

Moral Psychology as Soul-Picture

Francey Russell

Please cite the published version, forthcoming in The Philosophical Quarterly

Abstract:

Iris Murdoch offers a distinctive conception of moral psychology. She suggests that to develop a moral psychology is to develop what she calls a *soul-picture*; different philosophical moral psychologies are, as she puts it, “rival soul-pictures.” In this paper I clarify Murdoch’s generic notion of “soul-picture,” the *genus* of which, for example, Aristotle’s, Kant’s, Nietzsche’s, and Murdoch’s constitute rival species. Are all philosophical moral psychologies soul-pictures? If not, what are the criteria that a moral psychology must meet in order to qualify as a soul-picture? I propose five key dimensions. A soul-picture provides a picture of the soul or self that is 1) *holistic*, 2) *value-rich* and *psychologically realistic* (for Murdoch these are intertwined), 3) *reflexive*, 4) *therapeutic* and 5) the articulation of which makes use of *imaginative* language.

Key words: Iris Murdoch; moral psychology; self-consciousness; imagination; metaphor.

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“Moral psychology” is a nebulous concept and a correspondingly nebulous sub-discipline in contemporary philosophy. While what we now call moral philosophers have always developed what we now call moral psychologies, the term itself is arguably a 20th century invention, and the idea of it as an “area of specialization” in philosophy is arguably an invention of the past few years (as is the idea of disciplinary sub-specialization). One way to understand “moral psychology” is as a grab-bag of topics concerning the relationship of mind and moral value, topics like: responsibility, free will, weakness of will, self-deception, blame, forgiveness, emotions, desire, and practical rationality. Add to this motley of topics a motley of methods both within and beyond philosophy: moral psychology frequently engages questions, concepts, and findings from a variety of areas including meta-ethics,

normative ethics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, philosophical anthropology, metaphysics, empirical psychology, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, and on and on. Because of all this nebulosity and uncertainty, it is not uncommon nowadays for philosophers who work in this very area to ask each other, “what do *you* think ‘moral psychology’ means?”

Iris Murdoch offers a distinctive conception of the task of moral psychology.¹ She suggests that to develop a moral psychology is to develop what she calls a *soul-picture* (she sometimes calls this an “image of man” [IP: 9] or a “philosophical conception of the person” [1961/1999: 287] or even a picture of “the substance of our being” [*ibid.*: 293]). Different philosophical moral psychologies are, as she puts it, “rival soul-pictures” (IP: 2). In recent years, philosophers have worked to clarify *Murdoch’s* particular philosophical soul-picture. There is much debate concerning her conceptions of, for instance, attention, vision, imagination, art, and love; the ways in which Murdoch’s soul-picture constitutes a companion or rival to, for instance, Aristotelian, Kantian, or Nietzschean soul-pictures; and the ways in which Murdoch draws on imaginative language to articulate her soul-picture.² But we also need to clarify the general idea of a “soul-picture.” What is the *genus-concept* of which, for example, Aristotle’s, Kant’s, Nietzsche’s, Stuart Hampshire’s, and Murdoch’s soul-pictures constitute different species? Are all philosophical moral psychologies necessarily soul-pictures? If not, what are the criteria that a moral psychology must meet in order to qualify as a soul-picture?

This paper clarifies the very idea or genus concept of a soul-picture. Looking closely at Murdoch’s writing, especially “The Idea of Perfection” (1962), I distinguish five key dimensions. A soul-picture is 1) *holistic*, 2) *value-rich* and *psychologically realistic* (for Murdoch these hang together), 3) *reflexive*, 4) *therapeutic*, and 5) makes use of *imaginative* language. As we shall see, these dimensions are

¹ In this paper, I use IP when citing “The Idea of Perfection” (1962/2013).

² For recent work on Murdoch’s moral psychology or soul-picture, see for instance: Bagnoli (2012), Diamond (1996; 2010), Gomes (2020), Hopwood (2017), Katsafanas (2017), Merritt (2017; 2022), Mulhall (1997; 2000), Nussbaum (1996; 2011), Samuel (2021), Setiya (2013).

interdependent: an appreciation of any one dimension depends on appreciating them all, as they hang together.

Of these five dimensions, the dimension that has not been well-appreciated is that, for Murdoch, a soul-picture is *reflexive*. Soul-pictures are pictures in terms in which a soul, or a self, can *picture itself*. A soul-picture says not simply *this is what the soul or self is*, nor simply, *this is what you are*, but issues an invitation: *picture yourself like this*. This invitation invites reflexive questions: do we picture ourselves like this? Can we? Ought we? What of our life is made sense of if we do, and what is not? Which dimensions of our life is valued if we do, and which cannot not? What kind of life does a soul-picture invite us to imagine for ourselves and pursue?

In what follows I explain why Murdoch introduced the term, and discuss each of the five dimensions. In the final section I consider the differences and relationships between a soul-picture and what Murdoch elsewhere calls a “personal vision” (1956/1996).

§1. The Very Idea of Soul-Picture

Murdoch introduces the idea of a soul-picture in the first pages of “The Idea of Perfection.” She announces that she will analyze “the fascinating power of a certain picture of the soul” and then “attempt to produce, if not a comprehensive analysis, at least a rival soul-picture which covers a greater or a different territory [and which] should make new places for philosophical reflection” (IP: 2). Later in the same essay, she writes that a soul-picture should be thought of as “a general metaphysical backdrop to morals” (IP: 41) and that “philosophers have always been trying to picture the human soul, and [...] there seems no reason why philosophers should not go on attempting to fill in a systematic explanatory background to our ordinary moral life” (IP: 43; see also 1961/1999: 290). In these passages Murdoch describes soul-pictures as “general” and “systematic,” functioning an

“explanatory background” to moral life. This brings us to the first dimension of a soul-picture: a soul-picture is *holistic*.³

In contemporary philosophy, it is arguably more common for moral psychology to proceed piecemeal, arguing for apparently discrete, self-contained conceptions of, say, *moral responsibility* or *anger* or *intention* or *love*. But a piecemeal moral psychology is not what Murdoch means by a “soul-picture.” Rather a soul-picture is holistic: it is the holistic explanatory background in terms of which specific capacities, attitudes, mental states, as well as certain characteristic pathologies or failures, can be understood and evaluated; it is the whole within which the pieces hang together, more or less coherently. Such a holistic explanatory background is the kind of thing one is gesturing at when characterizing some contemporary moral philosopher as, say, *Aristotelean*, *Kantian* or *Nietzschean*, or when we say that a philosopher follows, for example, Kant not to the letter but “in spirit.” In this kind of case, a “comprehensive analysis” of, for example, Kant’s metaphysics might not be discussed or incorporated, but there is a general holistic orientation or background that qualifies it as “Kantian.” This in turn suggests that a more piecemeal moral psychology will often rely on or imply—whether implicitly or explicitly, illicitly or licitly—a broader, background soul-picture.

So a soul-picture is holistic. Notice, briefly, that this emphasis on “holism” and “background” already begins to clarify why a soul-picture is a *picture*, or as Murdoch writes, why systematic philosophy consists largely in “image-play” (1970/2014: 75): a soul-picture is not reducible to a set of propositions (even if a philosopher sets out his soul-picture in propositions), but is rather the broad moral-philosophical spirit, orientation, or background that those propositions invoke and imply, the articulation and communication of which calls for—as we will see more in §5—evocative, metaphorical, imagistic modes of presentation (think, for instance Plato’s use of dialogue and myth,

³ Thanks to Katja Vogt for very helpful discussion on this point.

or of Descartes' or Sartre's or Nietzsche's use of emblematic figures and scenes, like sitting alone by the fire, or getting caught peering into a keyhole, or a weak priest seething with resentment).

With this idea of a soul-picture as a holistic, explanatory backdrop in mind, I suggest that Murdoch's aim in "The Idea of Perfection" is to bring a then-dominant philosophical soul-picture out into the open, to show that this particular soul-picture has been so converged and tacitly agreed upon that it has come to seem as if it were the only plausible or only available picture, and to begin to develop an alternative.

As is well-known, Murdoch's critical target is the soul-picture orienting what she calls "the man' of modern moral philosophy" (IP: 4) and she draws this picture by reflecting on Stuart Hampshire's work as "typical" (*ibid.*) of this man, focusing on the primacy Hampshire accords to our status and self-conception as *intentional agents* acting in a world of other agents and other objects. For our purposes, we can leave the details of Hampshire's picture to the side, along with the question of whether Murdoch's assessment of Hampshire is accurate or fair. I only want to show how she teases a soul-picture or holistic background out of Hampshire's work, and how she begins to critique it.⁴

Murdoch notes that according to this popular soul-picture (she elsewhere calls this "the current view" [1956/1999]), reflective, deliberated, decisive choice is exemplary of human activity. This picture of the soul involves a ramification of related concepts (1956/1999: 82) such as freedom, intention, action, rationality, and reality. It also invokes certain images and metaphors. For example,

⁴ For quick evidence that Hampshire was in many ways an ally of the kind of philosophy that Murdoch herself espouses, one need only read his 1968 essay "Philosophy and Fantasy." There he presents himself as a philosopher who finds resources in literature as much as philosophy, suggests that individual style, philosophical prejudice, and psychological need are mutually informing, and advocates for the role of imagination in theory. Here is a representative passage: "I have looked in philosophy, as also in fiction and in poetry, not for a greater clarity in familiar ways of thought, but rather for a particular kind of confusion. The confusion is that which comes from trying conflicting possibilities of description, and from postponing a decision between them. It is the kind of confusion that occurs when one listens to different voices speaking different languages at the same time, and when one will not stop one's ears against all the voices other than the most familiar ones."

Murdoch suggests that insofar as “the current view” pictures the human being as essentially a rational, intentional actor, “an object moving among other objects in a continual flow of intention into action,” its dominant, orienting metaphor is “touch and movement” (IP: 4, 5; see also Hampshire 1959: 48) and moral life is pictured as like a visit to a shop (IP: 8): an agent freely and knowingly enters the shop, reflects on his options that are already marked with descriptions (“apples,” “oranges,” “lying,” “killing”), evaluates his options (“fresh,” “good,” “bad,” “right,” “wrong”) and then chooses one—an apple or an action—for reasons that he understands and endorses.

With this vignette, Murdoch is illustrating first, the ways in which any particular soul-picture involves both a particular picture of the nature of moral concepts (in this case, as labels to be affixed to already comprehended but evaluatively-neutral particulars) and a particular picture of the nature of reality (in this case, as “an impersonal world of facts” [IP: 24]). These are just two possible concepts in the ramification of concepts that a soul-picture implies. Second, Murdoch wants us to see that a soul-picture is not just descriptive but always also evaluative and normative. A soul-picture involves decisions about which features of human life to emphasize, value, or strive for, and which features to exclude, ignore, devalue, or strive to overcome or avoid. Third, as Cora Diamond notes, above all “Murdoch wanted her contemporary moral philosophers to recognize that the picture of the soul with which they worked was [...] a picture of the soul, *their* picture” (2010: 76), and that other pictures are possible.

Murdoch begins her critical response to Hampshire’s soul picture as follows (noting that here “temperament will play its part in determining whether or not we *want* to attack or whether we are content. I am not content” [IP: 16]):

I find the image of man which I have sketched above both alien and implausible. That is, more precisely: I have simple empirical objections (I do not think people are necessarily or essentially ‘like that’), I have philosophical objections (I do not find the arguments convincing), and I have moral objections (I do not think people *ought* to picture themselves in this way). IP: 9.

Negatively, then, the task is to fill out these empirical, philosophical, and moral objections. Positively, Murdoch's task is to find the appropriate means and methods to articulate a compelling rival soul-picture, one that is closer to what persons are actually like, that is philosophically persuasive, and that offers a compelling normative alternative.

I will now step back from this particular rivalry and return to the task of specifying the generic features of soul-pictures, which generic or formal features will be filled in differently by different pictures. We've already seen that a soul-picture is holistic. In the next sections, I will argue that a soul-picture is value-rich and psychologically realistic, reflexive, therapeutic, and articulated at least in part through imaginative language.

§2. Soul-Pictures are Psychologically Realistic and Value-Rich

Soul-pictures are *realistic* and *value-rich* pictures of the soul in its engagement with moral life. Here is how Murdoch puts this point in "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts" (1970/2014).

Two things are required [of moral philosophy]. The examination should be realistic. Human nature, as opposed to the natures of other hypothetical spiritual beings, has certain discoverable attributes, and these should be suitably considered in any discussion of morality. Secondly, since an ethical system cannot but commend an ideal, it should commend a worthy ideal (76).

It turns out that these features—realism and value-richness—are intertwined precisely because, for Murdoch, there is no value-neutral way of intelligently accessing reality, psychological or otherwise; as Carla Bagnoli puts it, "the exploration of reality is both an evaluative and a cognitive activity" (2012: 209). To so much as articulate a soul-picture is already to take various normative and evaluative stances, to "commend an ideal."

The idea that for Murdoch any philosophical soul-picture is already value-rich may be the most well-known dimension of her conception of moral psychology. First, Murdoch argues that describing the soul and its capacities is interpretatively *active* where this interpretation involves making axiologically-inflected discriminations about what is essential or significant; second, if moral psychology articulates what in the mind is relevant for moral life, any sense of “relevance to moral life” involves a particular, non-neutral conception of what “moral life” is, some conception of how a person should be. The point is not that our minds are not empirically real or cannot “push back” against our moral ideals; one of her central complaints against existentialism is that it provides us with an unreal fantasy. Murdoch’s point is rather to caution against adopting a certain conception of reality, including psychological reality, as “an impersonal world of facts” (IP 24) which can be apprehended and discriminated independently of value, and against a certain conception of our perception of it, as normatively neutral.

How might this evaluatively-inflected attention to psychological reality look in practice? Consider one of the “facts” to which any moral psychology must do justice: one of the facts about human psychology is that it is partly or even largely unconscious, “acts mostly in obscurity,” to take a phrase from Kant. Or as Murdoch writes, we must “accept a darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational image of the dynamics of the human personality” (IP: 42). Any philosophical soul-picture must be realistic about this.⁵ But being “realistic” about this is not a matter of simply recording a bit of given psychological reality as a value-neutral, brute fact. To the contrary, different soul-pictures will “record” this fact in different ways, using different concepts, with different emphases and evaluations, and will do justice to this reality with greater or lesser success.

⁵ And in fact it would be difficult to find anyone in the history of philosophy who does deny this, perhaps not even Descartes. See Paul (2018) for arguments against the dominant reading of Descartes as the “high priest of Transparency” (1123), arguing instead that for Descartes, consciousness (of one’s thoughts) does not deliver self-*knowledge*.

According to one possible picture, the unconscious dimensions of the human mind might be pictured as a kind of residue of non-rational animality and as evidence of how we fall short of rational ideals. According to such a picture, the unconscious dimensions of the mind are aligned with the passive dimensions of our finite, animal nature, they have not been rationally organized by the agent, have not been endorsed or identified with, and so these dimensions are not part of the “*me*” of rational, responsible agency (whereas my conscious beliefs and intentions are *me*). This may mean that the unconscious dimensions of mind are less philosophically significant. One can find a version of such a picture in places in Kant and in Kantian moral psychology. Here there is an effort to do justice what the mind or soul is really like, but psychological reality is here apprehended evaluatively, in accordance with an ideal.

According to another possible picture, the mind’s unconscious dimensions may be conceived not as bits of brute empirical reality and not as regrettable animal residue, but as existentially significant, a vital source of creativity, and as an occasion for wonder. On such a picture, what is unconscious is still “*me*” but it is not wholly mine to make up and it is not the “*me*” identified with rationality. Rather, it is a more expansive “*me*” identified with, perhaps, imagination, or with a broader, more spiritualized, more “enchanted” nature. One can find a version of such a picture in Romanticism, in Schelling, in Nietzsche, and there are resources for developing such a picture in Freud’s work. Here too, there is an effort to do justice what the mind is really like, but reality is apprehended evaluatively, in accordance with some ideal.

The natural sciences will produce other pictures of the unconscious dimensions of the mind. Yet these methods often aspire to provide evaluatively-*neutral* or “value-free” pictures of psychological reality. The special authority of the natural sciences may be thought to derive from the premise that they present us with the world as it is, unadulterated by our values. But as Stephen Mulhall observes in his discussion of Murdoch on the fact/value distinction, “this [value-neutral picture] would be only

one position in a debate over how properly to characterize the business of truth-seeking, over what it is to seek, find and have respect for the facts” (2000: 261). That is, the purported value-neutrality of the natural sciences is not itself value-neutral but a specific, value-rich position about how best to conceive of reality and our relationship to it. Mulhall continues:

how we think of the factual in relation to the evaluative is not itself value-neutral, and so that supposedly non-committal talk of a ‘common factual world’ upon which we project our differing evaluative attitudes is in reality the expression of a specific evaluative perspective. (*ibid.*).

Put otherwise: to picture psychological reality as something that can be grasped in value-neutral terms, and to picture our ideal epistemic relationship to that reality as optimally untouched by value, is itself a value-rich picture (of what counts as objective knowledge and of what constitutes objective reality). Here too, there is an effort to respect what the mind is really like, and here too the exploration of reality turns out to be value-rich.⁶

So far, we have seen that any adequate soul-picture is *holistic*, and at once value-rich *and* psychologically realistic. Thus we can assess and critique any particular soul-picture with respect to its psychological realism and with respect to its values. This means that there can be soul-pictures that are *not* psychologically realistic—again, this is Murdoch’s complaint against Kantian and so-called existentialist soul-pictures, that they confuse wish with fact or fantasy with reality⁷—but this does not mean that it is not a soul-picture; it means, according to Murdoch’s criteria, that it is a bad soul-picture *because* it is not psychologically realistic.

⁶ See also Anderson (2004) for a very helpful and case-based discussion of the debate between value-free and value-laden (specifically, feminist) conceptions of science, and an analysis of how values can and should be deployed in scientific research. Thanks to Kenny Walden for the reference, and for discussion of this point.

⁷ Moran (2011) argues that Murdoch’s criticism of existentialism is misguided; and Merritt (2017; 2022) argues that Murdoch’s own view is more compatible with and indebted to Kant than Murdoch herself suggests.

But thus far, we have been implicitly picturing our philosophical *object*—the “soul”—as if it were on a par with other objects of possible study. Yet when the philosophical object is the self or the soul, then *we ourselves* are the object under discussion. Soul-pictures are pictures *of us*.

§3. Soul-Pictures are Reflexive

This brings us to the third, most distinctive and as far as I can tell least appreciated dimension of a soul-picture: *soul-pictures are reflexive*. In a phrase, soul-pictures provide pictures in terms of which a soul is to *picture itself*. As we shall see, this reflexivity transforms how we understand the other dimensions, the value-richness and the psychological realism, and it bears on how, with what kind of language, a soul-picture is best articulated. What do I mean when I say a soul-picture is reflexive?

Recall Murdoch’s criticisms of Hampshire’s soul-picture (IP: 9; p XX of this paper). Murdoch’s first objection concerns a failure of psychological realism; the second concerns a failure of argumentation. Her third, “moral” objection is that she does not think people ought *to picture themselves* that way. Writing elsewhere against the same image of man, Murdoch argues that

our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts *in terms of which to picture the substance of our being* (1961/1999: 293-my emphases).

Murdoch’s objection is that “current picture” is insufficiently realistic, and that this is problematic both because it invites us to picture ourselves in a way that is out of step with the kind of beings we actually are and because it invites us to pursue (what she takes to be) an inadequate moral ideal. She says we need alternative ways to *picture ourselves* (to picture “the substance of our being”). What does this mean?

What I am calling the *reflexivity* of soul-pictures in fact reflects the reflexivity of selves or souls, the fact that, in virtue of our self-consciousness, human beings generate more or less explicit, more or less conscious, more or less imaginative pictures of ourselves. This is what Charles Taylor is after when he characterizes the human being as a “self-interpreting animal,” arguing that we not only interpret ourselves but are constitutively shaped by those reflexive interpretations (1985). It is what Owen Flanagan—a critic of Taylor—is after when he characterizes human beings as “self-comprehending creatures,” where this self-comprehension “can be extremely dim and inchoate [and] can fail to track the truth” (1996: 149).⁸ The point I want to make here is that the reflexivity criterion on soul-pictures is grounded in an appreciation of the reflexivity of selfhood, the fact that the human being is not just some *thing*, but is something *for itself*. The reflexivity criterion is responsive to this fact about the human mind, and so construed, the reflexivity criterion can be understood as connected to the criterion of psychological realism.

In order to appreciate the reflexivity of soul-pictures, consider the contrast case. Non-reflexive objects are not self-interpreting or self-comprehending. In providing an account or a picture of a non-reflexive object, the philosopher or theorist is providing a picture *of* the object, but is not providing a picture *for* that object. The table and the oak tree do not have view of themselves and because they do not, they cannot adopt or recognize or refuse what the theorist comes up with. Thus the pictures we develop of the table or oak tree are not pictures “for” those objects but only “for us”—for the theorist and her community of knowers—because those objects are nothing “for themselves.” When it comes to non-reflexive objects, there is no question of correspondence between how the theorist pictures the object and how the object does or ought to picture itself.

⁸ The object of Flanagan’s criticism is not the idea that we are self-interpreting or self-comprehending creatures, but that we necessarily engage in forms of what Taylor calls “strong evaluation.”

But when philosophy generates pictures of the self or the “soul”, it is offering pictures *of* the self *to and for* such selves. When given such a picture, we may find that we already do picture ourselves in its terms, or we may decide that we could, or that we ought to; these decisions will be made on the grounds of realism (the picture better reflects what human beings are like) and on evaluative and normative grounds (the picture better reflects our values). Alternatively, we may find that we do not or cannot or *ought not* picture ourselves in its terms. In this way, as Richard Moran has argued, reflexive, intentional objects, like persons, exert a kind of pressure on our theories or pictures of them. He writes:

With respect to knowledge of persons, there is an issue [...] of being able to find oneself in the knowledge that others claim to have achieved, finding oneself in the language framing the descriptions and explanations. The tomato, the planet, and the proton don't have a view how they are described; there is no issue there of our best theories of these things leaving out some aspect of their existence that matters terribly to them [...] But as human beings, as both knowers and things sometimes known, there is the fact that the object of understanding (a person, or a practice) is already an intentional phenomenon, something already constituted by certain forms of description and explanation (2011: 253).

Philosophical moral psychology as soul-picturing says not only, *this is what you are*, but also: *picture yourself like this*. In response to a philosophical soul-picture, a soul or self is entitled to ask: *do* we in fact picture ourselves this way? *can* we picture ourselves this way? *ought* we? *why* should we? does this picture get human beings *right*? which values and forms of life does this picture rely on and promote, and which does it neglect or denigrate?

This clarifies why soul-pictures are so vulnerable to the distorting influences of wish and fantasy. Insofar as these are not just pictures of objects but pictures of us, it will be tempting to picture ourselves as we wish we were. Now as David Velleman observes (in a critique of Harry Frankfurt's ideal of whole-heartedness), any philosophical conception of the self or soul will involve some ideal, and so “a conception of the self cannot be faulted simply for being associated with wishes” (2006:

341). But, he continues, such a conception “should not be tailored to suit our antecedent wishes” (*ibid.*), for instance, tailored to satisfy our wish to be free in a special way or to be metaphysically and axiologically set apart from the rest of nature or to be morally immune from the vagaries of chance or to be free of ambivalence. It also clarifies why soul-pictures risk ratifying a pervasive ideology, and why we are at risk of gravitating towards such pictures. If, for instance, one lives in a culture that valorizes individual choice, decisiveness, and self-control, we may be drawn to produce and inhabit soul-pictures that emphasize and sanctify those capacities.⁹

Before turning to the role of imaginative language, let me make two final comments about soul-pictures. First: consider that many philosophers that have articulated moral psychologies that seem very remote from how we do or even could reflexively picture ourselves. One might think of how passions for Spinoza or drives for Nietzsche shape who we are, how we see, and what we do, in ways that radically diverge from how we ordinarily understand ourselves. Are these soul-pictures? My suggestion is that either such moral psychologies are not reflexive and thus are not soul-pictures, *or* such remote moral psychologies provide us with ways in which we should *strive* to picture ourselves, where the proleptic reflexive adoption of such pictures constitutes both an ideal and a therapy. In the latter case, a soul-picture may be revisionary and thus the reflexive criterion may be difficult to meet in practice, but the theory is not indifferent to it and to that extent it still counts as a soul-picture. This suggests that to the extent that a moral psychology is fully indifferent to reflexivity, it is not a soul-picture (this might be the case with, for example, the neuropsychology of morality). It also clarifies that a soul-picture is *therapeutic*: it provides a picture the adoption of which is meant to help us better understand and live with ourselves and others. Murdoch was especially concerned with moral progress, which she understood specifically as progress away from egoistic delusions and towards

⁹ Nomy Arpaly and Mark Schroeder (1999) make this kind of point against Harry Frankfurt’s conception of alienation, and our attraction to it.

appreciation of the reality of other individuals and of “the good.” Other philosophers will provide other pictures of progress and improvement. My suggestion is that all soul-pictures are in the business of facilitating some kind of moral or ethical progress and are to that extent “therapeutic,” and that this progress is reflexive insofar as it involves coming to picture oneself as the soul-picture recommends.

Second, we should ask whether a soul-picture aspires to *universality*. Do soul-pictures purport to represent “the human” in all times and places? The short answer, I think, is that while soul-pictures may aspire to such universality—and arguably many figures in the history of philosophy, like Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, have aspired to universality—they need not. Soul-pictures can aspire to generality without universality. For instance, in Nietzsche, while all human activity can be explained by recourse to drive activity, he develops different moral psychologies for different human “types,” types that are the outcome of natural and socio-historical developments. Arguably, the “nobles” of *On the Genealogy of Morals* did not and perhaps could not picture themselves in the soul-pictures of the “priests” or the “slaves.” Or consider Bernard Williams’ (1993) analyses of the soul-pictures, respectively, of the pre-Socratic Greeks and the post-Christian, post-Kantian moderns: Williams argues that whereas any moral psychology must involve certain generic building blocks—for instance, some distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary, some conception of blame—those building blocks receive different interpretation and organization at different historical moments, and thereby differently meet, or fail to meet, different needs.¹⁰ In the next section I will briefly look at W.E.B. Du Bois’ moral psychology, specifically his metaphors of “second sight” and “the veil” where these are emphatically not meant to be universal in extension but to characterize the “souls of black folk” (and even here we must ask: black folks at all times and places?). Finally note that Murdoch herself often positions her own soul-picture as historically and socially located and as responsive to,

¹⁰ See Queloz (2022).

for instance, the scientific revolution, Kant, Romanticism, the Second World War, communism, liberalism, and Freud (1961/1999).

These examples all suggest that while soul-pictures will aspire to a kind of generality, they need not aspire to ahistorical universality. Some soul-pictures are possible only within certain historical locations and as developed within specific historical trajectories, where, for instance, certain values, concepts, words, metaphors, and stories are possible or available.

In the next section I turn to the final key dimension of soul-pictures, and consider *how* a soul-picture is articulated. Language and style become especially important once we appreciate the reflexive and therapeutic dimensions of soul-pictures, since it is now clear that soul-picturing is in the business not only of description and evaluation, but also of communication and address. A soul-picture speaks not only *of* us, but *for* us and *to* us, so we must ask how it does so.

§5. Soul-Pictures and Imaginative Language

Murdoch makes serious, pointed, and elaborate use of imaginative language and metaphors in her own philosophical moral psychology—as Mulhall puts it, “images are part of the tissue of her thinking—not as an ornament or optional extra but the thing itself” (1997: 222)—and she frequently turns to art and literature as moral psychological resources. For Murdoch, metaphors and “semi-sensible pictures” (1951/1999: 33) are basic to our ways of representing our own activity and experience, and they are basic to philosophical thinking and writing.¹¹ If a soul-picture is a picture that could be

¹¹ And all this despite the fact that in a 1978 interview with Bryan Magee called “Men of Ideas” (Murdoch was the only woman), Murdoch herself claimed to reject literariness in what she calls the “ideal philosophical style,” noting: “of course philosophers vary, and some are more ‘literary’ than others, but I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style [...] a certain cold clear recognizable voice.”

reflexively adopted, then we should expect philosophy to make use of such imaginative language and imagery.

One way to think about the indispensability of imaginative language and metaphor for moral psychology is as a useful heuristic that facilitates our theoretical understanding of complicated psychological phenomena. For example, in his work on unconscious processing, Daniel Kahneman characterizes the human mind in terms of two Systems, each with its own distinct capacities, only one of which is conscious. Kahneman justifies using the heuristic of Systems as quasi-agents because this helps us grasp something quite complex: “the characters are useful because of some quirks of our minds, yours and mine. A sentence is understood more easily if it describes what an agent (System 2) does than if it describes what something is, what properties it has” (2013: 29) (so the capital S, suggesting a proper name, is not accidental to the strategy). Because of these “quirks of our minds,” it is easier to picture complex psychological activity in terms of inner, interacting agencies. Freud also sometimes characterizes his own metapsychology of id, ego, super-ego in these terms. As he writes, “I hope you have already formed an impression that the hypothesis of the superego really describes a structural relation and is not merely a personification of some such abstraction as that of conscience” (1933: 64). Freud here suggests that these “personifications” are, again, heuristics to aid our theoretical understanding and do not describe what is *really* going on in the mind.¹²

In these cases, the psychologist gives his audience a concrete, semi-sensible image to help us novices understand a complex system. On this account, images and metaphors are indispensable as pedagogical aids, but as our understanding deepens, we may be able to dispense with them. Or even if we never can dispense with metaphors, what is important is why they are employed, namely: to facilitate our theoretical comprehension of a complex object.

¹² Though see my Russell (2022) and (forthcoming) for arguments that Freud’s metapsychology is not purely functionalist but also reflexive.

But this is not why Murdoch thinks that we cannot do without metaphor “here,” in the context of articulating a soul-picture. Murdoch is not primarily concerned with theoretical comprehension of an object and metaphors are not just useful heuristics (“metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models” [1970/2014: 75]). Instead, I suggest that Murdoch’s emphasis on metaphor and imaginative language be understood in terms of the value-richness, psychological realism, reflexivity, and therapeutics of soul-pictures. In short: a soul-picture articulated through metaphors and images prompts and facilitates our imaginative adoption of the picture and helps us to picture ourselves in that picture’s terms. While Kahneman’s use of metaphor invites us to picture an *object* in a certain way in order to theoretically comprehend it, for Murdoch metaphor is indispensable for reflexive and practical purposes. When a soul-picture is articulated at least in part, yet indispensably, through imaginative language and metaphor, this invites a distinctively imaginative form of engagement on behalf of the reader: metaphors invite us to explore them, to see what they can illuminate, and in the case of soul-pictures, they invite us to, so to speak, try them on for ourselves. In a phrase: imaginative language invites imaginative access. The kind of understanding that such imaginative language facilitates is not theoretical and observational, but reflexive, affective, aesthetic, and practical.¹³

When, for example, Christine Korsgaard deploys her now famous image of “stepping back” as a metaphor for our kind of self-conscious agency, she invites us to picture ourselves as isolated wills surveying an array of options from which we must choose. This metaphor is attractive in part because this is how things can seem from the first-person point of view (so this picture is phenomenologically compelling) and also because such a metaphor speaks to an antecedent wish of being “perfectly self-aware and so perfectly detached and free” (Murdoch 1970/2014: 340), of “being able to encompass

¹³ See Nora Hämmäläinen (2014) for a similar conception of the role of metaphor in Murdoch’s conception of morality and moral philosophy.

ourselves completely and thus become the absolute source of what we do” (Nagel 1989: 118). While the metaphor arguably does aid our theoretical understanding of the conception of agency on offer, it also aids our imaginative access to the picture, allowing us to try it on as a picture of ourselves.

Or consider Murdoch’s suggestion that a person’s inner, barely conscious, ongoing activity of attending—more or less adequately, more or less creatively—to the world and other people be imagined as “forming part of a continuous fabric of being” (IP 20). While such inner, private, creative activity could be characterized as a mere “shadow” of real action (IP 5), or as less “mine” insofar as it is not an action that I, *qua* rational agent, self-consciously choose, Murdoch’s metaphor of a “continuous fabric of being” conjures a different picture. The metaphor suggests, for instance, that a soul cannot be neatly sorted into its active “bits” and passive “bits, and it suggests that, as Cora Diamond puts it, a person’s “moral being” shows itself not only in overt choices and actions, “but also in her thoughts, jokes, patterns of attention, fantasies, imaginative explorations, and a thousand other things” (2010: 72). It also suggests that one’s fabric of being is continuous with much that might seem “outside” the purview of the agent, for instance, history, culture, nature, and other persons; it suggests that I am interwoven with a vaster reality.

Or consider W.E.B. Du Bois’ metaphor of the “veil.” Early in his career, in his 1903 “The Souls of Black Folk,” Du Bois works to articulate what it’s like to *be* a problem, specifically, what it’s like to stand on the “other side” of the color line. He describes a childhood encounter at a New England school where children engaged in the practice of exchanging visiting cards with one another. In this context, a little girl refuses Du Bois’ card “peremptorily, with a glance:” and “then it dawned on me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (2016: 2). In the famous next paragraph, Du Bois writes: “after the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American

world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness.” Nearly twenty years, in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, Du Bois describes how that the veil “hangs there, this Veil, between Then and Now, between Pale and Colored and Black and White—between You and Me” (143, 1999).

My proposal is that Du Bois’ metaphor of the veil captures and communicates a reflexive characteristic of the “souls of Black folk,” where the realization of one’s “difference” is “like” encountering a screen or a veil that shuts one out from the world from which one has been excluded, that divides human beings from one another, and that produces a kind of “doubled” rather than unified self-consciousness. Du Bois also uses the metaphor to suggest that this veil can generate an interesting ethico-epistemic capacity, what Du Bois calls a “second sight,” which Charles Mills glosses as “the meta-perspective of blacks seeing whites seeing whitely” (2017: 107). Du Bois’ imaginative language facilitates imaginative access to this soul-picture. Now importantly, the social and historical positioning of the reader will inform the kind of imaginative access that can be achieved. Those “within the veil” will make different imaginative use of these metaphors than those “outside” or “on the other side.” The point is that the metaphors *do* invite such imaginative engagement or picturing, which is importantly different than providing a theoretical heuristic. Even finding that one’s imaginative access is blocked could function as an important moment of moral learning, and a way of realizing something about the structure of one’s own psychology, or how one has been picturing oneself and others.

Taking all of this together, a soul-picture, I have argued, is a holistic, value-rich and psychologically realistic, reflexive, therapeutic, and imaginatively articulated moral psychology. A soul-picture provides a picture in terms of which we are invited to picture ourselves. While it is already familiar that for Murdoch our conceptions of mind must be realistic and are at the same time pervaded by value, and while it is well-known that imaginative language is crucial both to Murdoch’s own philosophy and to her conception of human thinking full stop, I think the *reflexive* dimension of a soul-

picture has not been appreciated, and that once it is emphasized, it makes a difference to how we understand the other dimensions. It is especially important for understanding the role of imaginative language in the elaboration of a soul-picture, since imaginative language is especially helpful in facilitating our imaginative, reflexive, practical access to any such picture.

§7. Soul Pictures and Personal Visions

In this final section I briefly consider the relationship between a philosophical soul-picture and what Murdoch calls a “personal vision,” which she introduces in her 1956 essay “Vision and Choice in Morality.” Again her target is “the current view” in morality, a position again epitomized by Hampshire, and characterized by its emphasis on reflective clarity, deliberation, and discrete moments of choice, and she attempts to show that this view neglects and impoverishes what she calls the inner life, “personal attitudes and visions which do not obviously take the form of choice-guiding arguments” (1956/1999: 80). But, what has personal vision to do with ethics or morality? Here is one of Murdoch’s responses:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of man’s being or the nature of his personal vision. (*ibid.*, 80-1).

Murdoch wants her reader to see that the elaboration of a personal vision is a kind of moral activity, which activity essentially informs a person’s vision of and action in the world. If that is the case, then persons differ from one another “not only because we select different objects out of the same world

but because we see different worlds” (*ibid.*, 82). So, for instance, if it is part of my personal vision to emphasize the “inexhaustible detail of the world” and to cultivate a responsiveness to its mystery, then I will see and move within a different world from a person for whom a sense of mystery is frustrating or useless or obscurantist. But if, as Murdoch writes, “moral philosophy [is] a more systematic and reflective extension of what ordinary moral agents are continually doing” (*ibid.* 83), and if, as Diamond writes, a philosophical soul-picture is “expressive of the kind of moral being one is” (2010: 76), then should we say that a soul-picture is the articulation of its author’s personal vision?

There are, I think, two parts of an answer to this question. On the one hand, a soul-picture should arguably be expansive enough to accommodate a diversity of personal visions, or put negatively, should not be so narrow and determinate as to rule out certain kinds of personal vision or the very idea of a personal vision as morally insignificant. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that the philosopher’s own personal vision would not inform her soul-picture. As Murdoch notes, “temperament will play its part” in determining whether or not one wants to accept or reject some soul-picture. Murdoch’s own soul-picture, which emphasizes imagination, vision, and attention, is arguably an effort to show that moral philosophy can and ought to better accommodate features of her own personal vision. Moreover, if, as her reader, one is not at least to some extent attracted to her vision and sense of imagination and mystery, it is unclear whether one would be compelled by Murdoch as a moral philosopher at all. So while a philosopher’s soul-picture does not reduce to her own personal vision, we should expect that the latter would inform the former.

§8. Conclusion

In an early essay, “Metaphysics and Ethics,” Murdoch states what she takes to be the difficulty and the task of moral philosophy. She writes:

The difficulty is, and here we are after all not so very far from the philosophers of the past, that the subject of investigation is the nature of man—and we are studying this creature at a point of great conceptual sensibility. Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture. This is the process which moral philosophy must attempt to describe and analyze. 1957/1996: 75.

Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself which he then comes to resemble. If philosophy is a systematic and reflective extension of what ordinary persons are already doing, then philosophy as soul-picturing constitutes the systematic and reflective extension of this reflexive, self-picturing, self-transforming capacity. As part of *moral* philosophy and moral psychology, soul-pictures provide pictures that render our relevant ethical and moral capacities intuitive and accessible. When those capacities become genuinely intuitive and accessible to us, we have begun the process of coming to resemble the picture.

Not every moral psychology is a soul-picture. I suggested that piecemeal moral psychology is not itself a soul-picture, because it does not meet the holism criterion, and that moral psychologies that are indifferent to the reflexivity criterion are not soul-pictures. But the idea of a “soul-picture” allows us to ask, of any given moral psychology, what its broad explanatory backdrop consists in and how we would have to picture ourselves, if we were to picture ourselves in its terms. In that sense, the idea can function as an important philosophical-diagnostic tool. Further, while art and literature also produce such pictures, in the passage above Murdoch suggests that the special task of philosophy is not only to produce such pictures, but to critically reflect on this human process of producing soul-pictures and then transforming in light of them. In this paper, I’ve tried to contribute to this critical, reflective task.¹⁴

¹⁴ I want to thank the following people for conversations about this paper and these themes: Matt Congdon, Sam Filby, Jonathan Gingerich, Paul Katsafanas, Karen Ng, Andreja Novakovic, Richard Moran, Katja Vogt, Kenny Walden, and Vida Yao. Thanks also to the George Washington Philosophy Department, for hosting a colloquium for this paper, and to Nandi Theunissen and the graduate students in her Iris Murdoch seminar, for their questions and discussion.

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