

**Thin as a Needle, Quick as a Flash:
On Murdoch on Agency and Moral Progress**

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Jack Samuel

I

*The Sovereignty of Good*¹—especially the first essay, “The Idea of Perfection”—is often associated with a critique of a certain picture of agency and its proper place in ethical thought. There is implicit in this critique, however, an alternative, much richer picture. Though her immediate target is the Kantianism of Stuart Hampshire, which no longer enjoys the centrality in moral philosophy that it did in Murdoch’s time, a broadly Murdochian conception of agency provides just as compelling an alternative to both the Humean and Kantian varieties predominant in metaethics today.

The worry is that Humean and Kantian conceptions of agency are too thin, too isolated from everything else that makes for a life. Where the Humean emphasizes the complex personal context from which choice and action emerge, she conceives the agent as for the most part passive in creating it; where the Kantian emphasizes the activity of the agent, she focuses on the moment of choice at the expense of the development, maintenance, and improvement of the background ethical awareness through which the world is disclosed to the agent as normatively saturated.² Neither approach accounts for

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1971).

² These characterizations of “the Humean” and “the Kantian” are simplified for the sake of drawing the contrast, and I don’t intend them as portrayals of any particular philosopher. I discuss infra the extent to which they do and do not capture important features of leading Humeans and Kantians, especially Sharon Street and Christine Korsgaard, and what resources Street and Korsgaard have available to respond to the Murdochian critique. See especially n.30. To the extent that the toy Kantian and Humean views I invoke are simplified to the point of caricature I hope they are nevertheless valuable as devices for drawing out important details of the view I attribute to Murdoch.

Murdoch herself has in mind, in addition to Hampshire, Hare and Sartre in particular. The contours of these debates have of course shifted, but they have remarkably much in common. The lineage from Hare to today’s Humean non-cognitivists (and their similarities and differences from cognitivist Humeans; constructivist Humeans like Street or reductive realist Humeans like Mark Schroeder) are well-known, and Murdoch’s concerns about Sartre’s grounding of ethics in rationally unconstrained acts of choice appear in criticisms of Korsgaard, sometimes with Sartre invoked for comparison. See Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford University Press, 2007); see also Ruth Chang, “Voluntarist Reasons and the Sources of

the ongoing process of setting up the choice space, which by Murdoch's lights is to miss out on what is most important. Making sense of what we have reason to choose is not a task that can be understood independently of making sense of how we arrive at the normative circumstances that structure our practical possibilities to begin with. Murdoch underlines that agency is not a power dormant in us most of our lives, springing into act at moments of choice—it is the active aspect of our constant, inner, reflective engagement with the world. What emerges from her critique is a more sophisticated picture of agency, the ongoing, active work of which turns out to be implicated in ethical vision after all.

Another under-appreciated feature of *Sovereignty* is that Murdoch's account of moral progress involves an implicit account of alienation, as the inadequacy of one's practical standpoint to ethically relate oneself to concrete others.³ Murdoch is often read as a humanist for whom moral progress begins with simple egoism and ends with loving care directed at the individual other, understood as a kind of immediate, ahistorical respect for human dignity. There are elements of that sort of view in the text but there is also the material for a story about how to get people in view in their concrete, particular reality, in social and historical context, and in relation to oneself.⁴ Thereby we can

Normativity," in *Reasons for Action*, eds. David Sobel & Steven Wall: 243–71 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³ Neither this feature of Murdoch's view nor the account of agency play a role in, for example, recent articles like Kieran Setiya, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good," *Philosophers' Imprint*, vol. 13 (2013), Mark Hopwood, "Murdoch, Moral Concepts, and the Universalizability of Moral Reasons," *Philosophical Papers*, 46(2): 245–71 (2017); "The Extremely Difficult Realization That Something Other Than Oneself Is Real: Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 26(1): 477–501 (2018), or most of the essays in Justin Broackes (ed.), *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) (hereinafter "Broackes"). Though Carla Bagnoli's chapter, "The Exploration of Moral Life," does discuss the positive role of agency in Murdoch's work, the features that she emphasizes are not those discussed here.

Though most of the essays in the Broackes volume do not deal with the aspects of Murdochian agency that I am concerned with, Bridget Clarke's chapter, "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception," deals with the relationship between moral and political knowledge in a way that overlaps with the discussion in the second half of the paper, and Lawrence Blum's "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy" touches on some of the same ideas. I discuss both *infra*—see especially n.40.

⁴ The centrality, for Murdoch, of recognizing concrete particularity is discussed in illuminating detail by Lawrence Blum in "Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral," *Philosophical Studies*, 50(3): 343–67 (1986), and some of his examples in "Moral Perception and Particularity," *Ethics*, 101(4): 701–25 (1991), help to draw out the importance of social context. The case of Theresa and Julio is exemplary in this respect:

Theresa is the administrator of a department. One of her subordinates, Julio, has been stricken with a debilitating condition in his leg causing him frequent pain. He approaches Theresa to help work

understand moral progress less in terms of achieving clarity with respect to timeless truths about the human qua human, and instead as a process of getting clear about the social and moral world, often in ways that can be unflattering.

In §II I will try to draw Murdoch's positive conception of agency out of her critique of the then-predominant alternative, and in §III I will try to fill in this picture by seeing how it works in her conception of moral progress. My aims here are not purely exegetical: I want to provide a reading of the *Sovereignty* that I find compelling, and in doing so use Murdoch to pose a challenge to the orthodox presentation of logical space. I am convinced that by reflecting on and somewhat updating Murdoch's intervention into her contemporary debates we can see new and promising possibilities.

II

Murdoch's Critique

That Murdoch offers a way to think about agency and its role in the life of a person may seem a puzzling suggestion given that she emphasizes her criticism of an agency-centric moral philosophy, promising to focus on moral contemplation and vision instead. On a first glance Murdoch appears to want to make agency all but unimportant, taking a backseat to a contemplative picture of morality on which the primary concern is vision.

Nevertheless, her target is not agency in general, nor the idea that agency is important to ethics, but an especially narrow and simplistic conception of agency, promoted to the place of exclusive fundamentality in ethical thought. Murdoch's real

out a plan by which the company and in particular she and his division can accommodate his disability. Theresa is unable to appreciate Julio's disability and the impact it is having on his work. While in principle Theresa accepts the company's legal obligation requirement to accommodate to Julio's disability, in fact she continually offers Julio less than he needs and is entitled to.

More generally, Theresa makes Julio feel uncomfortable in approaching her and gives him the impression that she thinks he is perhaps too self-pitying and should just "pull himself together." It is not that Theresa fails entirely to see Julio as "disabled" and as "in pain," but she does fail fully to grasp what this means for him and fails fully to take in or acknowledge that pain. The level of his pain and its impact on his mental state is insufficiently salient for Theresa. (704-5)

While Blum does not explicitly address the role of ableism in preventing Theresa from seeing Julio clearly, he discusses the case with great sensitivity toward precisely this aspect.

target is the image of an isolated will, made vivid in her example of a certain common but mistaken conception of morality as a “visit to a shop:”

I enter the shop in a condition of totally responsible freedom, I objectively estimate the features of the goods, and I choose. The greater my objectivity and discrimination the larger the number of products from which I can select.⁵

The kind of mistake she wants to diagnose involves looking only at the “needle-thin” moment of choice—understood in terms of the public action that issues from it—as the source of value in the world. According to the simplistic picture agency is identified as the capacity for choice, an isolable faculty or power residing in a human creature, a “burrowing pinpoint of consciousness, inside, or beside, a lump of being.”⁶ Nothing else about this creature is of any ethical significance beyond the will it supports.

Because the moment of choice itself is understood as the locus of all value, the capacity must act against a background of value-neutral options: “If the will is to be totally free, the world it moves in must be devoid of normative characteristics, so that morality can reside entirely in the pointer of pure choice.”⁷ It is not just the rest of the human creature that is relevant only insofar as it bears the will, but the whole world of mere things that is relevant only because the will operates upon it.

Finally, agency so conceived is exercised only in the isolated moment of decision, and otherwise inactive: “the machinery is relentless, but until the moment of choice the agent is outside the machinery.”⁸ The only thing of moral significance is the “point of action,”⁹ at which “the agent, thin as a needle, appears in the quick flash of the choosing will.”¹⁰ What happens in between moments of choice is of no more ethical significance than the body as the will’s vessel or the world upon which choice is exercised.

⁵ *Sovereignty*, 8. Her target here is clearly not just a character in philosophical work on agency, but encompasses as well an image of the rational agent, recognizable in popular political and economic discourse.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

Inner Struggle

Murdoch rejects a picture of agency as a capacity that is dormant until the moment of choice, is significant only insofar as it issues in reaching out to pick something, and acts against a background of mere things that are simply present to us. Her more sophisticated picture is one in which having options before one is already an achievement of agency, and the moment of reaching out to pick something is almost an epiphenomenon to the whole affair of bringing the value-laden options to awareness—by then the choice has for the most part already been made.

If the metaphor of morality as a visit to a shop illustrates what is wrong in a certain way of thinking about agency and its role in ethical life, Murdoch's famous example of M and D captures what has gone missing.¹¹ The broad strokes of the example are that M is a mother whose son has married D, and while M initially forms harsh judgments of D, over time she comes to see D in a more favorable light, as a result of an inner effort. Certain details of the case are important (sometimes in ways that I think have been underappreciated) and I will return to them in due course. But the most obvious point the example makes is that morality is not just concerned with what is public—public reasons, public actions, public concepts—but in addition and in some ways more importantly with what is inner: inner acts, attention, moral knowledge, and the ongoing processes obscured by a mistaken emphasis on the moment of choice and action.

The inner acts Murdoch ascribes to M include reflection, introspection, observation, consideration, and an ongoing process of inner struggle. They flow from M's conviction that D is worthy of such reconsideration. M is characterized as "well-intentioned" and "capable of self-criticism," and the process begins when she says to herself, "let me look again."¹² Thus they cannot be understood as the mere operation of the "machinery" of M's passive psyche—Murdoch notes that it needn't turn out this way,

¹¹ See *Sovereignty*, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*

that M could instead “[settle] down with a hardened sense of grievance.”¹³ That M commits herself to the inner struggle is what makes these inner *acts* and not simply the alterations that her outlook undergoes.

One kind of inner activity upon which Murdoch places special emphasis is attention, a concept she borrows from Simone Weil: the “just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.”¹⁴ Murdoch is not entirely clear about this but she appears to understand attention not as a specific type of inner act but instead as a sort of functional kind: our reflections, observations, introspections, and other inner acts—including inner acts of omission that result from ceasing to think in certain ways—pattern together as forms of attention when they are directed with loving care upon a particular person.

Not all inner activity is attention in this sense. We can introspect (perhaps only in bad faith) in ways oriented toward rationalizing our own behavior; reflect on things we despise, reveling in our disgust rather than challenging it; or carefully observe our enemies while we plot revenge. Just as M could have remained unreflective about D out of a lack of self-criticism, she could as well have seethed out of spite or jealousy. This would be inner activity, and presumably of (negative) moral significance for Murdoch. But it would not be attention.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 33.

¹⁵ There are also forms of inner activity that appear to meet the criteria for attention, but which are ethically or politically problematic. The phenomenon Kate Manne has dubbed “himpathy” (“the excessive or inappropriate sympathy extended to a male agent or wrongdoer over his female victim”), for example, involves directing excessive attention to the wrong individual reality. See *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Perhaps we should say that attention is not always a good thing, or perhaps we should say that himpathy is not attention after all: that the social conditions that make someone an inappropriate object of sympathy for the same reason make a loving gaze directed upon him *unjust*; a lot depends on how much work justice does in the definition of attention. Compare Miranda Fricker’s concept of a credibility surplus. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); see also José Medina, “The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice: Differential Epistemic Authority and the Social Imaginary,” *Social Epistemology* 25(1): 15–35 (2011). To consider an object of attention in abstraction from his social and political context would be to center love at the expense of justice.

An ethics that takes as its subject-matter decontextualized individuals, relying on a standard set by their humanity as such, for example, would be humanistic in the way that I worry Murdoch might be. But if we take seriously the idea that justice is a constitutive feature of attention, then taking into account the social and political context in which an agent’s relationship with another is situated will be required to

What individuates inner activity as attention is its object (an “individual reality”) and its loving character. It aims at a certain kind of morally crucial recognition, at love understood as “knowledge of the individual,”¹⁶ which is the “central concept of morality... thought of in light of the command ‘be ye therefore perfect.’”¹⁷

That attention aims at *knowledge* introduces a further purpose of the example, and the other of the two likely most remarked-upon: that inner moral activity results in an epistemic improvement, a state of clear vision. Moral knowledge is of the real as it is, not the idle background of free choice, but normatively saturated. Moral concepts, Murdoch explains, don’t move about in a non-normative world but “set up... a different world.”¹⁸ In this context the term “reality” itself “appears as a normative word.”¹⁹

Important in this process is the role of moral concepts. For Murdoch they are learned from involvement in public language but refined and developed internally over a lifetime. We derive them initially from our surroundings, but “take them away into [our] privacy.”²⁰ Refinement of our moral concepts is something like the *mechanism* by which attention reforms our moral vision. M comes to have a new understanding of D in which concepts like vulgarity, indignity, and juvenility have been replaced by the newly-refined concepts of refreshing simplicity, spontaneity, and youthfulness. Presumably M would earlier have been incapable of seeing D through these positively-valenced concepts, and being able to do so is the achievement of inner struggle. Though doing so amounts to seeing D clearly, moral vision is always mediated by concepts.²¹

establish what clear vision amounts to, and Murdoch’s view certainly provides the resources to make good on this approach. I will return to this theme in the conclusion.

¹⁶ *Sovereignty*, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 36. Cora Diamond discusses the converse phenomenon, namely the *inability* to occupy a “life-with-a-concept” once the background conditions of the concept’s full applicability have been lost. Cora Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts.” *Ethics*, 98(2): 255–277 (1988), 266 and following.

²⁰ *Sovereignty*, 25.

²¹ From a certain perspective this kind of concept-dependence, and in particular dependence on concepts that one struggles to grasp, appears to trade off against any kind of realism. This is a much bigger issue than I have the space to address here, indeed it is one way of seeing the central challenge taken up by John McDowell, whose work is broadly Murdochian in spirit. See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Moral concepts are, for Murdoch and for McDowell,

Struggle as Agency

Taken altogether this story of inner activity, moral vision, and an always already normative reality might appear to be an alternative to an ethics of agency. But what is crucial here is that it is a story about ethical *activity*. Indeed, attention, for Murdoch, is “the characteristic and proper mark of the *active moral agent*.”²² Hers is not a two-stage account of what is morally relevant in the life of a person—first inner contemplation, and then only after that the act of choice—but a picture of a continuous, active process: “what we really are seems much more like an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the conditions of the system in between the moments of choice.”²³ She occasionally refers to this as a picture of human agency but more often as a picture of human freedom, which comes to the same thing.

If inner struggle serves, for Murdoch, as a conception of agency rather than an alternative to it, what sort of conception of agency is it? In some ways it is more an expansion of the concept than a rival: rather than a capacity that is mostly dormant, active only in the moment of choice, agency is an ongoing process from which choices emerge, when they do, as a kind of externalization or “outward movement” of the inner process.²⁴ Rather than acting against a background of inert options (products as givens, present to us whenever we glance at the shop shelf) with choice as the source of value, agency aims at achieving clear perception of an already normative reality: “freedom is not the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logical complex, it is a function

connected to virtue, which they both understand as a quasi-perceptual faculty. Virtue is a moral standpoint from which things show up for us as demanding a certain response. That the real is saturated by normativity (“enchanted,” for McDowell) and that our full possession of moral concepts is required to clearly perceive it (what he calls the “unboundedness of the conceptual”) are core commitments of both philosophers. See also John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 62(3): 331–50 (1979).

²² *Sovereignty*, 33, emphasis added.

²³ *Ibid*, 53.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

of the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly.”²⁵ And rather than living within the creature—itsself a mere “lump of being”—the activity of agency is integrated in the appetitive, emotional, and locomotive aspects of our embodiment. One of its most important effects is cultivation of proper desire, for we are “unified being[s] who see, and who desire in accordance with what [we] see.”²⁶

Compared to a standard conception of agency Murdoch shifts the emphasis away from the moment of choice and toward the ongoing process of generating and maintaining a context within which choice takes place. As she notes, very little of what we do involves stopping to consider the moral pros and cons of the available options, the reasons for and against, and making a choice that expresses our freedom. Most of what we do, even when we do it consciously, involves asking and straightaway answering, “shall I go? Oh yes, I promised to” or simply paying the check at a restaurant when we see it set before us.²⁷ Given that we arrive at those rare moments of choice after a lifetime-so-far of achieving a moral perspective on a normatively structured world, “at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over.”²⁸ Still, these outward actions are no less the expression of agency: they are expressions of agency precisely because it is our agency that is at work all along.

Rival Conceptions of Agency

Murdoch’s picture of agency emerges from her critique of Hampshire’s, and half a century later his is all but forgotten. Today’s Kantians have largely abandoned the

²⁵ *Ibid*, 23; cf. 36: “I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is the result of the moral imagination and moral effort.” Maintaining that it can take effort to put oneself in a position to see value, without treating value as any less real, is a central theme of both Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Kayla Ebels-Duggan, “Beyond Words: Inarticulable Reasons and Reasonable Commitments.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 98(3): 623–42 (2019). The idea of clear perception here also works something like “practical understanding” in Karl Schafer, “Rationality as the Capacity for Understanding, *Noûs*, 53(3): 639–63 (2019).

²⁶ *Sovereignty*, 39.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 36.

behaviorism that, according to Murdoch at least, informed mid-20th-century moral theory, as well as the flat-footed Wittgensteinianism that appears to begin and end with a behavioristic reading of the “private language argument.”²⁹ Nevertheless a broadly Murdochian conception of agency provides just as compelling an alternative to both the Humean and Kantian varieties predominant in metaethics today.³⁰

Humeans tend not to emphasize agency as such, instead focusing on the subjective context in which choices are made. Given an agents’ values, preferences, attitudes,

²⁹ Murdoch’s own picture is, I think, Wittgensteinian in its own way, and readers of the *Philosophical Investigations* are no longer as likely to find in it a rejection of the idea that concepts could be “taken into privacy” and developed in the way Murdoch proposes. See, for example, citations herein to McDowell and Diamond, Wittgensteinians if anyone is!

³⁰ Both Street and Korsgaard themselves—as well as other Humeans and Kantians like Annette Baier and Barbara Herman who do not thematize agency in the same way but offer richer visions of moral psychology—have more sophisticated pictures than the following discussion suggests. Korsgaard at least may be working with a conception of agency that goes some way toward the one I’m proposing, even if the “received view” of Korsgaard is considerably more simplistic. For example, Michael Bratman, “Review of Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58(3): 699–709 (1998), Alan Gibbard, “Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard’s Kantian Lectures,” *Ethics* 110(1): 140–164 (1999), Michael Ridge, “Why Must We Treat Humanity with Respect? Evaluating the Regress Argument,” *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 1(1): 57–73 (2005), William FitzPatrick, “The Practical Turn in Ethical Theory: Korsgaard’s Constructivism, Realism, and the Nature of Normativity,” *Ethics* 115(4): 651–691 (2005), and Samuel Kerstein, “Korsgaard’s Kantian Arguments for the Value of Humanity,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31(1): 23–52 (2001).

Street’s discussion of attachment in terms of recognizing a value-laden gap between the way the world is and the way one wants it to be in has echoes of the sort of value-laden world-making Murdoch is concerned with (for more on this see below). See Sharon Street, “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 90(1): 161–189 (2016). Note as well that Kant himself leaves room for the virtues, and argues for duties to cultivate ourselves (see Part I, Book I of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797)), which Korsgaard takes up in *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Whatever resemblance they bear to particular thinkers, the Humean and Kantian characters I address here are, I hope, recognizable in the collective imagination of metaethics. Beyond those articulating what I refer to above as the “received view” of Korsgaard (which does, I think, map quite closely onto the toy Kantianism I contrast with Murdochian agency in the body text), the ideas of agency as discrete choice and as instrumental rationality with respect to fixed aims and desires exert considerable force on metaethical debates.

My argumentative strategy here somewhat mirrors Murdoch’s own, in that she juxtaposes her view against an especially flat-footed Kantianism for the sake of drawing a more vivid contrast, but readers of Murdoch have been quick to note that there is more compatibility between her and a more sophisticated Kantian on the role of love and attention in ethics. See, for example, Carla Bagnoli, “Respect and Loving Attention,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33(4): 483–516 (2003), and Melissa Merritt, “Love, Respect, and Individuals: Murdoch as a Guide to Kantian Ethics,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 25(4): 1844–63 (2017). Insofar as the Murdochian critique of toy-Kantian agency is effective, it sets a standard that any more sophisticated Humeans and Kantians will have to meet. See also Donald Regan, “The Value of Rational Nature,” *Ethics* 112(2): 267–91 (2002), for a similar criticism of the arbitrariness of the Kantian will. For example, he asks, “what do this ‘reflecting’ and ‘choosing’ amount to in a world where there are no standards of value outside ourselves?” (280).

desires, or ends, choosing is a straightforward affair of maximizing, applying a bit of instrumental reason perhaps, but not contributing much itself to the normative circumstances. What the Humean gets right, for Murdoch, is the way that arriving at a choice with a rich, complicated, contingent, and personal point of view leaves little room for the capacity for choice itself—the rational will—to generate or anoint value.

Kantians, on the other hand, emphasize the active role that agency plays in determining choice and action, bearing ultimate responsibility for value in virtue of having the capacity to reflect on possible actions. Kantian agency takes in a world that is practically significant only insofar as it causes us to form desires and inclinations, and normative only insofar as our ability to step back from desires and inclinations and choose whether to endorse them is what makes them reasons. While it is not ultimately up to each of us what reasons we have, even the categorical reasons that we necessarily share are explained by our agency itself, and not by anything about the context in which our agency is exercised.³¹

Neither of these pictures is complete by itself, by Murdoch's lights: choice does not take place in a vacuum, generating its own normativity against a normatively inert backdrop, nor does the normative context in which we act simply appear to us as given. The particular form of awareness we bring to bear on the world does most of the work most of the time in determining what we do, but to cast us as passive in its creation is to miss the crucial role that agency plays.

For Murdoch agency is implicated in how we form a moral understanding, in how we refine our moral concepts, and in how we cultivate desires. The act of choice is the "outward movement" of this inner process but it is only agency becoming explicit and concrete, and not the principal work of agency itself. The decision has most of the time already been made by the formation of an awareness, in which agency is always already

³¹ Cora Diamond, "Murdoch the Explorer," *Philosophical Topics*, 38(1): 51–58 (2010), makes a similar observation about the relationship between Murdoch's anti-Kantianism and Korsgaard's particular brand of Kantianism.

involved. Agency does not move the person to act in a mechanistic world of mere objects but mediates our involvement with a normatively saturated world of persons and things of value.³²

Practical Standpoints

At this point I want to depart from the text and make what I hope is a friendly suggestion for how to think about this alternative picture of agency: it is one on which the characteristic exercise of agency is not choice but the development, construction, and transformation of the *practical standpoint* from which choice emerges.

The practical standpoint is typically understood as that occupied by an agent, a valuer, a creature that acts for reasons as such.³³ An individual's distinctive practical standpoint, then, is a set of evaluative attitudes and judgments, a practical identity through which possibilities are made reason-giving. Here again we can see Murdoch not as presenting a rival conception of a practical standpoint so much as an expansion: what this generic characterization leaves out is the way that the development and revision of a practical standpoint is integrated into in an agent's life.

Further, a practical standpoint is not *merely* a set of attitudes or judgments—it constitutes a distinctive outlook on the world, a way that the world itself is present to one. This is just to say both that there is some degree of unity or holism to the content of

³² Insofar as there are any accounts available of how agency is involved in self-constitution, for example in Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution and Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Chang, "Voluntarist Reasons," and "Grounding Practical Normativity: Going Hybrid," *Philosophical Studies* 164(1):163–87 (2013), they rely on too thin a picture of what agency *does*, and the role of agency not only in making a choice but in constructing a context for choice and action. For Korsgaard, for example, "your identity is in a quite literal way *constituted* by your choices and actions," Korsgaard *Self-Constitution*, 19, and reflection aims only at arriving at a description under which you value yourself, Korsgaard, *Sources*, 100–01. One can see in Chang's attempt to look beyond choice alone for a source of normativity a tacit admission that setting up the choice matters—that's what "given reasons" do, until they run out—but treating them as given misses all of the action.

³³ For general discussions of the idea of a practical standpoint along these lines, see Sharon Street, "Constructivism about Reasons," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* III, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau: 207–45 (2008), "What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?" *Philosophy Compass* 5(5): 363–84 (2010), David Enoch, "Can there be a Global, Interesting, Coherent Constructivism about Practical Reason?" *Philosophical Explorations* 12(3): 319–339 (2011), and Karl Schafer, "Realism and Constructivism in Kantian Metaethics: Realism and Constructivism in a Kantian Context," *Philosophy Compass* 10(10): 690–701 (2015).

a practical standpoint, and that while it is personal it is not therefore subjective in the strong sense that would exclude there being something outside of ourselves with which our evaluative attitudes and judgments put us into contact. Our practical standpoints relate us to the world, and to the others with whom we share it.

Finally, there is a structuring element played by the distinctive moral concepts that we rely on as resources in determining our attitudes and judgments. Different sets of moral concepts provide for different ways of disclosing the world.

So, a Murdochian conception of a practical standpoint is as a form of awareness of the world—a kind of self-world relationship—articulated through concepts derived from public language but refined in subtle ways for each agent, through which a reality outside of ourselves can be seen as normatively saturated, and from which choices and actions emerge as expressions or “outward movements.” And practical standpoints, in turn, are constructed, maintained, and transformed through an ongoing process of inner activity: the constant work of agency. This picture synthesizes the Humean and Kantian ones, and thereby provides for a more complete account of how a practical standpoint—including the work that goes into forming and reforming it, and the choices and actions that it produces—can be the locus of ethical self-understanding and evaluation.

This picture additionally helps to make good on another central feature of the role Murdoch ascribes to inner reflection in the life of a moral agent: she warns against a conception of morality limited to discrete concerns like keeping promises and paying debts, and understands it instead as a constant pursuit of self-improvement, which suffuses every part of life. With this conception of agency in mind we can see that lifelong ethical task as one of tending to and improving our practical standpoints.³⁴

Even though her main concern is to dislodge a misleading picture of agency we can find in Murdoch an alternative one, as the ongoing process of refining and

³⁴ Contrast again Korsgaard: “there is work and effort—a kind of struggle—involved in moral life... the ongoing struggle for integrity...” *Self-Constitution*, 7, which is to say the struggle to achieve coherence among one’s commitments.

transforming one's practical standpoint. It is, in my view, an attractive picture, one that can make sense of the seamlessness with which our habitual and skillful actions emerge from our simply being in a world of significance, and of agency as a feature of human life rather than an isolable activity: the embodiment of our capacity to determine ourselves.

This picture stands on its own as an attractive alternative to those that dominate moral philosophy. It is, however, a picture that I am extracting from a particular way of thinking about moral progress, with a particular conception of its aim and what stands in its way. Given that so far I've only offered a schematic characterization of the idea of a practical standpoint, to get a bit clearer it will help to work through Murdoch's own conception of moral self-development, to get a sense of the sort of practical standpoint that she takes us to begin from and the one that underwrites an ethical ideal.

III

In this section I want to apply Murdoch's conception of agency to a picture of moral progress. There is, as it turns out, more structure to her account than just the idea of a practical standpoint, to be filled in with different commitments, judgments, or sets of values—some good, some better, perhaps one ideal. For Murdoch moral progress involves moving from an alienated standpoint to a self-consciously social one, where alienation and self-conscious sociality are not standpoints exhaustively characterized by their contents: they each represent formally different ways of relating to the world outside of oneself. Hers is a picture of moral self-improvement on which the movement between standpoints is not just a matter of trading in one for another, structurally identical but substantively different, but a movement that proceeds by improving the "quality of our relations with the world."³⁵

For Murdoch, moral progress is a matter of transcending egoism in order to achieve clear vision of a normatively-saturated reality. My stalking horse in this section

³⁵ *Sovereignty*, 95.

will be an overly simplistic interpretation of this picture; while it is a misreading of Murdoch, I think it would be a natural way of developing the same general idea of moral progress using the resources provided by the Kantian and Humean approaches to agency against which I've tried to position hers.

The simplistic idea is this: that the egoism with which moral progress begins is the natural state of a creature whose power of reason is instrumental and whose purposes are narrowly self-interested, that what makes the egoistic practical standpoint ignoble is its lack of complementary altruistic purposes, and that moral progress aims to generate them by carefully attending to the reality of other persons because to appreciate the humanity in another brings about a psychological change toward greater altruism.

Unlike the image of morality as a visit to a shop, which Murdoch herself displays as a contrast for the M and D example, she does not explicitly consider this picture of moral progress. The essays on moral progress, unlike "The Idea of Perfection," are less focused on rebutting a dominant approach than directly reflecting on themes she finds compelling. Still, it is helpful to have in view for the same contrastive purpose, as it differs from the one I want to attribute to Murdoch along each axis that interests me. For Murdoch egoistic alienation is not a matter of natural self-concern, nor is the ethical standpoint achievable independently of reflecting on social context and history.

Alienation

Murdoch characterizes the enemy of moral progress as the "fat relentless ego," and elsewhere as "fantasy" and "self-focus."³⁶ It may be tempting to find here an implicit theory of human nature as essentially selfish and in need of being overcome, a version of the familiar Hobbesian state-of-nature-dweller, *homo economicus*, the Calliclean in the breast of us all.

³⁶ *Sovereignty*, 51, 57.

One reason to hope, however, that this isn't what Murdoch is up to is that she cautions against precisely this kind of move in Hampshire, whom she accuses of "imposing upon us a particular value judgment in the guise of a theory of human nature."³⁷ And indeed we find in her description of M not an obsession with maximizing self-interest but an intersecting set of moralized judgments, in particular class bias. D initially appears to M as "unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement... silly and vulgar;"³⁸ M doesn't like how D dresses, or her accent—she thinks her son married beneath him; M's polite outward behavior is ascribed to correctness; and as she becomes reflective about her motives she discovers snobbery and narrow-mindedness.

True, she is also jealous and protective of her son. But the complex of attitudes and judgments with which she begins reflect, for one thing, a concern that could only be self-interested in a broad sense of "self-interest," given that D is no threat to her pursuit of material gain.³⁹ If M is driven by self-interest at all it is by the drive for honor, status, or esteem, and not even her own but her son's. And it is not at all clear that she is even driven by this socially-articulated form of self-interest: Murdoch nowhere describes her as concerned with the effects D will have on her or her son's life, nor properly concerned with particular consequences at all. Rather, M's harsh appraisal of D follows directly from the standpoint of a certain social class, defined by custom and manner. M is nothing like the image of a Calliclean egoist—her moral failings are the result of inhabiting a historically conditioned class position. Her moral failings have a political character.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid, 2.

³⁸ Ibid, 16–17.

³⁹ All the more so given that D is, by hypothesis, out of the picture once M's reflections begin

⁴⁰ Blum, "Visual Metaphors," identifies the political reading of the M and D case but argues that Murdoch did not intend it, and that this reflects a more general shortcoming of her work, namely her focus on personal fantasy as a source of distorted vision at the expense of investigating the social and political sources of the same. He laments that "Murdoch's moral philosophy shows very little appreciation of the social and culture forms of the distorting images that block an appreciation of the humanity and the individual reality of other human beings." 317. Blum may very well be right about Murdoch herself, but the reading of *The Sovereignty of Good* that I'm offering here is one that centers precisely the social and political dimension of moral perception that Blum takes Murdoch not to appreciate. As I noted from the outset my concern is to draw a compelling picture of moral agency and moral progress out of the text, and not to contribute to the project of historical scholarship that concerns itself primarily with what Murdoch actually meant to claim.

If M is exemplary of the kind of self-focused, self-aggrandizing, clouded vision that Murdoch identifies as the enemy of moral progress it is not because she exhibits any kind of supposedly natural selfishness, but because she cannot see D through her class-based social conditioning. She suffers not from innate drive to out-compete her conspecifics but from a socialized drive to evaluate others on the basis of class-marked behaviors and manners. The point generalizes: the ethical standpoint from which moral progress departs is not a natural one but a social one. We are all products of time and place and circumstance, we encounter the world from a particular social position, from a particular form of subjectivity.⁴¹

The problem with a practical standpoint marked by selfishness, then, is not that it is wanting in complementary altruistic impulses but that it obscures “a reality separate

Another reader of Murdoch who has called attention to the political aspect of the M and D case is Bridget Clarke, “Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception,” in Broackes. She does so in the course of developing, on Murdoch’s behalf, a response to the concern that placing virtuous habits at the center of moral theory risks making a sufficiently critical perspective on existing social practices inaccessible. She argues that part of moral perception, for Murdoch, is seeing how others are different from oneself, often in ways conditioned by social practices:

For an agent to attend to another person in the Murdochian sense, the agent must grasp both the relevant similarities and the relevant differences which obtain between himself and the individual to which he attends. In these terms, to attend is to walk the fine line between overestimating and underestimating the continuities between oneself and others... The appreciations of similarity crystallize in the recognition that he is as real as oneself. The appreciations of difference crystallize in the recognition that he is separate from oneself. And this, I want to suggest, is another way to understand what it means to perceive another justly and lovingly, in all his particularity and complexity, i.e. in the light of the Good as Murdoch conceives it. 238

She argues that “true (Murdochian) perception of individuals involves understanding the past and present position of those individuals within the larger social structure,” 251, which is only possible for agents whose practical standpoints are informed by and situated within communal, political practices of critique and consciousness-raising.

While I have some minor disagreements with Clarke I think (and hope) that the view I defend here is complementary to, rather than in conflict with hers. In particular I have some reservations with the importance Clarke places on seeing similarity, and as I argue just below what we see when we see clearly is more than a morally significant subset of the properties others have, but Clarke’s suggestion that the individual moral standpoint is conditioned and enabled by social-political resources is congenial to the picture of the relationship between morality and politics that I sketch in the conclusion.

⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), offers a similar discussion of the ways that agency is conditioned by subjectivity, noting that “I am already affected before I can say ‘I’ and that I have to be affected to say ‘I’ at all.” 2. There are further resonances between my reading of Murdoch and Butler’s positive vision, including with the way that the context of action is itself of ethical significance: “the ethical does not primarily describe conduct or disposition, but characterizes a way of understanding the relational framework within which sense, action, and speech become possible.” 12.

from ourselves.”⁴² Her concern is not with the traditional difference between egoistic and altruistic motive but with the ways that self-focus can trap us behind a cloud of fantasy, the “tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one,” which in turn bears the traces of social and political context.⁴³

Moral improvement—the achievement of moral knowledge—issues from escaping fantasy and self-focus, from “detachment” or “suppression of the self,” and from “clearing our minds of selfish care.”⁴⁴ Thus, moral improvement is a process of getting us outside of ourselves and into genuine contact with others. If this is what an improved practical standpoint consists in, and agency is the ongoing process of improving one’s practical standpoint, we can see its activity not just in the production of discrete actions but in the ongoing transcendence of mediation by the self and its interests.

Generalizing from the example of M, alienation from others is not, for Murdoch, a matter of unquestioned, natural egoism, but of *unreflectively* occupying a socially and historically conditioned practical standpoint from which others are ethically obscured.⁴⁵

⁴² *Sovereignty*, 46.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 57. This is one of the places where Murdoch most clearly diverges from Korsgaard, for whom moral failing is explained by making oneself into the wrong kind of agent by endorsing the wrong kinds of practical principles—those of self-love, say—rather than having a mistaken understanding of one’s world. For the Kantian, defect is a matter of acting on the wrong motives and on the wrong maxims, rather than seeing through a distorted conceptual framework. See, for example, Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 162 and following.

⁴⁴ *Sovereignty*, 64, 82. There are interesting echoes here of Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), who argues that the ethical task is to transcend the illusory *principium individuationis* and recognize our unity with all beings, and of course with the Buddhist and Vedic philosophical traditions he draws from. See for example 253: “[the will] sees through the form of the phenomenon, the *principium individuationis*; the egoism resting on this expires with it.” Indeed Schopenhauer also employs, sometimes on behalf of classical Indian philosophy, the metaphor of clouded vision (for example, 352). On the relation between Murdoch and Schopenhauer, see Roger Crisp, “Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value,” in Broackes, 283–4.

⁴⁵ This is a different sense of alienation than the one diagnosed by Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J.J.C. Smart & Bernard Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), as a defect in moral theory, interpreted in terms of a kind of internal, psychic disunity. Cf. Michael Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73(14): 453–466 (1976). It is also a different sense from the one discussed by, for example, Richard Schacht, *Alienation* (New York: Psychology Press, 1970) and Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), drawing on Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and others, as a defect in social formations, interpreted in more metaphysical terms, involving estrangement from one’s *essence*. Murdoch addresses the latter under its Marxian guise, arguing that mid 20th-century socialism lacks a compelling vision of the

Perhaps, for example, we are alienated by pride rather than narrow, material self-interest, and thus unable to see ourselves as complicit in social practices with consequences we refuse to acknowledge. Coming to see others clearly, then, might involve overcoming prideful self-consciousness, coming to see oneself in social relation to others in ways that are shameful (as a snob, say, for M, or as the beneficiary of oppressive power relations). It might also or instead involve transitioning from a standpoint characterized by the false appearance of having no particular standpoint (Reason as the universal white male, and so on) to a standpoint in which one self-consciously relates oneself to others through politics and power (sometimes imaginatively casting oneself as a villain—the apologist for or beneficiary of injustice, the colonizer, the one on the wrong side of history).

Self-Conscious Sociality

It is easy to see how social contingency conditions an alienated standpoint—we are all socially and historically positioned in different ways, ways that come along with distinct ways of having one’s vision clouded—but it is less clear how social contingency could condition moral progress, the overcoming of alienation. Plausibly, each alienated standpoint is alienated in its own way but clear vision is always the same.

The first thing to note, however, is that there is more to achieving a standpoint of clear vision of others than simply having another person in view. To occupy an ethical standpoint involves seeing not just the other but oneself in relation to the other. This kind

nature and costs of being alienated from one’s labor power, which a renewed commitment to theorizing in terms of the development and refinement of concepts can help to address. Iris Murdoch, “A House of Theory,” reprinted in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Allen Lane/the Penguin Press 1998). As far as I can tell, Murdoch’s discussion of alienation there, as a defect in economic relations, is only indirectly connected to the kind of alienation I am concerned with here.

I do think that my use of the term has a legitimate claim to capture a part of the phenomenon that motivates at least Williams and Stocker, namely that, in the classic cases with which they begin, a part of what appears to have been “theorized away” by moral theory is our ability to stand in the right kinds of self-conscious relations with others—with spouses and friends for Williams and Stocker, and perhaps with those with whom we stand in background moral relations for Schacht, Jaeggi, and their historical antecedents (I am considerably less confident about the latter commonality). See Jack Samuel, “An Individual Reality, Separate from Oneself: Alienation and Sociality in Moral Theory,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming)

of recognition is not just a matter of knowing that another is there or what she is like, but of knowing how one stands in relation to her—of knowing her in relation to oneself and oneself in relation to her. Ethical knowledge is not the mere discovery of an attribute something has (personhood, say) but a self-conscious placing of oneself in a world of persons.

If this is right it suggests that we can have a kind of ersatz knowledge of others even through a cloud of fantasy and self-focus—nothing is stopping M from *believing* that D is, for example, a person. In the sense in which the concept of personhood is public it paradigmatically applies to creatures like D, and if M didn't take D to be in the concept's extension we might doubt whether she had even minimal competence with it. But as M reworks her moral concepts she arrives at a recognition of D cum ethical self-knowledge. Or rather, to recognize D clearly and to understand herself in relation to D are one and the same state of ethical vision.⁴⁶

This is the first bit of structure I want to add to the idea of moral progress as overcoming alienation: it is a movement from an alienated knowledge of others that amounts to merely endorsing a proposition that predicates something of another, to a self-conscious knowledge of others that places oneself with respect to them. This is what achieving clear vision amounts to, and through the process we come into contact with a normatively-saturated reality outside of ourselves.

Ideology

There are a number of ways a standpoint can be alienated but one common factor in obscuring our ethical vision of others is ideology: roughly, an implicit system of values

⁴⁶ The status of personhood is of course not what is at issue in the M and D case; the unsuitable concepts through which M initially sees D pick out specific, judgment-laced ethical features, and the concepts through which M comes to see D clearly equally so. The point I'm making here is broader: failures of recognition even in the most general sense are not failures to have predicative beliefs with ethical content, but failures of self-conscious relatedness *through* ethical concepts. Given that recognition of personhood is the kind of thing that is often thought to do real moral work the example helps to show the broader application of my point.

that disguise relations of power.⁴⁷ Exactly how to think about overcoming alienation, then, is a delicate matter. The most straightforward story to tell is one on which, in virtue of occupying a particular social position and therefore starting with a socially-conditioned form of subjectivity, moral progress amounts to transforming our practical standpoints from those infused with ideological biases to standpoints free of any. At first we see others only through an ideological haze of stereotypes and assumptions, unable to appreciate their individuality. Moral progress is achieved by carefully reflecting on the ideology we find in ourselves in order to rid ourselves of it, to see others clearly.

This story is familiar from a genre of *Ideologiekritik* that has recently been embraced by some political philosophers in the so-called analytic tradition,⁴⁸ and whatever there is

⁴⁷ I don't mean to propose this as the one true definition of ideology, but I think as a rough characterization it is a helpful way to see ideology as something that can structure an alienated practical standpoint. I should also confess here that I am begging a question I will not raise explicitly until the conclusion: whether and to what extent alienation depends on the *political* context in which one's naive practical standpoint develops.

I think it is clear in the example of M and D that Murdoch thematizes class bias, and thus to suggest that something recognizable as ideology obscures M's vision of D. Nevertheless, if Murdoch herself is more humanistic than I am and thinks of the contribution of political context as one isolable element of alienation among many, we can treat ideology in what follows as a stand-in for a broader phenomenon, including self-narrative and self-absorption that don't obviously reflect features of context uncontroversially ascribed to politics. We can then read "ideology" in the rest of this section to mean something like *moral* ideology: a value-laden worldview not exhausted by moral theory but concerned with private interactions and not wide-scale social negotiation.

⁴⁸ Tommie Shelby, "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," *Philosophical Forum* 34(2): 153–88 (2003), 174, for example:

Ideologies perform their social operations by way of illusion and misrepresentation. What this means practically is that were the cognitive failings of an ideology to become widely recognized and acknowledged, the relations of domination and exploitation that it serves to reinforce would, other things being equal, subsequently become less stable and perhaps even amenable to reform.

See also Tommie Shelby, "Is Racism in the 'Heart?'" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33(3): 411–20 (2002). Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) defends a similar view, on which ideology "occludes" widespread injustice and "misleads us about the structure of reality." 207. Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)—likely the other most prominent analytic theorist of ideology—has a more complex conception of ideology, but insofar as she uses "ideology" as a pejorative term her view appears to be one on which the ideal would be to escape it.

Of course neither Shelby nor Stanley think overcoming ideology is easy to achieve through internal reflection alone; indeed these 'restricted' conceptions of ideology are subtle and sophisticated in their own way, and my criticism in the main text is not directed at them *per se*. Only combined with the Murdochian conception of moral progress discussed here would they yield such implausible results. I do, nevertheless, think that the Althusserian alternative discussed below is more promising. See Eric Swanson, "Critical Notice of Jason Stanley *How Propaganda Works*," *Mind* 126(503): 937–47 (2017), for a criticism of Stanley along the same lines. See also Olúfemi Táíwò, "The Empire Has No Clothes," *Disputatio* (51):305-330 (2018), who glosses recent analytic Ideologiekritik along similar lines, and argues, on that basis, that it is

to be said for it I am reluctant either to endorse it or to ascribe it to Murdoch. For one thing, at least on a particularly naive version, when combined with Murdoch's account of the *mechanism* of moral progress— inner activity—we are left with the unsatisfying suggestion that the solution to political problems is individual moral improvement. If we just reflect thoroughly enough we can rid ourselves of ideological illusion, revealing the world as it really is, free of ideology.

There are a number of reasons to push against this picture. The idea of individual, moral solutions to political problems involves a distastefully naive kind of humanism— ideology becomes all too easy to unlearn, and the self-other relations that come to self-consciousness have no content of their own. (Could introspection really get us that far? I doubt it.) And for my own part I'll just confess that I'm much more attracted to an Althusserian approach to Ideologiekritik, captured by the slogan "ideology has no outside," which strikes me as appropriately modest and realistic.⁴⁹

My own commitments aside, however, there is some reason to doubt that Murdoch would accept the equation of clarity with escaping ideology. For one thing she opens "On 'God' and 'Good'" with the plea for "a moral philosophy which can speak significantly of Freud and Marx, and out of which aesthetic and political views can be generated."⁵⁰ She explores aesthetics throughout *Sovereignty*, but nowhere explicitly returns to politics.⁵¹ One hopes, however, that she wants moral theory to generate political views

inadequate to play such central a role in political theory and practice. I largely agree with Táiwò's criticism. The more capacious conception of ideology I advance (which is tied to practice, thus synthesizing the doxastic conception of ideology Táiwò opposes and the "practice first" approach he opposes to it), along with the more modest role I ascribe to it vis-à-vis political progress, should hopefully allay his concerns.

⁴⁹ See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), and compare Quill Kukla, "Slurs, Interpellation, and Ideology," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 56: 1–26 (2018).

⁵⁰ *Sovereignty*, 45.

⁵¹ Nowhere, that is, within the three essays that constitute *Sovereignty*; Murdoch does discuss politics and its relationship to ethics elsewhere, especially in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Press, 1993). Indeed much of what I say in this section and in what follows at least superficially conflicts with Murdoch's attitude toward politics in other work. For example, she notes there that "we do not 'live' the world of politics in the way we 'live' our private lives," 744, which suggests that she sees the interpersonal dimension of morality and involvement in social movements, institutions, and other forms of engagement with the process of reforming the social world as playing different roles in the lives of individual agents. My aim here is to propose and apply a reading of Murdochian agency as elaborated in

with more sophistication than the proviso *achieve enlightenment by escaping ideology through personal reflection*. A virtue of the reading I'm sketching here (or at any rate, a feature that I see as a virtue) is that it makes room for a more reciprocal relationship between moral and political thought than the more common, foundationalist picture of politics as applied ethics.

Finally, this picture leaves out the role Murdoch ascribes with great emphasis to the development and refinement of moral concepts. Appreciating the role of moral concepts may be key both to declining to attribute to Murdoch the picture of moral progress as tracing an arc from selfishness to a-historical altruism, and to exploring an alternative. Recall that the process of transforming our practical standpoint consists inter alia of taking once-public concepts and working them into a more nuanced apparatus for disclosing the world to us. For Murdoch the inner effort of agency has the ultimate aim of making itself obsolete: we work to get our concepts in order so that they become invisible in disclosing the world to us.

The Theory-Ladenness of Clear Vision

The task for agency, then, is to overcome the distinction between the inner and the real. The real is saturated by normativity but it takes a constant inner effort to see it through the haze of self-interest and fantasy. But the aim of that inner struggle, of the agential ordering of attention and development of adequate moral concepts, has the aim of making itself invisible. If correct perception occasions right action then to achieve this kind of perceptual contact with a normatively saturated world of others, invisibly mediated by the outcome of a constant active effort, is to make moral action natural, to

Sovereignty, and a detailed discussion of Murdoch's stance toward politics more generally would be beyond the scope of this paper. See Clarke, "Critical Moral Perception," and "Imagination and Politics in Iris Murdoch's Moral Philosophy," *Philosophical Papers* 35(3): 387–411 (2006), for discussion of the political dimension of individual morality in Murdoch's work more broadly. See also E. M. Hernandez, "Gender Affirmation and Loving Attention," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (forthcoming), for a quasi-political application of Murdoch's conception of attention (political insofar as gender affirmation is a heavily politicized topic, and the issues surrounding it are only legible against that background).

make one a part of the world—a different world, “set up” by moral concepts, as we saw above—in which one is embedded and with which one interacts.

Nevertheless, achieving a moral standpoint amounts to developing adequate concepts. It is the achievement of a process of conceptual development. Thus, even as our moral concepts fall away at the point of clear vision there is still a sense in which they are operative, in which clear vision is a matter of conceptually-mediated awareness of others that makes our social relations into a part of how we see ourselves. This looks like a case of “theory-laden” awareness, where clarity and conceptual mediation are not exclusive but complementary. The moral standpoint involves a better theory, one that gets us outside of ourselves and into reflective contact with a world, but no less conceptually articulated. This kind of theory-ladenness is a close cousin of ideology, and if this is right moral progress propels us toward a standpoint that is no less political than the one with which we began.⁵²

To overcome alienation, then, is often to divest oneself of socially-based moral illusion—the illusion that one deserves what one has, say, or that more moral progress has taken place than really has. Importantly, on the Murdochian picture this does not happen automatically, and some people will remain alienated from this bit of social

⁵² A perennial temptation among philosophers urges that we can clearly distinguish the descriptive content of perception, which is theory-independent, from the evaluative content, which supervenes on the descriptive (or the natural, the material, or the non-evaluative). The kind of theory-ladenness I attribute to Murdoch here, however, is well-captured in Sturgeon’s arguments that even perception of empirical phenomena is theory-laden, and in precisely the same way as that in which evaluative concepts saturate our perceptual relationship with the world. See Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral explanation,” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoff Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Indeed his discussion of the case of Mary and Jane in “Harman on Moral Explanations of Natural Facts,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24(1): 69–78 (1986), 74, echoes Murdoch’s description of the moment at which M decides to “look again” and thereby (eventually) comes to see D differently. See also Nicholas Sturgeon, “Doubts About the Supervenience of the Ethical,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* IV, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), for related doubts about supervenience.

Murdoch is more explicit about endorsing something like this in “Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 30(1): 32–58 (1956), where she claims that different concepts may “[decide] the relevance of the facts and may, indeed, render them observable,” that “if the concept is withdrawn we are not left with the same situation or the same facts,” and that “if moral concepts are regarded as deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn around separable factual areas, then there will be no facts ‘behind them.’” 54–5.

reality. Being presented with evidence—say, of routine police brutality in black neighborhoods—is never enough without reflection.

The kind of clear vision that one achieves is not just of others qua human but as others situated with respect to oneself in historically-contingent ways. We see others precisely in our shared social contexts rather than escaping those contexts to a realm of pure dignity, respect, or abstract rightfulness.

IV

I've proposed a Murdochian conception of agency as the capacity to occupy and transform a practical standpoint, and a schematic Murdochian account of moral progress in terms of overcoming an alienated standpoint to achieve a standpoint of clear vision. I've further suggested that alienated standpoints obscure our vision because of the particular way they are ideological, and that seeing oneself in relation to others is still theory-laden insofar as it relies on having developed adequate moral concepts. Thus the distinction between cloudy and clear vision—between fantasy and reality—is not a matter of whether or not one's relationship with the world is mediated by a socially-contingent conceptual framework, but the extent to which that framework makes our social relations visible to us and allows us to become reflectively self-aware in relation to others.

The result of these kinds of transformations involves coming to understand oneself in relation to others not in ahistorical, decontextualized, purely human ways, but precisely in ways that are socially and politically realistic, that bring the social, historical, and political circumstances in which these relations are embedded into explicit self-awareness: what is often called consciousness raising. From a standpoint of ethical clarity these relations are visible and normatively-valenced—seeing things as they are, socially and politically, is not to see them “neutrally,” morally speaking, but to see them as calling for response.

This picture of moral knowledge as socially-situated self-knowledge raises a handful of closely connected questions, questions about the *content* of the moral standpoint—that is, about those concepts that are most central to the conceptually-mediated clarity of vision at which moral progress aims, about the relationship between the internal struggle to reach moral clarity and political struggle to improve the social relations made self-conscious in it, and about just how much moral progress is possible in the span of one lifetime. I don't have the space here to offer anything like a complete accounting of these issues, either on Murdoch's behalf or my own. Still, I would like to conclude with some reflections on the direction in which such an accounting would likely go.

A fairly conventional moral ideal would be to transcend circumstance and social position, struggling toward an ahistorical, morally absolute standpoint: a moral view from nowhere. As we have seen, however, for Murdoch making social and political relations explicit in our understanding of ourselves among others leaves us still trapped within them, morally speaking. Through inner activity alone the best we can hope to achieve is a realistic view from where we are, with all of its contingency.⁵³ Working to change the context that constitutes this standpoint is a matter of politics, and not of moral progress alone. The world must be set aright before any of us can truly achieve clear moral vision.

The specter of a certain kind of pessimism looms: the idea that for some of us, born in the wrong time or place to have ethical life available, there might just be no point in moral struggle—or, with a “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” twist, that without hope of ever truly achieving a moral standpoint one must still commit to the task.⁵⁴ More hopefully, however, this picture may recommend appreciating the limit of

⁵³ On the idea that we can allow some contingency into our evaluative standpoints without losing our grip on an independent reality, see John McDowell, “Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World,” in *Pleasure, Preference, and Value*, ed. Eva Schaper (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), reprinted in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁵⁴ See Antonio Gramsci, Letter from Prison (19 December 1929). He uses the phrase in the context of political struggle, not a moral one, but as I note just below I think the two combine nicely.

moral self-improvement alone, without the proper accompaniment of political struggle. The idea would be that the inner struggle to achieve morally clear vision and the outer struggle to achieve a shared, ethical form of life are complements. Moral progress for the individual and political progress advance hand in hand.

Insofar as inner struggle aims, among other things, to put one in a position to contribute to political progress, it might involve cultivating solidarity, becoming an accomplice or a comrade, learning to recognize hidden forms of injustice that are made explicit and given names as required by circumstance, being liberated from a false sense of obligation, discovering that one is entitled to what has historically been sanctioned. “Morally correct action,” as Lukács puts it, “is related fundamentally to the correct perception of the given historico-philosophical situation,” and often aims to overthrow it.⁵⁵

For a more concrete example, consider the concept of womanhood, which many radical feminists thought depended on a class system that had to be overturned, while simultaneously being tactically necessary for feminist organizing.⁵⁶ More generally this can help to explain why concepts corresponding to socially constructed and historically marginalized groups can be crucial for political struggle, even if what they denote is an essentially unjust social formation.⁵⁷ The often-used metaphor of “colorblind racism” is nicely illustrative: even while the struggle for racial justice plausibly aims to create a society in which indifference to race is an aspect of public life, one’s ability to see others in relation to a shared social context requires race-concepts, without which one might be trapped in a fantasy of justice that has not yet arrived.

⁵⁵ György Lukács, “Tactics and Ethics,” (1919), reprinted, trans. Michael McColgan (Brooklyn: Verso, 2004).

⁵⁶ For example, Monique Wittig, “The Category of Sex,” *Feminist Issues* 2(2): 63–68 (1982).

⁵⁷ That temporary allegiances structured by political concepts are crucial for political struggle is most explicitly thematized by Haraway, from whom I take important inspiration. See Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, originally published as “Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review*, 80: 65–108 (1985).

All of this will be responsive to the actual social circumstances, and making the right concepts available for inner struggle will often be itself a political achievement.⁵⁸ Moral progress is achieved through inner struggle but may nonetheless require social, environmental, and institutional scaffolding. And likewise political progress may be impossible for those trapped behind the veil of fantasy, who watch the dramas of their own lives play out with themselves at the center, unwilling to accept a supporting role in a political narrative—or who see themselves through the eyes of their social “superiors” as mere instruments without moral or political agency of their own.

A lot remains to be done to make this picture complete, let alone plausible, but here are the seeds of what I think is a promising way to think about agency, moral progress, and its relationship with politics. The account of agency as the capacity to cultivate and transform one’s practical standpoint, and of moral progress as the movement from an alienated standpoint to a socially self-conscious one through which we can clearly see others in relation to ourselves, are Murdoch’s, and in speculating about the relationship between moral struggle and political struggle the basic resources I’ve used are hers. Thus, I hope to have made good on my claim that looking again to Murdoch as a neglected figure can help us to see some things that we may have been missing.

New York University School of Law

⁵⁸ One fault line I have so far largely avoided, though I have hinted at it, is that between those who take the concept of the human in particular to do serious moral work, and those, like me, who think it is almost always either too broad or too narrow. Diamond offers a defense of a kind of moral humanism in a broadly Murdochian spirit. See Cora Diamond, “The Importance of Being Human,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 29: 35–62 (1991).