can call ‘focused’ and ‘open’ attention: in focused attention, we concentrate, say, on a friend’s story, or on a mathematical problem; in open attention, we remain receptive to the relative salience of what’s around us, without consciously choosing. This is a distinction made only for the sake of clarity: receptivity is necessary also when we focus our attention, and what becomes salient in moments of openness is determined by previous and habitual focal points. Another reason to consider Murdoch’s concept of attention as broader than the scientific one is that it involves the whole individual rather than specific faculties, while psychologists and cognitive scientists normally study attention in relation to vision and related specific mental states and processes.

The relationship of Murdochian attention with attention in ordinary language is more difficult to pin down, because the concept is far less clearly defined in both. There are, however, at least two instances in which Murdoch seems to depart from ordinary language, noted above: the possibility of bad (self-interested, malicious, cruel) attention, and the neutral, passive capturing of attention by external stimuli. One pertains to the quality of attention, the other to its object. Both quality and objects are key to understanding the moral relevance of attention, so I will discuss these points more fully below. It will emerge that Murdoch’s attention, while on the whole being morally good, nonetheless differs from these ordinary uses less than it might at first appear.

*Activity, attitude, faculty*

I have been talking of attention, implicitly, as an action, a faculty, and an attitude. Attending, attention, and attentiveness are ways in which attention—taking ‘attention’ as the general word— operates in us, but the main point for Murdoch remains the same: a movement towards moral progress, led by the desire for good, and aiming at reality. Murdoch herself prefers to use the words ‘task’ or ‘effort’ to talk about attention, rather than these three words, yet she implies, through her use of the concept in different contexts, the possibility of taking it as a faculty, as an attitude, or as an activity. As a faculty, attention encompasses the exercise of other faculties, the senses, intellect, emotions, in particular configurations. As an attitude, attention involves a stance of the individual towards reality; it is possible to develop habits of attention, which then give rise to something that can be considered a virtue, so that attention becomes spontaneous or part of the individual’s character. But not all acts of attention are the spontaneous result of an attentive attitude. Moreover, attention can generally be exercised for limited periods of time. Attention, thus understood, is an act or activity, which has a beginning and end in time and can be exercised, voluntarily, even by someone who is not generally attentive.

*Attention and visual perception*

We have seen that attention in psychology is mostly thought of as visual attention, and despite the differences Murdoch herself shows a preference for the semantic field of vision in her discussions of both attention itself and morality more generally. Attention is famously described as ‘just and loving gaze’ (IP 327), the human being is ‘a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees’ (IP 332), and moral progress involves ‘clear vision [which] is a result of moral imagination and moral effort’ (IP 329). Given that attention is not only visual attention, what is the role of such prominence of vision, and to what extent is it metaphorical?[[2]](#endnote-2)

Murdoch addresses the problem with reference to Plato and the ‘vision’ of beauty and the Forms in the *Phaedrus*:

Plato here draws attention to the dominance of sight over the other senses. We also, in a natural metaphor, ‘see’ (perceive) non-visual forms of beauty. Plato, in his myth, does not discuss exactly what seeing beauty is like. He assumes his hearer will understand. He is suggesting to us the naturalness of using visual images to express spiritual truths. (MGM 15)

Murdoch, too, often seems to assume the naturalness of visual imagery for moral perception. It is something that ordinary language can, indeed, accommodate well—especially when argument seems redundant or useless (‘Can’t you *see* that what you did was wrong?!’). Vision, Murdoch writes, is the ‘clearest of the senses’; it certainly seems to be the one that, for historical, accidental, or natural reasons, is most natural to use with regards to apprehensions that are not only empirical.

Murdoch herself acknowledges the worry connected to the predominance of vision in the same passage: ‘Plato has been criticised for his use of visual imagery by thinkers who want to connect this with allegedly abstract or intellectual aspects of his ethics’ and she answers that ‘In fact many of these images, in which the visual so eloquently mirrors the moral, are to suggest the absolute closeness, at some points at any rate, of the spiritual world, how close and how numerous are its cues’ (MGM 15). What she does not explain is why vision brings the spiritual world closer than touch or smell do. This preference for the visual is also manifest in—and may be partly explained by—the great importance she places on art (often by art she means ‘visual art’) as both training for and locus of moral progress; and, relatedly, on beauty, as one of the doors that lead to moral improvement: beauty attracts our attention, makes some aspects of reality salient, and defeats our desire to change it, making moral progress easier for us.[[3]](#endnote-3) The role of beauty also shows that vision is not just metaphorical, if we take metaphor to mean a replacement of the real thing. First, for Murdoch, language itself is ‘fundamentally metaphorical’ (TL 41), as we naturally use images to make sense of the world. Second, through the senses one can perceive the moral properties of the world, which attention makes available.

*From looking, to attending, to truthful vision*

I have presented attention as mostly morally relevant for its capacity to put us in touch with reality, where truth is good in itself, and with the moral properties of reality. In this respect, the moral achievement of attention seems to depend on its success. In another sense, attention can be considered good in its very exercise, due to the improvement that we gain simply by attending, whatever attention leads to. This second reason for the moral desirability of attention is related to its capacity for ‘unselfing’ or removing the pernicious influences of the ego, which according to Murdoch is the prime enemy of clear vision, standing at the opposite end of attention. In both cases, the moral goodness of attention depends on its ability to bring the subject in contact with an external reality. But the measure of success for the two ways of thinking about attention is different. In the first understanding, attention is good only insofar as it reveals reality; in the second, attention is good insofar as it is an honest attempt to see reality, and for the concomitant suppression of self-concern.

So, are we making progress as long as we are trying, or as long as we are seeing? And can attention designate both processes? Blum (2012) engages with these questions as part of his observation of Murdoch’s various, and sometimes inconsistent, uses of visual metaphors. His attempt to disentangle the different visual metaphors serves to differentiate between three notions he identifies in Murdoch: perception considered neutrally as to its moral quality (either good or bad); successful, i.e. clear and just, perception; and the attempt to achieve such perception.

As Blum notes, Murdoch sometimes refers to the first notion by using ‘seeing’ and ‘vision’, taken as activities that present to us the world we have ‘partly created’ for ourselves through the use of the imagination (see DPR 201). Blum calls this the ‘subjectively perceived’. This idea is also expressed in verb form by the use of ‘looking’, which Murdoch contrasts directly with attention: ‘I would like on the whole to use ‘attention’ as a good word and use some more general term like ‘looking’ as the neutral word’ (IP 329). Somewhat confusingly, ‘attention’ is also used by Murdoch to refer to this general activity, considered neutrally as to its moral character, for example here: ‘if we consider what the work of attention is like, how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us … ’ (IP 329).

In passages such as this one, Murdoch is highlighting the fact that the objects we often engage with mentally play a role in building up our inner life, shaping what occupies our mind, what we take to be important. But there is no indication, here, of the moral quality of the activity. This could be attention only considered as to its self-shaping capacity, but not in relation to its objects or its quality. That is why, more often, Murdoch uses ‘looking’ for this consciousness-building activity, and prefers to use ‘attention’ as something that organises our inner life in a desirable—truthful—way.

Still, some unclarity in Murdoch’s usage remains: when she qualifies ‘attention’, for instance, we are not sure whether she is emphasising some qualities of attention as she understands it, or adding qualities that attention alone does not have, as in ‘just attention’ (IP 330), ‘animal attentiveness’ (MGM 246), ‘concentrated attention (loving care)’ (MGM 505), ‘(virtuous) attention’ (MGM 39), etc.

Nonetheless, I suggest we hold on to the distinction between looking and attention, for it allows us to differentiate between the constant engagement of the mind with reality, which can be more or less truthful, and which changes us for the better or for the worse depending on its objects and quality, and the less ubiquitous activity of attention, which connects us with reality, and is sometimes rather difficult. Returning to ordinary language, we all know the difference between just looking and paying attention.

The fact that attention is the capacity to connect us with reality more truthfully does not mean that attention is always successful. Here we reach Blum’s second and third category of Murdoch’s visual vocabulary: successful clear perception, and the attempt to achieve it. Murdoch writes: ‘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 that have such important cumulative results’ (IP 334). The task is omnipresent. Our fulfilment of it, however, is not. Therefore, as Murdoch writes, what goes on all the time is either attention or its lack: ‘at every moment we are “attending” or failing to attend’ (MGM 296).

If attention is a task, then its success is not guaranteed. Yet again, as Blum notes, Murdoch sometimes writes as if attention was already clear perception. Blum suggests that such inconsistent use can be harmonised by considering the ‘magnetic’ role of the Good in Murdoch’s philosophy: given that Murdoch believes that the Good exerts a ‘magnetic pull’ on every individual, Blum concludes that ‘there is a sort of tendency … for outward focus to become attention—to successfully grasp another’s reality’ (2012: 311). This solution takes outward focus as the initial stage of a spectrum leading to attention as clear perception. However, given Murdoch’s equally strong claims about the tendency to fantasise and distort reality, this solution fails to have conclusive appeal. Not only does outward looking easily, and indeed naturally, fail, but attention too is described by Murdoch as not enough to see clearly.

The identification of attention with moral progress lies more easily in the idea that by trying to see clearly we are making a virtuous effort, exhibiting the right kinds of desire, and already ‘uselfing’ to some extent. So there is some success inherent in attention, but mostly relating to the subject and not—although it goes some way in that direction—the success of undistorted perception. That is why, for Murdoch, attention needs to be *patient*: ‘We can see the length, the extension, of these concepts as patient attention transforms accuracy without interval into just discernment’ (SGC 374). So Blum is not wrong in saying that outward looking tends to deliver clearer vision than the lack of it does, and that is true of attention too, of which outward looking is an element, but something more is needed. This element Murdoch, following Weil, often calls ‘grace’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

What ‘grace’ is here is difficult to spell out. It is a little easier to understand it in terms of what it does: grace assists us when we pay attention: not only when we focus outwardly, but when we do so with the right intention and frame of mind—attention to the Good, or loving gaze: ‘When a man has thus directed his thoughts and desires toward beauty of the mind and spirit he will suddenly receive the vision, which comes by grace, θεíα µóiρα, of the Form of Beauty itself’ (FS 416). An outward look that truly desires to see what is there, that is sufficiently unconcerned with the self’s interest in it, is attention. That has the right elements to become truthful vision (potentially), and to improve the subject (in any case). Potentially truthful: for, again, desire and achievement, as we all painfully learn, do not coincide. Articulating what else needs to happen—the role of ‘grace’—is not simple. Murdoch talks about divine grace, but also tells us that “[t]he concept of grace can be readily secularised.” (OGG 351). From Plato’s *Meno*, where grace is presented as the right way to virtue, being ‘neither natural nor taught’ (MGM 23), to Simone Weil’s grace as the answer to prayer (OGG 344), grace is that which stretches between our fumbling, limited attentional capacities and insight.[[5]](#endnote-5) We should not think of grace, in Murdoch’s philosophy, as an external agency operating on us, but rather, as signalling that all we can do is try, and that vision of reality cannot be entirely our choice, because reality is there, separate, and our minds can only approach it, never reach it perfectly and nor fully.[[6]](#endnote-6) Returning to our ordinary lives, I think we can easily appreciate how answers often come when we do not expect them, after the effort of attention, or when effortful attention has left space for a softer and receptive attention (both kinds are needed); when we take a walk or rest our eyes on a landscape. Something seems to come from outside. And it does. But not without our collaboration.[[7]](#endnote-7)

As we have seen, attention is an extremely multi-faceted concept, and its uses are sometimes difficult to hold together.[[8]](#endnote-8) Murdoch does not make explicit efforts to offer a unitary and clear definition of her concept of attention, rather following its fluctuations, such as those we observe in other domains. Examining the moral relevance of attention in Murdoch, however, gives us at least some clues as to what it specifically involves: attention is important, in Murdoch’s philosophy, both for its capacity to reveal what confronts us truthfully, and for the concomitant improvement we undergo by directing our focus outward, countering natural self-involvement and consequent distortions of reality; it can manifest as something we do on particular occasions (pay attention) or a more pervasive attitude (attentiveness), and it is the name of the faculty we exercise in both cases. And it is a task, something it is good to engage in, although the outcome is not guaranteed. Just how we can go about engaging in such task, what exactly it requires of us, is the subject of the next section.

**What are we doing when we are paying attention?**

Now that we’ve tried to get little bit clearer about Murdoch’s use of the concept of attention, the second step is to explore what it means for us to pay attention, what *we* are doing when we are attending. Once again, for anyone who has tried to apply Murdoch’s insights to their life, the answer is not entirely obvious.

In the much-quoted M&D example (where M, the mother-in-law, is in the process of changing her view of D, the daughter in law), M’s moral progress through attention occurs in two ways: through self-awareness, and through the direction of attention on D. M’s progress starts with the realisation that her prejudices may have clouded her view of D, then she ‘looks again’. Here we find, inextricably linked, the two ‘movements’ of attention: unselfing and love. Unselfing runs parallel to attention, for self-projection means lack of attention; love animates attention, and gives it the specific quality of vision that makes attention suitable for moral perception, rather than mere impersonal, empirical apprehension.[[9]](#endnote-9) In what follows, we will take a closer look at these two elements, and include a third: the extent to which attention is active or passive, or in other words, whether it’s something we do or that is drawn out of us. Each of these questions has given rise to interpretative controversies, identifying possible tensions within the moral task of attention and Murdoch’s discussion of it.

*Attention with or without the self*

M can be said to engage in unselfing, in her attention to D, because she is finally able to see D without the distortions that her prejudice, snobbery, etc. provided. What this story seems to suggest is that in order to attend properly, we need a good degree of self-awareness, at least to the extent that we need to know which beliefs, emotions, or attitudes may be blocking clear perception. From here, we get to a negative definition of attention: we are attending insofar as we are unselfing, and we are unselfing insofar as we are able to remove impediments coming from the self. We may have no guarantee our vision is indeed clear, but at least we have done our best to avoid distortions.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Murdoch’s emphasis on the ego’s involvement in perception and hence in morality is well known: the ego is the ‘enemy’ of the moral life (SG 52) and personal fantasy, in the shape of self-protection or self-aggrandizement, is the veil that primarily stands between us and reality (SG 59). It seems, then, that being attentive requires not only a turning of our consciousness outward, but also a significant degree of self-awareness, if Murdoch is right that the enemy of morality comes from within. So, the self is the enemy as well as the way through. This creates two difficulties.

First, there seems to be a tension within Murdoch’s philosophy: on the one hand, the self is the main source of moral failure; on the other, Murdoch works hard to recover a substantial conception of self, which in her view existentialism and utilitarianism have obliterated. Second, there is a tension in the application of Murdoch’s advice about attention: focus outward means not-focus-inward, but without looking ‘in’, how are we to know whether we are attending or fantasising?

The first difficulty is perhaps more easily addressed, because Murdoch is often careful to hedge her condemnation of the self: the self is ‘a place of illusion’ (SG 93) but she does not claim that it is *only* a place of illusion. It is ‘the place where we live’ (SG 93), and if there is any hope for us, it needs to be a place that can accommodate not only fantasy but also some (however slight) true perception. One solution that has been proposed (more extensively by Meszaros 2016) is to follow Murdoch’s overall usage of ‘self’ and ‘ego’, where the latter is more often taken as the culprit, and conclude that it is the ego, not the self, that we need to fight in unselfing. However, Murdoch’s usage is not entirely consistent in this case either, and the self does, on occasion, seem to be the problem (as suggested by the word ‘unselfing’). A modified version of the solution could be this: the self has a very strong (‘mechanical’) tendency towards fantasy and illusion, but it is only that—a tendency among others, even if it is the dominant one. The ego is the form the self takes when it is self-protective, and for *that* there is no hope.

This solution preserves the requirement that there is a self who attends (otherwise, who does?), but it is not enough. Murdoch is not just interested in maintaining the idea of a self, but of a thick, idiosyncratic, particular self, the individual that is so central to her ethics and is often the object of attention. Is there an asymmetry here, whereby we can perceive *others* as individual selves, but *we* should only be a thin point of perception? No. This possibility of a needle-thin subject may appear attractive, and Murdoch herself seems attracted to it, for instance in the passage where she quotes Rilke on Cézanne. There Rilke is praising Cézanne because of his ‘animal attentiveness’, for watching his subject with the ‘attention of a dog’ and with ‘humble objectiveness’, culminating in the prescription of an art that is ‘anonymous’, where even love has been excluded from the painting. The reproach to painters who fall short of excellence is voiced with the words: ‘they painted “I love this” instead of painting “Here it is”’ (MGM 246–7).

The word ‘anonymous’ is particularly arresting here. Is good art, and good, attentive perception, impersonal? Antonaccio (2012) has suggested that this is one of two strands in Murdoch’s thought, and it may just be in tension with the other strand which emphasises a rich self. But despite Murdoch’s attraction to impersonality, she does not go all the way. Her use of the word ‘impersonal’ tends to appear in contexts that are far from the objectivity that attention requires, and ‘objectivity’, too, is re-framed in her philosophy. ‘It is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge; not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, *whatever that may be*, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case…’ (IP 330, emphasis added).

Putting this together with Murdoch’s emphasis on the idiosyncratic, personal use of concepts, we get a different picture of the kind of unselfing that attention demands: the use of one’s own resources, including sensibility and experience, to put aside one’s self-interested demands on reality, and direct focus and energy truly outwards. The love that disappears in Cézanne’s painting disappears from the painting, not from the painter. We attend with who we are, with our own resources, and while we will never see the ‘whole’ picture (whatever that may be, as Murdoch might say), our own experience and capacities are what enable us to see clearly—and also what makes it hard to see. There is no blank slate in Murdoch’s philosophy.[[11]](#endnote-11)

It is here, I think, that Murdoch most clearly departs from Weil. She is closest to her in the Rilke passages, but Weil does go all the way towards impersonality. Murdoch cares about the individual; Weil does not. For Weil, as she writes in ‘Human Personality’ (2005), what is precious about each of us is the *impersonal* in us, that kernel of being that has nothing to do with what we are like. Murdoch’s gaze on human individuals is a tender and tolerant one, as befits a novelist perhaps. Weil’s is uncompromising and fiery, and in that fire she aims to burn everything that is not the most transparent receptiveness and obedience to a reality in which our self is—literally—an interference.

*Self-knowledge*

I have suggested that we think of attention and the accompanying unselfing as primarily directing focus and energy outwards, removing distortions. Yet this definition still causes trouble. While it is true that attention is ‘properly’ directed outwards (OGG 348), and that Murdoch talks about fantasy as coming from a direction of our gaze inward, toward the self, sometimes we need to attend to the self—in fact, attention *requires* self-awareness, as the beginning of the M&D story makes very clear. This may even look like a paradox: attention, as the activity fundamental to morality, requires outward directedness; but in order to know whether one is really attending, and sometimes in order to get attention started, one needs to direct one’s focus inward, to obtain knowledge about oneself.

This problem is taken up by Christopher Mole (2007), who suggests that we can, and in fact should, think about self-knowledge not in terms of self-directed attention, but in terms of our relationship with our objects of attention. For Mole, ‘attending inwards’ means introspection, which is a problematic way of achieving self-knowledge, the Cartesian model of which Murdoch rejects.

Mole’s suggestion, then, is to allow for self-knowledge while avoiding the introspection model by pointing out that the ‘morally important states of mind’, which he equates with character traits, are not to be understood as ‘inner occurrences’ at all (2007: 73); therefore, understanding one’s states of mind, as required for attention, does not involve self-directed focus.[[12]](#endnote-12) Self-knowledge, according to Mole, is rather to be conceived of as a relation, where self-knowledge is achieved by reflecting on the *object* of one’s states of mind.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This solution also serves as a reminder that the kind of self-knowledge we need in attention is not an abstract, universal one, but the kind that is demanded by the situation. When Murdoch attacks psychoanalysis and the ‘scrutiny of the mechanism’ of the self (OGG 355), although she is indeed worried about self-examination generally, she is also pointing at what she takes as an idle, potentially self-indulgent observation of the self, which is the opposite of the sharper, specific self-knowledge that is required to know whether we are distorting *this* situation, *this* individual, at *this* point in time.[[14]](#endnote-14)

*Attention, agency and the will*

Since attention, according to Murdoch, is such an important element of the possibility of goodness, it is natural to ask: how can I do it? The question itself shows an intuition that, to some significant extent, attention is up to us. And of course it needs to be, otherwise how could we talk of moral progress, if it were merely passive? But the kind of activity that attention involves is a very peculiar one, and the give and take between activity and passivity is a key aspect of understanding attention and its moral role.

If attention requires a direction of our minds away from the self, and if that is not natural to us, it is easy to think that attention requires a great amount of will-power, of the kind that we exercise when we intently scrutinise somebody’s facial expressions and actions. Yet this kind of intense effort of the will is amusingly rejected by Weil: ‘Most often attention is confused with a kind of muscular effort. If one says to one’s pupils: “Now you must pay attention,” one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles’ (1973: 109). She continues: ‘This kind of muscular effort in work is entirely barren, even if it is made with the best of intentions’ (110).

Instead, Weil defines attention as a ‘passive activity’ (1973: 194). Attention is difficult, it is, as Murdoch puts it, ‘moral effort’ (IP 329) and ‘moral discipline’ (IP 330), and it is something in which we are actively involved; yet it is also passive. How are we to understand this?[[15]](#endnote-15)

On the one hand, there are instances of attention where the subject seems to be completely passive, to the extent that it is unclear how she can be said to make moral progress, if it is through something that simply happens to her.[[16]](#endnote-16) This seems to be the case in the kestrel example (SGC 369–70), in which Murdoch is brooding on hurt pride, until her attention is caught by a kestrel outside her window. Despite her passivity, after attending to the kestrel she returns to her day morally improved, because the moment of attention has jolted her out of self-concern, and re-positioned those concerns so that, she now realises, they are less important.

On the other hand, there are instances of attention where we seem to be making a decision, like M does, to try and re-consider our perception, to make an effort to see things more clearly, rather than allowing our natural biases to lead the way. There are cases where attention comes easily, and others (perhaps more frequent) when it is hard; people who attend rather naturally, and people who need to learn to attend, again and again, painfully. That attention has different manifestations is not a reason to be concerned or confused. Something remains the same: clarity of perception, through the absence of self-concerned distortion. In attention the object—not us—takes centre stage in our consciousness. Given the complexity of attention, it is not surprising that some commentators have emphasised its active character (e.g. Antonaccio 2000, Lovibond 2018), others its passivity (e.g. Forsberg 2020), but to be true to Murdoch (and Weil) we need to hold both aspects. This is how I suggest we can do it.

The passivity of attention is the passivity of the ego, in Murdoch’s sense. Attention is ‘not seeking’ (Weil 1973: 112) and it is not even ‘to think about’ (MGM 218). Here attention diverges from some ordinary uses, because in the moral understanding, attention does not refer to those efforts we make, for instance, to identify the repartee that will make us more likable to our interlocutor, or to hit where it hurts the most. This is not Murdochian attention because the object is considered through the lens of the self, how it can benefit or relate to the self. The focus is partial (we look at what we need) and instrumental (we look for what we need). If attention is contact with reality, and if, when we are attending to something, we are really trying to see what that thing is, in itself, then there is no room for self-interested seeking or singling out, for that will not yield truth.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In attending we are passive insofar as we are receptive, not imposing ourselves upon reality, but also not even seeking anything in particular, except from the truth.[[18]](#endnote-18) Meditation, ‘wherein the mind is alert but emptied of self’ (MGM 245), which Murdoch recommends as moral training (in schools too), teaches this kind of passive activity. To be receptive to anything that comes. Too much effort, as all meditators know, is counter-productive. That is why the furrowing of the brows is not attention. This also explains why the kestrel moment is an example of attention: the self, caught off guard, does not even have the time to fabricate reality. And so, reality comes in.

At the same time, it is clear that attention is also, and to an important extent, up to us. Murdoch writes: ‘as moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection’ and we can do so because we have ‘continual slight control over the direction and focus of [our] vision’ (IP 332), where ‘passing moments have a positive controllable content’ (MGM 260). In understanding or in creativity, attention is exercised when the effort to understand, perceive, or truthfully create needs to be pressed a little harder, staying in the difficult world-grasping present without letting it pass ‘in vagueness and lassitude’: ‘this’, Murdoch writes, ‘is a place for the notion of an effort of will’ (MGM 179–80).

Here the notion of will comes back, but in ambiguous fashion. We can think of our own engagement in attention as moving along a scale: attention being ‘grabbed’ by something outside of us; attention being a habitual and more spontaneous attitude, perhaps enabled by the character trait of ‘attentiveness’; and attention as a more obvious effort, when we are inclined to do otherwise.

The last possibility shows that there is a place for will in attention, but not the ego-driven, seeking will that attends to the object for its own purposes. Reading Murdoch, we can identify three ways in which the will plays a role in attention: a) initially, as shown by M, when we realise we have a reason to try and attend, for we may have been blinded in our perception, or some nagging feeling tells us we should try again (‘I am probably prejudiced; let me look again’); b) when we check ourselves, to stop our thoughts from running away (you are listening to someone pouring their heart out to you; a thought about unfinished work pops into your mind; you push it aside); c) when we obey reality, during and after attending, our will conforming to what we see, instead of fighting it by creating a more palatable world (‘obedience’: I want nothing but what is, and what is demanded of me).

The idea of will as obedience is closely connected to another active force in attention: love, or eros.[[19]](#endnote-19) As we saw, attention is loving insofar as it is animated by the desire to see things as they are. Following Plato, Murdoch takes a passionate desire for the good to connect us to the object of our attention truthfully, for truth and good are not separate. Truth is not something passively received, but something we desire, accept, seek, and love. Attention, as a loving gaze, is thus far from passive, but passionate—much like Weil’s ‘paradoxical desire’, which wants the object to be what it is.

Finally, speaking of the subject’s involvement in attention as something we can partly will requires an important qualification on what is meant, here, by will. When Murdoch attacks moral philosophy’s over reliance on the idea of the will, she is attacking not only an exaggerated emphasis on the will, but the very concept of will that is being employed: the will as a force that we can exercise in complete independence, not only from the world, but from the rest of our being. Instead, she proposes, we need to understand the will as emerging from our consciousness, being shaped by it and shaping it in turn, and as deeply embedded in the world which also determines who we are, and which we see differently according to the multitudinous movements of our minds. We are not ‘seer’ plus ‘agent’, or ‘a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will’. What we are—and the reason attention is so crucial—is ‘a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what [s/]he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of [her/]his vision’ (IP 331–332).

**Conclusion**

Opportunities for attention are everywhere, all the time, and all the time we are put to the test, we can move closer to reality, or further away from it. It matters what we desire, and how we desire, when we engage with the world. Imperceptible moments of attention can affect us in the long term, or they can lead to unexpected change; an act of attention can change us slightly, or it can lead to a sudden momentous realization. In the business of living, we are not frequently aware of how, or how much, but Murdoch reminds us that every moment matters, and that if we pay attention, we are not wasting any of the time given to us.

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1. It is largely in this sense, it seems to me, that attention has been central in the feminist ethics of care. See e.g. Gendron 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See also the chapter by Anil Gomes in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Here too—in linking attention to beauty, as means of access to a deeper insight into reality—not only her debt to Plato, but also and perhaps primarily her debt to Weil is significant. See ‘Love of the Order of the World’ in Weil 1973. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also the chapter by Elizabeth Burns in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love. With it goes the idea of grace, of a supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality’ (OGG 344). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This, incidentally, points in the direction of Murdoch’s moral realism, expressing its rejection of both mind-independent ontological claims and subjectivist positions. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Compare Weil in ‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God’: ‘If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer’ (1973: 106). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This is not just a problem for ethics. In psychology, too, the attempt to offer a unified explanation of attention was for some time abandoned (see Johnston and Dark 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In fact is not clear that, on Murdoch’s view of consciousness, such a thing exists. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Although Clarke (2012) rightly suggests that sharing our views with others goes some way towards realising, at least, whether we need to double-check such views. This social element is not something that Murdoch discusses much. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On Murdochian attention as showing us reality more justly, rather than simply more accurately or in greater detail, and why love is required for it, see Cordner 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Mole (2007) includes character traits in the notion of states of mind, and equates ‘morally important states of mind’ with character traits. While I agree with the general solution, we do not need to limit such states of mind to character traits, nor see attention as a virtue, for the suggestion to work. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. We can expand on this point by noticing that self-knowledge, obtained through our objects of attention, also means knowing how we affect other people. That may well mean seeing ourselves from afar, but it is a phenomenon that is both common and significant, and one which the idea of unselfing, if wrongly understood, may cause us to overlook, with negative consequences. This point draws out a possible reciprocity in attention, however, which is not prominent in Murdoch’s discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Although this is probably unfair to psychoanalysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On this problem, see also Robert Stern’s chapter in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Antony Fredriksson and have discussed the passivity of attention and how to square that with moral progress in Fredriksson and Panizza (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Dorothea Debus (2013) makes a similar point about the moral value of attention by making a distinction between attention and ‘full attention’. Murdochian attention is the latter. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. It is worth noting that most of the occurrences of ‘seeking’ in MGM are in the phrase ‘truth-seeking’ which is a special kind of seeking, not for oneself. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. On love as eros in Murdoch, see Hopwood 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)