

“Seeing” Human Goodness: Iris Murdoch On Moral Virtue

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Abstract

One recent advance in contemporary moral philosophy is Iris Murdoch's unique understanding of the concept of the moral self. Murdoch attempts to remedy the account of the moral self she associates with traditional ethics, which mainly focuses on the will. Drawing from the world of art appreciation, Murdoch holds aesthetic perception to be the necessary component of moral regard for others. She claims that a moral person becomes suitably other-directed through the practice of aesthetic perception through ego "unselfing." In contrast to the Aristotelian emphasis upon the rewards of virtue, Murdoch posits the self-interested "ego" as the chief obstacle to correctly *seeing* others and, following from this, not rightly *exercising* virtue towards them, for the ego cannot *love*. Hence, Murdoch's concept of virtue is a rigorous one, since it advocates the perfection of one's moral vision as an end-in-itself, thus presenting a concept of virtue which comes much closer to the holiness of the saint than to the excellence of a hero. However, the critical question remains: Can an aesthetic construal of the goodness in others become a sufficient basis for knowledge claims about virtue? To answer this question, the article analyzes Murdoch's process of obtaining aesthetic "seeing" through development of a "virtuous consciousness," a process of empathic experiencing, that provides the *only* true path of practicing virtue towards others.

I want now to speak of what is perhaps the most obvious as well as the most ancient and traditional claimant, though one which is rarely mentioned by our contemporary philosophers, and that is Love. Of course Good is sovereign over Love as it is sovereign over other concepts, because Love can name something bad. But is there not nevertheless something about the conception of a refined love, which is practically identical with goodness? Will not 'Act lovingly' translate 'Act perfectly,' whereas 'Act rationally' will not? It is tempting to say so (Murdoch 1997, 384).

1.1 Introduction

Noted literary critics consider Iris Murdoch to be an excellent novelist, but she is less known as a philosopher. Nevertheless, the philosophical work of Iris Murdoch occupies a distinctive place in the field of contemporary moral inquiry. Her main claim is that an adequate understanding of the moral self requires a connection between ethics and aesthetics. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the plausibility of Murdoch's claim. This article also demonstrates Murdoch's contribution to the field of ethical theory through her account of the moral self as becoming suitably other-directed through the dual practices of aesthetic perception and ego "unselfing." The process is analogous to art appreciation. Murdoch discounts the ego as the chief obstacle to seeing others clearly, and instead of emphasizing the rewards of virtue, she argues that it must express selfless love. A chief advantage of her account is that it explains how the aesthetic "seeing" of the other (and the de-centering of the self that follows) is virtue-developing and can be applied in our endeavor to ethically treat others as they really are.

Murdoch argues that liberalism, romanticism, existentialism and linguistic empiricism fail to articulate a criterion for morality that goes beyond choices and the will. Instead of a solitary agent who creates value by choices alone, the moral self, according to Murdoch, ought to efface its ego in seeking to perceive the others as they really are in order to respond to them in a morally adequate way.

The questions I am addressing in this article concern: (a) the realism of Murdoch's view of regard for others and (b) the development of virtue through aesthetic perception. Murdoch proposes a cognitive meta-ethics to justify her moral realism, which claims that virtue is knowledge of the good. Nevertheless, the question remains: If virtue is knowledge of the good, and aesthetic perception as knowledge of the good is virtue developing, how can this provide a foundation by which to evaluate goodness in others? For, unless it clearly articulates a standard by which to evaluate the quality of our knowledge of goodness in others, Murdoch's theory is open to the charge of subjectivism. In defending Murdoch's view, what is at stake is the issue of what *kind* of realist and cognitivist Murdoch is, and whether her account of the moral self as other-directed succeeds, in turn, in providing a realist standard for the moral appreciation of others.

The analysis performed in this article will demonstrate how aesthetic perception as an imaginative construal (understanding) of the goodness and tragedy of others can help to increase our awareness of their reality. Murdoch focuses upon the nature of virtue as not related to human interests or *eudaimonia*, but as intrinsically other-directed. Developing virtue is a matter of transforming consciousness through moral struggle. The resulting "virtuous consciousness," Murdoch advocates, should become the central element in developing our moral regard for others. To explain the process of acquiring virtue through aesthetic perception, Murdoch appeals to an analogy between the novelist and

the moral agent. Thus she reveals some aspects of perceiving the beauty/goodness in nature and art that apply to understanding human beings. The constructive implications of the nature of aesthetic perception will justify Murdoch's assertion that virtuous consciousness is fundamental to the moral self.

1.2 Virtue and eudaimonia

Murdoch confronts the neo-Aristotelian view that moral virtue is a matter of acting rightly with an appropriate motivation, which results in the beneficial disposition needed for the agent to live well or flourish. Contemporary Aristotelian ethics starts with the question of *what* constitutes the good and worthwhile life, and therefore, the issue of moral virtue usually relates to practical reasoning and individual choice. Contrary to the Aristotelian conception, Murdoch's rhetoric of virtue primarily concerns our understanding of others through the development of virtuous consciousness. Furthermore, as subject to necessity and chance, human beings become virtuous not because it is advantageous to flourishing and living well, but because being virtuous is intrinsically good. Murdoch claims, unlike Aristotle, that human life has no external point or *telos*. Considerations of specifically human flourishing are therefore irrelevant to determining whether a given act is right or wrong:

There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search ... equally the various metaphysical substitutes for God — Reason, Science, History — are false deities. Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or explained ... And if there is some kind of unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it (Murdoch 1997, 365).

Therefore, if virtue has an instrumental value, virtuous people must have their own individual conceptions of what constitutes a life of *eudaimonia* as the starting point for their moral deliberations. Though Murdoch does not exclude “happiness” from the agent’s life, she does not understand happiness as living well or flourishing; instead, she argues happiness is obtained through a perfected goodness with a constant orientation towards the needs of others. Following Rorty, she believes that contingency is the watchword of our lives, making us subjects of necessity and chance, and *telos* a misnomer (1989). This contingency of our reality explains why moral judgments cannot be primarily a matter of constructing and extending *a priori* moral principles. Such moral idealizations provided by theories isolate the general properties of the situations ethicists want to discuss, while discounting the “messy details” that bring ambiguity and complexity into our moral life. Although we can attempt to provide responses to non-ideal situations when we are confronted with our imperfections, we hardly know how to respond to them by using such abstract moral principles. While certitude can be the home

of particular existence, it can also be a cage in which an inevitable ignorance sings and dies imprisoned. To master the actual “messy details” of our life, the best way is to rise above them, Murdoch claims, by continuing to move through our moral life, figuring it out as we go along, living experimentally, trying out different moral attitudes, changing our minds, sometimes coming back to the beginning.

What is at stake in this account of virtue is the attempt to articulate and defend the value of the contingently existing individual. As the life experience of each individual is unique, the application of abstract rules or patterns of moral thinking is insufficient for the moral agent to apprehend the reality of others. Therefore the knowledge obtained by virtuous consciousness is a necessary condition because only its moral perception is sufficient to motivate humans to have full regard of others:

But I would suggest that, at the level of serious common sense and of an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals, it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge; not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certain and perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline (Murdoch 1997, 330).

1.3 The nature of “virtuous consciousness”

Thus, virtue consists in searching for, *seeing* and *knowing* the goodness in others, and not in discovering the permanent truth of abstract values and norms. So, according to Murdoch, the modern philosophers’ focus on human will fails to dismantle selfishness, the central dilemma of moral life, which distorts the moral agent’s perception of others. As Murdoch’s moral psychology locates egoism directly at the image-creating processes of human consciousness, this process must be disrupted: “increasing awareness of the ‘goods’ and the attempt to attend to them purely, without self, brings with it an increasing unity and interdependence of the moral world” (1997, 375). Hence, virtue consists partially in the complex movement beyond the self, toward what Murdoch calls “virtuous consciousness,” and partially in the developed capacity for love. While Murdoch believes that virtue is the movement beyond the self, nonetheless life often shows that we constantly look after ourselves, day-dreaming in seeking consolation, for, “We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world” (1977, 369). Such fantasies about ourselves and the world around us, in Murdoch’s judgment, inflate the ego to the point of becoming a world unto itself preventing us from ever achieving the real knowledge of other people.

While Murdoch opposes idle fantasy she elevates creative imagination, for the faculty of imagination and our aesthetic sensibility help us to generate and rehearse possible

situations in which the reality and uniqueness of others can be revealed. The disciplined, creative use of attention and imagination, as opposed to fantasy, becomes central to our aesthetic perception of others, disrupting fantasy-beliefs about them resulting in the transformation of consciousness.¹ Given these considerations, it is not surprising that Murdoch sees unselfishness as an *acquired* condition through knowledge of the good because, “Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings ... In the moral life the enemy is the fat, relentless ego” (1997, 341-342). For Murdoch, the fundamental moral problem is to acquire clarity of vision as the condition of virtuous consciousness. Virtue comes then through a complex process called “unselfing.”² A shift occurs through knowledge of the good, from focusing on others’ outward conduct to cultivating one’s own inner life of virtuous consciousness, from choice to vision, from will to consciousness, from outward conduct to inward knowledge.

Murdoch holds that the primary moral faculty for knowing the good is vision or perception. Her answer to what virtue is grounds value in the nature of reality. We know the good first by *seeing* it through a complex form of moral vision. As virtue is partially “unselfing” through knowledge of the good, we must first understand the meaning of the good. The reality of goodness is not grounded in an epistemology according to which the good is directly apprehended through reason (as in Plato’s view); instead, for Murdoch, the good is mediated through a *reflexive* and *linguistic* turn with respect to her account of consciousness.³ The good for Murdoch becomes *real* and *absolute* and not relative and

optional; therefore, it cannot be related to human choice as in the Aristotelian tradition. Murdoch is a cognitivist in that goodness is an object of knowledge. For her, the crucial connection of the good is with what is real. And what is real is necessarily true. However, this connection does not depend on the postulation of a supersensible world of forms as in Plato's view. Murdoch's connection of the good with what is real *hic* and *nunc* links the concept of value to human life as a whole. All human life is lived under the aspect of the good as it is the framework and the background of all existence. It is indefinable because we cannot see it; instead, it facilitates our *seeing*. The good cannot be known as other things are known:

Asking what Good is, is not like asking what Truth or courage is, since in explaining the latter the idea of good must enter, it is that in the light of which the explanation must proceed... And if we try to define the Good as X we have to add that we mean of course a good X. If we say that Good is reason we have to talk about good judgment. If we say that Good is love we have to explain that there are different kinds of love. Even the concept of truth has its ambiguities and it is really only of Good that we can say 'it is the trial of itself and needs no other touch.' And with this I agree (Murdoch 1997, 380).

1.4 The idea of perfection

In considering the connection between the good and virtue, Murdoch is concerned with the relationship between language and reality. The good is a concept which occurs whenever we speak about *seeking* it, or *loving* it and implies a quality greater than the

particular referent: “We may also speak seriously of ordinary things, people, works of art, as being good, although we are also well aware of their imperfections”(Murdoch 1997, 376). As concepts transcend reality and exist beyond representation, the nature of Murdoch’s view of virtue as knowledge of the good resides in the need to maintain a belief in certain *a priori* truths, transcendent and indefinable. ⁴ She argues, “The concept good ... is not a mere value tag of the choosing will, and functional and causal uses of ‘good’ (a good knife, a good fellow) are not, as some philosophers have wished to argue, clues to the structure of the concept”(1997, 376). Instead, Murdoch associates the good with what she calls ‘the idea of perfection’: “the proper seriousness of the term [good] refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know (‘There is no good in us’) and *which* carries with it the idea of transcendence.” (Ibid.).

For Murdoch, the good as transcendent operates through the idea of perfection, and thus has a connection with what’s real and necessarily true. The posited connection with the idea of perfection runs through all human activities, because it is the ideal standard of performance. This standard of perfection is directly related to the nature of virtue as “unselfing.” Particular cases of various human activities exemplify the idea of perfection which corresponds to the standard of perfection appropriate in each instance. For example, the activity of teaching requires such a standard of perfection that every conscientious teacher aspires to. As an idea of perfection, goodness is also connected, by

analogy with the attempt to see oneself in relationship with others; this practice of *seeing* and *responding* to the real world of others develops a virtuous consciousness by overcoming the tendency of the (selfish) ego to efface the reality of others. Accordingly, moral perception presupposes a fundamental relation between consciousness and morality. Murdoch attempts to save the epistemic and cognitive value of metaphysical beliefs in order to reaffirm the connection between morality (value) and knowledge (cognition). Such a connection is at the very center of Murdoch's view of the moral self. Murdoch's connection between the transcendent good and what is real does not depend on the existence of an intelligible world of Ideas or Forms (as in Plato's view), nor on the virtue of duty (as Kant maintains). Rather, Murdoch links the transcendent good with a virtuous consciousness:

Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the 'unself,' to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness, in the light of the idea of perfection. This is the non-metaphysical meaning of the idea of transcendence to which philosophers have so constantly resorted in their explanations of goodness. 'Good is a transcendent reality,' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is (1997, 375).

Furthermore, the idea of perfection as a standard for all human activities emphasizes the objectivity of the good:

... the Good functions not only transcendently, as the fundamental and necessary condition for human knowing, but also as a transcendent object that guides the direction of our knowledge. This represents one aspect of the metaphor of the sun [Murdoch uses] - as the “magnetic center” towards which knowledge strives. The Good represents [is reflected by] the ideal standard of perfection by which we measure our knowledge of the real as we come to know it in diverse forms of human activity (1997, 361).

Claims about human goods can be divided in two types: subjective and objective or perfectionist ones. Subjective claims make each person’s good dependent on personal desires. By contrast, for perfectionists such as Murdoch, certain states of humans are objectively good.

She maintains that what is important for ethical inquiry is the development of human nature, since all humans possess certain essential and distinctive dispositions to perfect themselves morally. Such dispositions have to be considered in any ethical endeavor. In Murdoch’s view, the main disposition is the learning ability all humans possess. All people have the ability to apprehend the idea of the good, and thus become virtuous. For this reason, everyone can experience moral change and progress. Murdoch holds that knowledge achievements and deep personal relations are intrinsically good and selfless. This results in moral virtue as the perfected knowledge of the good. Murdoch supports this common perfectionist claim by discussing at length the “selflessness” and

“pointlessness” of virtue as it is displayed in good works of art and in the lives of humble people:

The indefinability of Good is connected with the unsystematic inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue. In this respect there is a special link between the concept of good and the ideas of Death and Chance ... a genuine sense of mortality enables us to see virtue as the only thing of worth; and it is impossible to limit and foresee the ways in which it will be required of us ... there are few places where virtue really shines, great art and humble people. And can we, without improving ourselves, really see these things clearly? ... We cannot then sum up human excellences for these reasons; the world is aimless, chancy, and huge, and we are blinded by self (Murdoch 1997, 381).

Conceiving virtue as intrinsically good, Murdoch considers vice as intrinsically evil. Benevolence, courage, love, etc. make life better; malice, envy, gluttony, etc. make it worse. Nevertheless, Murdoch’s claim does not suggest that virtue is the *only* intrinsic good; she does hold that moral virtue is among other intrinsic goods. The main objection one might have to Murdoch’s perfectionism is that such moral virtue is not related to human desires or interests. That is to say, her account makes any standard of perfection not a *hypothetical* imperative but a *categorical* imperative, similar to Kant.

1.5 Moral realism - imagination and attention

Murdoch's conception of value influences her account of virtue as she claims that we apprehend goodness in terms of virtues which belong to a continuous process of knowing the other. To better understand the nature of the good it is necessary to consider her argument for the reality of values.⁵ This consideration will serve to clarify the nature of virtue as knowledge of the good. Murdoch's argument runs as follows: We find things of value not only in intellectual disciplines but also in nature as well as in products of human art:

There are important bridge ideas between morality and other, at first sight human activities, and these ideas are perhaps most clearly seen in the context of virtue ... In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly ... The value concepts are here patently tied on to the world, they are stretched as it were between the truth-seeking mind and the world, they are not moving about on their own as adjuncts of the personal will. The authority of morals is the authority of truth that is of reality (1997, 373-374).

Beauty found in a landscape as well as in music, painting or literature provides aspects of our experience of value traditionally ascribed to the field of aesthetics. On the other hand, the value of our lives or the evaluation of a person or of an action as good or bad, just or unjust, has been relegated to the distinct field of ethics. Murdoch synthesizes the two

fields by recognizing that humans usually think about moral questions not in terms of abstract principles, with an aim to systematize some large moral experience, but contextually in terms of concrete relationships with other people. These relationships find value in people through lived experiences. Given this complexity of life, a realistic ethical view of the regard for others requires essentially viewing them through aesthetic perception and reflection. Such an investigation calls primarily for moral perception, which requires discipline to accomplish just as such disciplined training is necessary in art creation and appreciation. This is Murdoch's claim concerning the development of virtue as knowledge of the good in others.

Goodness, therefore, *unites* value and cognition in the perceptual and evaluative activity of consciousness. Thus, the concept of Good exists as a fundamental background of human knowledge and existence; understanding how such a background operates may prove a better way of understanding a moral situation. Since goodness is a unified perceived object of knowledge, Murdoch argues there is no pervasive gap between factual reality and individual value. Accordingly, judging right and wrong is mainly a matter of situational sensitivity. *This* is her unique moral claim.⁶

If this is the case, the philosophers' moral task then becomes to say what it is for a moral viewpoint to be objective, or in Murdoch's terms, how we can best perfect our vision of

the good through imagination and love. Murdoch is aware of this difficulty, which makes distinguishing between imagination and fantasy vital:

What counteracts the system [of self-centered fantasy] is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love. In the case of art and nature such attention is immediately rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty. In the case of morality, though there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place. Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action ... All just visions, even in the strictest problems of the intellect, and *a fortiori* when suffering or wickedness have to be perceived, are a moral matter. The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person (1977, 354-357).

Murdoch understands the conceptual process of imagining as an activity that implies the responsibility of stripping away individual selfishness, and thus allowing for the exploration of the reality of others.⁷ The process of imagining corresponds to a sort of a personal venture into the outside world. Because we make the world as it is by imagining and attending to it, we are therefore responsible for what we see. This is to say that the concept of moral responsibility is not isomorphic with the sphere of action but with perception. We are responsible for engaging in this “imaginative seeing” as much as we are responsible for the world we create. The work of imagination is thus what produces

moral vision, a vision that bridges facts and values: “The value concepts are here patently tied on to the world, they are stretched as it were between the truth-seeking mind and the world, they are not moving about on their own as adjuncts of the personal will. The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality” (Murdoch 1997, 374).

According to Bagnoli’s interpretation of Murdoch’s view, “Even though reality and value are not logically distinct and separable, yet this synthesis is not an invitation to endorse all sorts of reductive realism. The kind of realism that Murdoch elaborates is not, strictly speaking, the Platonic kind of realism usually (if mistakenly) attributed to Moore; the view that normative realities do not exist unless we make them. For Murdoch, reality is made normative *through* the operations of our mind, in a constructive work of the imagination, with the patient and humble exercise of attention.” (Bagnoli, 2002, 10).

In intellectual disciplines as well as in the enjoyment of art and nature, we discover value in the world around us through our ability to forget ourselves, to be oriented towards the real, and to perceive it justly through love. In view of that, we use our imagination not to *escape* the world but to *join* it, and this unity exhilarates us because it collapses the usual distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and the apprehension of the real. The same can be said about our relationships with others.

1.6 Love as “unselfing”

In one journal entry (July 9, 1976), Murdoch says, “Like Socrates, perhaps, love is the only subject on which I am really expert ?” (Conradi 2001, 6). The world of love is one of freedom and uncertainty, and humans’ capacity to love — though it contains the desire for possession — can be separated from the urge to dominate. Murdoch does not provide a theory of love *per se* which seeks to explain how a person is in some respect the paradigmatic focus of our love while defining love. Perfectly aware that love is a concept too complex to fully explain, she seems to imply that one is loved not only as a bearer of loveable qualities but that love must encompass the totality of the beloved: “There is a paradox here about the nature of love itself. That the highest love is in some sense impersonal, is something which we can indeed see in art, but which I think we cannot see clearly, except in a very piecemeal manner, in the relationships of human beings” (1997, 361). How can love (as an imaginative construal of the other which engages attention and imagination) help one to overcome selfishness, as Murdoch claims? How does love come to be a virtue and also a means to virtue?

Murdoch contends that patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, thing, or situation, directs the will not only as unimpeded movement of reason but as something very much more like “obedience.” To illustrate the idea, Murdoch’s personal experience of learning a foreign language is relevant for considering intellectual disciplines as a locus of

exercising moral discipline. The activity of learning a language requires grammar rules and understanding idiomatic expressions. In describing her personal experience of learning Russian, Murdoch makes an interesting parallel with the process of loving the other. The insight we have into the other through love, (similarly in the process of learning a language) acts upon us and draws us to see goodness in that person, independent of the need to provide an evaluative rationale endorsing that person's behavior. As a result of such insights, moral principles become something that we must ever learn anew, in and through particular cases. The other's independence exists and can only be grasped by our attention and imagination. Similarly, the careful study of a language is a progress in knowing and therefore loving a reality without incorporating it into one's consciousness:

I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure, which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which is independently of me. Attention is rewarded by knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something that my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal (Murdoch 1997, 373).

The study of a language requires patience and humility, the acknowledgment of ignorance (as Socrates considers virtue to require) and, most importantly, an understanding of the “otherness” of a foreign language. In studying, we also appeal to a

standard of perfection, which transcends the reality of the subject as applied in the real world. To learn a language means to not only learn its grammar rules and how to apply them, but also to appreciate its individuality, its uniqueness and its independence. This fosters the love that is necessary for deeply understanding a foreign language. Thus the process of learning a language is both cognitive and affective with the capacity to learn requiring us to orient ourselves towards it in a sort of practical obedience. Selfish thoughts and interests must be put aside even when there is a practical value in learning a language. While learning a language for its intrinsic value, the effort displays virtue for it is an example of loving something real outside the self.

Similarly, the act of perceiving others through love especially engages attention and imagination. A loving gaze, however, needs to be qualified according to the role of love in cognition. Murdoch assimilates love of others into Plato's concept of *Eros*, which is also oriented toward seeing things in so far as they participate in the good. However, given that love is a movement toward the good, love may nonetheless be identified as a "knowable" goodness. The unity of the good as the unity of the virtues is realized through love. Virtue is goodness insofar as a human being participates in the good.

In Murdoch's view, it is *love* as the primary virtue that reveals the fullness of others. It is in loving others that one is just to them; justice resides in the realism of this love that does not project ideals of what others should be, but accepts them as they are. This accepting love needs to be disciplined by the aesthetic perception of the object of art or person, which implies exercising detachment to renounce the desire to own what you see: "What is truly beautiful is 'inaccessible' and cannot be possessed or destroyed" (1997, 348). Neither detachment nor the achievement of aesthetic perception through attentiveness toward others is easy to accomplish. However, through the force of *disciplined love*, the contemplation of beauty involves a movement towards transcendence. Ultimately, for Murdoch, morality is the perception of goodness through love. *Realism* and the idea of transcendence are, however, closely related in this view of love and goodness. Goodness is real in the person, but it cannot be grasped through concepts alone since it is particularly immanent in each person. The idea of the transcendence of goodness is connected in Murdoch's work, on one hand, with *perfection*.⁸ Though somehow problematic, perfection is not an unattainable ideal; it is just a matter of the *possibility* of change toward the good. The possibility of change that the very idea of perfection might imply comes from the capacity to love that inspires us. The indefinable good expresses itself through the idea of perfection which organizes our understanding of how we should see the world.

Attention is the effort to counteract states of delusion that come from self-serving interests. Such an attempt to see others in an unselfish way as both the artist and the Good man do renders virtue selfless. And the struggle to do so takes place in the mind, at the level of consciousness. Virtue, then, is knowledge of the Good by love of others which allows for moral progress through spiritual struggle. The difficulty of attaining the “absolute virtue,” as I call it, which means the *seeing* of others selflessly, stems from the fact that those elements of our experience that are owed to the idiosyncrasies of our vision and those elements that reflect the way the other person really is are intertwined. It requires a continuous process of “unselfing” and reflection even to realize that the two can be separated. Under this model, we should not expect that our moral experience should arrive as a pre-packaged piece of observation followed by a rational response.

Conclusion

The main argument of this article is that to be moral is above all to have a regard for others. Murdoch conceives of the perfection of virtue through aesthetic perception as essential for the moral self in the process of learning how to *see* others as they really are. There is a connection between the good and *seeing* in that we always act on the good we see or perceive to be so: “I would suggest that the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of the self” (1997, 353). This kind of moral perception

leaves room for moral progress and moral change. Thus, the fundamental background of virtue is not the will: it is the good, and *seeing* the good corresponds to the right description of moral situations. In order to be realistic, the perception should not be related to personal desires or interests; its relations with desires and interests are only contingent.

If we accept Murdoch's account of the moral significance of virtue as exclusively the regard for others, we are forced to challenge the traditional distinction between what is morally required and obligatory and what is, for Murdoch, an "ideal" moral self. Murdoch suggests that when a morally admirable person sees a situation as being one which requires a selfless action, his character is such that all other reasons are overridden by his perception of the moral requirement and thus he is motivated to act selflessly.

Murdoch does not think of the virtuous self as ascetic, or as one whose appetites for worldly things are weakened by training or by natural inclinations. Where the dictates of morality do not forbid it, the virtuous person can relish pleasure with as much zest as anyone. However, virtue requires a certain moral discipline, through struggle, which would, if circumstances were different, disregard any other course of action incompatible with what is morally right. Her perception of what is morally required silences her own desires, interests, needs, etc. Thus, the virtuous person for Murdoch, does not decide that, on balance, the path of virtue is to be preferred to that of vice. Simply, vice has nothing to

put into the balance which could weigh against virtue. Similarly, self-interest could not weigh against virtue either. Consequently, virtue needs moral discipline and change of consciousness so as to better see the others, without being influenced by desires or interests. Thus seeing the Good of others is in itself the framework of the ethical life of humans.

If we conceive of virtue as Murdoch does, we also seem to cut ourselves off from any understanding of moral weaknesses or *akratic* phenomena. Common sense tells us that people often are knowledgeable of what morality requires for their actions towards others, yet they are tempted by other considerations (interests, desires, needs, etc.) and fail to comply with the standard of being moral as suggested by Murdoch. It looks like there cannot be a moral case where the moral person as Murdoch conceives of it, clearly perceives the right thing to do but fails to do it. Only the lack of clarity of moral perception results in doing wrong.

It is important to mention that beyond her emphasis on morally perceiving others, Murdoch does not deny the importance of *acting morally* by following moral rules. For her, facts and values are morally related and the clarity of vision of the situation becomes the condition of the right action towards others. Perception itself is a mode of evaluation so that for Murdoch, virtue is merely a matter of perception and change of consciousness.

Thus the moral self as other-regarding does not only respect the virtues in others; it has a regard for others especially when they suffer or fail to come up to a standard of virtue.

One might argue that there is something superhuman about such an account of the moral self. In fact, we may never attain it. It represents, however, Murdoch's conclusion of what she thinks is a realist account of morality. The distinctive ways that virtuous ones see situations which enable them to clearly perceive the demands of morality regarding others, distinguish them from less moral people. The less those considerations of what would be in their interest or would satisfy some craving distract them from looking at a situation, the more truly moral they become. Concerning the claim that Murdoch's view disregards phenomena of weakness of will, an answer is possible. One might assume that inattentiveness to others is related to a weak will in her account. The moral struggle must involve the will, at least to the extent that attention must be properly directed if it is to become a real form of seeing. Murdoch claims it is the function of the novel to develop this kind of attentiveness to others. It may well be that some problems related to weakness of will may alternatively be understood as failures of a consciousness that is not adequately, not comprehensively, engaged in acquiring a vision of others. For "seeing" others is not simply like seeing an orange. It is a matter of coming to a sense of the others' life as a whole, of understanding actions and attitudes in relation to the others' understanding of what is good and whom they are. We all have had the experience of not

being able to put a novel down. One way of interpreting this attitude is to say that one cannot be drawn away from the book, precisely because one is so thoroughly and deeply engaged with its characters. Perhaps there would be an analogous phenomenon when it comes to morals, of not being able to put others aside, so much does one's vision of others engage one's concern. So, on this view, weakness of will is just a superficial attention.

Nonetheless, one of the most difficult points to grasp in Murdoch's account of moral virtue is the claim that the idea of the good is transcendental for knowledge. As we recall, Murdoch fills in, albeit without definition, the way in which we should understand love. Since we do have experience of the tragedy and triumphs of others, the concepts that make this experience possible must be shared. Fundamental in this context seems to be the *idea* of the good. Without such an idea, we cannot acquire knowledge of others. Hence, the good is a universal necessary condition for the possibility of such knowledge of others. Murdoch's attempt to find such a universal condition appears to be question-begging. It assumes that we have an experience that is knowledge of the relevant sort. That is what grounds the claim about the concept/idea being universal and necessary. But is it clear that our ideas of the tragedies and triumphs of others is knowledge? Perhaps we have such ideas of them only in virtue of projecting upon them a sense of our own good that comes from the map of fundamental approvals which we have been socialized to and/or adopted, in the creative reinvention of ourselves. The experience of tragedy and

triumph might, arguably, be more a function of an idea of beauty (Kantian-like) tied to certain, ultimately, subjective ideas of whom we are as ends, than an idea of a necessarily objective good. In conclusion, Murdoch's transcendental argument seems unable to provide the metaphysical understanding of morality she requires.

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Notes

¹ In a dialogue with Bryan Magee about the relation between philosophy and literature, Murdoch makes the distinction between fantasy and imagination. “It may be useful to contrast ‘fantasy’ as bad with ‘imagination’ as good ... fantasy is the strong cunning enemy of the discerning, intelligent, more truly inventive power of the imagination, and in condemning art for being ‘fantastic’ one is condemning it for being untrue.” See *Talking Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 236.

² The process of “purifying” (this is the term Murdoch uses) consciousness from selfish desire involves the change of perception through imagination. The process is normative and requires moral struggle. Like all novelists, Murdoch makes a distinction between a good character, which, if real we consider virtuous, and a good characterization of a fictional character, which is well presented regardless of its behavior. Good novelists ought to love all their characters no matter their behavior, Murdoch states. The world of the novelist is always metaphorical of our own. By means of metaphors the novelist organizes areas of human thought and feelings thus creating unique characters. In contrast to the scientist who organizes observations of the natural world of facts through a system of mathematical and logical connections, the novelist recreates the facts about characters through imagination. Differently conveyed through imagination, the truth does not presuppose rational argument as it does in science. The novelist does not describe a world of facts through observation; instead, she constructs a world of characters similar to our own through imagination. We should not confuse real people with fictional characters. Real people exist in a context of other people and have their own history. The novelist must struggle to depict (represent) characters by paying particular attention to how people’s stories create their own images. Though fictional characters exist only in the language of the novel in which they are presented; for the novelist, it is worth paying attention to what those images of real people assume about human character precisely because the process of creation is similar to the way we get to know and understand real people and because we, too, constantly make and act on assumptions about human character. That is why Murdoch claims that people make images of themselves and others and then they attempt to assemble them in a way that renders them unique.

³ Maria Antonaccio qualifies Murdoch’s view of morality as “reflexive realism.” She uses the term to contrast both the meaning of moral realism and that of literary realism. Murdoch’s realism seems to be reflexive in nature because reality exists for her not only outside us but also as mediated through our consciousness and perception. If so, the good is revealed through the medium of consciousness as it reflects on itself; yet, this act of reflexivity renders the good as an ideal-limit or perfection that transcends consciousness. In Murdoch’s view consciousness contains an implicit ideal of perfected moral knowledge by which it is also evaluated in actual attitudes towards others. Murdoch’s kind of realism is not analogous to the empirical assumptions of the scientific kind. Scientific analogy in her “reflexive realism” is replaced by aesthetic analogy. For more details, see Antonio, Maria and Schweiker, William, (eds.) *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁴ For both Plato and Murdoch, morality is not only about conduct. Murdoch states: “Human nature, as opposed to the nature of other hypothetical rational beings, has certain discoverable attributes and these should be suitably considered in any discussion of morality. Secondly, since an ethical system cannot but commend an ideal, it should commend a worthy ideal. Ethics should not be merely an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct; it should be a hypothesis about good conduct and about how this can be achieved. “How

can we make ourselves better?" is the question moral philosophers should attempt to answer" (Murdoch 1997, 364).

⁵ The main claim of classical moral realism is that, whether or not our moral beliefs are true depends on the way things are. Whatever their differences, moral realists hold in common that there is a moral reality independent of our moral beliefs, which determines if they are true or false. There are moral truths which can be recognized, and it depends on us to discover and recognize them. Their existence does not, however, depend upon our recognition of them only. The central idea of the realist is that in moral experiences we are genuinely sensitive to moral properties. Moral properties of things or actions are essentially part of the configuration of the world. The alternative view is the so-called "moral *ir*realism." There is no moral reality, its advocates claim; hence, our moral convictions are not best thought of as moral beliefs. We invent our personal moral values, consequently, there is no moral reality independent of us. To believe something is to believe that it is true, and moral opinions cannot be true or false *ipso facto*. As a moral realist, Murdoch supports that there is moral reality and its existence is independent of our moral beliefs. Our moral task then consists in discovering *existing* values, rather than attaching them to facts by acts of will and choices. Murdoch's account of realism, though different from the classical one, conceives the nature of the *good* to be without separation of values from facts. Goodness is an object of knowledge, desire and love. Goodness is conceived metaphysically, as a value, which we discover in the world. Goodness is indefinable not for reasons connected with human will and choice, as Moore and his successors argued; it is indefinable because understanding goodness partakes of the difficulty of apprehending the reality (Murdoch 1997, 336). Murdoch insists that human beliefs and judgments -- aesthetic, moral and religious -- are not subjective utterances but rather *modes* of knowledge and meaningful explanations of the world. By conceiving the idea of goodness as primarily connected with questions of truth and knowledge, rather than the will, Murdoch appeals to a cognitivist conception of the Good influenced by a Platonic understanding of reality. Murdoch believes that moral properties are *real* properties: therefore, moral questions are as much questions of fact as are any other questions. Murdoch disregards as mistaken the distinction between descriptive and evaluative meaning. The answer to the metaphysical question, "What is the Good?" grounds value in the nature of reality therefore she claims that moral evaluation is inherent to the way we experience the world. As a moral realist, Murdoch maintains that we should take the way our embodied experience represents the world very seriously, for this experience reveals moral beliefs as *objective* entities, independent of our feelings about them. This requires in turn, careful moral perceptions, a careful seeing. There is no human experience apart from the good as all human life is, as Murdoch thinks, lived in the light of the good. Thus, the moral self as other-directed has sense only as a part of the framework of reality that is configured in the light of the good. And by good, Murdoch means virtue, which is not an object of sense, or an abstract concept: it is the fundamental background of human life itself.

⁶As well known, both Aristotle and Plato see virtue as the expression of good inner motives or states. Aristotle thought that practical reasoning is connected to a complex perception of one's situation and he relates the correct moral choice to perception. In the essay, "The Discernment of Perception -- An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," Martha Nussbaum notes that Aristotle's statement, "The discernment rests with perception," reflects the priority of perception of a more informal and intuitive kind over learning general moral rules. Thus, through experience, deliberative, emotional and social skills enable the moral agent to choose in a way which is suitable to each particular situation. For more details see the essay in *Love's Knowledge- Essay on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1990, 54.

⁷ Murdoch refers to an analogy between our moral sensibility in perceiving others and the aesthetic sensibility of a good novelist whose disciplined capacity to appreciate the reality of others inhibits the temptations of personal fantasy in portraying characters. The reflexive power of moral imagination that Murdoch insists upon in her view of the moral self as other-directed reveals the crucial connection between aesthetic experience and moral sensibility through perception and imagination. Murdoch develops at length her view of the role of imagination in her literary theory. Imagination allows good writers to explore the reality of their characters' mode of existence but, most importantly, it engages the readers by allowing them to learn about real people from the characters in fiction. In real life imagination is also a very important way of understanding others by projecting ourselves in their situations. There is also a response to others' situations in our imagination. On the basis of our imagined response to others' realities we are able to understand their thoughts and actions. According to Murdoch, a novel possesses realism when it enables us to engage in a kind of empathic and compassionate understanding with its characters. When we are responding that way to its characters, we are responding to fiction as to life. Moral objectivity or realism is not divorced from the perceiving subject. The realism of a great novelist is not a photographic realism it is essentially a perception of others, which implies both love and justice. The novelist's realism is devoid of any interest or selfish desire; it is based on attention to the reality of characters through love.

⁸ Murdoch substitutes perfection for Kant's notion of "idea." For Kant, we cannot have knowledge about freedom, about God, about cosmos, etc. as a whole. Nevertheless, because of the faculty of reason we can have ideas about them. The ideas of reason are *regulative ideas* necessary to grasp the world as a whole. While we cannot form a concept of the Good, we can have an idea of it through the idea of perfection. The idea of the good therefore becomes a regulative idea for *seeing* human life as a meaningful whole. To illustrate the impossibility of defining the good, Murdoch uses an analogy between human conduct and the artist's idea of perfection. Both are related through love of others. Their relation springs from the aesthetic apprehension of beauty.

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