

Iris Murdoch and the Epistemic Significance of Love

1. Introduction

In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Iris Murdoch gives love an intellectual and epistemic standing with which many philosophers would be uncomfortable. She says not only that it is epistemically valuable – a claim already too strong for many, given the lover’s seeming tendency to misperceive¹ – but also that we do not see reality as it truly is *unless* we love. This is a puzzling claim. We tend to think that the very point of objective knowledge is to abstract away from any personal, particular point of view, taking something like what Bernard Williams (1978) calls ‘the absolute conception’ as our standard. And we often think of love as a paradigm of just such a personal, particular – and perhaps distorted – point of view. It thus seems precluded from playing the epistemic role that Murdoch assigns to it. Part of my aim in the present paper is to offer an interpretation of the conception of love in *The Sovereignty of Good* such that this seeming tension between love and objective knowledge is dissolved.²

For Murdoch, love has a particular significance in the perception of *moral* reality. There is an obvious causal connection between love and morality: love can be a powerful factor in motivating us to act in morally admirable ways. However, Murdoch’s claim is that love is also *epistemically* significant for our ethical lives. On the Murdochian interpretation, ‘loving thy neighbor’ entails not only being motivationally affected by one’s neighbor’s wellbeing, but also standing in an epistemic relation to them that involves knowledge and continuous progression towards truer understanding of them. This may seem counter-intuitive, but I will suggest that

¹ Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006), for example, suggest that friendship constitutively involves epistemic partiality.

² In this paper I shall focus on Murdoch’s conception of love in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and other early works: ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ (1956) and ‘The Sublime and the Good’ (1959). Her overarching ethical vision in later work such as *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) is somewhat altered, becoming more heavily Platonic and mystical. This corresponds with a linguistic change in Murdoch: in later work she refers primarily to *eros* rather than love. There is thus reason to think that her conception of love may have similarly developed and altered over time, and I shall not examine the later conception. I will use the term ‘Murdochian love’ to refer only to the conception of love found in her early works.

there are good reasons to take Murdoch's account seriously. Her claim is not ultimately as puzzling as it first appears.

I begin in §2 by outlining Murdoch's moral framework and the role of love within it. In §3, I then explore two contrasting interpretations of Murdochian love proposed by Velleman (1999) and Hopwood (2014, 2017) and discuss the ways in which each fails to do justice to the full epistemic role Murdoch assigns to love. In §4, I explore the notion of objectivity that underlies Murdoch's account. In §5, I argue that Murdochian love is best interpreted as a virtue, with a particularly lofty position in the hierarchy of the virtues. This allows Murdoch's claims about love's epistemic value to be understood whilst retaining her claims about objectivity. My aims are not, however, only exegetical. In §6, I argue that this reconstructive exercise yields an illuminating account of our ordinary conception of love.

2. Murdoch's Moral Framework

Murdoch's discussion of love is framed by the conviction that there is an essential kind of moral activity that is not reducible to publicly observable actions. She calls this neglected kind of activity 'attention'.³ According to Murdoch, the dominance of broadly behaviorist theories of mind in 'modern moral philosophy' led to the conviction that "morality resides at the point of action" (Murdoch 1970: 16) and that moral agency must therefore relate only to publicly observable outward action. Murdoch is wholly resistant to this line of thinking, which she regards as distorting our understanding of what is at stake in ethics by disregarding important areas of our ethical lives. Such a conception of morality automatically rules out phenomena such as attention from moral consideration, but Murdoch claims that these phenomena are deeply morally significant. She thus advocates re-emphasising the importance of various concepts that were peripheral in contemporary moral philosophy, and I shall focus here on her attempted reinstatement of the concept of love. Murdoch's basic idea here is that we must *attend* to objects, must see them in a morally significant way, before we can hope for our publicly observable actions to be morally worthy. More importantly, she insists that attention is itself a fundamentally moral activity. Such attention, she thinks, is a kind of *love*.

³ This is a term taken from Simone Weil (1956).

Murdoch thus begins two of her most famous essays with assertions of the significance of love in ethics. She claims that “love is a central concept in morals” (Murdoch 1970: 2) and that “we need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central” (Murdoch 1970: 46). Having declared that love is a central moral concept, she specifies that one role love fulfils is epistemic: our coming to grasp moral truths, and the progressive deepening of our grasp of them, is a manifestation of love.

It is not obvious that love is morally and epistemically valuable. Love can appear to be as much bound up with illusion as perception, and to be capable of leading to cruelty as well as self-sacrifice. (Think, for example, of Othello’s claim after murdering Desdemona that he has “loved not wisely but too well”.) Nonetheless, Murdoch presents love as fulfilling a crucial ethical and epistemic role:

Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (Murdoch 1959: 51)

Love is knowledge of the individual. (Murdoch 1970: 28)

In particular situations ‘reality’ as that which is revealed by the patient eye of love is an idea entirely comprehensible to the ordinary person. (Murdoch 1970: 40)

Murdoch here describes the ordinary concept of love as having an epistemic dimension: it involves *knowledge*, *discovery* or *perception* of the individual and reality. Love is thus presented as fulfilling some kind of epistemic role: it in some sense involves grasping truths.

Murdoch illustrates this epistemic role of love with an example that is, for her, a paradigm case of both moral and epistemic progress through loving attention:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile.

... Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging

word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: ‘I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.’ Here I assume that M observes or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters... D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. (Murdoch 1970: 17-18)

Murdoch describes M’s transition here as a transition to viewing D ‘lovingly’. Although not attended by any outward change in M’s behavior it is intended by Murdoch to be a fundamentally moral transition, one in which M’s moral standing improves. As M lovingly attends to D, she becomes able to perceive features of D that were previously obscured or distorted by latent selfishness and prejudice. For example, as M attends lovingly to D, D’s delightful youthfulness, which was previously obscured by M’s snobbery and jealousy, becomes discernible to M.

Murdoch’s claim is thus that love fulfils an epistemic role: love involves attending to reality, and results in a deepening understanding of reality. She understands attending to reality not merely as something that one *can* do lovingly but as *itself* “an exercise of love” (Murdoch 1970: 42). Such loving attention, she suggests, will progressively lead one towards a deeper, more adequate conception of reality: “[w]hen M is just and loving she sees D as she really is” (Murdoch 1970: 37). In the next section I shall explore two interpretations of Murdoch that offer ways of spelling out how Murdochian love performs this function. I will suggest that both fall short of Murdoch’s own claims about love’s epistemic significance.

3. Alternative Interpretations of Murdochian Love

Some philosophical discussions of love have assumed that there is a tension between morality and love.⁴ By contrast, both Velleman (1999) and Hopwood (2014; 2017) follow

⁴ See, for example, Williams’ (1981) discussion of the permissibility of saving one’s wife rather than a stranger, suggesting that the demands of close relationships might *conflict* with those of morality.

Murdoch and use her thought in articulating models of love that aim to vindicate its moral significance, and that make some place for love's epistemic significance. However, both square Murdoch's thought that love is a moral activity with her thought that love is epistemically rich only at the expense of denying further aspects of her view; they connect love and morality but fail to explain the broader connection between love and knowledge. An alternative account of love is thus needed to elucidate its role in Murdoch's thought. I will consider Velleman and Hopwood's accounts in turn, before discussing Murdoch's background commitment to realism in §3 and offering my own account of Murdochian love in §4.

In an account of love that he aligns with Murdoch's, Velleman argues that love is a rational state capable of being justified by reasons.⁵ On his account, love constitutes an appreciation of inherent value in the beloved which brings with it an emotional vulnerability to them. Specifically, he regards love as involving an "arresting awareness" (Velleman 1999: 360) and appreciation of the value of *rational* natures, and therefore suggests that Murdochian love resembles Kantian respect.⁶ He claims that responding to the value of rational natures with respect is a rationally 'required minimum', and that responding with love is an 'optional maximum'. This is an epistemically rich account of love insofar as love is understood by Velleman as constituting a *recognition* of value.

However, this cannot be Murdoch's conception of love. Velleman suggests that love is a morally and rationally optional response to the unconditional value of rational natures, but Murdoch contends that love is morally necessary. In response to Kant's contention that only practical love (performing loving actions) can be a duty Murdoch argues that 'pathological love' (love as an affective state or quality of consciousness) also matters morally: "I do not agree that only practical love can be commanded...Pathological love can be commanded too, and indeed if love is a purification of the imagination, must be commanded" (Murdoch 1959: 55). For Murdoch, what we are morally 'commanded' to do extends far beyond publicly observable actions. Her claim is that we are also *obliged* to love in the sense of lovingly attending to others ('purifying the imagination'). For Murdoch, an unloving perspective will simply not allow one to perceive truths about the world that the lover can see, and therefore lovingly attending to the world is both epistemically and morally obligatory.

⁵ For example, Velleman writes "[t]his hypothesis would explain why love is an exercise in "really looking", as Murdoch claims" (Velleman 1999: 361)

⁶ Bagnoli (2003) also suggests that Kantian respect and Murdochian love are "significantly analogous": they "exhibit a similar phenomenology and work likewise, as constraints on deliberation" (Bagnoli 2003: 506, 485).

Moreover, on Velleman's account love does not reveal the features of persons that Murdochian love reveals. For Murdoch love is an acknowledgement of the reality of particulars outside oneself, whereas for Velleman it is directed at the same universal aspect of each person, their rational nature.⁷ Murdoch explicitly criticizes Kant for exactly this failure:

Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts. In so far as we are rational and moral we are all the same, and in some mysterious sense transcendent to history.
(Murdoch 1959: 51)

Given Velleman's belief in the similarity between Murdochian love and Kantian respect, it is unsurprising that this criticism of Kantian respect can equally be applied to Velleman's account of love. For Murdoch, love directs one's attention "towards the great surprising variety of the world" (Murdoch 1970: 66). On the Murdochian account, loving another person involves directing one's attention towards a particular concrete individual, not simply towards a universal abstract property instantiated in them. Murdoch's emphasis on particularity thus precludes Velleman's account from capturing Murdochian love.⁸

Hopwood's account, on the other hand, correctly emphasizes the particularity of Murdochian love. He contends that Murdoch's conception of love is that of Platonic *eros*, which he understands as follows:

[E]ros is (i) a form of desire that is (ii) directed at a particular object whose value (iii) cannot be captured under a closed description, that (iv) engages the imagination, and that (v) carries with it the awareness of a normative demand on the subject. (Hopwood 2014: 61)

A closed description, for Hopwood, is one in which the object can be exhaustively characterized in terms of its properties, where one's relation is to any object that falls under the relevant description.⁹ To desire an object whose value cannot be captured in a closed

⁷ Clarke (2012) emphasizes the idea that Murdochian attention involves seeing an object "in all of its (significant) particularity", and the political potential of this idea for overcoming prejudice (Clarke 2012: 238).

⁸ Murdoch does believe that 'the Good' is also an object of love, which appears to be in tension with this. However, she maintains that it is a 'concrete universal' (Murdoch 1979: 29).

⁹ Hopwood illustrates the idea of loving someone under a closed description with the following example: "If we were to propose to take Romeo away and replace him with another person possessing exactly the same set of characteristics ... Juliet would presumably not be happy to accept the swap. Her desire for Romeo is a desire for a particular individual, and precisely because of this, the value that she sees in him cannot be captured under a closed description" (Hopwood 2014: 8).

description is therefore to value an irreducibly particular object. According to Hopwood, *eros* is a form of desire, an affective state that nonetheless involves recognition of the capacity of the beloved, as such, to place demands on oneself, enabling one to see one's response to the object of love as potentially inadequate, or as falling short in some way. Hopwood thus claims that love has an epistemic component, the potential to be aware of one's response as failing to do justice to its object.¹⁰

The idea that the object of love cannot be captured under a closed description introduces into this account an ineliminable particularity. On this account, love is not a response to an abstract or universal property, but to a particular person or object. Moreover, on Hopwood's account love plays both moral and epistemic roles, since it is understood as a form of desire that brings with it an awareness of normative demands upon the agent.

However, Hopwood's account does not do full justice to the epistemic role Murdoch assigns to love. Murdoch contends that love is important not only in the perception of normative demands that loving awareness of objects places on the lover, but in the perception of objects themselves. Love, for Murdoch, *primarily* reveals objects themselves rather than normative demands that agents face. She claims that "love is knowledge of the individual" (Murdoch 1970: 28): loving attention is necessary for any truly adequate perception of a person, object or situation itself, not merely knowledge of normative demands. Hopwood's account of Murdochian love is therefore, like Velleman's, too narrow to account for the fullness of the epistemic role Murdoch assigns to it.

4. Love and Realism

One possible way of affording love the broad epistemic role Murdoch insists upon would be to understand moral reality as constitutively dependent upon the subject. This is suggested by Hopwood's claim that it is *in virtue of loving the object* that one sees it as making demands on oneself. One way of reading this would be as suggesting that there is no fixed moral reality for the observer to respond to that exists apart from the observer's perception and their love. On this reading, the reality that places demands upon the observer does so, at

¹⁰ Hopwood depends heavily on Murdoch's later work, particularly *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). Although Hopwood's account does not capture Murdoch's early conception of love, it may capture her later conception of it.

least in part, *because* it is loved, not vice versa. Thus interpreted, Hopwood suggests that Murdoch should not be read as subscribing to a robust form of realism. If the claim that love enables us to get to the *objective* truth about the beloved is relinquished, the apparent tension between love (a seemingly personal and particular state) and knowledge (apparently objective) disappears. If the objectivity of moral reality is given up, there can be no tension between it and the epistemic role Murdoch assigns to love: love reveals moral reality because that reality is (at least partly) constituted by its being loved.

However, Murdoch is committed to the idea that the truth of moral claims is constitutively dependent on reality *outside* the observer's perceptions and beliefs. M, for example, is described as 'discovering' D's moral qualities, suggesting that such features do not depend on her. Murdoch also describes M's loving re-evaluation of D as revealing her "as she really is" (Murdoch 1970: 37), suggesting that the moral evaluation depends on D's characteristics, rather than on M.

Pervasive throughout *The Sovereignty of Good* is the image of the moral life as an exercise of vision. Importantly, Murdoch conceives of this vision as revealing what is there independently of the perceiver's conception of it or attitude towards it. In her discussion of the arts as introductions to (and initial participations in) the moral life Murdoch claims that what is required of both is "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, *objective* attention" (Murdoch 1970: 64). Elsewhere, she focuses on the connection between the real and the true: "the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true" (Murdoch 1970: 64). In fact, in her criticism of the 'current view' of persons she states that "we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves" (Murdoch 1970: 46). Love, she suggests, helps us to discern what is true, a reality that is *separate* from ourselves. Murdoch therefore cannot be suggesting that love reveals moral reality in virtue of moral reality being dependent upon the perceiver's loving stance.¹¹

Indeed, Murdoch suggests that 'fantasy', the projections of one's own self in one's view of the world, is the "chief enemy of excellence in morality" (Murdoch 1970: 59). For her, projections of the self in one's vision of the world are fundamentally distorting. It is by directing one's attention away from the self and the distorting fantasies generated by the selfish

¹¹ For more on Murdoch's metaethics, see Jordan (2014). He understands her as a realist committed to cognitivism, success theory, and objectivism.

ego that moral reality is progressively revealed. On her account, moral reality thus cannot constitutively depend on the subject.

How, then, can we make sense of the idea that loving attention reveals a reality that is separate from the observer? I want to suggest that Murdoch's claim is best understood in the context of her repudiation of the idea that objective reality is that which is revealed by value-neutral perception. Rather, she claims that all perception itself is morally imbued.¹² The moral realist, Murdoch argues, ought not to attempt to strive to demonstrate the objectivity of morality through its assimilation into the 'hard' world of impersonal facts that purport to be 'neutral' and available to *anyone*, but instead should reject such a model of objectivity:

[G]oodness 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 (Murdoch 1970: 38)

Murdoch's suggestion here is that 'impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge' is not all there is to knowledge. Indeed, she claims that the knowledge that is morally significant (that to which 'goodness is connected') and that reveals 'what is really the case' is not such value-neutral knowledge at all. In saying this, she rejects the idea that something like Williams' absolute conception will reveal all truths that are available to be known. Moral knowledge, that is, might require concepts that make sense only *within* the moral life.

Murdoch parodies the idea that all morally significant facts will be revealed by value-neutral perception by suggesting that it models morality on something like a simple shopping trip:

On this view one might say that morality is assimilated to 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 ... I find the image of man which I have sketched above both alien and implausible (Murdoch 1970: 8-9)

Again, Murdoch's suggestion here is that value-neutral perception will not reveal all that is of moral significance. On her account, the moral life is not reducible to a set of choices made

¹² Mulhall (2000) argues that, for Murdoch, we are continuously engaged with moral value, and that this is a core tenet in her rejection of the existence of a distinction between fact and value.

between the same discrete and neutrally evaluable objects in the way that shopping might be. Rather, the very objects and features one picks out are morally significant, and sustained loving attention may reveal very different objects to those one initially seemed to see.

On Murdoch's account, many objectively real objects and qualities can be understood only from within the perspective of a human, value-laden conceptual scheme. Broackes (2012) describes this as Murdoch asserting that "we should allow the world to contain all that meets the gaze of a just and loving moral perceiver" (Broackes 2012: 47); according to Murdoch the objectively real includes that which is perceived from a personal perspective. Murdoch's claim is that a human moral scheme is necessary to fully perceive reality. For example, the qualities that M comes to see in D are real qualities that D possesses, but could not be assimilated into an impersonal or unloving account of D. There is no more basic description that might capture what it means for D to be 'delightfully youthful', and certainly no non-evaluative equivalent.¹³ For Murdoch, the applicability of moral concepts cannot be understood from outside the moral schema itself. The very concepts necessary for understanding the world themselves can themselves be understood only 'in depth', from the perspective of an agent embedded in moral practices who is to some extent virtuous.¹⁴

5. Love as a Virtue and a Perceptual Sensitivity

Murdoch claims, then, that love has an irreducible epistemic role: it involves knowledge or perception of reality. This reality is to be understood as *existing* independently of being loved, but *perceptible* only to the person who lovingly attends to it. I have suggested that neither Velleman's nor Hopwood's interpretations of Murdochian love do justice to both the broad scope of love's epistemic role in her thinking and to her realism about what is to be perceived. In this section, I will suggest that Murdoch thinks of love as a virtue and outline the conception of virtue that she has in mind. On her account, the virtues in general are epistemic and

¹³ Murdoch thus claims that moral philosophers' task is "the provision of rich and fertile conceptual schemes" (Murdoch 1970: 45): had M possessed only concepts such as 'juvenile' and 'vulgar', she would have been unable to recognize that D is in fact 'refreshingly simple' and 'gay'.

¹⁴Murdoch's view is similar to that defended by McDowell (1979: 2011). In 'Aesthetic Value, Objectivity and the Fabric of the World' (1998), McDowell explicitly rejects Williams' absolute conception of objectivity.

hierarchically ordered traits, and love occupies a particularly lofty position in the hierarchy of the virtues.

A seldom remarked-upon but significant feature of Murdoch's conception of love is that she repeatedly refers to love as a *virtue* and includes it amongst lists of the virtues in discussions of the moral life. This, I want to suggest, is central to understanding how Murdoch retains her commitment to moral realism whilst claiming that love involves knowledge. As I have discussed, Murdoch considers love to be a desirable quality. Further, she suggests that it is not merely desirable or pleasant, but that it is morally necessary: it is 'commanded'. As such, she thinks of it as a virtue:

All just vision, even in the strictest problems of the intellect, and a fortiori when suffering or wickedness have to be perceived, is a moral matter. The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person. (Murdoch 1970: 70)

As we deepen our notions of the virtues we introduce relationship and hierarchy. Courage, which seemed at first to be something on its own, a sort of specialised daring of the spirit, is now seen to be a particular operation of wisdom and love... It would be impossible to have only one virtue unless it were a very trivial one such as thrift (Murdoch 1970: 95)

Here, Murdoch refers to love as a virtue and lists it among more commonly recognized virtues such as courage and wisdom.¹⁵

On this conception of love, it is not simply an episodic attitude, but a deeply important character trait. The virtues are often thought of as traits that involve certain dispositions: dispositions to think, act, perceive and feel in certain ways. In the first quotation above, Murdoch suggests that love is required for 'just vision'. Extrapolating from this and from cases such as M and D we come to a conception of the kind of virtue that Murdoch has in mind. Murdoch conceives of love as a virtue that entails the disposition to know, grasp, or understand

¹⁵ I am here leaving open exactly what kind of virtue ethicist Murdoch is, as well as the role of the virtues in her overarching account of ethics. My argument depends only on the uncontroversial ideas that she is deeply impressed by the importance of the virtues and that she regards them as having a crucial role in the moral life. McLean (2000) offers an argument against identifying Murdoch as a virtue ethicist, noting that she is more influenced by Plato than Aristotle and is therefore at odds with neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. This, however, is no reason to think that she is not *some* form of virtue ethicist.

an object of attention *ever more adequately*. On the Murdochian account, then, love involves a disposition to see truly, to (progressively) perceive individuals as they really are. The connection between love and knowledge is thus intimate: love is necessarily truthful because love is (at least partly) *constituted* by progression towards ever more adequate knowledge of its object.

We can shed light on the connection between love and moral knowledge by considering the general role of the virtues in Murdoch's thinking. For Murdoch, the virtues are reliable sensitivities to certain features of the world, and as a virtue love involves such a perceptual sensitivity. On this account, the virtues in general therefore look as much like epistemic dispositions as affective or motivational dispositions. Murdoch states: "virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (Murdoch 1970: 93). Elsewhere she writes that "anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue" (Murdoch 1970: 84). For Murdoch virtues are thus highly epistemically significant traits: they are traits that enable a kind of perception that arises only from a human and normatively rich standpoint. Given this conception of virtue, love is necessarily truth-conducive: one can only *perceive* or be *sensitive* to real features of the world.¹⁶

This knowledge or perception is connected with action; the perceptual sensitivities that constitute virtues are manifested in dispositions to act. The person who perceives the true extent of these demands, Murdoch suggests, will act in 'obedience' to reality:

[T]he idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like 'obedience'. (Murdoch 1970: 40)

In other words, Murdoch suggests that the agent who perceives the full moral significance of a situation is often not left with an open choice about how to respond. In order to discern the true moral contours of a situation in the first place, the agent must attend in a way that is loving. Attending lovingly is motivationally and affectively laden; it eventuates in 'obedience' to the moral demands of what is perceived.¹⁷

¹⁶ A similar conception of virtue is proposed by McDowell (1979), who also understands the virtues as perceptual sensitivities, and argues for the claim that 'virtue is knowledge'.

¹⁷ It seems plausible that there will be degrees of love, so not all love will entail complete moral motivation. But insofar as one is loving, one will be motivated to act in accordance with what is perceived.

Murdochian love is not, however, simply a form of clinical precision. In relation to the example of M and D, Murdoch notes that “what M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly” (Murdoch 1970: 23). The ‘just’ in this quote is significant: seeing lovingly is not *opposed* to accuracy, but is a far richer form of vision, a form of vision reaching *beyond* simple accuracy, which may be difficult to achieve. In approaching the object of love from the loving perspective, one approaches it from a position into which is built a commitment to understanding the object justly and in its full complexity. Moreover, the affective richness of the loving perspective allows for a depth in one’s grasp of one’s concepts that is *transformative* of them. The loving perceiver does not take the same concepts that could be grasped from a detached perspective and apply them to a fixed scenario, but they rather have conceptual resources that differ from those of the unloving perceiver, which transform what one can perceive.¹⁸

To illustrate this, compare the ballet lover’s experience whilst watching *Swan Lake* to the experience of a reluctant audience member with no interest in ballet. Whilst both would have a visual experience of the same thing, they would see very different things. The ballet lover might see graceful arabesques and lively grand jetés within an innovative production of the ballet, whereas the disinterested audience member might simply see dancers moving and jumping. Even if we imagine that the disinterested audience member has better eyesight, so that their perception of the ballet is more visually accurate and they are able to track more precisely the exact movements that the dancers make, we would plausibly think that their vision and understanding of it was importantly lacking. The loving attention that the ballet lover pays to the performance plausibly alters what they discern in it, enabling them to better understand the ballet as a whole.

To love, for Murdoch, therefore entails attending to particular objects from a virtuous perspective which involves an affective component. This affective component includes generosity and an appreciative understanding of the object of love. By viewing the object from this perspective, the good qualities that it genuinely possesses become visible. Viewing others in this way enables one to perceive real qualities that they genuinely possess, but which, without attending lovingly, one will not be sensitive to. For example, in *Othello*, were one to view

¹⁸ Murdoch writes “[k]nowledge of a value concept is to be understood... in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal network... We do not simply, through being rational and knowing ordinary language, ‘know’ the meaning of all necessary moral words” (Murdoch 1970: 29).

Othello from a detached, impersonal standpoint, his character would undoubtedly be unappealing. However, the play derives its power and its tragedy from enabling one to perceive him from a loving perspective, from which he can be seen as partially noble, yet at the same time deeply mistaken and cruelly blind. These qualities are a genuine part of the object of perception, but they are not visible from a perspective external to love.

This account of love as a virtue that is a reliable perceptual sensitivity enables Murdoch to maintain that love is epistemically beneficial. However, this on its own does not entail that love is *necessary* for true vision, nor that it is *uniquely* epistemically significant. In the following sections, I shall suggest that these features of love can be understood as a result of Murdoch's acceptance of the unity and hierarchy of the virtues respectively.

5.1 The Unity of the Virtues

Many virtue ethicists have been tempted by the thought that the virtues are somehow unified.¹⁹ Murdoch too understands the perceptual sensitivities constituting the virtues in this way. In discussing this, she claims that an examination of everyday moral virtues reveals ways in which they are deeply intertwined and ordered. Again, this is suggested by the above-mentioned text:

As we deepen our notions of the virtues we introduce relationship and hierarchy ... It would be impossible to have only one virtue unless it were a very trivial one such as thrift. (Murdoch 1970: 95)

Murdoch's claim is thus that no single virtue can be understood, let alone possessed, in isolation.²⁰ On her conception, the virtues are perceptual sensitivities to certain features of the world. But the features that call for kindness, for example, must be understood in relation to those that call for justice, and so on: the *fullest* form of kindness will be sensitive to the demands of justice.

¹⁹ For more recent defences of the unity of virtue, see Badhwar (1996), Wolf (2007), and Toner (2014). Badhwar and Wolf defend qualified versions of the thesis. For scepticism about the unity of the virtues, see Sreenivasan (2009).

²⁰ She adds the caveat "unless it were a very trivial one such as thrift" (Murdoch 1970: 95). However, the kind of thrift that is virtuous plausibly involves other virtues such as prudence and a proper appreciation of goods (in order to distinguish appreciative thrift from mere stinginess).

Murdoch argues not only that the virtues cannot be defined in isolation but that they cannot be possessed in isolation: one cannot be truly courageous, for example, without also having the wisdom to know how and when to act courageously. This does not entail that one cannot possess any virtue to *any* degree without possessing the other virtues with which they are conceptually interconnected, but that the virtues cannot be possessed in isolation insofar as one could not *fully* possess any virtue without possessing the virtues with which it is interconnected. She writes, for instance:

[T]he *best* kind of courage (that which would make a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp) is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving (Murdoch 1970: 57)

On this view, lack of one virtue can impose a limitation on the extent to which one can possess another, and the fullest form of any virtue will involve further virtues.

For Murdoch, love, as a virtue, is therefore interrelated with every other virtue: to be loving, in the fullest and truest sense, involves being just, wise, honest etc. Love, on this account, is therefore necessary for the full possession of any virtue. This yields a sense in which love is always epistemically required: it is a perceptual sensitivity, and full possession of the perceptual sensitivities that are the other virtues also requires love. Love is not therefore required only on odd occasions in order to perceive a narrow set of features of the world, but necessary for all fully virtuous perception. Insofar as the virtues are unified, love allows one to perceive the world justly, courageously, and compassionately, and is therefore epistemically valuable in enabling all of these sensitivities.

5.2 The Unique Significance of Love

Love, on Murdoch's view, is thus deeply intertwined with all other virtues. However, for Murdoch love occupies a *unique* position among the virtues: it is love in particular that is identified as "a central concept in morals" (Murdoch 1970: 2). The thesis of the unity of the virtues alone does not provide reason to set love apart from any other virtue. It suggests that love is bound up with every other virtue but that the same is true of all virtues, since they are *all* interconnected. Nonetheless, in the above quotation Murdoch claims that deepening our concepts of the virtues introduces not only relationship between the virtues but also

'hierarchy'. 'Hierarchy' suggests that some virtues are more fundamental than others and play a more significant unifying role within the realm of the virtues. In Murdoch's scheme, love occupies a special position in this hierarchy: love is the form of all the virtues and has a particularly close connection to the Good itself.

Murdoch's suggestion is that love occupies a special position in the hierarchy of the virtues because the formal object of love is simply the real. On her account, love is a form of perception whose object is the real, that which exists outside of oneself and constrains one's will: "love... is the discovery of reality" (Murdoch 1959: 52). Elsewhere, she discusses "the real which is the proper object of love" (Murdoch 1970: 68). As such, all virtues are forms of love, for all virtues involve perception of the real. All perception is perception of the real, and therefore all virtues are forms of love. One can attend lovingly to any object in the world, and for any object, loving attention will be morally and epistemically appropriate, allowing one to see it as it truly is and thus respond in a suitable way.

According to Murdoch, the form or method of all the virtues is love: loving attention is necessary for all true vision. That is, all virtues require and involve true vision of the world, which for Murdoch true vision means that they involve loving attention. On her account, love is therefore a necessary component of any virtue since it is the truthful vision that allows perception of the particular features of the world sensitivity to which constitutes the particular virtues. Since love is necessary for and an integral constituent of every other virtue, love has a special place within the hierarchy of the virtues, involving a unique contribution to *all* virtue.

Murdoch thus states: "'Good': 'Real': 'Love'. These words are closely connected" (Murdoch 1970: 42). On her account, love is a form of attention to and perception of the real, and the good is to be found in the deep configurations of the real. Love, for Murdoch, is a form of attention to particulars, and as such, it is the method of all the virtues. According to Murdoch, to be loving is to attend virtuously to the real, and loving attention to the real reveals entities that make moral demands on the perceiver.²¹ Murdoch's justification of love's epistemic and moral significance is therefore dependent on her account of love as the form of all virtues.

²¹ Murdoch states "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?" (Murdoch 1970: 102).

6. The Everyday Concept of Love: A Defence of Murdoch

Murdoch thus presents an epistemically weighty account of love. She understands it as involving perception of the real and conceives of the loving perceiver as progressing towards a deepened understanding of the object. However, one might question whether what she is discussing is genuinely *love*. Setiya (2013), for instance, raises the question of whether Murdoch's use of "love" is 'quixotic', and leaves this unanswered, and Schaubert explicitly claims that "Murdoch's official, cognitive conception of love is unfamiliar" (2001: 482). I shall address two particular sceptical questions that might arise in this regard: firstly, can this account of love allow for love's affective dimension? Secondly, can this account explain love's selectivity, and particularly the problem that evil objects of attention seem to pose? I shall suggest that Murdoch has the resources to respond to each of these concerns.

Firstly, the affective dimension to love: one might worry that in understanding love as a perceptual sensitivity, Murdoch affirms its epistemic significance at the expense of its affective role. However, love's epistemic role does not entail that it lacks an affective dimension. Indeed, Murdoch suggests that an account on which cognition or perception is severed from evaluation and affect is "both alien and implausible" (Murdoch 1970: p. 9).²² Identifying love with perception does not imply that it is not an emotion, nor that it is not affectively significant; rather, perception itself, or the knowledge thus gained, might be affective. Döring (2007) and De Sousa (1987, 2002), for instance, argue that emotions are perceptions of value, Roberts (1988) understands emotions as concern-based construals of value, and Nussbaum (2001) argues that emotions are forms of evaluative judgement. If emotions are understood on models such as these that unite the epistemic and the affective, love can be both perceptual and emotional. The phenomenal, affective, or 'emotional' character of love is not therefore denied by understanding love as involving knowledge; conceiving of love as an emotion is compatible with thinking of it as being a kind of perception.²³

²² Indeed, Murdoch speaks of "obedience to reality as an exercise of love" (Murdoch 1970: 42), suggesting a close connection between love and action, a connection that plausibly goes via the affective.

²³ Murdoch is not alone in offering an epistemically laden account of love: Jollimore (2011) also understands attending to the beloved in certain way as central to love.

Murdoch's conception of love as an epistemic state, then, is at least compatible with the ordinary conception of love as an affective state. She is, however, committed to the claim that one cannot truly love another *without* being in the concomitant epistemic state, whereas it might seem that the ordinary conception of love is only or primarily of an affective state. Although Murdoch's account is consistent with the ordinary conception of love, one might therefore worry that it has a significantly different emphasis.

In fact, however, we do ordinarily think of love as importantly involving knowledge. It seems plausible that if someone were utterly unmotivated to understand another, then however warm one's feelings towards them, this would fall far short of love: they would be failing to relate to the intended object of love. Moreover, as Badhwar (2005) notes, "to the extent that others are deceived about us we fail to be the actual objects of their love" (Badhwar 2005: 60). Othello's professed love for Iago, for instance, seems to be based upon too pervasive a misunderstanding of whom Iago is to truly love him. Othello's profoundly mistaken beliefs about Iago prevent him from knowing Iago, and thus form a barrier preventing him from loving Iago. It is thus plausible that love at least has the *aim* of knowing or understanding the other, and a love that did not involve any insights about the beloved would seem questionable.

Further, although the everyday conception of love is closely related to an affective state, there is reason to think that it is not reducible to this. Naar (2013), for instance, argues that considerations such as the historical nature of love, its ability to permeate one's identity, and its persistence across both time and temporal disruptions suggest that it is not merely an occurrent affective state. As he notes, love is not a state that one could be in for only five minutes and is conceived of as persisting throughout disruptions such as depression or doubt. The ordinary concept of love is therefore not reducible to its affective dimension.

Moreover, some significant elements of paradigmatic instances of interpersonal love are straightforwardly epistemic. As a friend or lover, one discerns features in another beyond those which would be available to an unloving observer, revealing a deeper knowledge of who the person is. Some prominent non-philosophical descriptions of love focus on this epistemic dimension to love. Take, for example, Jane Austen's description of Darcy's growing love for Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*:

Mr Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that

she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes... he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness.

In this passage, Austen reveals Darcy's emerging love for Elizabeth by describing his increasing disposition to perceive her good qualities. The everyday conception of love does not therefore seem to identify it solely as an affective state, but to involve perception.

Secondly, a critic might claim that the ordinary conception of love involves selectivity: we do not love all equally, and we feel justified in limiting loving relationships to particular people. For Murdoch, on the other hand, love is morally 'commanded' for every object of attention. She states that the virtuous agent, like the artist, sees their objects lovingly "whether they are sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil" (Murdoch 1970: 66). However, lovingly attending to all of reality does not imply that one must always express love in the same way, or that the love need always take the same form. Loving one's friends and one's children, for example, will involve very different relationships. It seems plausible that the everyday conception of love covers a variety of phenomena, and that romantic and sexual love, for example, involve far more than the basic moral case. In these cases, the aspects of love that Murdoch identifies might be necessary but not sufficient conditions for love. Thus, that selectivity is part of the everyday conception of romantic love need not be in tension with loving attention being 'commanded' for every object of attention.

Moreover, love's selectivity is in part explained by the differing relationships that we have with others. The beloved's attitude towards the lover plausibly affects the agent's capacity to lovingly perceive them. The beloved's behavior and attitudes can plausibly enable or make difficult loving perception of them. Certain ways of acting open one up to others, express one's identity, and encourage engagement, whilst other ways of acting (indifference, taciturnity, aloofness) discourage the perceiver from attending lovingly. Although love is morally and epistemically necessary, there is therefore an explanation for the selective way most people love: the way another person acts can assist or hinder the lover in lovingly attending to them.

Nonetheless, an objector might urge that this does not account for evil objects of attention, objects that seem unworthy of love. The idea that such evil objects morally and epistemically ought to be lovingly perceived seems to be far less obviously attractive than the

idea that one's friends and partners ought to be lovingly perceived; such objects do not seem to be *lovable*.²⁴

One response to this is that as well as identifying love with knowledge of the real, Murdoch seems to identify 'the real' with 'the Good': "'Good': 'Real': 'Love'. These words are closely connected" (Murdoch 1970: 42). Underlying Murdoch's work runs a deep optimism in the reality and magnetic power of 'the Good' which might justify the idea that loving attention reveals objects that are ultimately worthy of love. However, I shall set aside this option, since it involves theoretical commitments which many would be hesitant to accept, and instead focus upon whether, if the real and the good are extricable, one might still conceive of love as knowledge of the real.

Crucially, this objection depends upon an un-Murdochian model of love. Understanding love as a reliable sensitivity to the real does not entail that one must find the object of one's love to be 'lovable'. For instance, in the M and D example, Murdoch allows that attending lovingly to D might lead M to conclude that her daughter-in-law is indeed unworthy. In the same way that virtues such as justice might require negative appraisals and emotions, so too a properly loving response might include ultimately negative evaluations.²⁵ Attending lovingly does not entail that one will ultimately conclude with a positive appraisal of the object of attention, but that the genuinely positive features of the object that are there to be seen will be increasingly fully perceived: the ultimate appraisal of the object will be just and truthful – but not necessarily positive. Indeed, the connection to virtues such as honesty and justice suggests that loving necessarily involves possible negative evaluations as well as positive ones. However, these will be situated within a vision of the other that does justice to the complex whole. It does not seem implausible that it is right to perceive even things that are overall unpleasant or evil in this way.

Finally, the idea that no-one is an inappropriate object of love is far from peculiar to Murdoch. Perhaps the most famous ethical advice in the Gospels is found in Jesus' injunction: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44,

²⁴ Chappell (2018) takes such objections to give reason to think that Murdoch does not, after all, identify love with knowledge or take love to be necessary for knowledge.

²⁵ Wolf (2015) notes that to love, and to lovingly attend to another, need not entail finding them wholly lovable or admirable. Indeed, she suggests that the best kind of love involves a clear-eyed awareness of the beloved's flaws.

NRSV), which is surely a case of morally commanded love for evil objects of attention.²⁶ In this context, it seems that Murdoch's account of love coheres with features of the familiar concept of it. If it is embedded in an ordinary conception of love that love for one's enemies is possible, then Murdoch's account seems like a natural development of the everyday conception of love, and a development that may shed new light upon it.

Conclusion

I have argued that Murdoch's claims about love's epistemic role can thus be understood in relation to her conception of virtue. On her account, love is a virtue, and as such involves a perceptual sensitivity to objective features of reality. Moreover, Murdoch conceives of the virtues as unified, and of love as occupying a special position in the hierarchy of the virtues, which explains her contention that love is of unique moral and epistemic significance. However, Murdoch does not suggest that virtues attune one to features of reality that could be discerned by any neutral or impersonal perceiver; for her, there are objective features of reality that will be perceptible only from within a human moral schema. The loving agent's conceptual resources themselves are transformed by loving attention. The apparent tension between love's epistemic role and objectivity is thus resolved, since on Murdoch's account love is personal but nonetheless involves an openness to the real. Although this account of love can seem surprising, it is nonetheless a rich and interesting account that is consistent with core components of the everyday conception of love.

Cathy Mason

²⁶ This congruence between Murdochian love and Christian love is unsurprising given that Murdoch's conception of loving attention was influenced by Simone Weil, a deeply religious thinker.

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