

IRIS MURDOCH ON MORAL VISION

Samuel Cooper and Sasha Lawson-Frost

Iris Murdoch (1919–99) was a philosopher and novelist who wrote extensively on the themes of love, goodness, religion, and morality. In this article, we explore her notion of ‘moral vision’; the idea that morality is not just about how we act and make choices, but how we see the world in a much broader sense.

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Vision and Choice

When we are asked to think about problems in moral philosophy, most of us will probably think of questions about how to make moral decisions. We might think of questions like ‘when is lying morally permissible?’, ‘how should I evaluate the possible consequences of my actions?’, or ‘should I be vegetarian?’. Alternatively, we might think of specific moral dilemmas (like trolley-problem cases) which force us to think critically about how moral considerations should determine how we act.

Something that all of these questions have in common is that they focus on moral choice. They usually involve circumstances in which I am faced with a moral dilemma, and have to choose between some set of possible options – like lying or telling the truth, eating meat or being vegetarian, or choosing between actions with different possible outcomes. In cases like this, both the problem and the options we have when confronting it are presented as ‘ready-made’: we know that we’re being confronted with a problem which requires a decision, we know what the stakes are, and we know all the possible responses we have to choose from. They are questions about the actions

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we end up taking and our reasons for choosing those actions.

Iris Murdoch poses an interesting challenge to this paradigm in moral philosophy which focuses exclusively on choice: she thinks that it neglects the role of our inner, mental experiences in morality. She describes how this emphasis on choices and moral dilemmas results in a picture of philosophy where 'the "inner life" is not to be thought of as a moral sphere' (*The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 8). The moral questions we've mentioned so far are all about the actions we take in the world and how those actions affect others. Obviously, questions about how we should act are important, and moral philosophy will always need to deal with them. But are they the whole story? They don't even touch on what our attitudes to the possible choices are, or how we deliberate between the options available to us; how we think, feel, and reason. Murdoch thinks that if we *only* ask questions about choices and actions when we do moral philosophy, we risk leaving out something fundamental: how we think and understand the world privately. For Murdoch, this is itself an important moral matter, even before we come to take overt actions and decisions.

The choice-focused paradigm of philosophy leaves out what Murdoch calls our 'moral vision'. Moral vision is about how we see the world as human beings in a way that is shaped by our moral beliefs and concepts. It concerns our attitudes to the world and how we mentally respond to things we encounter in it. For instance, if I have an optimistic moral vision, we might say 'I see things in an optimistic light' – think of the metaphor of 'seeing the world through rose-tinted lenses'. We often use the language of seeing to describe a person's attitude to the world. In this case, moral vision might involve things such as seeing the best in people, being hopeful about the future, and paying attention to good things in the world rather than brooding on the bad. Our moral visions can be shaped by our personalities,

things that happen to us, our mood and feelings, and our relationships with others.

One helpful way of getting to grips with the idea of moral vision is to think of it as a kind of 'seeing as'. When we describe the literal vision of our eyes we might describe how I see different objects: for example, 'I see a chair', 'I see the colour blue'. 'Seeing as' brings in another sense of seeing which often comes up in descriptions of moral vision: for example, 'I see this painting as a masterpiece', 'I see her as a human being'. This kind of seeing doesn't just involve seeing different objects, but also involves our personal values: things like our attitudes towards others, our compassion, our artistic tastes.

For Iris Murdoch, moral vision is a fundamental part of morality. She describes how we should strive to have a 'just and loving' vision of the world, and for her this is an important part of one's moral development (*The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 33). To see why she thinks that some moral visions are better or more just than others, we can look at some examples:

- Alex passes a homeless person on the street. Many people walk past the homeless person without paying attention to them or acknowledging their existence as a human being. Alex, however, feels sorry for the homeless person, and 'sees' them as a human being who is like her and needs help. Many of us will want to say that Alex is seeing the homeless person in a more just or compassionate way than the people who walk past without acknowledging them.
- Beth has just learned about where meat comes from and the conditions that animals are kept in before they are slaughtered. When she goes to eat dinner with her family, she 'sees' her plate of pork in a different way than before. She no

longer just sees it as food; she sees it as a dead animal who had a short and pain-filled life.

What Murdoch wants us to realize is that, by the time you get to a decision, a lot of the most important stuff has already happened. Most people who are passing the homeless person whom Alex stops to speak to aren't *deciding* not to stop. It just never occurs to them. It never comes up for them as a live decision, a choice that they actively have to make. Likewise with Beth, it isn't necessarily that she actively chose to eat meat before she learned about the exploitation of animals: perhaps she just ate whatever her parents bought without much critical reflection. What's interesting about her change of vision is not that she makes a different moral choice, but rather that a fairly ordinary scenario appears to her as a moral decision point for the first time.

Many of these examples of moral vision will also have important impacts on how a person then chooses to act: for instance, maybe Alex will be moved to talk to the homeless person, and maybe Beth will go vegan. This is one important reason – though not the only reason – why Murdoch thinks that moral vision is important.

However, Murdoch also maintains that how we see the world is morally important *even if* it doesn't always lead to changes in how we act.

To demonstrate this, Murdoch gives an example of a mother-in-law who changes how she 'sees' her daughter-in-law (*The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 16–17). At first, the mother-in-law sees her daughter in a somewhat cruel or unfair way: she thinks of her as 'undignified', 'juvenile', and 'rude'. However, by a process of self-reflection the mother-in-law is able to realize that she is being unfair and narrow-minded in this view of her daughter-in-law. She is then able to reorient the way she thinks about her daughter-in-law's qualities, so that she ultimately starts to see her in a more kind and charitable way, and 'her vision gradually alters'. After this process of reflection, she sees her

daughter-in-law as 'spontaneous' instead of 'undignified' and 'delightfully youthful' instead of 'juvenile'.

What the mother-in-law has managed to do here is to improve her moral vision. She has not necessarily changed her actions or behaviour towards the daughter-in-law at all; for instance, she may have been acting polite and kind to her the whole time. What's changed is her way of 'seeing' her daughter-in-law. For Murdoch, this is a kind of moral improvement, even if the change in moral vision is not accompanied by any changes in how the mother-in-law makes practical decisions or choices.

On this view, we start to see morality as something much bigger and more expansive than a set of principles about how to act in some especially moral situations. Rather, it is something that concerns us all the time in our day-to-day relationships and activities.

To get a grasp of how moral vision pervades and influences our lives, we would suggest thinking about your own experiences of moral vision. Have you had any experiences like the mother-in-law when you have actively changed your way of looking at something or someone? Or any other times when your way of seeing the world has changed? This might come from a period of reflection, or perhaps from learning new information about a situation or person. Do you think that your way of seeing things changed for the better or the worse? And how did your change of vision affect your actions and attitudes towards the world?

Failures of Vision

If moral vision – the way we see the world and other people – is so important to goodness, it should come as no surprise that Murdoch locates the source of much of our moral failure in failure of vision: illusions and self-deceptions, and in the failure to look properly at all. She thinks that when we can see things in the right way, then good action naturally follows. For example, she says that the

more you can see other people as fully real, with thoughts and wishes and a way of seeing and a whole life that is as rich as your own, the harder it will be to treat them inconsiderately or exploitatively (*The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 64). On the other hand, when we fail to see other people properly, don't pay attention to them, and never try to imagine what things are like for them, it becomes very easy to be thoughtless and cruel, to treat them as unimportant – to treat them like things.

There are many different kinds of failures of vision which can distort the way we relate to other people, to the world, and to ourselves. We all have some illusions: prejudices, mistakes, some things we've just never really thought about, some things we have difficulty admitting to ourselves. This is just part of being human. We can come up with dozens of examples of such failure to see or to look properly at the people and circumstances around us. For example:

- Bad social conventions or prejudices, like classism and racism: 'I'm sure she's a wonderful candidate, but is someone with an accent like *that* really suitable?'
- Personal hang-ups and insecurities: 'everything always works out for everyone – except me! Everything is so hard for me!'
- To maintain a pleasant self-image: 'Sure, I like to party, but I don't have a drinking problem.'
- Overactive envy or jealousy: 'I know my wife is unfaithful! What other explanation could that absence *possibly* have?'
- Lack of self-confidence: 'I'm not actually any *good* or *talented* at this, I just work really hard.'
- The influence of the company you keep: 'Anna does this all the time, and Anna is a good person. So how bad can it really be?'
- Self-absorption: 'I could use a friend right now, I'm going through a really hard time.' 'Oh me too, let me tell you *all about it*. . .'

And there are many more. In short, anything that could shape the way you see the world so as to take you away from how things really are.

These failures of vision might work by distorting the facts, or by changing what philosophers call the 'salience' of facts: which things stand out to you as important, as worth taking into account or worth acting on. A sexist boss might tell you that men are smarter than women, just ignoring or dismissing evidence to the contrary: this person would have a distorted view of the facts. Alternatively, they might say all the right things about equality, but in practice they treat their employees differently. Perhaps when they're dealing with a man, they overlook small mistakes and praise them when they do small tasks, but when they're dealing with a woman, they are harsh about small mistakes, and treat their extra work as expected, not something to praise. They might not even be aware that they are doing this. This boss has all the facts, but the wrong facts 'stand out' to them, and they stand out in the wrong ways.

Fantasy and Reality

In Murdoch's picture of the moral life, becoming a better person involves getting rid of these sorts of failures of vision, moving slowly towards a more truthful vision of the world and the individuals around you. She calls many of these failures of vision 'fantasies': illusions that keep us stuck in our own view of the world, unable to see things as they really are.

We can sometimes identify our fantasies and try to get over them. You can see this in the example of the mother-in-law we discussed earlier. She says:

'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' (*The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 17)

Her recognition that her vision might be infected with prejudice and jealously starts her down a path of thinking again about her daughter-in-law, and trying to 'look again': to get rid of the things that are distorting her vision. It is her progress in getting over these illusions which is the measure of her moral growth and improvement.

This movement from fantasy to reality is sometimes seen in a momentary or experiential way: there are times when, all of a sudden, you realize you've been blind: as sometimes discovering something new about a person changes your whole idea of who they are and why they act like they do. It can also be understood in a long-term way, a lifelong journey of trying to see with a wider and a clearer vision.

Sometimes, like the mother-in-law, we can do this ourselves, by looking and thinking carefully and trying to notice and check the things which are distorting our vision. But this can be a very difficult process. Murdoch is not optimistic about the amount of fantasy which human beings usually carry around with them. She sees the default state not as one where we are mostly in touch with reality, hampered here and there by a few fantasies; but rather one in which we are deeply mired in illusion, where even small changes toward truth and goodness are difficult, and backsliding is easy and extremely common. We constantly have to grapple with the temptation to believe what is easy for us, what flatters our vanity, what serves our purposes, and what confirms our existing beliefs and values.

Even when we do manage to make changes in our way of seeing things, we can't always tell which way we are moving. Sometimes we think that the scales have fallen from our eyes, but actually we're just as blind as before, or even worse. In Shakespeare's play *Othello*, the main character thinks he's discovered that his wife, Desdemona, is being unfaithful to him. He thinks this is a big, shattering realization about how the world is. But in fact, he has been tricked by his subordinate: his wife is true to him after all. When we're in the midst of such situations, we often can't tell whether a realization is real or fallacious. The truth has

no special mark, no magic glow to tell us when we've reached it.

Other people, though they can also lead us astray, can help us here. When others, and especially people we care about, disagree with us, or see situations differently from how we see them, it can help us to look at those situations again and think about them in new ways. Likewise, when we're totally new to a subject or an area of thinking, we rely a great deal on more knowledgeable people to teach us and show us the ropes. Other people can point things out to us that we'd missed, call us out on our mistakes, and pull us out of spirals when we're obsessing over something.

Our illusions can also be destroyed without any work on our part at all, when unexpected events and realizations shatter our mistaken notions about how the world works, and force our vision to shift. This process can sometimes be a nice one: for example, you might ask for help one day and discover that your friends care about you a great deal more than you had realized. But because our illusions are so often flattering, pleasant, and self-serving, disillusionment is often correspondingly painful. Maybe an experience of death or illness reminds us how fragile and vulnerable our human lives are. 'Painful', though, doesn't just mean 'bad'. We can often learn, grow, and do better after we've been forced, even despite ourselves, to see more clearly.

Iris Murdoch often talks about the importance of imagination as part of our moral lives. Her emphasis on vision might sound like it's going to promote a sort of passivity: I'm supposed to just look at people and situations, and then good action will flow naturally from having the right view. But this 'looking' is a kind of *activity*, and one which can be very difficult. On the one side, I have to examine and suppress those tendencies in myself which might lead me to a distorted vision. Here again we can go back to the example of the mother-in-law, who notices that she is jealous and tries to look again, this time trying to notice how jealousy has tinged her view, and trying to overcome

it. She has to think imaginatively to find new ways in which she might see and understand her daughter-in-law: for example, she might try to imagine how she would feel about her daughter-in-law if she were not married to her son, or if she had met her in some different context.

Paying real attention to things often involves a sustained imaginative engagement with them. When I'm trying to judge whether an action or a new policy is a good idea, I have to think about how it impacts on other people: and this generally involves exercising my imagination. How would this make this person feel? How would it affect their lives? How would it *look* to them? How might the action seem from a different perspective? This kind of imaginative activity can go wrong, as we are always tempted to fill in the picture with what suits us or what goes with our prejudices ('of course he won't mind us borrowing this'; 'she doesn't really need help, she's just lazy'). But it is an essential part of being a moral agent.

Using our imagination to see the world in a different way is something we do all the time in nearly every part of our lives: from our personal relationships, to art, to politics. This is crucial to emending and improving our moral vision, because it helps us to correct our prejudices and biases, and understand that the world doesn't always conform to our hopes and expectations. If we stop thinking imaginatively, we risk being closed-minded, dismissing arguments or ways of seeing the world because we don't agree with them.

Vision and Attention

A concept which you might notice has cropped up many times in this article is the idea of 'paying attention' to something: trying to look at it closely and realistically and without being unduly influenced by prejudices in your moral vision. For Murdoch, this 'attention' is a crucial concept for thinking about morality, which even takes on a kind of religious significance. She gets this idea from the twentieth-century

philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. Weil describes attention as a kind of spiritual practice – when we pay attention to something we engage with it patiently and contemplatively, trying our best to see it truthfully.

Doing mathematics and learning a language are examples of attention which Weil and Murdoch use. We get to grips with these subjects by working through examples; and through practice we come to understand their rules, structures, and applications. This requires us to be patient and careful; we must set aside frustrations, avoid cheap workarounds that come at the expense of real understanding, and recognize our own limitations. You won't get very far in either subject if you refuse to accept when you've made a mistake, or if you act as if you know everything already. Attention is about being open to things in the world teaching us things we didn't already notice, accept, or recognize. When we attend to something well, we will learn to see the thing we are studying in better and more developed ways; as when you finally understand *why* the correct answer to a maths problem is the right one.

Although Murdoch and Weil are using the word attention in a slightly technical sense, their use isn't far away from the ordinary concept of attention that we use in everyday life. When I pay attention to something, I look at it carefully and try to see the thing for what it really is, and not just what I expect it to be like. When something 'grabs my attention', it compels me to look at it and notice new things about it.

We think that the best way to understand what Murdoch means by attention is to practise it yourself. Start with picking up an object around you – anything will do: a pencil, your phone, anything. Now, without seriously looking at it, describe what it's like to yourself: What colour is it? What shape is it? What texture does it have?

Now, look at it again, and this time really pay attention to how it looks and feels. Try to list any details or features about the object you can see or feel that you didn't notice the first time round. This might be details in the texture of

the object, how the light reflects off different angles, maybe the shape of its shadow, bits of patterns. If you managed to notice more things about the object than you saw initially, you've paid attention to the object better.

For Murdoch, this kind of attention is importantly connected to moral vision: by paying attention to something in the right way, we can improve our moral vision and see the world in a better way. It might be hard to see how seeing a pencil in more detail can make you a better person, but a more obvious example can be seen if we think of paying attention to other people. The previous example of Alex seeing the homeless person as a human being is one example of this: she pays attention to the homeless person in a way that most passers-by don't. Treating people in a way that is compassionate, sensitive, and understanding often requires paying attention to their lives, backgrounds, and values.

However, Murdoch also gives us examples of how even attending to more mundane and less obviously moral things can improve our moral vision too. For instance:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but the kestrel. And when I return thinking of the other matter it seems less important. (*The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 82)

Here we have a person who notices a kestrel, and by observing and attending to it her vision of the world is changed. Before, she was feeling 'anxious' and 'resentful', perhaps experiencing one of the failures of vision we talked about earlier. Murdoch implies that this person is thinking too much about herself and her 'prestige' – so much that it's making her inattentive to her surroundings. But, by

attending to the kestrel, she is able to look away from whatever it is that's prompting this self-absorption. She focuses on something totally external to her, and this knocks her out of her negative frame of mind, and she is able to look at the world in a fairer, less resentful, way. Her vision is improved.

It is important that Murdoch points out that this person doesn't just look at the kestrel and ignore what was bothering her in the first place – attention isn't just a form of escapism. Rather, she looks at the kestrel and then returns to the problem she started with in a fresh way. When she returns to the original thing she was thinking about, she sees it more objectively: it seems less important and no longer totally absorbs her thought. Here we might be reminded of times when we've been agonizing over something embarrassing that happened to us in the past, but when we are able to take our mind off it for a bit we can go back and realize that we were making a big deal about something no one else remembers. By paying attention to something else, we can keep some failures of vision in check and remind ourselves that the world doesn't revolve around us.

Conclusion

In this essay, we've explored Iris Murdoch's notion of moral vision, and looked at how this relates to imagination and attention. For Murdoch, how we see the world is an important part of morality and moral development, even if improvements in our moral vision do not always lead to specific moral actions. Imagination and attention are important for improving our moral vision because they allow us to engage with our vision of the world in different ways and help us to recognize when we are looking at things in a biased or self-absorbed way.

We've talked about how some different experiences can change your moral vision and help you overcome some

failures of vision. The question we want to leave you with now is: do you think these experiences can make us better people? If you think being a good person involves having a good vision of the world, perhaps they can. If so, are these experiences enough, or do we need something else to make us live well and morally?

Further Reading

If reading this article has made you want to go away and read some more Iris Murdoch, we have some suggestions for where to get started:

Browning, Gary, *Why Iris Murdoch Matters* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). An accessible introduction to Iris Murdoch's philosophical and literary works

Murdoch, Iris, *The Bell* (London: Penguin Vintage, 1958). One of Murdoch's early novels. This one isn't too long and reflects some of the philosophical themes which interested Murdoch.

Murdoch, Iris, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970). A collection of three essays, which includes discussion of moral vision.

Murdoch, Iris, *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986). Two short plays written in the form of philosophical dialogues.

Samuel Cooper is a PhD student at the University of Liverpool. samuel.cooper@liverpool.ac.uk

Sasha Lawson-Frost is an MA student at the University of Durham. sasha.lawsonfrost@durham.ac.uk