

Iris Murdoch on Love as Just Attention

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Raja Rosenhagen is associate professor of philosophy at Ashoka University in New Delhi. He specializes in love, the philosophy of science, epistemology, and many other philosophical subjects. In this essay he presents and defends the influential theory of love offered by Iris Murdoch. Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) was an Irish and British novelist and philosopher best known for her novels about good and evil, sexual relationships, morality, and the power of the unconscious. Murdoch argues that love is properly understood as giving someone the appropriate kind of attention, “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.”

How can we make ourselves (morally) better? To Iris Murdoch, philosopher and award-winning novelist, this is among the most important questions moral philosophers should address—a task she sets herself in *The Sovereignty of Good*.¹ Moral agents, Murdoch thinks, should work to acquire an increasingly clear vision—of the Good, other individuals, and of what is good for them.² Such work requires *love*, which she characterizes as *just* (and *unselfish*) *attention*.³ Some philosophers regard love as interfering with morality. To be motivated by love, these philosophers think, conflicts with, e.g., the moral requirement to be impartial.⁴ As we will see, for Murdoch—as for Plato and Aristotle before her—love is not foreign to morality, but at its core.⁵

In recent years, philosophical interest in Murdoch's work has increased, various questions about it have been raised.⁶ Some concern how her philosophical work relates to her novels, her *fables of unselfing*,⁷ in which her protagonists struggle with various facets of love, faith, its loss, and the vagaries and vicissitudes of moral life. Given the novels' strong philosophical overtones, it is tempting to ask whether Murdoch's philosophy shows up in her novels, or how. But one must also square

one's answers with Murdoch's explicit views on how philosophy and art differ in their respective aims, functions, and tools.⁸ Other questions are exegetical, but inevitably point to broader philosophical issues. Here is a non-exhaustive list: What does Murdoch's proclaimed moral realism amount to and how are we to understand her proposed proof of the existence of Good?⁹ Does Murdoch offer a viable account of moral perception?¹⁰ What is her conception of conceptual change and can it be extended beyond the realm of the moral?¹¹ What is Murdoch's notion of the self,¹² what the nature of her affinity with Buddhism,¹³ and what the role of moral rules and duties in her work; is she a moral particularist?¹⁴ Do demands of love outweigh those of reason?¹⁵ How plausible is Murdoch's hyper-internalist¹⁶ claim that true vision occasions right conduct, and: Must we love everyone? In the following, none of these can be settled. Instead, I will highlight some pertinent aspects of Murdoch's conception of love by contrasting it with a kind of view she opposes and leave it to the reader to follow up on these interesting, yet much thornier issues.

The philosophical camp Murdoch explicitly opposes comprises existentialists, behaviorists and,

arguably, Kantians. All of these are said to hold that the locus of moral activity is the will¹⁷ and moral activity its overt movement—its choices.¹⁸ By behaviorist lights, a moving will, to be real, must manifest as publicly observable action. As per the existentialists, in authentically choosing between the publicly available options for action, subjects don't respond to antecedently existing moral facts, but freely generate and embrace their values. All facts relevant to this procedure are taken to be publicly available and accessible. Moral activity, the expression of the agent's freedom, is construed as a moving about between such publicly accessible facts, a leaping of the will in moments of choice between publicly available options, as something entirely public. Inner private episodes have only a shadowy, parasitic existence and derive their meanings, if any, from the public meanings of words we use to describe them, which are, in turn, spelled out in terms of observable behavior. Unless I act, on this view, I haven't really decided, no matter what I tell myself privately; there either is no privileged access to my decision, or it is irrelevant.¹⁹ Further, moral activity is discontinuous. It occurs when an agent, faced with moral choices, thoroughly examines the public facts and freely exercises her will.

We will not ask whose views such characterizations may capture.²⁰ For our purposes, what matters is that Murdoch rejects them all. A moral subject, she thinks, is more than a moving will; a realistic picture must be more complex and suitably linked to some workable psychological terminology ("motive," "drive," "emotion," "subconscious mechanism," "neurosis," "transference," etc.). Over metaphors of movement she prefers those of vision and imagination. Seeing others clearly—and what one's various actions vis-à-vis them morally amount to—Murdoch insists, is no mean feat. Many morally relevant facts, she thinks, are not easily publicly accessible, nor are they private or subjectively created. They are simply hard to see. But a central moral activity, she insists, *is* private, need not involve or terminate in overt behavior, and happens continuously:²¹ the activity of attending to, imagining, and (re-)evaluating others and their actions.

Why should such (re-)evaluations be private? To Murdoch, proponents of the opposing camp model moral concepts too closely on a common understanding of scientific concepts. On it, requirements regarding the mastery of scientific concepts are specifiable in terms of communally determinable and publicly intelligible norms, norms that govern behavioral (including linguistic) patterns that competent concept users must exhibit. But moral concepts (and perhaps scientific ones too), Murdoch holds, work differently.²² Learning moral concepts does involve mastering conventional, publicly acknowledged rules and publicly observable behavioral patterns. Yet with moral concepts, this is not the end of the story (nor, Murdoch insists, the beginning).²³ Acquiring a better understanding of moral concepts is a "deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process," involving a movement of understanding with respect to our moral concepts which is "onward into increasing privacy."²⁴ One's image of courage at forty differs from that which one had at twenty,²⁵ she points out and emphasizes that word-utterances and concept uses are historical occasions, whose meanings must be understood in the relevant contexts of use. But such understanding cannot be gleaned from crude public rules. To understand how particular concept applications emerge as results of idiosyncratic trajectories generated through different occasions of use, and changes in such applications, something else must enter the equation: how we attend to others, the quality of our attention, and what we can, accordingly, see. Attention, understanding, evaluations, and changes therein are shaped both by individual, contingent, historical details and by the attending individual's quality of attention. Typically, such evaluations and re-evaluations are thus highly idiosyncratic and are performed privately in the sense that nobody but the subject who engages in them could engage in (let alone readily understand or describe) them.²⁶

Arguably, even if partly unconsciously, we constantly evaluatively characterize real and imagined situations and the individuals in them. This ongoing activity, Murdoch thinks, in turn affects which options for acting toward others we see and

consider; we differ, for example, in what options we consider vis-à-vis those we evaluate differently, as *cowards*, as *brave*, *reckless*, *hesitant*, or as *prudent*, say. Through evaluative activity we build up, continuously and imperceptibly, "structures of value round about us"²⁷—the world we can see, within which we move and choose. Our evaluations may predetermine the outcome of our choices before we face them. Yet they may also miss the mark; the structures of value we build up and the images we create of the people we face may become distorted, caricaturesque even. The following passage from Murdoch brings this out nicely:

The world which we confront is not just a world of "facts" but a world upon which our imagination has, at any given moment, already worked; and although such working may often be "fantasy" and may constitute a barrier to our seeing "what is really there," this is not necessarily so. [. . .] The formulation of beliefs about other people often proceeds and must proceed imaginatively [. . .]. We have to *attend* to people, we may have to have *faith* in them, and here justice and realism may demand the inhibition of certain pictures, the promotion of others. Each of us lives and chooses within a partly private, partly fabricated world [. . .]. To be a human being is to know more than one can prove, to conceive of a reality which goes "beyond the facts" in these familiar and natural ways. This activity is, moreover, usually and often inevitably, an activity of evaluation. We evaluate not only by intentions, decisions, choices [. . .], but also, and largely, by the constant quiet work of attention and imagination.²⁸

How, then, does Murdoch's notion of moral activity contrast with that of her opponents? First, moral activity, construed as attending to and (re-)evaluating others, is in an important sense a private activity. Second, it is constant, quiet, and at least partly unconscious. Third, morally relevant facts are *not* readily publicly accessible. Whether we can see what is real and act in ways that truly promote what is good depends on how accurately we evaluate, on whether we attend lovingly and *justly* to those with

whom we interact, on whether we do justice to them in how we picture them. Just vision is unselfish, Murdoch insists, and requires that we remove distorting veils created and interposed between us and the world by our private fantasies, by our desires and anxieties concerning how others may serve or obstruct our egocentric goals. Just vision also requires taking into account that the views of others, too, might be clouded. Just like it is difficult for us to see them clearly, it may be difficult for them to see *us* and *our* intentions well, what *we* take to be the best course of action, and *why*. A corollary of this, fourth, is that for Murdoch, freedom is not primarily the freedom to choose.²⁹ It is the ability to see and respond to what is real and to pursue a vision of what is good that is also informed by an understanding of the good we realistically imagine others as pursuing. This ability is gained by freeing oneself from (selfish) fantasy and if, as Murdoch suggests, true vision occasions right conduct,³⁰ then mastering it yields good actions almost automatically.³¹

Like the Socrates of the *Symposion*, for whom a properly cultivated *eros* can propel us from appearance to reality, and like Aristotle, for whom complete friendship-love requires that one know one's friend well (as one can only truly benefit those whom one knows), Murdoch ties "love" to "knowledge," "reality," and "truth."³² Love, she aphorizes, is "knowledge of the individual,"³³ the "extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real."³⁴ It is "the general name of the quality of attachment,"³⁵ and, if developed, it aids us in determining what is true. Again, developing this ability, Murdoch concedes, is extremely difficult, its full realization a distant ideal.³⁶ Striving toward it requires fighting what Murdoch thinks is the biggest enemy in moral life—the fat relentless ego³⁷—and only few manage to free themselves from fantasy and from the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self. The humble, Murdoch suspects, may most likely become good,³⁸ not least because just attention involves compassion and humility both. One must be compassionately mindful of what may cloud others' perspectives and humbly accept that they may see more clearly where our own vision is murky.

Acting toward others based on loving attention thus importantly differs from acting that results from merely imagining what one *oneself* would do in their stead. Individuals *differ*, so walking the proverbial mile in their shoes is hard. It takes moral effort, perhaps faith, to see them and to properly understand their actions as directed at the good *they* seek to achieve.³⁹ When facing an angry person, we will act better toward them if, instead of automatically showing indignation or reciprocating anger, we understand how their rage may blind them, if we consider that, initial appearances notwithstanding, we may not in fact be its main target, and succeed in imagining their pain, needs, motives, and desires realistically. Perhaps we realize how we helped trigger their pain, are humbled, moved by compassion, and learn and grow by looking. We need not, perhaps will not, endorse what good we imagine them as pursuing. Yet if we attend to them lovingly and appreciate what drives their actions and imbues these actions with meaning, our actions will be better attuned to what is truly there, possibly better overall, even vis-à-vis those who morally go astray. Love, for Murdoch, rather than extraneous to morality, is quite the opposite: as it enables realistic vision and good action, it is tied to morality at its heart.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to Murdoch, unselfishly imagining who others are and attending to them justly are moral activities that, if perfected, enable us to engage in actions that are truly responsive to others and serve to do well by them. Suppose we take it, like Murdoch, that the moral progress required for improving our ability to attend justly and imagine realistically is a matter of improving our ability to issue accurate evaluative judgments, a matter of using the right concepts in evaluating the situations we face, perhaps a matter of using our concepts in an increasingly better way. Should we think of this process as the acquisition of a perceptual capacity that is sensitive to antecedently existing moral properties or facts? How else might one understand what “getting things right” would amount to?
2. “True vision occasions right conduct,” Murdoch claims. In doing so she suggests that we do the

right thing automatically once we recognize it. But is this plausible? Don’t we often recognize what is right and still decide to do something else? On Murdoch’s account, does true vision make weakness of the will (*akrasia*) impossible? More generally, when Murdoch attacks the opposing conception of the moral self as a moving will, does she go too far and leave too little room for the will in her own conception? How is her position like (or unlike) a conception on which once the right option is truly recognized, all competing considerations are silenced?

3. Suppose one is inclined to agree with Murdoch that true vision occasions right conduct. But why should it only be *true* vision that occasions right conduct? More specifically, why not think that not-so-true vision occasions not-so-right conduct, too? If we pursue this line of thinking, what are the implications for how we should think about moral responsibility and obligation?
4. As indicated in note 22, Murdoch hints at the possibility that the mastery of scientific concepts, too, may be ill-described in terms of the mastery of publicly available rules. The requirements on conceptual mastery and the appurtenant injunction to improve the quality of one’s attention that Murdoch thinks enable moral progress, might they apply to non-moral concepts as well? What might implementing an analogous account with respect to scientific observation look like? Would such an account be plausible?

NOTES

1. Cf. Murdoch (1974), 53, 78, 83.
2. “good for S” can mean “what seems good to S” or “what is (in fact) good for S.” Both senses are implied here.
3. Murdoch adopts the emphasis on attention from Simone Weil. See Murdoch 1974, 34; Justin Broackes’ introduction in Broackes 2012, and Broackes 2019.
4. See Schaubroeck 2018 for a helpful overview.
5. For a discussion of Murdoch in terms of Plato’s *eros*, see Hopwood 2018, for a juxtaposition of just attention with Aristotelian *philia*, see Rosenhagen 2019.
6. Various philosophers have cited Murdoch as an influence, e.g., Cora Diamond, John McDowell,

- Hilary Putnam, Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams, Susan Wolf (see Setiya 2013), others are Martha Nussbaum and Philippa Foot, who was also one of Murdoch's close friends. Some monographs and anthologies highlighting various aspects of Murdoch's work that have been influential in stimulating debate are Antonaccio & Schweiker 1996; Antonaccio 2000, 2012; Widdows 2005; Rowe 2007; Lavery 2007; Rowe & Horner 2010; Lovibond 2011; Broackes 2012; Forsberg 2013; and, more recently, Browning 2018a, 2018b; and Hämäläinen & Dooley 2019.
7. See Gordon 1995.
 8. See Rowe & Horner 2010 for some such attempts. Bryan Magee's interview with Murdoch in Murdoch 1998, the contributions in Dooley 2003, Forsberg 2013, and Browning 2018b (especially chapters 1 & 3) provide a good entry point to Murdoch's thoughts about philosophy and literature.
 9. One influential view is developed in Antonaccio 2000, for a critical response see Robjant 2011a.
 10. See, e.g., Blum 1991, Clarke 2012, Clifton 2013, Cooper 2019, and Panizza 2019 for discussion.
 11. See Forsberg 2013; Rosenhagen 2021.
 12. See Antonaccio 2012, ch. 2. A critical assessment of Murdoch's view from a feminist point of view is provided in Lovibond 2011, discussion of the latter in Robjant 2011b and Hämäläinen 2015.
 13. A thorough investigation of Murdoch's interest in Buddhism, which she appreciatively mentions in her letters as the greatest religion and as something she has learnt from, has yet to be undertaken. Interested readers might consult Conradi 2004, Robjant 2011a, and the pertinent letters in Horner & Rowe 2015.
 14. For a proposal of how moral particularists could benefit from turning to Murdoch, see Millgram 2002.
 15. Murdoch suggests this in Murdoch 1974, 102.
 16. "hyper-internalist" here refers to a kind of conception according to which seeing what is good intrinsically carries with it a motivation to do it. See Setiya 2013, also Bakhurst 2020 for a productive response.
 17. To the Kant of the *Groundwork*, nothing is good without qualification except for a good will (cf. *Kants Schriften*, Akademie Ausgabe, Berlin: deGruyter, 1902–, Vol. 4, 393). Though she is not a Freudian, Murdoch engages with Freud's work repeatedly (e.g., in Murdoch 1974, 1977, and throughout Murdoch 1992). She praises him for having provided a realistic, complex, and detailed picture of the fallen man and a substantial notion of the self and the various egocentric quasi-mechanical processes it involves that often remain opaque to the subject (cf. Murdoch 1974, 51–54). To the extent that Kant's moral subject can appear as lacking such substance and as being reduced to the will, it strikes her as unrealistic.
 18. There is another camp Murdoch opposes that I don't have space to discuss here. It comprises those according to whom the individual is determined and absorbed without remainder by the framework of social relations and determinations it inhabits. For Murdoch, the picture of the individual this view affords is under-complex and thus, again, unrealistic. See Antonaccio 2012, ch. 2, esp. her discussion of the Natural Law view.
 19. We sometimes attribute decisions to ϕ to agents who do not ϕ , e.g., when we judge that they would have ϕ -ed had not the world intervened. But even such attributions, Murdoch's opponents might say, rest on publicly observable behavior and one could anyway doubt whether attributions about what someone *would* have done require that in the agent some inner act, one called "deciding," has taken place. See Murdoch 1974, 13ff.
 20. See Moran 2012 for a critical discussion of Murdoch's characterization of existentialism.
 21. The classic Murdochian example of such an activity appears in *The Idea of Perfection*, the first essay in *The Sovereignty of Good*. In it, M, a mother in law, engages in a reevaluation of her daughter in law, D, upon whom she had previously looked down for, she suspects, possibly selfish reasons. For a recent discussion of this example and its role in *Sovereignty* see Jamieson 2020.
 22. Perhaps the meanings scientific concepts are *taken* to have within the scientific community are curled up in the inferences deemed acceptable within the community that they figure in. Such inferences change along with new discoveries and the *real* meanings of scientific concepts may transcend the individual attitudes, even those of the community as a whole. To introduce talk of the *real* meanings

of scientific terms is to introduce into the notion of a scientific concept an ideal limit. It is also to raise some doubt with respect to the idea that the scientific facts lie out there, open to all. While even on such an account what is real is at least potentially open to all observers, the ability to appreciate the facts will in practice depend on the details of how the concepts forming the perceiver's conceptual apparatus are interconnected. Murdoch briefly considers a general position along these lines, but only to put it to one side. (See Murdoch 1974, 11.) For her, just as for us here, the focus lies not on arguing that the idea of publicly available facts is *in general* too crude to be of use in providing an account of perception and proper concept use—scientific or otherwise. Rather, she focuses more narrowly on *moral* perception and *moral* concepts, arguing that no matter what one thinks about scientific concepts, for moral concepts, an account according to which the understanding of moral concepts and the appreciation of moral facts are, at heart, a matter of publicly conforming to certain behavioral regularities is particularly unconvincing.

23. Murdoch 1974, 29.
24. Murdoch 1974, 28f.
25. Murdoch 1974, 28.
26. With respect to particular acts of re-evaluation, Murdoch says that “[i]ts details are the details of *this* personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately.” Murdoch 1974, 23.
27. Murdoch 1974, 37.
28. Cf. Murdoch (1998), 199f.
29. Indeed, referring to the preparatory work of attention, she suggests that “at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over.” Murdoch 1974, 37.
30. See Murdoch 1974, 66.
31. “Good,” Murdoch says, “is the magnetic center towards which love naturally moves.” Murdoch 1974, 102. Murdoch’s claim that the good—though hard to see and undefinable—works as a magnetic center towards which love naturally strives betrays an important Platonic debt (about which Murdoch is quite explicit). I take it that for her, our understanding of others and their actions is transformed once we acquire an understanding of what they deem good. Likewise, such understanding will

enrich and contextualize our own conception of the (common) Good and affect how we respond to others, as we obey to the normative pressures of the reality we can now see (cf. Murdoch 1974, 40ff., for how Murdoch adopts Weil’s idea of obedience). The idea that true vision occasions right conduct is part of what Setiya 2013 seeks to capture by the term ‘hyper-internalism’ (see note 16 above).

32. As I have argued elsewhere (cf. Rosenhagen 2019), parallels between Murdoch and Aristotle abound: note, e.g., that i) *philia* requires time and familiarity (NE 1156b25–32), ii) complete friends love and wish well alike to each other *qua* good (NE 1156b8f.), iii) becoming familiar with others is very hard (NE 1158a11–17), iv) friendship and justice are closely related (NE 1159b25–1160a8), v) friendship asks a man to do what he can, not what is proportional to the merits of the case (for that may be more than he could do) (NE 1163b13–18), and vi) bestowing benefits on others appropriately is laborious (for, as Murdoch would say, it is hard to realize that others are different) (NE 1165a14–1165a36; also: NE 1168a21–27).
33. Murdoch 1974, 28.
34. Murdoch 1959, 51.
35. Murdoch 1974, 103f.
36. Murdoch typically avoids characterizing the ideal moral agent. Here is a rare exception: “The good (better) man is *liberated* from selfish fantasy, can see himself as others see him, imagine the needs of other people, love unselfishly, lucidly envisage and desire what is truly valuable. This is the ideal picture.” Murdoch 1992, 331.
37. See Murdoch 1974, 52.
38. See Murdoch, 1974, 103. Presumably, part of her reasoning is that those who are humble are not already full of themselves, which, in turn, makes it easier for them to see (e.g., others) more clearly.
39. See Murdoch 1998, 199.

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